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RELIGION AND POLITICS
IN MODERN INDIA

WORLD 8
STARMER BEGINS POST-BREXIT
'RESET' WITH EU

MONEY 10
CYBERSECURITY PLAYERS SEEK
DIGITAL SECURITY PUSH IN BUDGET

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F1 DRIVER MAGNUSSEN
TO LEAVE HAAS AT END
OF THIS SEASON
11 SPORTS

SC directs NTA to upload NEET UG results on its portal by July 20th



Students display placards in the precinct of the Supreme Court during a hearing on the NEET paper leak case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday directed the National Testing Agency (NTA) to publish the city and centre-wise results of this year's NEET-UG exam on their website, masking the identity of the candidates, by 12 noon of July 20 (Saturday). The top court will resume hearing the arguments on July 22 on a batch of pleas seeking cancellation, re-test and a court-monitored probe into

the allegations of large-scale malpractices in the prestigious test held on May 5. "We direct the NTA to publish the marks obtained by students at the UG-2024 NEET examination, while, at the same time, without disclosing the identity of the students. The result should be declared city and centre wise by 12 noon on July 20, 2024 and shall be uploaded on the website of the NTA," the bench, also comprising Justices JB Pardiwala and Manoj Misra, said in its

order. "We want the identity of students be masked. You can have dummy roll numbers. But let us see it centre-wise what is the marks pattern," the bench said.

The call for city-and centre-wise results underlines the focus this hearing has taken a deep-dive into data about the precise number of students who sat for the exam and passed, as well as the number who have asked for a re-test or for results to be scrapped, and those opposing any intervention. The bench noted the counsel for the petitioners have submitted that it would be appropriate if the result of NEET-UG 2024 examination was published on the NTA website so as to bring about transparency with regard to centre-wise marks obtained by candidates.

It also said material collected by the Bihar Police and the report of its Economic Offences Wing (EOW), before the investigation was taken over by the CBI, shall be filed in the court by 5 pm on July 20. At the outset, the bench said it has prioritised the hearing on the pleas over other cases as these have "social ramifications" and lakhs of students are waiting for the outcome.



Local residents gather after Chandigarh-Dibrugarh Express derails in Uttar Pradesh on Thursday

Express coach derailment in UP leaves two dead

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
GONDA/NEW DELHI

Two passengers were killed and 20 injured when eight coaches of the Chandigarh-Dibrugarh Express derailed near Gonda in Uttar Pradesh on Thursday. A railway bulletin said in the wake of the accident, three trains were being run on diverted route. The diverted trains are 15707 Katihar-Amritsar Amrapali Express, 15603 Guwahati-Jammu Tawi Amarnath Express and 15910 Lalgarh-Dibrugarh Avadh Assam Express.

Gonda District Magistrate Neha Sharma, who reached the spot, said eight coaches of the train got derailed. He said the injured are being rushed to hospital and relief operations are on at the site. A 40-member medical team and 15 ambulances are at the spot and more medical teams and ambulances are being

rushed there, Relief Commissioner Kumar said. Eyewitnesses said the loud noise of the coaches leaving the track and toppling over to the left was followed by loud cries of the passengers, especially children. The passengers started coming out of the emergency windows and doors of the tilted sleeper coaches, and some went back to pull out their belongings. In the AC coaches, passengers helped each other break the window panes and pull out those injured or stuck. Passengers had to wade through knee-deep water in the fields on either side of the track to reach the nearby approach road. Others, shocked by the accident or injured, sat on the track itself, waiting to be rescued. When police teams reached the spot, officials made announcements asking people to stay away from the damaged coaches.

Army prepares for long haul in Jammu

MOHIT KANDHARI ■
JAMMU/NEW DELHI

While gradually inducting more troops on ground zero, the Indian Army is preparing for the long haul ahead of flushing out Pakistani terrorists occupying 'Jammu Heights'. Prime Minister Narendra Modi also reviewed the current security situation in Jammu in the wake of number of terrorist attacks in the past weeks. He chaired a meeting of Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), which includes Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Home Minister Amit Shah.

Adopting offensive posturing the Indian Army has already rushed additional troops to be deployed along the higher reaches of the Kathua district bordering Himachal Pradesh to plug the gaps and block the escape routes of infiltrating terrorists. Troop deployment is also being reviewed across the frontier districts of Rajouri and Poonch as the region has witnessed repeated ambushes on army trucks and patrol parties since October 2021. The security forces are also contemplating setting up additional posts in the upper reaches of the Doda and Kishtwar districts to block the traditional routes of crossing into the Kashmir valley. As per the preliminary assessment made by the different agencies, part of the multi-layered security grid in Jammu and Kashmir, the involvement of ex-Pak army



Army personnel during an encounter with terrorists in a forest village in Doda district on Thursday

regulars along with a well-trained cadre of Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) terrorist outfit cannot be ruled out behind these attacks. Most of these ambushes were planned and executed under the same command structure and the desired objective was to inflict maximum casualties on the Indian security forces to spread the 'Arc of terror' across the peaceful Jammu region. Before the four soldiers were martyred in the Dessa forest area of Doda, five soldiers were ambushed by Pakistani terrorists in the Badnota area of Machhedhi in the Billawar tehsil of Kathua on July 8. The security grid along the International border has been kept in a state of high alert to prevent fresh infiltration attempts from across the border. Meanwhile, two terrorists were killed as security forces foiled a fresh infiltration bid

along the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir's Kupwara district on Thursday. In a post on X, the Srinagar-based Chinara Corps said, "An infiltration attempt has been successfully prevented with the elimination of two terrorists today on the LoC in Keran Sector, Kupwara. Anti Infiltration Operations are continuing". In Doda, two Army personnel were injured when a group of terrorists lobbed a grenade and opened indiscriminate firing on the Government school building where these soldiers had taken a temporary shelter during the night. According to official sources, the information about the presence of soldiers in the school complex may have been shared by the local associates of the terrorists in the Kastigarh area of Doda.

India issues advisory after shocking Bangladesh quota protests

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE/AGENCIES ■
NEW DELHI/DHAKA

India on Thursday issued an advisory to its nationals and students in Bangladesh, urging them to restrict movement outside their living premises. The advisory comes in the wake of the ongoing quota violence across parts of the country claiming six lives. India also issued some 24-hour emergency numbers.

"In view of the ongoing situation in Bangladesh, the Indian community members and the Indian students residing in Bangladesh are advised to avoid travel and minimise their movement outside their living premises," the advisory read.

"In case of any urgency or need for assistance, please reach out to the High Commission and our Assistant High

PM Modi boosts Party cadre confidence post elections



Prime Minister Narendra Modi being welcomed by Union Minister and BJP President JP Nadda as he arrives to meet party workers at the BJP headquarters, in New Delhi, on Thursday

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

A day after political activities were reported from Uttar Pradesh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday reached out to the party workers to boost the sagging morale after not so good performance in the just concluded general elections in which BJP could not secure majority on its own to form the Government just like it did comfortably in 2014 and then in 2019.

Sources said Modi reached the BJP headquarters in the evening and moved around the party's huge complex on DDU Marg and chatted impromptu with many of the workers. The

PM also visited a few offices of party workers and then moved on to interact with the party workers and volunteers in a conference hall.

Modi interacted with them in what is being seen as his appreciation for their work following his return to power for a third straight term. Hailing their contributions, Modi said he will continue to meet them in future. Modi was greeted by BJP president J P Nadda as he arrived at its headquarters.

"He was too glad to meet us and personally identified many of us to whom he said he has been knowing several of the dedicated workers for more than five decades now. He

reminded some of the chit chats and also cracked jokes while recalling some of the events that happened in the closed premises of the party headquarters which was earlier at Ashoka Road in Lutyens," said a worker attached to a party General Secretary while quoting the PM.

He mentioned that Modi told them to continue working with the same zeal as it is their sole contribution for making BJP the largest political party of the world, another worker said, quoting the PM.

This gesture is not unprecedented, as Modi has similarly met and thanked party workers following the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections, aiming to boost morale and recognise their contributions. The BJP, known for its robust cadre-based structure, upholds a tradition of top leadership engaging directly with ground-level workers to bolster their efforts.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the party lost its parliamentary majority, securing 240 seats, a decrease of 63 seats compared to their 2019 performance. Notably, in the crucial State of Uttar Pradesh, the party's seat count dropped from 61 in the previous term to 33 in this election.



Religion display on stalls on UP highways to help Kanwars eat right

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI/MUZZAFFARNAGAR

After drawing fire from various quarters, including politicians, over display of owners' names over the eateries enroute Kanwar Yatra, the Muzaffarnagar Police on Thursday issued fresh advisory making it a "voluntary" measure to put a board of names of their owners. The Muzaffarnagar Police said its intention was not to create any kind of religious discrimination but only to facilitate the devotees passing through Muzaffarnagar district and prevent any untoward situation. "During the holy month of Shrawan, many people, especially Kanwariyas, abstain from certain food items in their diet," the Muzaffarnagar Police stated through its

social media posts. "In the past, such instances have come to light where some shopkeepers selling all types of food items on Kanwar Marg named their shops in such a way that it created confusion among the Kanwariyas and created a law and order situation. To prevent such a recurrence, hotels, dhabas and shopkeepers selling food items on Kanwar Marg have been requested to voluntarily display the names of their owners and employees... This system has been prevalent in the past, too," the advisory further said.

The fresh advisory came after the administration's earlier order asking eateries, including roadside carts, to display the names of their owners in front of their shops faced severe criticism. Police personnel had also started to enforce the order.

Disgraced daughter Puja Khedkar leads mother into remand, father on the run

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

Within days after controversial probationary IAS officer Puja Khedkar was shunted back to her Mussoorie-based alma mater on disciplinary grounds, the police arrested her mother Manorama Khedkar on Thursday for allegedly threatening some farmers at gunpoint to grab their land at Mulshi taluka in Pune district.

Manorama — who had been absconding for nearly a week after a video showing her threatening farmers at Mulshi in a bid to usurp their land went viral — was traced to a small lodge, Parvati Niwas, near Mahad town in Raigad district where the visiting Pune rural police reached and arrested her. Manorama was later brought back to Pune where a court Judicial Magistrate First Class SG Barde remanded her in police custody till July 20. A former Sarpanch (village headwoman) of Bhalgaon in Pune district, Manorama had been staying at the lodge under a fake name of 'Indu Dnyandev Dhakane' with another person identified as 'Dadasaheb Dnyandev Dhakane'. Acting on a complaint lodged by farmer Pandharinath Pasalkar (65), the Paud police had registered a complaint against Manorama and her husband Diliprao Khedkar, both residents of National Housing Society in Baner, and one Ambadas Khedkar of Ambi village in Haveli, and other unidentified persons.



Insult to India's dhoti kurta forces a Mall to shut shop in Bengaluru

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
BENGALURU/NEW DELHI

In an interesting development, the Karnataka Government on Thursday ordered closure of a mall for seven days after a farmer was allegedly denied entry owing to his attire — a 'dhoti' and a white shirt — an incident which drew strong condemnation from members cutting across party lines in the Legislative Assembly. The Government also termed the alleged insult to the farmer as an infringement on "dignity and self respect", and said it cannot be tolerated.

"I checked with the BBMP (Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike) commissioner as to what can be done. The Government has the powers. Action will be taken against the (G T World)

mall in accordance with law immediately and we will ensure that the mall is closed for seven days," Urban Development Minister Byrathi Suresh told the House. Social Welfare Minister HC Mahadevappa said the incident is condemnable. "For every individual self respect and dignity are important, this has been violated, and the Government will take action," said the Minister. The incident reportedly happened on Tuesday when septuagenarian Fakeerappa from Haveri district visited the mall, along with his wife and son to watch a movie at a multiplex. Fakeerappa was reportedly wearing white shirt and 'panche' (dhoti), and the security staffer at the mall allegedly told him and his son that he won't be allowed



Photo: Screengrab

inside in a 'panche', and asked him to "wear trousers and come." Earlier, Assembly Speaker U T Khader raised the issue and asked the Government to take action. "I saw in the media that a youth from the rural area, who is

studying here in Bengaluru, when he took his father wearing 'panche' — which is the traditional attire of Karnataka — to show him the mall, he was not let in because of the attire. This is highly condemnable and strict

action should be taken by the government, which becomes a lesson for all malls," he said. "Merciless action should be taken, however big the mall owner or management is," the Speaker said. "We have nothing to do with them, we have to show that the super rich owning malls are not important for us, and it is the common man, poor and last person of the society who are leading a life with self esteem are important," he said. Congress MLA Laxman Savadi, stating that mere condemnation won't help, urged the Government to at least cut the power supply to the mall for a week. Ranabennur Congress MLA Prakash Koliwad, noting that the farmer belongs to a village in his constituency, said, "The farmer

has given education to all his nine children, one of his son is studying MBA here in Bengaluru and the son wanted to take his father to show him the mall. The farmer was disrespected for his attire and the mall should be closed down." Congress MLA and chief whip from the ruling side Ashok Pattan suggested that action should also be taken on private clubs in Bengaluru, which impose dress code. Leader of Opposition R Ashoka said such issues have been discussed in the House earlier too, "but what's the result?" The Speaker or the Government will have to issue some orders, which should be implemented strictly by the secretaries and bureaucrats.

Uttarakhand to ban use of names of Dhams in trusts & construction of temples

Cabinet authorises CM to take decision on monsoon session of Assembly

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Taking note of the widespread anger in the people of the State over use of the names of the sacred temples of Char Dham for constructing temples and forming trusts in different parts of the country, the Uttarakhand government has decided to impose a ban on such practices. A decision in this regard was taken in the meeting of the State cabinet held at the secretariat on Thursday. The cabinet expressed concern on use of names of Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri and

and decided to formulate strict laws to prevent such practices.

Informing about the cabinet decision, Secretary Shailesh Bagauli said that the department of Religious Affairs will prepare the draft of the regulations in this regard and table it before the State cabinet soon.

The cabinet also decided to set up a centre for Hindu studies at Doon University. Bagauli said the centre will focus on history, culture and religious practices of Hinduism and will

be in accordance with the National Education Policy (NEP)- 2020 which has laid emphasis on study of Bharatiya Gyan and Parampara by university students.

The cabinet also approved the plan to revise and reduce

charges of Out Patient Department (OPD), In Patient Department (IPD), registration fee, bed charges and ambulance charges at the health centres, sub district and district hospitals of the State. The Health secretary R Rajesh Kumar said that the OPD charges will be Rs 10 at Primary Health Centre (PHC) and Community Health Centres (CHC) and Rs 20 at district and sub district hospitals (DH). Earlier this charge was Rs 13 (PHC), Rs 15 (CHC) and Rs 28 at DH. Similarly the IPD

charges at PHC will now be Rs 15, Rs 25 at CHC and Rs 50 at DHs. The admission charges have also been revised and reduced in these health centres. Kumar further informed that the ambulance charges which were Rs 230 for first five kilometres and Rs 63 per kilometre thereafter have been revised to Rs 200 for first five kilometres and Rs 20 per kilometre thereafter. The Health department has also revised the laboratory charges in all the health centres in accordance with the CGHS rates. In another decision, the cabinet took back its earlier decision to hand over the Naini-Saini airport in Pithoragarh district to the Indian Air Force (IAF). The State government will now operate this airport. Moving forward on the proposed expansion of the Pantnagar airport in Udham Singh Nagar district, the cabinet approved the plan to transfer 212.4868 hectares of the land, acquired by it to the Airports Authority of India (AAI).

In another important decision the cabinet gave its nod to the proposal of giving contracts up to Rs five lakh to local contractors only. The department of Planning will also impart capacity building training to the local contractors. The proposal to increase the gratuity limit from existing Rs 20 lakh to Rs 25 lakh for the State government employees was also approved.

The cabinet meeting chaired by chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami commenced by paying homage to the martyrs of the State in Kathua attack in Jammu and Kashmir. The cabinet also paid tributes to the Kedarnath MLA Shaila Rani Rawat who passed away recently.

The cabinet authorised Dhami to take decision on the venue and dates of the upcoming monsoon session of Uttarakhand Assembly.



Cabinet members pay homage to martyrs and recently deceased Kedarnath MLA before start of their meeting on Thursday

Pioneer photo

Yamunotri and other temples located in Uttarakhand in construction of temples by trusts/committees in different parts of the country. The cabinet members were of the view that such activities create confusion in the public and hurt the religious sentiments of the people

be in accordance with the National Education Policy (NEP)- 2020 which has laid emphasis on study of Bharatiya Gyan and Parampara by university students.

The cabinet also approved the plan to revise and reduce

CM directs UCADA to connect every district and major tourist sites with air services

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami directed the Uttarakhand Civil Aviation Development Authority (UCADA) to connect every district and important tourist places with air services. He also directed the officials to make arrangements for night landing at Pantnagar airport and pay attention to its expansion and development of infrastructure facilities like in the Dehradun airport. Besides this, he also directed them to ensure effective arrangements to stop black marketing of tickets during the Char Dham Yatra. The CM stated this in the ninth meeting of the board of directors of the UCADA at the secretariat in Dehradun on Thursday. The CM gave his nod to start the process of purchasing new aircraft for the State. He said that UCADA should take a new aircraft on lease until it purchases a new one. He also gave his approval for signing an MoU with the Airports Authority of India to establish manned traffic control centres at helipads in

refuelling helicopters and a vehicle for transporting oil barrels in the Kumaon region. He said that the officials concerned should also pay special attention to increasing air connectivity in the State and make a proposal if they need support in this regard from the central government. He asked them to work towards increasing the connectivity of Pantnagar airport with major cities of the country. He also directed them to prepare a master plan for the proper use of land in the Pantnagar airport area. Dhami said that it is necessary to expand and strengthen air connectivity in the State to promote industries and destinations. People will be more motivated to visit if the State will have good air connectivity and associated facilities. The CM also asked UCADA officials to focus on efforts to increase sources of income. He directed them to make Naini Saini, Chinyalisaur and Gauchar airstrips more convenient so that small aircraft facilities can



Kedarnath Dham and Sahastradhara to establish contact with the Air Traffic Controller (ATC) in case of emergency for operating the helicopter service. Besides this, the CM also gave approval for purchasing a fuel pump for

be made available there too. He also directed them to pay attention to making the heliports being developed under the UDAN (Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik) scheme more convenient with necessary resources.

CANDID NOTES

Gajendra Singh Negi

Plain speak

The defeat of BJP candidates (both turncoats) in the recent Badrinath and Manglaur Assembly bypolls has made the long-sulking core cadre of the saffron party assertive against the entry of defectors and assigning plum assignments, including party tickets, to them. This assertion was on display in the party's extended working committee session in Dehradun recently. Held in the aftermath of the twin defeats, former chief minister Tirath Singh Rawat came down heavily on the decision makers of the party in the session for blessing defectors at the expense of its sincere and seasoned workers who have been carrying the party flag on their shoulders from the days when the BJP was struggling to get a foothold in the political landscape of the State. Amid loud and lusty cheers from the audience, the veteran leader in his inimitable style stressed on the importance of the workers and advised the party leadership to listen to those who have their ears to the ground. The blunt talk by the veteran along with the growing consensus in the saffron outfit that the new entrants are liabilities rather than assets denting the party's image as one with difference has left many turncoats wary about their political future in their new hideouts.

Good gesture

The accolades heaped upon the chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami by the deputy leader of Congress legislature party Bhuwan Kapdi has come as a pleasant surprise amidst the cut-throat political rivalry, no holds barred attack on political opponents and acid-dripping below the belt personal attacks to garner political brownie points have become the norms.

Kapdi appreciated CM Dhami's prompt response and swift action in extending help to the flood-affected people of Khatima. The CM released a sum of Rs 10 crore for the affected families and administration distributed relief material and food packets in the flood-affected areas. This appreciative gesture is all the more significant as it came from Kapdi who, a political bete noire of CM Dhami, inflicted a humiliating defeat on the latter in Khatima in the 2022 Assembly elections. The defeat forced Dhami to contest a by-election from neighbouring Champawat in order to reach the State Assembly and continue as the CM of the Himalayan State. One hopes that Kapdi's salubrious gesture will set a healthy trend amidst the charged-up political atmosphere of the State.

Dissecting debacle

The fact-finding committee sent by the Congress president Mallikarjun Khadge to probe the party's rout in all the five Lok Sabha seats of the State has started meeting leaders and functionaries and the frontal organisations in Dehradun. The deliberations are expected to pin down the causes for the party's poor performance in the LS elections and string of electoral losses in the last 10 years. It is learnt that a section of the party leadership is bent on fixing the responsibility of the 5-0 defeat in the LS elections on the State party chief Karan Mahara and they may pay for his blood. However, the Mahara camp will try to force the detractors to hold fire by appropriating credit for the Congress victory in the recent Badrinath and Manglaur bypolls. His supporters are most likely to pillory the veterans like Harish Rawat, Yashpal Arya and Pritam Singh for fleeing the poll battlefield while arguing that it sent a message to the electorate that the grand old party was staring at an imminent rout.

Negligence turns GDMC hospital into potential dengue hotspot

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Despite the guidelines issued by the Health department regarding dengue prevention, the Government Doon Medical College (GDMC) hospital can become a hotspot for dengue due to water stagnation and faulty air conditioning systems, particularly in the OPD building. Inadequate crowd management due to understaffing has also emerged as a significant issue. Considering this, patients and their attendants have expressed their worries about the heightened risk of dengue and other infections at GDMC hospital due to poor hygiene practices.

gienic conditions in the hospital are more likely to cause infections in patients visiting the premises.

Another patient Reena Srivastav raised concerns regarding the leakage and water stagnation issues at GDMC, especially with the onset of monsoon. She has observed a lack of crowd management and unhygienic conditions at the hospital during her visits, highlighting the potential adverse effects on patients with compromised immunity. She opined that the GDMC hospital has inadvertently become a breeding ground for mosquitoes due to stagnant water in the OPD building, increas-

A patient, Arif Khan claimed that he suffers from asthma



and, as a result, he regularly visits the OPD building at GDMC for check-ups. However, he has noticed for a while now that there are issues with water leakage and stagnation in the parking area, rear section and other parts of the building. He emphasised that although the hospital administration raises awareness and advocates for the prevention of dengue, they have not taken action to address these issues. The stagnant water directly increases the risk of mosquito breeding, which can easily affect patients like him. He also added that the hospital administration should prioritise hygiene as unhy-

ing the risk of ailments. The hospital administration should urgently address the water stagnation problem and improve the level of hygiene to prevent infections among patients.

Regarding this, many patients have expressed their concerns about the GDMC hospital potentially becoming a breeding ground for mosquitoes due to water stagnation. Despite repeated attempts made by the correspondent to contact the deputy medical superintendent of GDMC hospital regarding this issue, the phone calls went unanswered.

Chamoli district hospital receives NQAS & Lakshya national certification

Hospital ranked high on various parameters, says minister

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Meeting the standards of the National Quality Assurance Standards (NQAS), the Chamoli district hospital has received NQAS and Lakshya national certification, Health minister Dhan Singh Rawat said.

The minister informed that the Health and Family Welfare ministry recently evaluated seven sections of the Chamoli district hospital, including labour room, maternity OT, general OT, pharmacy, radiology, maternity ward and general administration under the quality assurance standards. The assessment examined the hospital's service system, patients' rights and responsibilities, support services, clinical services, infection control standards and quality control, he said. Rawat added that considering the examination the district hospital ranked highest in each section. Rawat credited the district quality assurance team, the chief medical officer and his team for meeting the NQAS standards. He also informed that Uttarakhand has received a total of 19 Lakshya national certifications. In the current financial year 2024-25, the State has received two national certifications from the Central government, one being the Lakshya national

certificate and the other being the NQAS certificate. Additionally, the NQAS evaluation of two medical units has been completed and the government is focused on improving medical facilities across the State, he said.

Nizamuddin, Butola given rousing reception at Rajiv Bhawan

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The newly elected MLAs of Manglaur and Badrinath Assembly constituencies, Qazi Nizamuddin and Lakhpat Singh Butola respectively, were welcomed by the leaders and workers of State Congress at Rajiv Bhawan on Thursday. Speaking on the occasion the Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) president Karan Mahara said the pride of the BJP was shattered in the bypolls. He said that victory in Manglaur and Badrinath is the victory of justice and added that Congress party leader Rahul Gandhi has been fighting for the poor and the downtrodden.

Terming the victory in the bypolls as a major achievement, the leader of opposition (LoP) in Vidhan Sabha, Yashpal Arya said that the Congress party should fight the upcoming municipal body and Panchayat elec-

tions with unity.

Manglaur MLA Qazi Nizamuddin said that the Congress won the elections because of the unity exhibited by the leaders. He said that the party will win the

Assembly election of 2027 and will form the government in Uttarakhand.

Badrinath MLA Lakhpat Butola thanked the senior leaders and workers for supporting him.

उत्तराखण्ड पेयजल संसाधन विकास एवं निर्माण निगम						
कार्यालय अधिष्ठात्री अतिथिवाता, द्वितीय निर्माण शाखा, कोटद्वार (पीडी बहावल)						
E-mail: ee2ndcdkot@gmail.com						
पत्रांक: 1387/निविदा/45	निविदा सूचना		दिनांक: 15.07.2024			
एतद्वारा अध्यक्ष, उत्तराखण्ड पेयजल संसाधन विकास एवं निर्माण निगम की ओर से जल जीवन मिशन/अन्य कार्यक्रमार्थ निम्न कार्य हेतु जल जीवन मिशन कार्यक्रम के सन्दर्भ में पाईप लेईंग, "डी" अथवा उच्चतर श्रेणी के उत्तराखण्ड पेयजल निगम अथवा उत्तराखण्ड जल संस्थान में एवं अन्य कार्यक्रमों के सन्दर्भ में पाईप लेईंग, "डी" अथवा उच्चतर श्रेणी के उत्तराखण्ड पेयजल निगम में सम्बन्धित कार्यक्षेत्र हेतु पंजीकृत/अनुमोदी टेकदारों से मोहरबन्द निविदायें दि 05.08.2024 (किरी कागजवश अवकाश घोषित होने पर अगले कार्यदिवस) की अपरान्ह 3:00 बजे तक इस कार्यालय में आमंत्रित की जाती हैं, जो उसी दिन दि 05.08.2024 को उपस्थित टेकदारों के समक्ष अपरान्ह 3:30 बजे अधोहस्ताक्षरी अथवा अधोहस्ताक्षरी द्वारा मनोनित अधिकारी द्वारा खोली जायेगी। निविदा प्रपत्र दिनांक 03.08.2024 की अपरान्ह 5:00 बजे तक इस कार्यालय से क्रय किये जा सकते हैं।						
क्र.सं.	कार्य का विवरण	विकास क्षेत्र	कार्यक्रम	घरदार धनराशि	निविदा प्रपत्रों का मूल्य	कार्य पूर्ण करने की अवधि
1	गुनेडी तल्ली पेयजल योजना	रिखणीखाल	जल जीवन मिशन	10000.00	500.00+जी.एस.टी.	3 माह
2	गुनेडी मल्ली पेयजल योजना	रिखणीखाल	जल जीवन मिशन	10000.00	500.00+जी.एस.टी.	3 माह
3	बकरोटी पेयजल योजना	नैनीबांडा	जल जीवन मिशन	15000.00	1000.00+जी.एस.टी.	3 माह
4	कुणजोली पेयजल योजना	जयहरीखाल	जल जीवन मिशन	20000.00	1000.00+जी.एस.टी.	3 माह
5	श्रीधाम पेयजल योजना	रिखणीखाल	जल जीवन मिशन	20000.00	1000.00+जी.एस.टी.	3 माह
6	सिरवाडी पेयजल योजना	रिखणीखाल	जल जीवन मिशन	20000.00	1000.00+जी.एस.टी.	3 माह
7	सिरवाडी पेयजल योजना	नैनीबांडा	जिला योजना	10000.00	500.00+जी.एस.टी.	4 माह
8	पीडी हवाठ पेयजल योजना	रिखणीखाल	जिला योजना	10000.00	500.00+जी.एस.टी.	2 माह
9	कमेडा पेयजल योजना	नैनीबांडा	जिला योजना	10000.00	500.00+जी.एस.टी.	2 माह
10	मणीगाण पेयजल योजना	रिखणीखाल	जिला योजना	16000.00	1000.00+जी.एस.टी.	4 माह
11	जुकरनिया वल्ला पेयजल योजना	रिखणीखाल	जिला योजना	5000.00	500.00+जी.एस.टी.	2 माह
12	बैसोटी मैदीडी (सुदुडीकरण)पेयजल योजना	रिखणीखाल	जिला योजना	5000.00	500.00+जी.एस.टी.	2 माह
13	काण्डई पेयजल योजना	जयहरीखाल	जिला योजना	6000.00	500.00+जी.एस.टी.	2 माह
14	सामान्य मरम्मत रिखणीखाल	रिखणीखाल	राज्य सेक्टर	20000.00	1000.00+जी.एस.टी.	3 माह
15	चिन्वी, मोदल श्रोत मरम्मत	जयहरीखाल	चिन्वी/राज्य पैकेज	8000.00	500.00+जी.एस.टी.	2 माह
उक्त पेयजल योजनाओं पर धनवर्तन होने के उपरान्त ही भुगतान किया जाना सम्भव होगा।						
1. कतिपय योजनाओं में निर्णय यथास्थिति वर्तमान गतिमान अनुबन्धी पर सख्त प्राधिकारी के निर्णयानुसार रहेगा।						
2. यथास्थिति कतिपय योजनाओं में निर्णय पुनरीकृत प्राकल्पन/नवगठित प्राकल्पनों पर सख्त प्राधिकारी की स्वीकृति के अधीन रहेगा।						
3. शेष नियम एवं शर्तें कार्यालय में किसी भी कार्यदिवस एवं कार्यालय समय (सुबह 10 बजे से सायं 5 बजे तक) में देखी जा सकती है।						
सहायक अभियंता						
"जल संवर्धन-जीवन संवर्धन" "कृपया जल स्रोतों को प्रदूषित होने से बचाविये" वैधानिक चेतावनी-जल स्रोतों को प्रदूषित करना दण्डनीय अपराध है।						

उत्तराखण्ड पावर कारपोरेशन लि

विक्टोरिया क्रॉस विजेता गवर सिंह रुजा भवन, कांठली रोड, देहरादून

विद्युत समस्याओं के निवारण हेतु 1912 (टोल फ्री) पर कॉल करें।

सार्वजनिक सूचना

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राज्य सरकार द्वारा स्थापित सभी कॉमन सर्विस सेंटरों (सीएससी) पर विद्युत भुगतान की सुविधा उपलब्ध है। सम्मानित विद्युत उपभोक्ता इसका लाभ उठावें।

निम्न उपभोक्ता सेवा सम्बन्धित आवेदनों के लिए उपाकालि कस्टमर सर्विस सेंटर आराधर, देहरादून में अपने आवेदन प्रस्तुत कर सकते हैं।

- नये संयोजन हेतु
- नाम स्थानान्तरण हेतु
- विद्युत भार परिवर्तन हेतु
- विद्युत प्रकार परिवर्तन हेतु

नीचे दिये गये कोड को 9219503400 पर SMS कर जानकारी प्राप्त करें।

बिल विवरण की सूचना हेतु	BD<space><13 digit Service Connection No.>
बिल भुगतान की सूचना हेतु	PYD<space><13 digit Service Connection No.>
नये संयोजन की स्थिति जानने हेतु	NC<space><12 digit Registration No.>
शिकायत की स्थिति जानने हेतु	CD<space><11 digit Complaint No.>
मोबाईल नं० पंजीकृत करने हेतु	RMN<space><13 digit Service Connection No.>
13 Digit Service Connection No टाइप करने का तरीका	3 digit खण्ड संकेत +4 digit बुक संख्या +6 digit कनेक्शन संख्या

"साफ़ हित में बिजली बचावें" "बिजली बचाने हेतु एल.ई.डी. बल्ब का प्रयोग करें"

Congress remarks often incite violence against Modi: BJP

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Thursday accused the Congress of often using remarks, which incite violence, against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and said words like 'maut' and 'hinsa' should not be used in speeches to target political rivals.

Information and Broadcasting Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said the Opposition should maintain decorum and seriousness in its political discourse as the use of such inciteful words have a psychological impact in society, promoting violence and raising unnecessary tensions.

"The choice of words is very important in public life. The kind of comments used by the



Opposition for PM Modi is a matter of grave concern," he said.

The Minister and BJP spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi cited a write-up of a former IPS officer to highlight that rhetoric used for short-term political benefits at times incites violence. Trivedi referred to the killing of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the recent assassination attempt on Donald Trump to make the point. Targeting the Congress, Trivedi said its leader Rahul Gandhi used words like violence and murder in Parliament and had rationalised as throwing of some article at Modi's convoy during the poll campaign as an evidence of people's fear of the Prime Minister ending.

Modi's security was endangered in Punjab when the Congress ruled the state, he said, contrasting this with the security provided to Rahul Gandhi in sensitive places like Kashmir and Manipur.

Someone who spoke of cutting Modi into pieces in a Congress MP now, and it was the Congress leader Sonia Gandhi who had used "maut ka saudagar" barb against him in 2007 when he was Chief Minister of Gujarat, Trivedi said. The BJP never wished death to the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi

even after she imposed Emergency, he said.

Trivedi said Rahul Gandhi, as the Leader of Opposition, should show maturity in his speeches, and anyone not doing so is not fit for politics.

In this context, Trivedi referred to the Ishrat Jahan case, saying the CBI, which reports to the central government, changed its first affidavit that called her a terrorist for political reasons as she was targeting Modi.

She along with her accomplices were killed in an encounter in 2004 by the Gujarat police. The Congress-led UPA was in power at the Centre at that time. The Congress has often supported separatists and terrorists but it is now speaking their language as well, he alleged.

Foreign Secretary Misri's first foreign trip to Bhutan today



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri will pay a two-day visit to Bhutan beginning Friday, in his first trip abroad after assuming charge of the top post.

In Bhutanese capital Thimphu, Misri will meet Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay, Foreign Minister DN Dhungyel and Foreign Secretary Pema Choden among others, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said while announcing the visit.

The foreign secretary's visit underscores the "highest priority" the government of India attaches to its 'Neighbourhood First' policy, it said. Misri will also receive an audience with Bhutanese King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, according to the MEA.

In their talks, Misri and Choden are expected to carry out a comprehensive review of the bilateral ties, including issues having mutual security interests, people familiar with the visit said.

"Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri will pay an official visit to Bhutan from July 19-20, which will be his first visit abroad after taking over as the foreign secretary," the MEA said.

"During the visit, Foreign Secretary Misri will receive an audience with His Majesty The King of Bhutan. He will call on the Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, and meet the foreign secretary and other senior officials of the Royal Government of Bhutan," it said.

The MEA said the two foreign secretaries will also co-chair the India-Bhutan development cooperation talks.

"The visit is in keeping with the tradition of regular high-level exchanges between India and Bhutan, and underscores the highest priority Government of India attaches to its 'Neighbourhood First' Policy," it said in a statement.

Last month, the Bhutanese Prime Minister was among the leaders of seven countries from India's neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean region who attended the swearing-in ceremony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Union council of Ministers.

Misri's visit to Thimphu also comes against the backdrop of China and Bhutan looking at an expeditious resolution of their festering boundary row that could have implications for India's security interests.

Around 10 months back, Bhutan's then Foreign Minister Tandi Dorji held talks with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Beijing.

A Chinese readout on the talks said Bhutan firmly abides by the one-China principle and stands ready to work with China for an early settlement of the boundary issue.

New Delhi has been keeping a close eye on the negotiations between Bhutan and China on their boundary row as it could have implications for New Delhi's security interests, especially in the Doklam tri-junction.

In August last year, China and Bhutan agreed to expedite and take simultaneous steps to implement a "three-step roadmap to resolve their festering boundary dispute.

In October 2021, Bhutan and China signed an agreement on the "three-step roadmap" to expedite negotiations to resolve their boundary dispute.

The signing of the pact came four years after the Indian and Chinese armies were locked in a 73-day stand-off at the Doklam tri-junction after China tried to extend a road in the area that Bhutan claimed belonged to it.

The India-China stand-off in the Doklam plateau in 2017 even triggered fears of larger conflict between the two neighbours.

Bhutan had said the area belonged to it and India supported the Bhutanese claim.

CDS hails soldiers heroism in Kargil



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan on Thursday hailed the heroism of soldiers in the Kargil conflict and said besides recalling memories of a war, it is also important to look at its aftermath and draw the "right lessons" for the future.

Speaking at an event held here to mark the 25th anniversary of the Kargil war, he also said "We must not repeat the same mistakes".

War and warfare are evolving at a very, very rapid pace. Their character and nature are changing rapidly because of transformation in technology and ongoing geopolitical flux, he said.

"The memories of sacrifices made by our soldiers must become a part of our national folklore, as indeed it has become with the Kargil war," General Chauhan said.

Saga, bravery and fortitude must continue to inspire future generations of the youth as well as soldiers who join the Indian armed forces, the CDS said.

Besides recalling memories of war, it is also important to look at its aftermath and draw useful lessons for the future, he said.

He also said multiple initiatives are being taken by the Indian Armed Forces to maintain an edge over our adversaries, and improvements in our war fighting doctrines, strategy and concepts as per perceived threat have been enunciated.

Presenting the Kargil Honours, CDS thanked the Veterans and Veer Naris for their immense contributions and sacrifices during the Kargil War. He also lauded the Indian Defence Industry for supporting the national effort.

General Chauhan said capability development to include infrastructure and robust operational logistics is being attempted in a progressive manner through indigenous means to build future ready Armed Forces. Multiple re-organisation and re-structuring initiatives are ongoing to enhance war fighting efficiency and effectiveness, he added.

The CDS highlighted that the nature of future military and non-military security challenges brings to fore the imperative need for the Armed Forces to be prepared for multi-domain and multi-spectrum challenges.

"There is an inescapable requirement of seamless integration across all domains - land, sea, air, space, info and cyberspace, and infusion of inter-operable systems among various branches of Armed Forces," he said.

Kargil was a conflict that underscored the need for a robust and responsive defense strategy. "The Kargil conflict highlighted the significance of maintaining vigilance and preparedness for safeguarding our borders.

It also emphasised the importance of public and international diplomacy, a strategy which was used effectively to maintain the neutrality of inimical nations and gain global support," said CDS.

Highlighting the steps taken towards integration of the Armed Forces, Chief of Defence Staff said, moving beyond jointness, the three services are now working towards promoting joint culture and integrating themselves in a number of domains.

Mentioning Kargil War as the first televised war in India where free and open media exist, CDS stressed that with constant battle of narratives attempting to shape perceptions across the world, 'Information domain' has emerged as another key battle zone.

Withdraw order for eateries on Kanwar route, says Tyagi

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Janata Dal (United) leader KC Tyagi on Thursday said the Muzaffarnagar Police order asking eateries on the Kanwar Yatra route to display their owners' names should be withdrawn as it may cause communal tension and there should not be any discrimination on the basis of religion or caste.

Police in Muzaffarnagar have reportedly ordered all eateries on the Kanwar Yatra route to display the names of their owners to avoid any "confusion".

Asked about the order which has drawn flak from the politicians and members of the civil society, Tyagi said the 'Kanwar Yatra', a pilgrimage undertaken by the Hindus during the month of Sawan of the Hindu calendar, has been crossing different areas of western Uttar Pradesh for ages and communal tension has not been reported.

The JD (U) leader said such discrimination on the basis of religion is wrong and will only widen the communal divide. "Kanwar Yatra has been crossing through the areas of western Uttar Pradesh for ages and communal tension has not been reported," Tyagi said.

"Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs as well welcome the pilgrims by setting up stalls. Muslim artisans are also involved in making the Kanwar... Such orders can increase communal tension," he added.

In the yatra, devotees, who are called 'Kanwaris', carry pitchers of holy water on their shoulders, balanced on decorated slings known as Kanwars.

Tyagi said the district administration should review its decision and take it back. "Police should investigate that no anti-social elements should be running any shops, but there should not be any discrimination on the basis of religion or caste. It increases the divide in the society," he said. "Such directives can increase communal tension. It should not be implemented," he added.

Muzaffarnagar Police chief Abhishek Singh earlier on Monday said, "About 240 km of Kanwar Yatra route falls in the district. All the eateries, including hotels, dhabas and carts, on the route have been asked to display the names of their proprietors or those working on these shops."

"This has been done to ensure that there should be no confusion among kanwaris and no law and order situation arises. All are following this voluntarily," he told reporters.



Statistics show workers can buy less today than 10 years ago: Ramesh

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Flagging the issue of "decline in real wages", the Congress on Thursday said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been delivered a "stinging rebuke by voters" in his efforts to reach "400 paar" in the Lok Sabha but the Budget offers him the chance to achieve "Asli 400 paar" of a nationwide minimum wage of Rs 400 per day.

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh said multiple data sources, including the government's own official statistics, are unanimous in showing that workers can buy less today than they could 10 years ago.

"A combination of slow wage growth and back-breaking inflation has caused an unprecedented decline in real wages (wages adjusted for price rise)," he said in a statement.

Citing the government data of labour bureau's wage rate index, Ramesh said real wages for labourers stagnated between 2014 and 2023, and in fact declined between 2019 and 2024.

He further cited the Ministry of Agriculture's Agricultural Statistics to claim that under Manmohan Singh, real wages for agricultural labourers grew at 6.8 per cent each year, while under Modi, real wages for agricultural labourers declined by minus 1.3 per cent each year.

Citing Periodic Labour Force Survey Series, Ramesh said the average real earnings over time have stagnated between 2017 and 2022 across all employment types - salaried workers, casual workers, and self-employed workers.

He further cited data from Centre for Labour Research and Action to claim that real wages of brick kiln workers have stagnated or declined between 2014 and 2022. "Brick kilns involve intensive labour and are a low-paying work of last resort for India's poorest," he said.

To deliver justice to 'Shramiks', and to dispel this cycle of stagnant wages, the Congress had guaranteed a nationwide minimum wage of Rs 400 per day of work in its 'Nyay Patra' manifesto, he said.

"The self-anointed non-biological PM has been delivered a stinging rebuke by voters in his efforts to reach 400 paar in the Lok Sabha. The Union Budget offers him the chance to achieve what the INC has called Asli 400 paar. A nationwide minimum wage of Rs 400 per day is an idea whose time has come," Ramesh said.



India, Malaysia to deepen cooperation in oil palm

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India and Malaysia have decided to increase cooperation between the two countries in the field of Oil Palm and other sectors.

This was discussed here on Thursday during the meeting of the Union Minister for Agriculture and Farmers Welfare and Rural Development Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Minister of Plantations and Commodities of Malaysia Datuk Seri Johari Abdul Ghani.

The Malaysian Minister is on a visit to India from 16-19 July and met Chouhan at Krishi Bhawan here to discuss opportunities to deepen the bilateral agriculture cooperation between India and Malaysia.

The sides expressed the desire to collaborate on the National Mission on Edible Oil Palm, discussed the market access issues related to agriculture and allied products, institutionalization of the cooperation in agriculture, and application of digital technology in the plantation sector.

The meeting concluded with Chouhan thanking Minister Johari Abdul Ghani for a fruitful visit to India and expressing optimism for continued cooperation in Agriculture and other areas.

SC orders release of YouTuber jailed in TN

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday ordered the release of YouTuber 'Savukku' Shankar who was detained under the Goondas Act in May by the Tamil Nadu Police. Granting the interim relief to Shankar currently lodged in the Coimbatore Central Prison, a bench of Justices Sudhanshu Dhulia and Abhanuddin Amanullah said it would not decide the case on merit as Madras High Court is seized of the matter.

The bench recorded the submission of lawyers appearing for the parties that they will mention the matter before the Chief Justice of the High Court or before the appropriate bench on Monday or Tuesday seeking to expedite the hearing in the matter.

"We are definitely of the view that the petitioner has no hands in the delay caused in the matter. In the peculiar facts, the petitioner be released



till the case against detention is decided by the high court," the bench said while clarifying that its order pertains only to the preventive detention matters.

If the petitioner is in jail in any other case, this order will not affect that, the bench said.

The top court was hearing an appeal challenging the Madras High Court order adjourning the habeas corpus petition that was filed by Shankar's mother challenging his detention under the Goondas Act. At the outset, the apex court

asked senior advocate Siddharth Luthra, appearing for Tamil Nadu government, to explain need of preventive detention against Shankar. Luthra submitted that the YouTuber has been accused of forging documents, and indulging in mala fide acts.

The bench then asked, "How can he be put in detention? Is he a threat to the security of this country?"

This is not an ordinary civil dispute but a preventive detention matter. Somebody's liberty is at stake. He is in preventive

detention for over two months." Senior advocate Siddhartha Dave, appearing for Shankar's mother, submitted that the YouTuber was detained only on the basis of apprehension that he would come out on bail in criminal cases.

Based on the orders of Commissioner of Police, Greater Chennai, Sandeep Rai Rathore, the detention order under the Goondas Act was served on Shankar by a cyber crime (Chennai) police inspector on May 12.

There are seven cases pending against Shankar in Chennai police's central crime branch/cyber crime out of which three are under investigation, charge sheets have been filed in two and the remaining are pending trial, according to a Chennai police press note.

Shankar, 48, was arrested by Coimbatore police on May 4 for alleged derogatory statements about women police personnel/police officials in an interview to a YouTube channel.

Other cases Shankar faces include one for possession of ganja, which was registered by Theni police.

The YouTuber had submitted in court that he was assaulted in Coimbatore prison.

A detainee under the Goondas Act may be imprisoned for one year, subject to scrutiny by an advisory board and the validity of such detentions is also examined by the High Court based on petitions filed by the affected persons.

Shankar, who has been accused by a number of people of making personal attacks and uncivil remarks is also a strong critic of the DMK regime and Chief Minister MK Stalin.

A former special assistant in the Directorate of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption, the YouTuber was accused in 2008 of leaking sensitive conversations between officials and a court had years later acquitted him in that case.

Conviction in child marriage cases still low, says report

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The conviction rate under the Prevention of Child Marriage Act stands at 11 per cent while for all other crimes against children it is 34 per cent, according to a new report.

In 2022, out of the total 3,563 child marriage cases listed for trial in courts under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, a mere 181 cases were successfully concluded in terms of trial completion.

Despite the fact that there are 3,365 cases pending, with the current rate of disposal, the country may take 19 years to clear the backlog as of 2022, according to a report by the India Child Protection (ICP) research team which was released by child rights body the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR).

The total number of child marriage cases registered during the last five years was less than the number of girl child marriages taking place in a single day in the country, according to a new study. On an average, only one case of child marriage per district was registered for prosecution in 2022.

The report said the official data has shown that out of 63,513 children of kidnapping and abduction who were recovered in 2022, 15,748 (25%) were kidnapped and abducted for the purpose of either 'marriage' or 'illicit intercourse'. Of this, 15,142 children recovered in 2022 were kidnapped solely for the purpose



of marriage. This report used a multi-faceted approach, combining primary data gathered at the village level through engagement with key stakeholders, including Panchayati Raj Institution functionaries and NGO activists involved in child protection initiatives.

Secondary data from the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) and the Crime in India Reports published by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) from 2018 to 2022 were analysed, along with an extensive literature review to enhance understanding of the barriers to child marriage elimination efforts and their impact on children, particularly girls.

The primary data was collected from a sample of 1,132 random villages across 20 districts of Assam, encompassing a total population of 21 lakhs and a child population of 8 lakhs.

The report said 81 per cent reduction in the instances of child marriage between 2021-22 and 2023-24 in the state.

In absolute numbers, the incidence of child marriages in the study villages has declined from 3,225 cases in 2021-22 to 627 cases in 2023-24.

In 30 per cent of the villages surveyed in Assam, child marriage has been completely eradicated. Additionally, 40 per cent of villages reported a significant decline in the occurrence of child marriage.

The study said 98 per cent of the respondents believed that the Assam government's strict law enforcement initiatives in 2023 had a substantial and striking influence on the reduction of child marriages within their communities.

The overwhelming majority of respondents acknowledged the effectiveness of stringent enforcement measures in curbing child marriage.

In 12 districts, out of 20, over 90 per cent of respondents believe that taking legal action such as arresting individuals and filing FIRs in cases related to child marriage can effectively address the occurrence of such cases.

Overall, the same percentage for all 20 districts stands at 72 per cent.

Karnataka CM to go slow on private sector job quota Bill

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Thursday said his government has decided to withhold the bill mandating job reservation for Kannadigas in private sector due to "certain confusion." He said the bill will be taken up for discussion in the next cabinet meeting to clear the doubts. "On Monday, complete discussion (on the topic) could not take place in the cabinet meeting. By then reports had appeared in the media," he told the Karnataka assembly. "There was some confusion. We will clear those confusions in the next cabinet meeting. Let's have a detailed discussion." The CM was replying to Leader of the Opposition R Ashoka's demand to clarify the state government's stand on the bill. He said the Chief Minister changed his message on 'X' thrice. Ashoka recalled that Siddaramaiah in his first post said that the cabinet has decided 100 per cent reservation for Kannadigas in the private sector and then deleted it. The Chief Minister then posted another message saying that there will be 50 per cent reservation in the management category and 70 per cent in non-management category for Kannadigas. "Finally, you



other establishments shall appoint fifty per cent of local candidates in management categories and seventy per cent in non-management categories," the bill read. If the candidates do not possess secondary school certificates with Kannada as a language, they should pass a Kannada proficiency test as specified by the 'Nodal Agency,' it added. The nodal agency will have powers to call for any records information or documents in the possession of an employer or occupier or manager of an establishment for the purpose of verifying the report.

The government may appoint an officer not below the rank of Assistant Labour Commissioner as the authorised officer for the purposes of compliance of the provisions of the Act. Any Employer or Occupier or Manager of an Establishment, who contravenes the provisions of this Act should be liable for a penalty between Rs 10,000 to Rs 25,000. The move drew flak from the industry. NASSCOM even cautioned that the companies will move out of Karnataka. Ministers quickly issued a statement assuring the companies that their interest will be protected.

any industry, factory or

Post-Covid, world came to know India has roadmap to happiness: RSS chief

PTI ■ GUMLA (JHARKHAND)

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat on Thursday asserted that after the Covid-19 pandemic, the entire world came to know that India has the roadmap to peace and happiness. He also stated that 'Sanatan Dharma' believed in the welfare of mankind. "Various experiments were made in the past 2,000 years, but they failed to provide happiness and peace that are ingrained in India's traditional way (of life). After corona, the world came to know that India has the roadmap to peace and happiness," Bhagwat said. He was addressing a village-level workers meeting organised by Vikas Bharti, a not-for-profit organisation. "The Sanatan Sanskriti and Dharma did not come from royal palaces but from Ashrams and forests. With changing times, our clothes may change but our nature will never change," said the RSS head. "To continue our work and services in the changing times, we need to adapt to new ways and methods. Those who keep their nature intact are called developed," he said. Bhagwat asserted that everyone should work relentlessly towards the welfare of society. He also said the tribals have remained backward and a lot of work is needed in the area



of education and health for them. "In forest areas where the tribals traditionally live, the people are peaceful and simple in nature which is not found in big cities. Here I can trust villagers with closed eyes but in cities, we have to be careful with whom we are talking," he added. Bhagwat added that he was never worried about the country's future as many people were working collectively for its betterment which was bound to show results. "There has been no doubt about the country's future. Good things should happen, as all are working for it. We are also making efforts," he said. The RSS head said people of India have their own nature and many are working for the welfare of the country without a desire for name or fame.

"We have different styles of worship as we have 33 crore Gods and Goddesses and more than 3,800 languages are spoken here and even the food habits are different. Despite the difference, our mind is one and cannot be found in other countries," he said. "When we work for the betterment of anyone, our development also takes place. Human beings never live alone and they are not scared of death. If he is made to live alone in a closed room, he will get mad in a few months. If humans live together they have sentiments attached to them," the RSS chief said. Bhagwat added that these days so called progressive people believe in giving back to society which was ingrained in Indian culture. "It is nowhere written in the scriptures but generation by generation it is there in our nature," he said.

Red alert issued for Nilgiris district following incessant rain

PTI ■ UDHAGAMANDALAM (TAMIL NADU)

The Regional Meteorological Centre in Chennai on Thursday issued a red alert for Nilgiris district following incessant rains. The RMC has predicted isolated heavy to very heavy rain with extremely heavy rain at one or two places in the district. The movement of vehicles from the Nilgiris to Kerala is likely to be affected as the road linking the neighbouring state is damaged at Nadugani. Traffic between Gudalur and Karnataka was affected at Thorapalli area in the district for nearly five hours as the gusty winds accompanying the rain uprooted bamboo trees and tossed them on the road. Over one hundred houses and agricultural lands were inundated by rainwater in Pandalur and Uppatti areas near Gudalur. People affected by inundation have been shifted to safe places, a senior district official said. Landslide occurred at Avalanche-Upper Bhavani road. State Tourism Minister K R a m a c h a n d r a n , accompanied by Additional Collector H R Koushik and other officials, visited the affected places and directed the authorities to take appropriate action.

Rivals TDP and YSRCP spar over young man's murder in Andhra

PTI ■ PALNADU

The ruling TDP and opposition YSRCP on Thursday accused each other over the party affiliation of the person who murdered a 25-year-old man in this district. According to police, Sheik Jilani (25), hacked Sheik Rashid to death in the middle of a road at Mundlamuru bus station at Vinukonda in Palnadu district around 9 pm on Wednesday. However, the local police noted that there "was nothing political" in this incident but only personal enmity between the two. "There was no political issue. There were only personal issues between the two persons (Rashid and Jilani). Rumours are being circulated and some people are projecting it as a political murder," a police official told PTI on Thursday. Palnadu superintendent of



police K Srinivas Rao noted that the crime scene will be reconstructed today, followed by the arrest of Jilani under Section 103 of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). Reacting to the murder, former Andhra Pradesh chief minister and YSRCP chief YS Jagan Mohan Reddy alleged that a "demonic reign" is prevailing in the southern state, bereft of law and order. "My deepest condolences to

the family of Rashid, who was murdered by TDP cadres in Vinukonda," said Reddy, adding that there is no safety to people's lives under the TDP government. According to the opposition leader, Andhra Pradesh has turned into a den for murderers, rapes, political vendetta and attacks in just 45 days of the new government assuming power. Terming the Vinukonda

murder as a shame to the TDP-led government, Reddy alleged that Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu and other persons are perpetrating these atrocities. Rebutting Reddy, the TDP claimed that Jilani was a follower of the YSRCP chief and called on the former CM to 'stop supporting' the murderer. It asserted that Palnadu's superintendent of police had 'denied any political connection to the cold blooded murder' that took place in Vinukonda. "The killing is purely on personal issues and no political party is involved in the murder," said the TDP in a release, quoting Srinivasa Rao. According to the ruling party, prohibitory orders were clamped down in Vinukonda, while the SP warned of serious action on anyone resorting to law and order violations in the town.

Vishalgad violence: Cong demands action against local authorities

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Congress leader Vijay Wadettiwar on Thursday demanded a high-level inquiry into the violence during an anti-encroachment drive at Vishalgad Fort in Kolhapur as well as action against the collector and superintendent of police. In a letter to Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, the leader of opposition in the state assembly claimed anti-social elements targeted a particular community in the name of removing encroachment in Vishalgad. "The violence at Gazapur in Vishalgad was government-sponsored," Wadettiwar alleged and said the main culprit should be unmasked. "The unfortunate incident happened in the presence of the collector and superintendent of police. The collector should be transferred and the

superintendent of police should be suspended," he said. The anti-encroachment drive at Vishalgad Fort turned violent on Sunday as a mob hurled stones at police personnel and damaged properties, leading to the arrest of 21 persons, according to police. he situation turned tense after some right-wing activists led by Maratha royal and former MP Sambhajiraje Chhatrapati, who had come from Pune, were stopped at the base of the fort in view of prohibitory orders. Addressing a press conference here, Wadettiwar claimed the ground was slipping under the feet of communal forces after the victory of a candidate upholding progressive values in the Lok Sabha polls in Kolhapur. "The violence was engineered keeping in mind the upcoming assembly elections. Those indulging in violence



cannot be followers of Chhatrapati Shivaji. Hence, the government must find out who are the culprits," he said. The Congress leader accused the police of inaction while the violence was on. The issue of encroachment could have been resolved through dialogue, but the government did not want that to happen, he claimed. On Tuesday, Maha Vikas Aghadi leaders, including Kolhapur MP Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj and MLC

Satej Patil, both from Congress, visited Vishalgad. Shahu appealed to the government to ensure peace at the site. Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis on Tuesday underlined the government's commitment to legally address the issue of encroachments at the Vishalgad Fort. The Deputy CM has urged Opposition leaders to clarify their position on the Vishalgad issue, emphasising the need to preserve historical sites while dealing with illegal constructions. Vishalgad Fort holds profound significance in Maratha history as Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj escaped to it after being besieged at Panhala Fort in 1660. In 1844, Vishalgad was ruled by the Kolhapur State when a rebellion was led against a Brahmin regent installed by the British as the natural heir to the throne was underage.

Telangana Govt to launch farm loan waiver scheme

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

Telangana government will launch a farm loan waiver programme, part of its poll promise benefitting 70 lakh farmers, on Thursday, official sources said. Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy had earlier announced that the government would implement the loan waiver up to Rs 2 lakh by August 15. The loan waiver funds up to Rs one lakh will be deposited in the farmers' accounts at 4 pm on Thursday. The chief minister said Rs 7,000 crore in total would be credited to the accounts of farmers whose loans of up to Rs one lakh are being waived. Crop loans of up to Rs 1.5 lakh would be waived by the end of July, and the loan waiver process would be completed in August when loans of up to Rs two lakh are dispensed with. Reddy also suggested organising a gathering of farm loan waiver scheme beneficiaries at "Rythu Vedikas" and Ministers, MLAs and other public representatives of the respective districts should also attend and share the joy with the farmers. Ahead of the launching of the flagship programme, Deputy CM Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka will hold a meeting with



bankers this morning. A senior level officer will be made available for two districts (undivided old district) in the Secretariat to clarify the doubts, if any, raised by the Collectors on loan waiver scheme and resolve them immediately. The state government has clarified that ration cards are used only for family identification. The total number of ration cards in the state is 90 lakh and the number of farmer accounts with bank loans is only 70 lakh. The chief minister clarified that 6.36 lakh farmers who do not possess ration cards and took farm loans are also eligible to avail the farm loan waiver benefit.

If RJD comes to power in Bihar, quotas will be diverted to Muslims: BJP leader

PTI ■ PATNA

BJP national general secretary Vinod Tawde on Thursday cautioned the people of Bihar that if the RJD is voted to power, they might redirect the quotas from backward classes to Muslims. Tawde, who also serves as the party's Bihar in-charge, made this remark during his address to the state executive meeting. "The Congress robbed OBCs of their reservation benefits in Karnataka where the facility has been extended to

Muslims. If Tejaswi Yadav wins the next assembly polls, the same thing could happen in Bihar. Workers of our party must explain this to the people," the BJP leader said. He further added, "People must also be informed that the false campaign during the Lok Sabha polls, alleging that BJP aimed to amend the Constitution, was part of an international conspiracy to prevent Narendra Modi's return to power. Billionaire George Soros had splurged about Rs 6,000 crore for the purpose."

"No wonder, the amount of unaccounted cash recovered by Election Commission in raids during the polls was more than Rs 9,000 crore. Despite all this, the number of seats won by the BJP alone is more than the combined tally of the entire INDIA bloc. That is some cause for celebration," Tawde added. In his more than 30 minutes long speech, the BJP leader lambasted the Congress and RJD for opposing "tribal woman" Droupadi Murmu in the Presidential polls. He also expressed confidence

that the BJP-led NDA will win handsomely in next year's Bihar assembly polls, notching up "more than 200 seats" of the 243-strong House. The state executive meeting was attended, among others, by Deputy Chief Ministers Samrat Choudhary, who is also the Bihar BJP president, and Vijay Kumar Sinha. Also present on the occasion were former state BJP chiefs Nityanand Rai, currently the Union Minister of State for Home, and Sanjay Jaiswal, Lok Sabha member.

ATS seizes ₹51.4 cr drugs, raw materials from Surat unit; 3 held



PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

The Gujarat Anti Terrorist Squad (ATS) has busted a mephedrone manufacturing unit on the outskirts of Surat city and seized drugs and raw materials of Rs 51.4 crore, an official said on Thursday. Three persons — Sunil Yadav, Vijay Gajera and Hareesh Korat — have been arrested in this connection, an ATS release said. It was found that the three persons had hired an industrial shed at Kareli village in Palsana taluka of Surat district on a monthly rent of Rs 20,000 to manufacture mephedrone, also known as MD drugs, using various materials, it said. The ATS officials recently received a tip off that Yadav, Gajera and Korat were involved in manufacturing mephedrone at the shed in Kareli and selling it to

Mumbai resident Salim Saiyad, the release said. Based on the information, a team of ATS raided the shed in Darshan Industrial Area of Kareli on Wednesday night and apprehended Yadav and Gajera from the spot while Korat was nabbed from a place in Junagadh in the early hours, it said. The ATS recovered 4 kilograms of mephedrone and 31.4 kg of raw materials valued at Rs 51.4 crore from the unit, which was sealed after the raid, the release said. A preliminary probe indicated Yadav was into chemical trading business and learnt the technique of manufacturing mephedrone from the Internet. The three persons came together and started manufacturing the drug at the shed and had already delivered 4 kg of mephedrone to Saiyad some time back, the release said, adding further probe was on into the case.

Landslide disrupts traffic on Goa-Karnataka route

PTI ■ PANAJI

A landslide occurred in a ghat section of Goa in the wee hours of Thursday following incessant rains, disrupting vehicular traffic movement from the state to neighbouring Karnataka, police said. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has issued an 'orange alert' for Goa, predicting heavy rains in the next 24 hours. In the last one day, both North Goa and South Goa districts received heavy showers, Ponda taluka in South Goa received the highest 190 mm rainfall, according to the IMD. The landslide occurred near Dudhsagar Temple at Anmod Ghat, located on the southern boundary of Goa, leading to Karnataka, a police official said. "Traffic movement from the ghat section to

areas like Belgaum and Khanapur in Karnataka was disrupted, he said. "A huge pile of mud was seen on the road near Shree Dudhsagar Temple in the ghat region. Personnel of the fire and emergency services rushed to the spot to clear it, but it could not be removed till morning," he said. Traffic movement through the Anmod Ghat will remain closed at least till the afternoon, the official said. Anmod Ghat is an important link between Goa and Karnataka, used for going to Belgaum and Khanapur in Karnataka and Kolhapur in Maharashtra. Several vehicles were seen lined up in the ghat section after the incident, as per sources. Police were stopping the vehicles at Mollem check post, alerting travellers about the landslide. Many vehicles carrying essential items like

milk and vegetables pass through this route. Goa continued to receive heavy rains on Thursday amid the 'orange' alert. The IMD bulletin said heavy rains at scattered places with very heavy showers at isolated places are expected along with strong surface winds over North Goa and South Goa districts. The Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Service (INCOIS) has issued a high wave warning for the North Goa coast from Chapora to Panaji (Malim), as per the IMD. "High waves in the range of 3.7-4.0 meters are forecast from 17:30 hours on 16-07-2024 to 23:30 hours on 18-07-2024. It is advised that small vessels should not ply and nearshore recreation activities be totally suspended as erosion/wave surges are possible," it said.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Bill of woes

Karnataka Govt puts local job quota bill on hold after the State's IT industry reacts strongly

The Karnataka government has put on hold a bill requiring reservations for locals in the private sector following significant backlash from the industry. The Government will reconsider the bill before presenting it to the state Assembly. This decision came just hours after the state cabinet approved the bill, which proposed reserving 50 per cent of management positions and 75 per cent of non-management positions for Kannadigas in the private sector. The Karnataka State Employment of Local Candidates in the Industries, Factories, and Other Establishments Bill, 2024, was to be presented in the Assembly on Thursday. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, along with his ministers, praised the bill, emphasising their "pro-Kannada" stance and stating that their main priority is to "ensure the welfare of Kannadigas." However, the bill met with tough resistance from the IT industry that criticised the bill, arguing that it would hinder the growth of the tech sector in Bengaluru and negatively affect the IT industry in Karnataka. The rationale behind the bill was to address the high unemployment rates among the state's residents and to ensure that local talent is given priority in job opportunities within Karnataka.



But industry leaders felt that a quota system for locals would hinder the ability of companies to hire the best talent available, potentially compromising their competitiveness and productivity. Besides, if implemented this bill would have legal and constitutional issues. The bill could violate the right to equality and freedom of movement, as enshrined in the Indian Constitution and could face significant hurdles in courts, leading to prolonged legal battles. Furthermore, the proposed bill raised concerns about increasing regionalism and social tensions. It was feared that such a policy could create divisions between locals and non-locals, leading to a less cohesive society and potential conflicts. According to a report by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce (FICCI), Karnataka's overall unemployment rate is 2.7%, which is lower than the national average of 4.2%. But these figures hide the low employability of the local populace. But to correct it with populist measures is not the best solution. Instead of mandating job reservations, the Government should focus on improving education and skill development programs for locals. Enhancing the quality of education and providing better vocational training could empower local youth to compete effectively in the job market. Now that the bill has been withdrawn it could come back later in a different form. The decision to put the bill on hold has significant political implications. The Karnataka Government has averted a standoff with the IT industry and other businesses but it may disappoint its support base which was expecting job opportunities. Nonetheless, suspending the bill will likely reassure businesses and investors. But the Government will have to focus on providing employable skills to locals, so that they could get employment in Karnataka's IT industry.

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PICTALK



Shia Muslim mourners participate in an Ashura (10th Muharram) procession, in Mirzapur

Religion and politics in modern India



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

Today, as memories of Partition fade with each passing generation, the intertwining of religion and politics continues to shape the nation's discourse

A community is also known for the issues it raises and seeks to debate. The national narrative over the last 100 years or more has been severely overloaded with religious contention. India is probably the only country in the world that got its independence with conditions in which the imperial power worked assiduously to debate/impose decisions in areas that were subjected to be tackled with the investiture of independence. The open threat and use of bloodshed in many parts of the sub-continent while sorting out such issues in the days preceding independence made the matter particularly gory. It was in many ways reminiscent of a civil war instigated for various reasons. Perhaps it will take still more time to coolly reflect on what happened, where and how, and indeed if it was at all avoidable. Interpersonal relationships, intertwined with religious overtones spilt over the streets and private homes in a matter which still makes one wonder how a noble cause of independence could so inextricably get mixed up with pre-disposed religious zeal and interpretation. Experience showed that partition did not solve the problem but only split the problem into two pieces. The two independent states of India and Pakistan are still to rise beyond the echoes of what happened. The price paid at the human level cannot be comprehended through the aid of books, cinematography, or visuals. As the generation that experiences it gradually passes away, the tremors of partition remain. This cannot be done well as a method of problem-solving for contentious issues. One wonders if the realization is sufficiently around to the effect that 'enough is enough'. The hatchet needs to be buried before the agony continues to reign with many real forms of misery. The subject is not just one of emotions, but how it has affected the very concept of nation-building in many ways, big and small. This cannot be the place to hope



for some permanent therapies or solutions. That may well prove to be more than a lifetime and generational effort. However, what can be done is to create certain awareness, which helps to restore a greater sense of balance and strengthen sanity all around. Election after election and contention after contention somehow veers around to undertones of communal issues. This is avoidable if a consensus can be built up not to go public with statements and actions on issues that are essentially communal. Many countries of the Third World broke away from the yoke of imperialism through the 20th century and beyond. In many cases, there was an undertone of violence that persisted. There was violence over race, there was violence over ideology, there was violence over the protagonist of the Cold War, but nowhere in the world was the post-independence issue so intertwined as an undercurrent with communalism as in the case of the sub-continent. Even a casual look at much of the media and listening to much of the media's drumming up of concerns shows how much of communication time is spent on overtones of communal concern. This is



A LEGITIMATE QUESTION THAT NEEDS TO BE UNDERSTOOD IS WHETHER ANYONE GAINING BY BRINGING RELIGION SO WIDELY INTO THE POLITICAL PROCESSES. IS IT POSSIBLE TO HAVE RELIGION BE A MATTER OF FAITH AND POLITICS A MATTER OF CONTROL OVER GOVERNANCE?

avoidable because it does not help development and it does not strengthen equity. Indians are known to be bright, intelligent, and have long traditions of intellectual excellence, which many parts of the world have not only recognized but gained strength from. To put it simply, a broad question can be asked: is it possible to freeze all talk from communal concerns as a public issue and let the concerns embedded in it be tackled only at the inter-community level? This needs to be done without blowing it up as a regional or national issue which begs support from communities that may not have even understood what was being debated. Whether Faizabad election results were determined by the nature and quantum of compensation to the communities is something on which the jury is still out. This issue needs to be understood in greater depth. However, one can avoid converting these concerns into fanning communally backed political support. In other words, can one simply delink religion from politics so that religion remains a matter of faith and politics deals with the struggle for control of the decision-making process?

A legitimate question that needs to be understood is whether anyone gaining by bringing religion so widely into the political processes. Is it possible to have religion be a matter of faith and politics a matter of control over governance? All political talk needs to avoid reference to religion, if for nothing better than avoiding emotiveness and irrelevant dissipation of energy. Political discourse can deal with economics, sociology, even history, and more, anthropology can be brought in, and so can industrialization and agriculture, but avoid drawing in religious loyalties, and emotions. Attempts to draw upon eschewed fervour with self-defeating orientation need to be stopped. An attempt to eliminate communalized political narratives and contentions may be an option worth considering. Some nations have successfully achieved this, and while they may be experiencing various forms of violence, violence stemming from religious loyalties is not their failing. (The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A CALL FOR ACTION

Madam — It is disheartening to note that four army personnel sacrificed their lives fighting terrorists in Doda district, Jammu. This cowardly attack must be condemned in the strongest terms. Our intelligence sources seem unable to effectively address the challenges in Jammu & Kashmir, leading to repeated attacks on our army. Despite the brave efforts of the army in counterinsurgency operations, the situation is worsening, with increasing casualties. This raises serious questions about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's abrogation of Article 370, which was intended to bring peace to the valley.

There is a clear lack of coordination between the State and Central governments, and a trust deficit between local people and the army, contributing to these escalating attacks. It is high time for Prime Minister Modi to act decisively rather than relying on empty assurances, as ground realities are more precarious than they appear. This failure is not only an intelligence issue but also deeply demoralizing for our armed forces, who are currently engaged in counterinsurgency operations while also keeping vigil over Ladakh's sovereignty. The increasing attacks are eroding the morale of the troops and causing immense grief to their families. The government must prioritize tangible actions over rhetoric to ensure the safety and security of our soldiers and restore faith among the local population.

Janga Bahadur Sunuwar | Japaiguri

DO NOT IGNORE ENGLISH

Madam — Encouraging the use of one's mother tongue and regional languages is important, but it's equally crucial to ensure that English education is not neglected from childhood. English provides citizens, regardless of age, gender, or profession, with global opportunities in education, employment, business, and services. No state should impose any regional language on

Age-defying sportspeople



If technology is rapidly transforming our lives, can we overlook the role of competitive sports? Uncertainty is the only constant in world-class sporting events. Recent years have shown that age is no barrier to success.

Athletes like Serena Williams, Novak Djokovic, MS Dhoni, Tiger Woods, Rohan Bopanna, James Anderson, and recently, Lionel Messi, continue to outperform younger competitors. Their success can be attributed to advancements in medical science, financial support, rest, temperament, a balanced diet, exercise, a positive attitude, and a relentless passion for their sport. Lionel Messi, despite participating in four major tournaments including the 2016 Copa America without victory, finally triumphed in this year's final, proving his skill and defying age. He has recreated the magic that Diego Maradona brought to soccer. We hope he continues to adapt and maintain his enthusiasm and spirit.

Vijay Singh Adhikari | Nainital

SC'S BENCH FOR MONEY BILLS

Madam — It's good that the Supreme Court has accepted to form a constitutional bench to look into the controversial issue of money bills in parliament. The money bills do not need to get approval of Rajya Sabha as they may be connected to urgent financial affairs of the country. Of late, it has become a practice for the Government which doesn't have majority in Rajya Sabha to introduce and get passed some bills as financial bills in parliament in order to bypass the close vetting by Rajya Sabha. The Aadhaar Act and Prevention of Money Laundering Act have been passed in that manner, attracting criticism from many. Now the highest judiciary would step in to clear the air in this regard. The executive should respect the constitutionally mandated role of the legislature in true spirit. This move is essential for maintaining the delicate balance of power.

DVG Sankara Rao | Vizianagaram

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

The harsh reality of child labour in rural Bihar



NISHA SAHANI

Despite Government efforts, the economic realities force families to make children work, often resulting in their exploitation

Baiju (name changed), an 11-year-old boy from Telia village in Kudhni block, 22 km from Muzaffarpur in Bihar, wakes up every morning like other children. However, instead of going to school, he heads off to work as a labourer, a burden he has borne for the past three years. Baiju, who belongs to the Mahadalit community, used to attend school. Life changed after his father's death, as he was forced to drop out of school and start working to support his family. He explains that his mother's meagre income is not enough to sustain the six members of their family. Consequently, he had to give up his education and begin working. She does not have enough money to educate her children, forcing her to send Baiju to work.



Children can be found working in domestic services, tea shops, and brick kilns. In India, child labour is more prevalent in rural areas compared to urban ones. Children from socially and economically disadvantaged communities are often compelled to work in these areas, stripping them of their fundamental right to education and perpetuating the cycle of poverty. This not only obstructs their education but also hampers their overall development. Children should be in school and playing, not toiling as labourers. Pinki Devi (name changed), a 45-year-old resident of Telia village, has two children who have left school to work as labourers. She explains that her husband, a daily wage labourer, is often ill. In such a situation, it became impossible to support the family with his income

alone, forcing her to send her children to work. Social worker Phuldev Patel points out that children from the most economically vulnerable Dalit and Mahadalit communities are predominantly involved in child labour. The dire economic conditions of their households compel them to abandon their education and start working. He asserts that the actual number of child labourers is significantly higher than what official statistics reveal. The government provides free books, notebooks, uniforms, and mid-day meals under the Right to Free and Compulsory Education to encourage children to attend school. However, the harsh economic realities overshadow these provisions, pushing children into labour. He further notes that human traffickers exploit this vulnerability, selling children as labourers in other states. Local journalist Amritanj observes that, like Telia village, there are numerous remote rural areas in Muzaffarpur where children work as labourers. He notes that the government may not have official statistics

on this issue because it is carried out in a highly systematic manner. Although the strict child labour laws and the vigilance of the local administration have reduced the rate of child labourers in recent years, it has not been entirely eradicated. Even today, children can be seen working in brick kilns, tea shops, grocery stores, construction sites, and as domestic helpers. As in previous years, this year too, the World Day Against Child Labor was observed on June 12 in India and around the world. When children in a society begin working as labourers at a young age instead of attending school, it prompts deep introspection within that nation and its society. They must confront why a child is forced to abandon books for labour. When a child's right to childhood, is denied, and they are thrust into labour, they endure physical, mental, and social exploitation, transforming their childhood into one marred by labour—an ordeal known as child labour.

(The author is a grassroots writer from Bihar. Views expressed are personal. Charkha Features)



FIRST COLUMN

FALLOUT OF TRUMP'S ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT

It could have far reaching implications for the US presidential elections and the US politics



KUMARDEEP BANARJEE

A week is a long time on the volatile chessboard of global affairs, however, the recent assassination attempt of former United States of America President Donald Trump would leave a deep impact on future courses of action. While several European leaders and some in the Middle East have been subjected to violent life-threatening attempts in the recent past, the bullet grazing past former president Trump's ears has left a shrill range of questions for world leaders. It may be too early to predict whether the assassination attempt would translate into a landslide victory for Donald Trump who is facing a rematch with current President Joe Biden in the November polls.

The Democrats in the US are a divided lot, with many leaders, internally questioning President Joe Biden's pitch for a second shot to the Oval Office, given his several public gaffes related to his age. Most of the public debates in the US and several other think tank zones across the world, have been debating President Biden's mental alertness and, if elected for a second time he would be able to complete his full four-year term. Any midway change due to a severe illness, which is being anticipated, would be a dampener for the US President's bid for a second run. Much like in every significant democracy, including India, the electorate in the US is a divided lot, with a deep gorge running right through the middle of the supporters of Trump and Joe Biden. The Democrat's attack on Trump and his supporters has been on the lines similar to what the opposition parties in India rallied around, during the recently concluded parliamentary elections.

The key message to their voters is to save the country from dictatorial forces (Trump/PM Modi), who will upend the constitution under their larger-than-life cult status leaders. This created a rift in the electorate, in an already ruptured society, constantly fed with an ocean of information primarily on social media, sending conflicting versions of the same events. Politics and rhetoric apart, it would be an interesting prism to watch the social messaging playing out with Trump coming back to the battlefield (election campaigns), after, he left the stage in Pennsylvania, with an iconic raised fist, and the US flag flying in the background. The pic-



ture is likely to define the resilience of the US democracy for a long time to come. Mr Trump in his few interviews, seems to have humbled down from the life-altering event, where he almost ended up being in the coffin rather than the Oval Office. It would be worthwhile to watch out if the former President sobers down on some of his key manifesto items such as immigration and freedom to choose (including the right to possess firearms for self-protection).

Immigration would be a closely watched topic from a global perspective, including India, where the largest chunk of immigrants land on US shores through legal or illegal routes. Donald Trump's Vice President choice JD Vance has a spouse who is a PIO. His wife's parents are immigrants from Andhra Pradesh and in a way, the choice defines the pluralistic nature of American Society. It would be a long shot to assume that if Trump gets a second term, his views and policies on immigration would be sobered due to his VP. Similarly, a Trump comeback could have a far-reaching impact on bilateral trade relations especially with India.

One may argue that India has bipartisan support in Washington DC on several defence and technology partnerships, carefully nurtured over a decade by PM Modi. PM Modi is perhaps the only PM, who has worked with three US Presidents in the last decade and is likely to see one of his former friends either Trump or Biden coming back in November. It may be uncertain times, however, the past relationships and promise for securing the future of the Indo-Pacific should be a super glue to hold India's US relationship under a new regime.

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

Rising political violence and struggles in the US



NILANTHA LANGAMUWA

The attack on Donald Trump underscores the nation's turbulent political climate raising concerns about the stability of American democracy and society.

Is the United States hurtling towards an internal civil war? Alex Garland's recent film 'Civil War', which premiered earlier this year, depicts a fictional yet chillingly plausible scenario of such a conflict. This leads us to consider whether the repercussions of US-initiated wars in recent decades, aimed at maintaining supremacy, now echo ominously at home, haunted by the spectres of those who perished globally. That is the inexorable wheel of karma. The shocking assassination attempt on former President Donald Trump at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, thrusts this issue into stark relief. In the aftermath, numerous conspiracy theories swirled around the incident, casting a spotlight on secret agencies whose heads have publicly voiced criticism against Trump. A police sniper had photographed the shooter, Thomas Matthew Crooks, just half an hour before the 20-year-old opened fire on Trump during the rally, suggesting multiple missed opportunities to prevent the attempted assassination, as reported. Despite the attack, Trump's political stature has only strengthened, evidenced by his selection of Republican Senator JD Vance as his running mate for the 2024 presidential election. Once a vocal critic of Trump, Vance now stands as a staunch ally, vigorously defending him and endorsing his policies. The incident, which reshaped Trump's political narrative—where a bullet grazed his ear—left him wounded but resolute. This assault, though shocking, accentuates a longstanding history of political violence in the United States, a phenomenon entrenched since the nation's inception. Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president, was the first to be assassinated, shot by John Wilkes Booth in 1865. Lincoln's support for Black rights during the Civil War, marked by the Emancipation Proclamation, has been cited as a motive for his assassination. Subsequent presidents, including James Garfield, William McKinley, and John F. Kennedy, also fell victim to such violence, with Garfield being shot in 1881, McKinley in 1901, and Kennedy in 1963.

Each of these assassinations profoundly impacted the nation and its political structure. Political violence has not been confined to presidents alone. Presidential candidates like Robert F. Kennedy and George C. Wallace were also targeted, with Kennedy being killed in 1968 and Wallace being left paralyzed in 1972. Presidents like Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan survived assassination attempts, highlighting the persistent threat of violence in American politics. The United States today exemplifies how a state structure can deteriorate when policymakers focus more on external affairs, neglecting internal issues. For instance, the fentanyl crisis devastates U.S. communities, with toddlers and infants increasingly falling victim to the potent opioid, which is 50 times stronger than heroin, according to public health experts. While adults account for the majority of fentanyl-related deaths, more children under 5 are either dying or ending up in emergency rooms after testing positive for the drug, due to accidental ingestion or exposure at home. The number of child overdoses has surged even as overall drug overdose rates in the country have declined recently. California leads in total fentanyl deaths, with 6,473 reported in 2022, while West Virginia has



the highest death rate per capita. This is a prime example to understand how the internal structure is falling apart. This cannot be stopped by exporting ammunition stocks and advanced weaponry to Ukraine and Israel through front channels while to other proxy wars in Africa and elsewhere through back channels. In societies, the root issue often isn't just institutions but the erosion of core values. Without a cohesive value system, managing politics becomes daunting.

This dilemma arises: while progress demands new values, preserving core societal values is crucial for stability and harmony. Neglecting this balance risks societal chaos and moral crisis. The inevitable decline, akin to the setting sun, cannot be halted by force alone. The political climate in the United States reflects the consequences of its global actions, suggesting a looming downfall through unpredictable events. Trump is a product of long-standing policies that have often ignored domestic ramifications.

He represents a symptom, not the cause, of the systemic issues within American politics, stemming from a history of exploiting other nations at the expense of the American public. Needless to say, engaging in political violence is fundamentally misguided and counterproductive. What Americans are slowly leading into what American decision-makers have executed throughout the world in recent history at the expense of unarmed civilians. Taking someone's life, regardless of their role or perceived wrongs, is morally indefensible. Whether it's a political adversary, a troublesome neighbour who's pushed you to the edge, a stranger evoking fear, or anyone else who has crossed your path, resorting to violence only perpetuates harm and suffering without resolution.

However, the Trump assassination attempt raises numerous unanswered questions. There is no indication that gunshot detectors were in use at the rally, although

such detectors can rapidly triangulate and locate a shooter. The shooter, Thomas Matthew Crooks, used a gun that was legally purchased by his father, which he had access to at a gun range the previous Friday. Questions arise about whether the gun was bought specifically for him, as Pennsylvania law allows 20-year-olds to buy guns. Reports state the shooter was identified by DNA, suggesting family members provided samples. Additionally, the reports suggested that no effort was made to obscure the gun's serial number, and the shooter had recently purchased 50 rounds of 5.56mm ammunition.

Preliminary acoustic evidence suggests the potential involvement of multiple shooters in the incident aimed at Trump. Initial gunfire originated from the shooter's position, with subsequent bursts detected from unidentified sources, as reported by news sources. Despite Secret Service snipers reportedly firing a single shot to neutralise the threat, discrepancies with acoustic evidence persist, necessitating further scrutiny of ballistic recordings for clarity. Questions arise over security failures allowing a 20-year-old to breach measures and reach a rooftop near Trump, firing multiple shots. Thomas Matthew Crooks, identified as the primary shooter, raises speculation about a potential second shooter. Described as a loner without a social media presence, Crooks' unexpected role and the presence of explosives in his vehicle suggest possible exploitation.

Criticism of rally security focuses on inadequate building coverage, allowing the shooter an unimpeded view of Trump, and exposing significant security vulnerabilities. These shortcomings emphasise systemic flaws in pre-event security protocols and the need for rigorous reforms. Political violence, however, has rarely solved the issues it aims to address, often creating a climate of fear and leading to further crackdowns on dissent. Historically, such violence

has only resulted in cycles of disaster, undermining the causes it purported to support. What we can see is that nihilism pervades American culture, dealing a fatal blow to its cultural and spiritual development. This decline in values undermines democracy itself. Democracy, while liberating individuals from traditional constraints, necessitates self-judgement—a task hindered by the erosion of traditional Western values. Without a genuine guiding societal value system, the state structures of any nation inevitably falter in fulfilling their role in shaping individual decisions.

The collapse of collective ideas correlates closely with societal institutions and behaviours. As Wang Huning, a leading Chinese political theorist, argued in his book 'America Against America', "The American spirit confronts profound challenges, compounded by the younger generation's unfamiliarity with traditional Western values. This spiritual shift raises critical questions about its impact on societal development and governance." The viability of any social system hinges not solely on legal frameworks but on collective belief in fundamental values guiding behaviour. If these values falter, the sustainability of the social order is called into question. The attempt on Trump's life demands a reevaluation of rhetoric and policies that normalise political violence. The incident calls for a reevaluation of gun laws and the broader societal acceptance of violence as a means to resolve conflicts. All sides of the political divide must recognise the danger of escalating violent rhetoric and its potential to incite further violence. This incident serves as a wake-up call to address the deeper issues within American society and politics, emphasizing the need for a shift towards reasoned discourse and humane policies. Ironically, America has been compelled to a point where it can't afford to lose Trump.

(The writer is a journalist and author. Views are personal)



THE ATTEMPT ON TRUMP'S LIFE DEMANDS A REEVALUATION OF RHETORIC AND POLICIES THAT NORMALISE POLITICAL VIOLENCE. THE INCIDENT CALLS FOR A REEVALUATION OF GUN LAWS AND THE BROADER SOCIETAL ACCEPTANCE OF VIOLENCE AS A MEANS TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS

RTI implementation faces challenges as the CIC is short of staff

Despite the formation of a new government, vacancies remain unfilled, exacerbating delays and overwhelming the few remaining commissioners

On September 13 last year, the Central Information Commission (CIC) admitted a second appeal from this columnist under Section 19(3) of the RTI Act, 2005. The appeal, apart from seeking imposition of penalty on the CPIO, for denial of information, also contained a few relevant suggestions for better implementation of the Act. However, on November 6, Ms Saroj Punhani, the Information Commissioner who dealt with cases for that particular ministry retired at the end of her tenure. On the same day Uday Mahurkar, another Information Commissioner retired, whereas their colleague Suresh Chandra had retired two days earlier. Several other



PRIYADARSHI DATTA

Information Commissioners like Ms. Vanjana N. Sarna, Neeraj Kumar Gupta and Dr. Amita Pandove had retired earlier last year at the end of their respective tenures. Y. K. Sinha, the Chief Information Commissioner, retired on October 3 whereupon Heeralal Samariya, the Information Commissioner was elevated to the position of Chief Information Commissioner. The total strength of the

Commission plummeted to a mere three by the end of 2023, from the maximum permissible ten at the beginning of the year. Even after the formation of the new government last month, little interest has been shown in filling up the vacancies that exist.

The reduction in the strength of the Commission has led to a proportionate overload of second appeals and complaints at CIC Bhawan. The second appeal of this columnist, already pending for ten months, is likely to see an indefinite waiting period. The outcome could hardly be compared with a long wait in the judiciary. Information is fragile, and prone to obsolescence faster than justice. This is where this columnist's suggestions would have helped. In his

limited experience as an RTI activist since 2010, he has found the CPIOs (Central Public Information Officers) generally share the information dutifully. However, where they do not, the Appellate Authority, who are generally their senior officers in the department/ministry is of little help.

They collude with their juniors to suppress the information, apparently in exchange for favours/obligations in office politics. Uday Mahurkar, as Information Commissioner, reportedly disposed of 5056 RTI appeals in 2021-22, the highest since the year of enactment of the RTI Act, 2005. However, it is equally a reflection of the utter non-performance of the Appellate Authority. Had those cases

been satisfactorily disposed at the stage of the first appeal, within the department itself, there was little need for approaching CIC with a second appeal. Information could be suppressed for a variety of reasons. In rare cases, it could be that the CPIO has committed some action in his substantive capacity (as Section Officer or Under Secretary) which he wants to be probed. In the instant case, a person has been blacklisted, on trumped-up charges, despite not having any financial dealing with the ministry.

The blacklisting order was signed, though with approval of competent authority, by the CPIO in his substantive capacity as Under Secretary. When asked to provide the file notes, complaints if any, rules posi-

tion violated he deflected the matter saying the file was under submission (there is no such ground for denying information under the RTI Act, 2005 even if the file is submitted with the PMO or Rashtrapati Bhawan).

This columnist requested the same information after the lapse of a year (thanks to the appeal pending for months in CIC) only to find that the file was still "under submission"! The conclusions are obvious. On both occasions, the First Appellate Authority, who is an IAS officer, helped the cause of suppression rather than transparency. Under Section 20(1) of the RTI Act, 2005 there is a provision for a penalty on the CPIO not exceeding Rs.25,000 for unjustified denial of information to the applicant. There

is, however, no penalty for the First Appellate Authority recognizably failing in his duty or acting in a mala fide manner. Endowing a member of the executive with quasi-judicial power without any scope of disciplinary proceedings is bait for misuse of power.

The CIC notice for hearing of appeal is sent only to the CPIO and not the First Appellate Authority. The fear of dressing down by the Information Commissioner, in front of the CPIO, who is a junior officer, will ensure the integrity of action on the part of the First Appellate Authority.

Disciplining the First Appellate Authority is the key to reducing the load of pendency at the Central Information Commission's desk. The gov-

ernment has recently decided to commemorate June 25 as "Samvidhan Hatya Divas", a queer-sounding name, in memory declaration of Emergency in 1975.

Whereas the Emergency might have been anti-democratic, it was in itself not unconstitutional being declared under Article 352. If the government is interested in deepening democracy in the 21st century then rhetoric like "Samvidhan Hatya Divas" or even "India Mother of Democracy" will not work if the CIC's strength is curtailed. The RTI Act, of 2005 was a major tool for transparency, accountability and governance. (The writer is an author, independent researcher and RTI activist based in New Delhi. The views expressed are personal)

Vance promises to fight for working-class Americans

PTI ■ MILWAUKEE

US Republican vice presidential nominee JD Vance praised former president Donald Trump and promised to fight for working-class Americans "cast aside and forgotten" by the Democrats, as he made his debut at the Republican National Convention.

Vance, 39, formally accepted the Republican vice-presidential nomination on the third day of the convention on Wednesday, making him among the youngest Americans to ever fill that role.

Introducing himself to millions of Americans, the Ohio Senator channelled his humble roots in the Midwest as he assailed politicians like President Joe Biden.

Trump and his running mate Vance will challenge President Biden and his Vice-President Kamala Harris from the Democratic Party in the November 5 presidential election. Vance said for the last eight years, President Trump has given everything he has to fight for the people of our country.

Trump didn't need politics, but the country needed him, he said.

"Prior to running for president, he was one of the most successful businessmen in the world. He had everything anyone could ever want in life. And yet, instead of choosing the easy

path, he chose to endure abuse, slander, and persecution," he said.

The author of the best-selling memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*, about his impoverished family, said "America's ruling class" had destroyed communities like his hometown with trade agreements and foreign wars. "From Iraq to Afghanistan, from the financial crisis to the Great Recession, from open borders to stagnating wages, the people who govern this country have failed and failed again," he said.

Trump represents America's last best hope to restore what – if lost – may never be found again, he said.

"I pledge to every American, no matter your party, I will give everything I have," Vance said. "To serve you and to make this country a place where every dream you have for yourself, your family and your country will be possible once again."

He accused "career politicians" like President Biden, 81, of destroying communities like his with ill-fated trade policies and foreign wars.

"When I was in the fourth grade, a career politician by the name of Joe Biden supported the North American Free Trade Agreement, a bad trade deal that sent countless good American manufacturing jobs to Mexico. When I was a sophomore in high school, a career politician by the name of Joe Biden gave China a sweet-

heart trade deal that destroyed even more good middle-class jobs. And when I was a senior in high school, Joe Biden supported the disastrous invasion of Iraq," he said.

"And at each step of the way, in small towns like mine in Ohio, or next door in Pennsylvania, or in Michigan and other states across our country, jobs were sent overseas and children were sent to war. Somehow, a real estate developer from New York by the name of Donald Trump was right on all of these issues while Joe Biden was wrong. Donald Trump knew, even then, that we need leaders who would put America First," he said.

Vance said Trump's vision is simple: "We won't cater to Wall Street, we'll commit to the Working man. We won't import foreign labour, we'll fight for American citizens."

The United States under the leadership of Trump will protect the wages of American workers and stop the Chinese Communist Party from building their middle class on the backs of hard-working American citizens.

He said Biden and the other out-of-touch politicians in Washington gave Americans a country that was flooded with cheap Chinese goods, cheap foreign labour and deadly Chineseentanyl.

"Joe Biden screwed up, and my community paid the price," Vance alleged.

'Next American pres has heart of lion'

Milwaukee (PTI): Donald Trump Jr has asserted that his father's instinct in the face of an assassination attempt has shown the world that the "next American president has the heart of a lion".

Addressing the Republican Party's once-in-four-year convention here on Wednesday night, Trump Jr, said that the assassination attempt on his father on Saturday "once seemed unimaginable became a terrifying reality." Trump, 78, survived an assassination attempt at a campaign rally on Saturday in Pennsylvania, injuring his right ear. The shooting left one spectator dead and two others critically injured. The 20-year-old male attacker was also shot and killed by a member of the Secret Service. "They say you can't truly know how you'll respond in a moment of danger until you're actually confronted with it," the 46-year-old eldest child of the former president, said.

"So what was my father's instinct, as his life was on the line? Not to cower, not to surrender, but to show for all the world to see that the next American president has the heart of a lion," he said, a day ahead of Donald Trump's acceptance speech as the Republican Party's nominee in



identical candidate "may have moved to the ground, but he stood back up." And when he did, my father raised his fist into the air. He looked out at the crowd, and what did he say?" he asked the audience. "We will fight, we will fight, we will fight with our voices," Trump Jr said, adding that they will fight with their votes in November. The Republican convention on Monday nominated Trump as the party's presidential nominee against incumbent Democratic President Joe Biden. Trump's eldest granddaughter Kai Madison Trump also spoke at the convention in support of her grandfather. In her first public speech, the 17-year-old promised to "share the side of my grandpa that people don't often see."

"To me, he's just a normal grandpa. He gets us candy and soda when our parents aren't looking," she said. She described Trump bragging when she had made the honour roll at school and peppering her with questions about her golf game.

Trump's wife, Melania, his daughter Ivanka Trump, son-in-law Jared Kushner and other family members are expected to attend the convention on Thursday in a rare show of public support for the former president as he accepts the

party's nomination for the president's post, CNN reported, citing sources.

Donald Trump takes the stage Thursday at the Republican National Convention to accept his party's nomination again and give his first speech since he was cut off mid-sentence by a flurry of gunfire in an assassination attempt at a rally in Pennsylvania. Trump's address will conclude the four-day convention in Milwaukee. He appeared each of the first three days with a white bandage on his ear, covering a wound he sustained in the Saturday shooting. His moment of survival has shaped the week, even as convention organisers insisted they would continue with their programme as planned less than 48 hours after the shooting. Speakers and delegates have repeatedly chanted "Fight, fight, fight!" in homage to Trump's words as he got to his feet and pumped his fist after Secret Service agents killed the gunman. And some of his supporters have started sporting their own makeshift bandages on the convention floor. Speakers attributed Trump's survival to divine intervention and paid tribute to victim Corey Comperatore, who died after shielding his wife and daughter from gunfire at the rally.

'Biden tests positive for COVID-19'

Milwaukee (PTI): US President Joe Biden has tested positive for COVID-19, halting his campaign at a critical juncture in the presidential election when he was facing increasing pressure about his health and concerns about his viability as a candidate.

"I'm sick," Biden, 81, wrote on X. Biden tested positive for COVID-19 on Wednesday, disrupting a key campaign event in Las Vegas meant to shore up support with Latino voters.

"He is vaccinated and boosted and he is experiencing mild symptoms, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement.

Biden has returned to his home in Delaware where he will self-isolate and will continue to carry out all of his duties fully during that time. The White House will provide regular updates on the president's status as he continues to carry out the full duties of the office while in isolation, she said.

The president was scheduled to speak at the Unidos event in Las Vegas on Wednesday afternoon.

"His symptoms remain mild, his respiratory rate is normal at 16, his temperature is normal at 97.8 and his pulse oximetry is normal at 97%." The President has received his first dose of Paxlovid. He will be self-isolating at his home in Rehoboth," the White House said.

"I feel good," Biden told reporters, as he boarded Air Force One in Las Vegas to fly back to his beach house in Delaware. He was not wearing a mask, nor were the people closest to him on the tarmac. It's unclear where and when the president contracted COVID-19. But the sudden diagnosis will place him behind closed doors at a time when Democratic lawmakers have been clamouring to see him out front.

Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends staying home until the infected person has been without a fever – with no fever-reducing medicine – for at least 24 hours and symptoms have been improving for 24 hours. It then recommends wearing a mask for five days after.

The president's physician, Dr Kevin O'Connor, said that Biden "presented this afternoon with upper respiratory symptoms, to include rhinorrhea (runny nose) and non-productive cough, with general malaise".

The president felt okay for his first event of the day, but given that he was not feeling better, point-of-care testing for COVID-19 was conducted, and the results were positive for the COVID-19 virus, he said.

"Given this, the president will be self-isolating in accordance with CDC guidance for symptomatic individuals. PCR confirmation testing will be pending," the doctor said.

Far-right Israeli minister visits sensitive Jerusalem holy site

AP ■ JERUSALEM/CAIRO

Israel's far-right national security minister visited Jerusalem's most sensitive holy site on Thursday morning, threatening to disrupt Gaza cease-fire talks. Itamar Ben-Gvir, an ultranationalist settler leader, said he had gone up to the contested Jerusalem hilltop compound of Al Aqsa Mosque to pray for the return of the hostages "but without a reckless deal."

Ben-Gvir said he was pressuring Netanyahu not to give in to international pressure and to continue with the military campaign in Gaza.

The move threatens to disrupt sensitive talks aimed at reaching a cease-fire in the 9-month-old Israel-Hamas war. Israeli negotiators landed in Cairo on Wednesday to continue talks.

Ben-Gvir's visit also came just days before Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu leaves for a trip to the United States, where he will address Congress. Ben-Gvir last visited the site in May, to protest countries unilaterally recognizing Palestinian statehood.

Jews and Muslims both claim the Jerusalem hilltop compound, which is considered the

holiest site for Jews. Palestinians consider the mosque a national symbol and view such visits as provocative, though Ben-Gvir has frequently visited the site, revered by Jews as the Temple Mount, during tense periods. Tensions over the compound have fueled past rounds of violence.

Meanwhile, an Israeli delegation has arrived in Egypt to press ahead with cease-fire talks, as Israel and Hamas consider the latest proposal.

That's according to three Egyptian airport officials, who did not provide further details. International mediators are pushing Israel and Hamas toward a phased deal that would halt the fighting and free about 120 hostages held by the militant group in Gaza.

Talks were rattled over the weekend when Israel said it targeted the Hamas military commander in a massive strike. His status remains unclear.

Hamas' Oct. 7 attack sparked the war when militants stormed into southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people – mostly civilians – and abducting about 250. Since then, Israeli ground offensives and bombardments have killed more than 38,600 people in Gaza, according to the territory's Health Ministry. It does not

distinguish between combatants and civilians in its count. Two international courts have accused Israel of war crimes and genocide – charges Israel denies. Most of Gaza's 2.3 million people are crammed into squalid tent camps in central and southern Gaza. Israeli restrictions, fighting and the breakdown of law and order have limited humanitarian aid efforts, causing widespread hunger and sparking fears of famine.

Jerusalem – Israel's parliament extended a temporary law which allows the country to shut down foreign media outlets they consider a threat to Israel's security. In a marathon session that lasted until early Thursday morning, the parliament gave final approval to extend the emergency law until Nov. 30.

Israeli officials used the new law on May 5 to close Qatar-based Al Jazeera within Israel, confiscating its equipment, banning its broadcasts and blocking its websites.

Under the law, Israel's Communications Ministry also briefly seized AP broadcasting equipment from southern Israel after accusing it of violating a new media law by providing images to Al Jazeera. The government returned the

equipment to AP several hours later.

A bill that would make the emergency legislation permanent is currently making its way through the Israeli parliament. The draft said a permanent bill is needed because Israel "has faced serious security threats since its establishment and is expected to continue to face them in the future, possibly even more severely." Critics say the measure passed earlier this year is undemocratic and a threat to press freedom.

Israeli strikes kill at least 11 people in central Gaza

Deir Al-Balah – Overnight Israeli strikes Thursday in central Gaza killed at least 11 people, including women and children.

Early Thursday an Israeli strike hit a house in central Gaza, killing at least six people, while another strike later hit a car, killing at least three. The dead were taken to the Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, where an Associated Press journalist counted the bodies. Among the six killed in the early strike in Zawaida were two children and two women. The area struck is close to Deir al-Balah, where many Palestinians displaced from across the war-torn Gaza Strip have fled.

Public failed by UK gov't, finds damning COVID inquiry

London (PTI): The British public was failed by the government's planning and processes when the COVID pandemic hit the country in early 2020, a damning independent public inquiry concluded on Thursday and called for "radical reform" for future civil emergencies. In the first of nine reports to be published by the 'UK COVID-10 Inquiry', chair Baroness Heather Hallett said the government prepared for the "wrong pandemic" and called for "radical reform" of the state of the UK's structures and procedures to prepare for future civil emergencies. The UK officially recorded more than 2,35,000 deaths involving COVID-19 up to the end of 2023 and the inquiry report finds that some of that "human cost" may have been avoided had the country been better prepared for the deadly outbreak.

"Never again can a disease be allowed to lead to so many deaths and so much suffering," said Hallett.

"I have no hesitation in concluding the processes, planning and policy of the civil contingency structures across the UK failed the citizens of all four nations.

Court: Closing arguments in espionage trial of WSJ reporter will be Friday

Yekaterinburg (Russia) (AP): Closing arguments in the espionage trial of US journalist Evan Gershkovich will be held Friday, a Russian court said, as the proceedings picked up speed in a case that has seen the reporter held in pre-trial custody for over a year.

Gershkovich attended a trial session for a second day behind closed doors on Thursday, the court said. He faces charges that he, his employer and the US government vehemently deny.

Unlike previous sessions in which reporters were allowed to see Gershkovich briefly before the proceedings began, there was no access to the courtroom and he was not seen, with no explanation given. Espionage cases are typically shrouded in secrecy.

Gershkovich, 32, was arrested on March 29, 2023, while he was on a reporting trip. Authorities claimed, without offering any evidence, that he was gathering secret information for the US. The American-born son of immigrants from the USSR, Gershkovich is the first Western journalist arrested on espionage charges in post-Soviet Russia.

The US State Department has declared him "wrongfully

detained," thereby committing the government to assertively seek his release. Gershkovich faces up to 20 years in prison if found guilty, which is almost a certainty. Russian courts convict more than 99 per cent of defendants, and prosecutors can appeal sentences that they regard as too lenient. They even can appeal acquittals.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Wednesday at the United Nations that Moscow and Washington's intelligence services are discussing an exchange involving Gershkovich, according to Russian state news agency Tass. Russia has previously signalled the possibility of a swap, but it says a verdict would have to come first. Gershkovich's trial began June 26 in the Ural Mountains city of Yekaterinburg after he spent about 15 months in in Moscow's notorious Lefortovo Prison.

At the trial's first day, the court said it was adjourning until mid-August. But Gershkovich's lawyers asked for the second hearing to be held earlier, Russian state news agency RIA Novosti and independent news site Mediazona reported Tuesday, citing court officials. The Russian Prosecutor

S Korea's top court recognises some rights for LGBT community

Seoul (AP): South Korea's top court ruled Thursday that same-sex couples are eligible to receive the same health insurance benefits as heterosexual couples, a landmark verdict hailed by human rights groups. The Supreme Court said it ruled that the state health insurance agency's refusal to provide spousal insurance coverage for gay couples was an act of discrimination that violates the constitutional principle of equality. Thursday's ruling is final and cannot be appealed.

"Today's ruling is a historic victory for equality and human rights in South Korea," Amnesty International said in a statement. "The court has taken a significant step towards dismantling systemic discrimination and ensuring inclusivity for all." A legal battle between a gay couple, So Seong-wook and Kim Yong Min, and the National Health Insurance Service began after the insurance agency revoked So's registration as a dependent of Kim, prompting So to file an administrative suit. In 2022, the Seoul Administrative Court ruled in favour of the insurance agency. But in February 2023, the Seoul High Court overturned the earlier verdict, saying that denying So's spousal coverage rights without reasonable grounds was discriminatory because such benefits are given to heterosexual spouses.

Starmer begins post-Brexit 'reset' with EU

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer welcomed leaders from the European Union to Oxfordshire in south-east England to initiate a "reset" with the 27-member economic bloc, which the UK is no longer a member of since a referendum in favour of leaving it in 2016. At a meeting of the European Political Community (EPC) in Blenheim Palace, the birthplace of Britain's war-time prime minister Winston Churchill, Starmer sought to set a new direction for his Labour Party government's post-Brexit ties with Europe to align on issues such as illegal migration and the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Distancing his new government from the previous Conservative Party policies,



the Labour Leader reiterated that the "unworkable" scheme of deporting illegal migrants to Rwanda had been "scrapped" and that the UK will never withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). "The EPC will fire the starting gun on this government's new approach to Europe, one that will not just benefit us now, but for generations to come, from disman-

tlng the people smuggling webs trafficking people across Europe to standing up to [Russian President] Putin's barbaric actions in Ukraine and destabilising activity across Europe," said Starmer. "I take a practical view of how the UK can meet this moment. I'm not driven by ideology – but by what is best for my country. So we will strengthen our existing relationships and we will build new ones. This includes resetting our relationship with the EU... and this summit is an opportunity to set a new path on illegal migration; to transform the way that we work together on border security and law enforcement," he said. Starmer then joined the EPC's Migration Working Group, which included leaders from Italy, Albania, Germany, Malta, Denmark, Hungary, the

Netherlands and Slovakia. Downing Street said the government is redeploying more than 100 Home Office staff from the Migration and Economic Development Partnership (MEDP) to a new rapid returns unit to take control of the country's borders. This will mean asylum applications from designated "safe" countries, such as India, will be speedily processed and illegal migrants returned to their country of origin.

It comes after the government announced a new Border Security Bill in Parliament on Wednesday to tackle criminal smuggling gangs giving a new Border Security Command counter-terrorism-style powers to disrupt organised immigration crime and ensure smugglers can be prosecuted for preparatory offences such as

supplying materials to facilitate organised immigration crime. "Dangerous small boat crossings are undermining our border security and putting lives at risk. Criminal smuggling gangs are making millions out of small boat crossings. We will work right across Europe to tackle this problem at (the) source, going after those profiting from this awful trade and bringing them to justice," said UK Home Secretary Yvette Cooper.

The EPC is a pan-European meeting of leaders, including the heads of the EU institutions and, for the first time at this EPC, leaders of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have also been included.

Seattle police fire officer who said Indian student killed had 'limited value' fired

New York/Seattle (PTI): A US police officer, whose insensitive comments and laughter following the horrific death of a 23-year-old Indian student had caused outrage, has been fired from the Seattle Police Department.

Jaahnavi Kandula was struck by a speeding police vehicle driven by Seattle Police Officer Kevin Dave as she was crossing a street on January 23 last year. Dave was driving at more than 119 kmph on the way to a report of a drug overdose call. Kandula was thrown 100 feet when she was struck by the speeding police patrol vehicle.

In bodycam footage released by the Seattle Police Department, Officer Daniel Auderer was heard laughing after the deadly crash and had remarked: "Uh, I think she went up on the hood, hit the windshield, and then when he hit the brakes, flew off the car... But she is dead." After making these comments, Auderer "laughed hard for four seconds," the department's Disciplinary Action Report said. Auderer's body-worn camera also captured him saying, "Yeah, just write a check. Just, yeah (laughter). USD 11,000. She was 26, anyway. She had limited value."

When asked at an Office of Police Accountability interview about his comments that Kandula had "limited value,"

Auderer claimed he was "ridiculing the city attorneys who would be tasked with litigating a potential wrongful death lawsuit".

Interim Chief Sue Rahr at the Seattle Police Department said in an internal email, seen by PTI Wednesday, that the hurt Auderer's words have inflicted on Kandula's family "cannot be erased. The actions (of) this individual police officer have brought shame on the Seattle Police Department and our entire profession, making the job of every police officer more difficult."

Rahr said that as the leader of the organisation, it is her duty to uphold the high standards necessary to maintain public trust. "For me to allow the officer to remain on our force would only bring further dishonour to the entire department. For that reason, I am going to terminate his employment," she said in the internal email.

Rahr noted that at the root of this case lies an extremely difficult judgment call of how to fairly balance "intent versus impact." "There is no doubt that the named officer's cruel comments and callous laughter about the tragic death caused deep pain to Ms Kandula's family, but also immeasurable damage to the public trust of police in the Seattle community, across the nation, and around the world," she said in the email.

NASA cancels its moon rover mission

Washington (AP): NASA has said that it is cancelling its water-seeking moon rover, citing cost overruns and launch delays.

The Viper rover was supposed to launch in late 2023 aboard a lander provided by Astrobotic Technology, but extra testing and increased costs kept delaying the mission, threatening other projects, the space agency said on Wednesday. The rover had aimed to explore the moon's south pole. About \$450 million had been spent so far on its development,



NASA said. The announcement comes days before the 55th anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission, which landed Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on the moon on July 20, 1969. NASA said it plans to study the presence of lunar ice through other projects.

Astrobotic still plans to fly its Griffin moon lander – minus a rover – by the end of next year. The company's first moonshot ended in failure in January with a fiery plunge over the South Pacific.

Ursula von der Leyen re-elected as European Commission pres

PTI ■ STRASBOURG



Lawmakers at the European Parliament on Thursday re-elected Ursula von der Leyen to a second 5-year term as president of the European Union's executive commission, giving her a comfortable majority and heading off a possible leadership vacuum. Von der Leyen raised both fists in victory as the Parliament President Roberta Metsola read out the result at the legislature. The re-election ensures leadership continuity for the 27-nation bloc as it wrestles with crises ranging from the war in Ukraine to climate change, migration and housing shortages.

A majority in the 720-seat legislature voted for the German Christian Democrat after a speech in which she pledged to be a strong leader for Europe in a time of crisis and polarization. Von der Leyen gained 401 of the 707 votes cast. There were 284 votes against her candidacy, 15 abstentions and seven void ballots. The secret ballot came hot on the heels of strong gains by the far right in last month's election for the European Parliament. "I will never let the extreme polarisation of our societies become accepted. I will never accept that demagogues and extremists destroy our European way of life. And I

stand here today ready to lead the fight with all the Democratic forces in this house," von der Leyen said in her final pitch. If lawmakers had rejected her candidacy, it would leave leaders of the 27-nation bloc scrambling to find a replacement as Europe grapples with crises ranging from the war in Ukraine to climate change. Instead, the continent now has an experienced pair of hands at the helm. In a speech that sought to shore up support from across the political spectrum, von der Leyen pledged to strengthen the EU economy, its police and border agencies, tackle migration and pursue policies tackling climate change while also helping farmers who have staged protests against what they call stifling EU bureaucracy and environmental rules. She also took a swipe at Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his

recent visit to Russia shortly after his country took over the rotating six-month EU presidency. "This so-called peace mission was nothing but an appeasement mission," von der Leyen said as she vowed that Europe would remain shoulder-to-shoulder with Ukraine. One radical right lawmaker, Diana Iovanovici-Sosoaca of Romania, was escorted out of the parliament's chamber for heckling a speaker during the debate following von der Leyen's speech. Iovanovici-Sosoaca briefly wore what appeared to be a muzzle and held up religious icons before being led out of the room. Over the past five years, von der Leyen has steered the bloc through a series of crises, including Britain's exit from the EU, the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. She has also pushed a Green Deal aiming to make the EU climate-neutral by 2050. As the debate ended, she told lawmakers: "I hope to have your trust and confidence for the next years. Long live Europe." Von der Leyen's election came as newly elected UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer was welcoming some 45 heads of government to discuss migration, energy security and the threat from Russia as he seeks to restore relations between the UK and its European neighbours. The lead-

ers signed off on the conservative German von der Leyen at a summit meeting late last month. The 65-year-old von der Leyen's bid was boosted when the European People's Party, which includes von der Leyen's Christian Democratic Union, remained the largest group at the EU Parliament after the elections. The German politician has been praised for her leading role during the coronavirus crisis, when the EU bought vaccines collectively for its citizens. But she also found herself receiving sharp criticism for the opacity of the negotiations with vaccine makers. The EU general court ruled Wednesday that the commission did not allow the public enough access to information about COVID-19 vaccine purchase agreements it secured with pharmaceutical companies during the pandemic. Before voting got underway, a majority of lawmakers rejected a motion from a leftist bloc in parliament calling for the election to be delayed until September in light of the court ruling. Following the elections for EU Parliament, European Union leaders agreed on the officials who will hold the key positions in the world's biggest trading bloc in the coming years for issues ranging from antitrust investigations to foreign policy.

Bangladesh govt says ready to hold talks with quota protesters; Army deployed

PTI ■ DHAKA

The Bangladesh government on Thursday expressed willingness to hold talks with the students protesting against the quota system in jobs after fresh violence erupted across the country as they attempted to enforce a nationwide shutdown over the issue. Authorities deployed Border Guard Bangladesh personnel across the country including the capital, to maintain law and order, the official BSS news agency reported. Addressing a press conference, Law Minister Anisul Huq said the government decided to sit in for a dialogue with protesting students and entrusted him and Education Minister Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury with the task of the discussion. "Whenever they agree, we will sit...it could be held this (Thursday) afternoon even," he said. "Government has agreed to hold talks with the quota reformists," he told journalists at a press briefing. He also said Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina asked the law minister to take the initiative to hold an early hearing of the quota-related case pending with the Supreme Court. He said he has already instructed the Attorney General to take

the initiative on this, and the AG will file an appeal with the Supreme Court on Sunday seeking an early hearing of the case. The government has decided to form a judicial probe committee led by High Court Justice Khandaker Diluruzzaman to investigate the violent incidents that have claimed at least seven lives, including four students. The committee will be formed upon receiving approval from the chief justice. The law minister also requested the protesters to either end or suspend their protest as the government is ready to hold talks with them. Fresh violence erupted in Bangladesh on Thursday after an overnight lull as thousands of students attempted to enforce a nationwide shutdown. Mainstream media and witnesses said the protesters clashed with police, leaving many people injured and prompting people to stay indoors. Owners preferred to keep many shopping malls shut. According to TV footage, riot police fired rubber bullets and tear gas canisters to disperse protesters while students aligned with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's ruling Awami League confronted them on the

streets with bricks and bamboo sticks. Witnesses said the protesters laid a siege on the state-run Bangladesh Television Bhaban in the Rampura area in Dhaka and damaged its front side while some 1,200 staff, including journalists, were stranded inside. The protesters overnight vowed to enforce a "complete shutdown" after days of demonstrations and violent clashes that left at least seven dead. The seventh death was reported on Thursday in Dhaka. Government offices and banks were open as paramilitary Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), riot police and elite anti-crime Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) patrolled streets in Dhaka and other major cities, but the attendance appeared thin because of limited transport. Many offices asked their staff to work from home. Bus services between Dhaka and the rest of the country were also cut off, with people staying at home. Staff members at different bus counters in Dhaka's Gabtoli and Sayedabad Bus Terminal told The Daily Star that bus owners have asked them not to run any buses on the roads. Many bus counters at the terminal were closed. Additionally, buses were

seen standing idle in queues at the terminal, our correspondent reports from the spot. Local markets and shopping malls had limited entry points open. Some roadside shops were open, while others remained closed. The clashes erupted on Monday as activists of ruling Awami League's student front confronted the protesters who insist the existing quota system was largely debarring the enrolment of meritorious students in government services. Demonstrators accused the ruling party's student wing, Bangladesh Chhatra League of attacking their "peaceful protests" with backing from the police. Fifty-six per cent of government jobs are reserved under the current quota system, with 30 being for the descendants of the 1971 Liberation War freedom fighters, 10 per cent for backward administrative districts, 10 per cent for women, five per cent for ethnic minority groups and one per cent for the handicapped people. Every year some 3,000 government jobs open up to nearly 400,000 graduates. The protesters waged the campaign for the reform of the system, saying it was debarring meritorious students' recruitment in first-class and second-class government jobs.

CCP endorses reforms to halt economic slowdown; emphasizes Xi's leadership

PTI ■ BEIJING



A crucial meeting of China's ruling Communist Party on Thursday adopted a resolution for comprehensive reforms to lift the sluggish growth of the world's second-largest economy by achieving socialist modernisation by 2035 and re-emphasised President Xi Jinping's "core" leadership position. Stated to be a defining moment of Xi's leadership of the party, the third plenum of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee discussed and adopted a report, presented by Xi, 71, an official communique said here at the end of the four-day meet. The plenum took place at a time when China, beset by a slowdown affected by COVID lockdowns, is struggling with various curbs and sanctions from the US and the EU, especially for its high-tech products. It is also trying to assure both foreign business and the private sector at home about the country's economic prospects to attract investments as the economic growth, in the April to June quarter, slowed to 4.7 per cent on an annual basis. Xi delivered explanatory remarks on the draft version of the resolution proposing reforms to revitalise broad sections of the economy at the meeting attended by 364 members of the CPC Central Committee, which is the top policy body of the party. Although details of the reform package presented by Xi are yet to be released, the commu-

nique said he mostly focussed on building a high-standard socialist market economy. "The overall objectives of further deepening reform comprehensively are to continue improving and developing the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics and modernise China's system and capacity for governance," the communique said. "By 2035, we will have finished building a high-standard socialist market economy in all respects, further improved the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, generally modernised our system and capacity for governance, and basically realised socialist modernisation," it said. The reform tasks laid out in the resolution shall be completed by the time the country celebrates its 80th founding anniversary in 2029, it added. The Plenum also highlighted the "core" leadership

position of Xi, who is in his unprecedented third five-year term in power and called for improving national security institutions and the CPC's control over the military "to effectively safeguard the country's stability and security over the long term," the communique said. Aiming to achieve basic modernisation of national defence and the armed forces, the communique further urged maintaining the Party's absolute leadership over the armed forces and fully strengthening the military through reforms for a strong guarantee for realising the goals for the centenary of the People's Liberation Army in 2027. In improving the Party's leadership "we must acquire a deep understanding of the decisive significance of establishing Comrade Xi Jinping's core position on the Party Central Committee and in the Party as a whole and establishing the guiding role of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," it said. In building a high-standard socialist market economy, the role of the market must be better leveraged, with a fairer and more dynamic market environment to be fostered and resource allocation to be made as efficient and productive as possible. Restrictions on the market will be lifted while effective regulation will be ensured to better maintain order in the market and remedy market failures, the communique said.

Shopping mall fire in China kills 16 people

Beijing (PTI): At least 16 people were killed after a fire broke out at a shopping mall in southwest China's Sichuan Province. The incident occurred on Wednesday around 6 pm at the 14-story building, located in a high-tech zone in the city of Zigong, Sichuan province, according to Chinese state media.

Dramatic images and videos showed a huge column of black smoke billowing from the building. Several people were also seen gathered on a balcony. The rescue operation was completed on Thursday. Around 75 people who were trapped inside the building were evacuated, the local fire department said. A total of 16 people have been killed, and the rest were evacuated from the building, state-run Xinhua news agency reported. According to the preliminary investigations, the fire was caused by construction work, the report added. China's Ministry of Emergency Management and National Fire and Rescue Administration said it has dispatched a working team to investigate the incident. Fire experts from across the country will also be sent to participate in the accident investigation, the ministry said. China continues to witness major fire accidents despite the directives from President Xi Jinping to implement strict preventive measures for provincial governments.

North Korea launches balloons likely carrying trash toward South Korea

AP ■ SEOUL



North Korea resumed flying balloons likely carrying trash toward South Korea on Thursday, the South's military said, days after it vowed to respond to what it called repeated South Korean civilian leafleting campaigns in the North. South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement that the balloons were flying north of Seoul, which is about an hour's drive from the border, on Thursday afternoon. It warned the South Korea public to be cautious of falling objects and report to authori-

ties if they spot balloons on the ground. Beginning in late May, North Korea has floated numerous balloons carrying newspaper, scraps of cloth, cigarette butts

and even manure toward South Korea, saying they were in response to South Korean activists sending political leaflets to the North via their own balloons. No hazardous materials were found. In response, South Korea suspended a 2018 tension-reduction deal with North Korea, resuming propaganda broadcasts briefly and front-line live-fire military drills at border areas. Earlier this week, the powerful sister of North Korea leader Kim Jong Un vowed to respond to what she called new South Korean civilian leafleting activities. She said South

Korean balloons have been found frequently at the North Korea border and other areas. In her statement Tuesday, Kim Yo Jong threatened new retaliatory steps, saying South Korean "scum" must be ready to pay "a gruesome and dear price." That raised concerns that North Korea could stage physical provocations, rather than balloon launches. South Korea's military said Wednesday it has boosted its readiness to brace for any provocation by North Korea. It said North Korea may fire at incoming South Korean balloons across the border.

Nepal's future is bright: Oli

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

Newly-appointed Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli on Thursday said that Nepal's future is "bright," but its current scenario needs to be changed, amidst frequent political turmoil in the Himalayan nation. Oli, who was sworn in on Monday as the Himalayan nation's prime minister for the fourth time, said the country's current scenario is not good. The Rising Nepal newspaper reported. Addressing the Engineer Day event here, the 72-year-old veteran Communist leader said that though the country is praiseworthy, its situation does not match it. Nepal has faced frequent political turmoil as the country has seen 14 governments in the past 16 years after the Republican system was introduced. "There is an issue in the country. If a body is unwell, then it cannot be said that hands are fine. Just like when the fever comes, the whole body suffers; the situation of the country is not good overall, at least not praiseworthy," Oli was quoted as saying. "The history of our country is glorious and worth praising, just like the country is. There is no doubt that the future of our country is good, but it is, at present, not in a place of satisfaction. Therefore, it needs to

be changed," he said. He underscored that the need of the hour was to take the country towards betterment from the present deteriorated condition, Nepal's state-run RSS news agency reported. Asserting that the government was involved in resolving the country's existing problems, Oli said, "There is no condition of being satisfied. We have to change this condition. There is no doubt that the future of the country is bright." He expressed commitment that the government would advance, resolving problems surfacing in every sector. Oli, who needs to secure a vote of confidence from Parliament within 30 days of appointment, will take a vote of confidence on Sunday. PTI Meanwhile, Chinese Premier Li Qiang on Thursday expressed his desire to implement the understanding reached between the top leaders and the two countries in the past to collaborate under the China-Nepal Belt and Road Cooperation and also to promote collaboration in other areas as well. Nepal and China signed a memorandum of understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a flagship initiative of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Under this, the two countries are expected to focus on connectivity, trade, development strategies, and policy dialogue for cooperation in the fields of economy, environment, technology and culture, among others. Li said that he is always willing to see new progress in Nepal-China-friendly strategic partnership for attaining development and prosperity. Li also said the relations between the two countries are based on peaceful coexistence, equality and collaboration in a win-win situation. During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Nepal in 2019, the existing bilateral relations between Nepal and China were elevated to a strategic level. It was agreed by both countries to transform the Nepal-China relationship from a "comprehensive partnership of cooperation featuring everlasting friendship" to a "strategic partnership for development and prosperity."

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Pak govt targets more social media platforms; FB, Insta restricted across multiple service providers

Lahore (PTI): After successfully blocking X for over six months, the Pakistan government has targeted more social media platforms — Facebook and Instagram — and restricted their access to the people, a step seen as a plan to impose a complete ban on social media. Since Wednesday, Facebook and Instagram have been restricted in Pakistan, causing users to experience difficulties accessing the social media platforms across various internet service providers (ISPs). Some users are also experiencing issues with other Meta-owned apps, such as WhatsApp. There has been no official word so far from the Pakistani government regarding restrictions placed on access to Facebook and Instagram. The ban comes amid an ongoing tussle between the superior judiciary, former premier Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) and the powerful military establishment which is apparently running the government. The Punjab government led by Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz earlier had asked the federal government to ban all social media platforms — YouTube, X, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc — from 6 to 11 Muharram (July 13 to 18) in Punjab, a province of over 120 million people, to "control hate

material, misinformation to avoid sectarian violence" during the holy month. Nayatel, a telecommunication company, said on X on Thursday: "Facebook and Instagram services have been disrupted with all service providers across the country for the last two days. This blockage is in addition to the already blocked Twitter/X. We are waiting for a reply from the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority for the reasons for this blockage and when this ban will be lifted." Downdetector which tracks outages by collating status reports from several sources including users showed that user reports indicated problems in accessing Facebook. According to NetBlocks, a global internet tracking agency, "Restrictions on Facebook are in effect on multiple providers in Pakistan." X (formerly Twitter) has been banned in Pakistan since February 17, 2024, following outrage on the "stolen mandate" of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) backed candidates in the February 8 general election. Pakistan Army Chief Gen Asim Munir has already declared social media a "vicious media" and underscored the need to fight against this "digital terrorism."

Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar who also has the portfolio of foreign minister has also called for placing a complete ban on social media. Both the military and the government have been receiving backlash on social media since the ouster of former prime minister Imran Khan through a no-confidence motion in April 2022. The government has arrested dozens of social media activities of Khan's party since then. After keeping mum on the ban on X for about five months, the Ministry of Interior recently told a higher court that it had taken the step as "X is a threat to peace and national security as it spreads 'misinformation and incites violence.'" The Shehbaz government also said that the ban was imposed on X "on the basis of reports from the intelligence agencies." Khan's PTI on Thursday lambasted placing restrictions on more social media apps like Facebook, saying: "After Twitter, Facebook and Instagram were also banned in Pakistan. Freedom of speech and access to information is not just a concept of the inherent human right to voice one's opinion publicly without fear of censorship or punishment, but also a right everyone's born with." The PTI further said that times like these when all tactics are

being employed to blindsides the most popular party of the country, thwarting freedom of speech even after oppression, now sounds like freedom to discriminate, by the power hub. PTI

PARADIP PORT AUTHORITY
MARINE DEPARTMENT
No. MD/SHS/TECH-27/2024/786 Date: 10.07.2024
e-Tender Call Notice (e-TCN)
Name of the Work: Maintenance dredging of S.O Larkis M' quantity from Mahanadi River Channel for one year i.e. for the year 2024-25 including Mobilization / De-mobilization. Estimated cost : Rs. 9,35,00,000/- . Last date of submission of tender on-line bidding till 17:00 hours on 02.08/2024. The technical bids shall be opened at 16:30 hours on 30/08/2024. For further details, please log on to the website: <https://eprocure.gov.in/eprocure/app>. Sd/- Deputy Conservator, Paradip Port Authority
PPA/PR/22/2024-2025 dttd.17.07.2024

PUNJAB STATE POWER CORPORATION LTD.
(Regd. Office: PSEB Head Office, The Mall Patiala-147001)
Corporate Identity Number U40109PB2010SGC033813
(Contact No. 96461-17606)
E-Tender Enquiry No.: 200/MM-ITGM-336(VIII)O&M/GHTP/2024 Dated 17-07-2024
Dy. Chief Engineer, Mechanical Maintenance Circle-I/GHTP, Lehra Mohabbat invites e-tender for "Cleaning of tubes of Turbine condenser of 210 MW (KWU) Unit-II and 250 MW Unit-III of GHTP, Lehra Mohabbat with Hydro Jet and water powered bullet cleaners".
For detailed NIT & Tender Specification please refer to <https://eproc.punjab.gov.in> from 17-07-2024 at 18:00 Hrs. onwards
Note: Corrigendum and addendum, if any will be published online at <https://eproc.punjab.gov.in>
GHTP-58/24
76155/12/3132/2023/35805 Dated CHD :- 7/18/2024

PUNJAB STATE POWER CORPORATION LTD.
(Regd. Office: PSEB Head Office, The Mall Patiala-147001)
Corporate Identity Number U40109PB2010SGC033813
(Contact No. 9646117609 E-mail: sefet-ghtp@pspcpl.in)
E-TENDER NOTICE
E-Tender Enquiry No.: 03/CE-28/FE&T/GHTP/2024 Dated: 19-07-24
Dy. Chief Engineer / FE&T Circle GHTP, Lehra Mohabbat invites E-Tender for the work to conduct Energy Audit of GHTP, Lehra Mohabbat Unit No.1 to IV having capacities of 2x210 MW + 2x250 MW for the year 2024-25. Detailed NIT and tender specification can be downloaded from website <https://eproc.punjab.gov.in> from dated 19-07-2024 at 17:00 hrs. onwards.
Note: No corrigendum will be published in newspapers. Details regarding corrigendum will be seen on official website <https://eproc.punjab.gov.in>
GHTP-59/24
76155/12/3134/2023/35810 Dated CHD :- 7/18/2024

FTA to boost India-Russia commerce

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Steps such as increasing exports, making local currency trading workable and a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union will help boost trade between India and Russia, think tank GTRI said on Thursday.

India should not worry over the trade deficit, as it is getting crude petroleum oil at cheaper than market rates from Russia and it is also cutting India's overall oil import bill, the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said.

Since the Ukraine war began in February 2022 and the US imposed sanctions on Russia, the trade relationship between India and Russia has shifted significantly.

Exports during the financial year 2020-21 and 2023-24 grew by 59 per cent, while imports surged by about 8,300 per cent, the report said, adding the trade deficit rose from USD 2.8 billion before the war in 2020-21 to USD 57.2 billion at present. It said that the import surge is solely due to India's



strategic procurement of crude oil from Russia influenced by favourable trade terms and Russia's need to find new markets amidst Western sanctions. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Russia visit on July 8-9, India and Russia have set an ambitious bilateral trade target of USD 100 billion by 2030.

With current bilateral trade at USD 65.7 billion in 2023-24, the target seems achievable, GTRI Founder Ajay Srivastava said. In 2023-24, India's exports to Russia were 4.3 billion, while imports driven by crude oil stood at USD 61.4

billion. Share of crude oil and petroleum products in imports was 88 per cent. India exports a diverse range of products to Russia including smartphones, shrimp, medicine, meat, tiles, coffee, parts of airplanes and helicopters, chemicals, computers, and fruits. "India has competitive advantage in these products and hence the potential to export more to Russia. India should prepare a product-level strategy to promote exports," Srivastava said. On local currency trade, the report said that trade

cannot be settled in rupee due to limited international use of the Indian rupee and Russia's reluctance to accumulate it beyond a limit.

After the Ukraine war, the US put sanctions on Russia, not allowing it to use SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) pipeline for dollar transactions.

The key question for India is finding the best way to pay Russia the amount equal to USD 60 billion in trade deficit.

"Local currency trading would be the best solution. To facilitate this, India needs to establish a transparent and open currency exchange. This exchange would provide clear, market-determined exchange rates between local currencies like Indian rupee and other currencies such as the Russian rouble, Malaysian ringgit, Thai baht, or Chinese yuan," it said.

It added that this would not only give banks a reliable reference for issuing letters of credit but also help businesses understand currency volatility better. "Countries with currency surpluses, like Russia with

its Indian rupee surplus from oil exports to India, could exchange their surplus for other currencies more efficiently in such a multi-currency exchange platform," it said.

It also suggested making the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) functional. The INSTC is a 7,200-kilometer multi-modal route linking India with Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia, Central Asia, and Europe. "When functional, it would reduce transit time between India and western Russian ports from 45 to 25 days and cut freight costs by 30 per cent compared to the Suez Canal route. INSTC, despite these advantages, has limited use due to underinvestment in infrastructure," it said.

The frequent loading and unloading of cargo along the INSTC and the involvement of sanctioned Iran also pose logistical challenges. Chabahar is a key part of this corridor. India is negotiating the 'India-Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Trade Agreement' with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Belarus. Formal talks for the agreement have not yet started.

Toshiba Group to invest 10 billion Japanese yen in India to expand capacity

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Toshiba Group on Thursday said it will invest 10 billion Japanese yen (over Rs 500 crore) to increase the capacity of producing power transmission and distribution equipment in India.

Toshiba Transmission & Distribution Systems (India) Pvt Ltd (TTDI) will increase its capacity of manufacturing power transformers and distribution transformers by about 1.5 times compared to FY2023, over a three-year period from FY2024 to FY2026, it stated.

Toshiba Group has positioned power T&D as a focus business and will invest about JPY 10 billion (over Rs 500 crore) in TTDI to expand its capacity. Hiroshi Furuta, Chairperson and Managing Director, TTDI, said in the statement, "Furthering our commitment to make-in-India and export-from-India, the new investment will improve operational efficiency, increase speed-to-market, and support in expanding our business in India and overseas." With this investment, TTDI will increase its assembly and test line capacity for distribution transformers and



power transformers for the transmission grids and distribution networks.

Enhanced testing capacity for power transformers will represent a significant upgrade, specifically geared towards expanding exports as well as meeting the high demand for 400kV/765kV transformers in the Indian market. Distribution transformer expansion is aimed at creating a dedicated facility for CRGO (Cold Rolled Grain Oriented) steel processing centre in order to enhance the vertical integration facility, which would help the company reduce the process lead time and enhance quality and safety, the company said. Besides, TTDI will also build a new manufacturing facility

for surge arresters during the first half of FY24 and the products will be commercially available in the market by the second half of the year.

TTDI offers a range of innovative and reliable technologies for the renewable energy sector, including photovoltaic (PV) inverters, power transformers, gas-insulated switchgear (GIS), and inverter duty transformers. TTDI is also focusing on enhancement of GIS, transformers, control relay & substation automation system solutions to applications in energy (renewable sector), data centre for smart cities, and for industry segments like petro chemical plants, refineries and railway.

Cybersecurity players seek digital security push in Budget for Viksit Bharat

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

With India looking to embrace artificial intelligence rapidly, cybersecurity players expect that the upcoming Union Budget will include measures to boost safety of the country's digital space through further allocation of funds and incentives.

Innefu Labs, CEO and Co-founder Tarun Wig said the global focus on AI presents a critical juncture for India. "The AI and ML (machine learning) models can be trained to identify and prevent 'zero-day' attacks. But this will require support from the government (in) nurturing and retaining top cyber talent, and empowering companies to invest in training AI models for cybersecurity," Wig said. He added that while other nations are busy building their AI infrastructure, India must prioritise on optimum use of AI which could include training AI and ML models for improving our defence and intelligence posture, and to reduce cyber crimes which are on the rise, to identify money laundering networks or using AI to take governance to the far flung villages of the country. "Adding government support for research and development



initiatives to proven companies in the private sector and not just academia would create a win-win situation. It would attract and retain talent while enabling companies, large and small, to innovate. This, in turn, would foster a digital environment that can support future advancements in AI and other emerging technologies," Wig said.

The government had announced a fund worth Rs 1 lakh crore for R&D in sunrise technologies in the interim budget for financial year 2024-25.

IIT Kanpur's Artificial Intelligence and Innovation-Driven Entrepreneurship Centre of Excellence (AIIDE-CoE) incubated Future Crime Research Foundation (FCRF), Co-Founder Shashank Shekhar said investment on cybersecurity is similar to

insurance for digital economies. He said India faces one of the highest number of cyber attacks globally every year. "While the government is making an effort to digitally empower every citizen of the country, it becomes imperative to secure them as well. We request the government to consider building Indian champions in the cybersecurity space to meet the aspiration of Viksit Bharat by 2047," Shekhar said. Futurex, South Asia-Vice President, Ruchin Kumar said it is important to increase funding for cybersecurity training programs to address the workforce skill gap. "To achieve this, collaborations with educational institutions to develop specialized cybersecurity courses and certifications must be

fostered. We strongly recommend fund allocation specifically for protecting critical infrastructure, such as power grids, transportation networks, and healthcare systems, from cyber threats," he said.

He said that the government should also mandate and fund regular security audits and vulnerability assessments for critical infrastructure sectors. Zeron, Founder, Sanket Sarkar said the government has consistently demonstrated its commitment to this critical industry through strategic investments and supportive policies.

"Reflecting on the past years, it's clear that our digital defenses have been significantly strengthened. I am optimistic that this year's budget will further amplify this focus, with substantial allocations to enhance our cybersecurity infrastructure," he said.

Sarkar said continued prioritisation of cyber resilience and innovation is crucial for defending against evolving threats and driving economic growth. "This budget will not be merely a financial planning; it'll be a bold declaration of India's intent to become a global cybersecurity leader," he said.

Markets turn negative after hitting fresh record-high levels

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark indices turned negative soon after hitting new record-high levels in a highly volatile trade on Thursday.

The 30-share BSE Sensex opened on a weak note, but bounced back later and climbed 193.9 points to hit a new record peak of 80,910.45. However, the benchmark failed to hold on to the gains and traded 151.38 points lower at 80,550.97 at 11:22 hours.

Similarly, the NSE Nifty after a weak beginning recovered the early lost ground and climbed 65.9 points to hit a fresh lifetime high of 24,678.90. The Nifty also gave up all the gains and quoted 66.35 points down at 24,546.65.

Among the Sensex pack, Adani Ports, Asian Paints, Tata Steel, NTPC, Power Grid and UltraTech Cement were the biggest laggards. On the contrary, Tata Consultancy Services, Hindustan Unilever, Bajaj Finserv, Tech Mahindra and State Bank of India were trading in the positive territory.



In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo and Shanghai were trading lower, while Hong Kong quoted higher.

The US markets ended mostly lower on Wednesday. Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.45 per cent to USD 85.45 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth Rs 1,271.45 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data.

Stock markets were closed on Wednesday on account of Muharram. The BSE benchmark climbed 51.69 points or 0.06 per cent to settle at a new lifetime high of 80,716.55 on Tuesday. The NSE Nifty went up by 26.30 points or 0.11 per cent to settle at an all-time closing high of 24,613.

Nokia sees double-digit fall in Q2 profit, sales in weak 5G market but sees improved 2nd half

AP ■ HELSINKI

Wireless and fixed-network equipment maker Nokia Thursday reported a double-digit fall in profit and sales in the second quarter due to a continuing weak market as clients are holding off investments in 5G technology.

The Espoo, Finland-based company reported a net profit of 328 million euros (USD 359 million) for the April-June period, down 20 per cent from 409 million euros (USD 447 million) a year earlier. Net income attributable to shareholders was 325 million euros (USD 355 million), down from 410 million euros a year earlier. Similarly to its Nordic rival Ericsson of Sweden, Nokia has suffered in the past year from operators cutting back on investments into 5G and other telecom technology because of economic uncertainty and high financing costs.

"Our financial performance in the second quarter continued to be impacted by the ongoing market weakness with net sales declining 18 per cent year-on-year in constant currency," Nokia CEO Pekka Lundmark said in a statement. Nokia's sales were down 18 per cent at 4.5 billion euros (USD 4.9 billion)



compared with 5.4 billion euros (USD 5.9 billion) a year earlier.

The Finnish company is one of the world's main suppliers of 5G, the latest generation of broadband technology along with Ericsson, China's Huawei and South Korea's Samsung. Lundmark said that the company's sales would improve in the second half of this year, particularly in its network infrastructure business unit.

"Looking forward, we believe the industry is stabilizing and given the order intake seen in recent quarters we expect a significant acceleration in net sales growth in the second half," he said.

However, in Nokia's mobile network unit, the biggest business entity during the quarter by sales, "the market dynamic remains challenging as operators continue to be cautious" of spending in 5G technology and equipment, Lundmark said.

Recycling industry body demands zero duty on aluminium scrap imports

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Ahead of the budget, recycling industry body MRAI has urged the government to remove the import duty on aluminium scrap, saying it will help promote sustainability in the industry.

According to the Material Recycling Association of India (MRAI), the recycling process of aluminium scrap emits only 0.3 million tonnes (MT) of Co2 on per tonne of production compared to 14 tonnes of carbon emissions on the production of 1 MT of aluminium through smelters route which involves maintaining of coal-based capacities for power supply. "Among the key challenges faced by the Indian aluminium recycling industry is 2.5 per cent import duty on aluminium scrap. It is a key raw material for aluminium recycling and the government should make it to zero until the quality material (scrap) is available in sufficient quantity in the domestic market," AI said in a letter to Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will present the full Union Budget for the



financial year 2024-25 in Parliament on July 23.

Many countries have realized the importance of scrap that it is sustainable because of recyclable in nature. The demand driver for aluminium in the next few years is going to be substantially higher due to India's projected higher growth of GDP and ambitious infrastructure development. The production of primary aluminium metal is also associated with the consumption of large volumes of natural resources, bauxite ore and coal and the generation of large quantities of solid wastes, it noted. "Aluminium recycling has become an important part of aluminium production in India because it is much less energy intensive than the production of primary aluminium," AI said.

Lower per capita aluminium consumption of 2.5 kg in India is also a challenge against a world average of 11

kg, as the recycling industry has to rely more on imports for quality aluminium scrap to meet the shortfall.

"India's aluminium recycling industry plays a pivotal role in harmonising efforts to combat climate change and bolster environmental sustainability. Recycling helps to combat the climate crisis by limiting the use of raw materials, protecting natural resources like bauxite and reducing the waste going into landfills," AI President Sanjay Mehta said.

"We need to take decisive steps here when it comes to its goals towards sustainability and low carbon ecosystem. World over metal scrap, especially Aluminium is considered as the greenest raw material to be used for metal production. "Having import duties on Aluminium scrap could be retrograde and would decelerate our efforts in reaching sustainability goals," said Dhawal Shah, Senior Vice President, of AI. The association has also sought zero duty on copper scrap and brass scrap which attract 2.5 per cent duty at present, and zinc and lead which have 5 per cent import duty.

Sales of luxury homes up 27% to 8,500 units in 7 cities in January-June: CBRE

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Sales of luxury housing units, each costing Rs 4 crore and above, rose 27 per cent to around 8,500 units during the January-June period across seven major cities in high demand, according to real estate consultant CBRE.

In its report 'India Market Monitor Q2 2024' released on Thursday, CBRE said that India's luxury housing (units priced Rs 4 crore and above) segment maintained strong sales momentum, registering a 27 per cent annual increase in January-June 2024.

"Total sales of luxury units during the January-June period stood at around 8,500 units compared to about 6,700 units during the same period last year," the consultant said. Delhi-NCR, Mumbai and Hyderabad emerged as prominent markets, accounting for nearly 84 per cent of the total luxury housing sales across the top seven cities. Further, Pune recorded a noteworthy increase in luxury sales activity with demand growing nearly six-fold on an annual basis to touch around 1,100



units. Sales in Delhi-NCR rose 14 per cent annually to 3,300 units. Mumbai saw a growth of 14 per cent to 2,500 units. Housing sales in Hyderabad stood at 1,300 units, up 44 per cent annually. Pune registered sales of 1,100 units, marking a 450 per cent year-on-year increase during this period. In Chennai and Kolkata, sales of luxury housing units, each priced at Rs 4 crore and above, remained flat at 100 units and 200 units, respectively.

significant land acquisitions by developers."

These elements are expected to balance supply and demand dynamics and invigorate market activity, he added.

"The luxury housing segment, particularly for properties priced at INR 4 crore and above, is set to thrive as buyers seek homes that align with their affluent lifestyles. Capital value growth in this segment is projected to stabilise, with an increasing focus on core project fundamentals such as quality, location, and access to essential infrastructure," Magazine said.

Moreover, he said the ongoing mega infrastructure projects across the country, including transportation networks, highways, airports and metro systems, are poised to bolster real estate growth. "We foresee a strong momentum in the housing market for the remainder of the year. This optimism is driven by favourable home buying sentiments, festive season promotions, and

Ceat net profit rises 7% in Q1; revenue increases

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Tyre maker Ceat on Thursday said its consolidated net profit increased by 7 per cent to Rs 154 crore in the first quarter ended June 2024.

The company had reported a net profit of Rs 144 crore in the April-June period of last fiscal. Revenue increased to Rs 3,193 crore in the first quarter as against Rs 2,935 crore in the year-ago period. Ceat Ltd said in a regulatory filing.

"We are encouraged by the strong growth we've had in the replacement and export segments across all categories during the quarter," Ceat MD & CEO Arnab Banerjee said. Despite facing margin pressure from significant increases in raw material costs and ocean freight, the company is actively mitigating these challenges through strategic price adjustments, he added. "Our strategic focus on premiumising passenger car tyres has begun to yield positive results. Looking ahead, we anticipate continued momentum in volume throughout Q2 and beyond," Banerjee stated.

FROM EXHAUSTION TO EXUBERANCE: SWIMMER NATARAJ EYES SEMIFINALS IN PARIS OLYMPICS

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Standing on the 2023 National Games podium adorned with 10 medals, eight of them gold, ace Indian swimmer Srihari Nataraj was utterly exhausted.

After all, he had been competing non-stop at major events since 2017 when he was just 16, and the relentless competitive grind, coupled with the rigours of training had finally taken a toll on his body.

"I just needed time off to rest because my 2023 season was crazy and so hectic with so many races. I think if I didn't take any time off, my body would have broken down by now," Nataraj told PTI in an interview.

"And it could have led to an injury or I would have lost the drive to train. My body was under so much stress. I kind of just needed a few weeks off just to let my body rest," he added.

Refreshed after the much-needed break, the 23-year-old is ready for his second Olympics, where he will compete in the 100m backstroke event. Nataraj qualified for the Paris Games via the Universality Quota, which allows countries to recommend their two highest-ranked swimmers for the showpiece if no one makes the cut through the regulation process.

Having secured direct qualification for the previous Tokyo Olympics, the entry to the Paris Games through the Universality Quota was not ideal by Nataraj's own admission. But he has opted not to dwell on the disappointment.

"It was annoying and disappointing that I didn't get the qualifying time because I had been training really well. But I'm not really bothered about what



happened," he asserted. "I got the quota spot. It might be a step back, but I still got the spot. And now I can spend the coming weeks either thinking 'oh, this is not the way I wanted it'. Or I can focus on what I want to do in Paris. So, I'm taking it as motivation."

Since returning from the break, Nataraj has been training better, which resulted in two silver medals at the Mare Nostrum meet in Spain and France in May.

"This season, the training's been so much better than last season. It's so good. I think it's all because of that break," he said.

There have been times when Nataraj

has come close to a podium finish but missed out by a fraction of a second. Some other times, his best performance has not come at the right time.

"I think it just hasn't clicked on race day yet," he conceded.

Nataraj has not been able to improve his best time in the 100m backstroke since 2021, when he clocked 53.77s.

However, he and his coach Nihar Ameen have been able to identify where exactly the Bengaluru swimmer has been lacking.

"I think it's just race execution. I am working on having a little more speed - front end speed and a little more natural speed so that I don't have to put in as much effort on the first 50," he

explained. He has been able to improve his first 50m and claims to have gone "fastest I've ever been" in training.

"We're doing a lot more high intensity explosive short sprints. And we're just hoping that it converts in time and I can open the first 50 a little more effortlessly."

"I've always had good capacity in good second 50m."

Nataraj, who has a season's best of 54.68s, aims to better his personal best time which would put him in semifinal contention at the Paris Games.

"I just have a goal towards trying to get a personal best. And I think if I make a personal best, it puts me in a good spot to be in the semifinals."

Odisha FC pitted against Jordan and Singapore clubs

AFC WOMEN'S CHAMPIONS LEAGUE



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian club Odisha FC were drawn alongside Ethihad Club (Jordan) and Lion City Sailors FC (Singapore) in Group B of the preliminary stage of the 2024-25 AFC Women's Champions League, following the draw conducted in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday.

Odisha FC, the champions of the 2023-24 Indian Women's League, will travel to Jordan to play in the preliminary stage, which will be held in a centralised league format from August 25 to 31.

group winners will qualify for the 12-team group stage, joining the other eight clubs that have qualified directly.

Should Odisha FC top their preliminary stage group and qualify for the next group stage, they will be placed in Group C alongside Urawa Red Diamonds Ladies (Japan), Taichung Blue Whale Women's Football Team (Chinese Taipei), and hosts Ho Chi Minh City Women's FC (Vietnam).

The group stage comprises three groups of four teams and will also be contested in a centralised league format from October 6 to 12.

Clubs were seeded and placed in pots for the draw according to their respective member

association rankings, based on the FIFA women's world ranking (as of March 15, 2024). The top two finishers of each group and the two best third-placed sides will progress to the quarterfinals, to be played on March 22 and 23, 2025.

A knockout stage draw will be conducted prior to the quarterfinals to determine the four pairings, which will be contested in a single-leg format, with the higher-ranked team of each tie to serve as the home side.

This will be followed by a centralised finals, which will see the semi-finals and final - all single-leg ties - being played out from May 21 to 24, 2025, to determine the first ever champions of the tournament.



F1 driver Magnussen to leave Haas at end of this season

AP ■ KANNAPOLIS (US)

Formula 1 driver Kevin Magnussen will leave Haas at the end of the season when his contract expires, the team said on Thursday. The 31-year-old Magnussen is competing in his seventh season with the American team, starting 135 grand prix across two spells, from 2017-20 and 2022-24.

The former McLaren and Renault driver achieved a career-high ninth in the drivers' standings for Haas in 2018. He has five points this season.

Haas did not say who is going to replace Magnussen.

"I'm proud to have raced for such a great team of people

these last few years," he said. "While I'm looking forward to the next chapter of my racing career, I remain fully focused on giving everything I've got for the rest of 2024."

On the eve of the Hungarian Grand Prix, team principal Ayao Komatsu said he hopes they can "find a way to keep working together in some capacity."

News of Magnussen's departure came after Oliver Bearman signed a multiyear deal with Haas from 2025 onward. 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.

Argentina tops FIFA men's rankings as Govt hits back at critics of team's racist France song

AP ■ BUENOS AIRES (ARGENTINA)

Argentina was confirmed as the world's No. 1 team in the FIFA men's rankings on Thursday, as the national government doubled down on defending the players who celebrated winning the Copa America by singing a racist song targeting No. 2-ranked France.

The fallout of the chant sung late on Sunday in Miami - which mocked the African heritage of some France players - continued four days later, including a rebuke to Argentina's critics by the vice president in its far-right government. Argentina's government on Wednesday fired one of its leading sports officials who urged Lionel Messi and the president of the Argentine Football Association to apologize.

The sports under-secretary, Julio Garro, spoke after FIFA said it was looking into the incident and English club Chelsea started a disciplinary process



against its midfielder Enzo Fernandez. He broadcast the footage on social media from the Argentina team bus in Florida. Fernandez later published an apology on his Instagram account, which disappeared by Thursday, saying he was "truly sorry. That video, that moment,

those words, do not reflect my beliefs or my character." However, a defiant post by the vice president of Argentina, Victoria Villarruel, on social media hit back at the country's critics. "No country with a colonial history is going to put us down for a song sung on

a field nor for speaking a truth that nobody wants to admit," Villarruel wrote.

"Enough of pretending to be offended, hypocrites. Enzo I am with you, Messi thanks for everything! Argentines always keep your heads high! Long live Argentina!"

Villarruel said Argentina's history had been forged by people of all races: "We never forced our way of life on anyone, nor will we tolerate that someone tries to do the same to us."

The song refers to France players being "all from Angola," having parents from Nigeria and Cameroon, and also includes an offensive reference to Kylian Mbappé.

One of Fernandez's French teammates at Chelsea, Wesley Fofana, who is Black, described the video as "uninhibited racism." France players Jules Koundé and Mike Maïga also posted critical comments about the Argentina incident.

Hockey men's and women's sub junior South Zone championship from today

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The second edition of Hockey India's sub junior men's and women's South Zone championship involving six teams will be held at Kollam in Kerala from Friday. Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Puducherry and Kerala are the six teams in men's and women's categories in the competition.

The format of the tournament will be round-robin wherein all teams will play against each other once. The top two teams will advance to the final after the end of the first round whereas the third and fourth placed sides will battle for third-place finish.

"This championship is not only about winning but also about learning and growing as players. It provides a crucial platform for young players to showcase their skills and gain valuable experience," HI president Dilip Tirkey said in a statement.

On the first day, Andhra Pradesh will take on Puducherry, Karnataka will face Telangana, while Tamil Nadu will lock horns with Kerala in the men's category. In the women's section, Telangana will compete with Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu will face Puducherry, and Kerala will take on Karnataka.

After no men picked for Olympics in artistic swimming, Italy's Minisini says he's ending career

AP ■ ROME

With no men picked to compete in artistic swimming at the Paris Olympics, where they are eligible for the first time, a former world champion is ending his career this week. At the Italian national championships, four-time worlds gold medalist Giorgio Minisini said he is competing for the last time at age 28.

"Obsession is a young man's game," Minisini, who was left off the Italian Olympic team in April, wrote on his Instagram

account Tuesday. Minisini and Bill May of the United States were the two most likely Olympic pioneers aiming to be picked for Paris as the first men to compete in artistic swimming. The sport debuted at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics as synchronized swimming. However, the 96 athletes picked by 18 different nations for the Olympics were all women.

"World Aquatics is very disappointed that no male artistic swimmers have been selected for Paris 2024," the



governing body said. "This should have been a landmark moment for the sport."

The rules change by World Aquatics in December 2022 allowed up to two men to be selected in an eight-athlete

squad for the Olympic open team event. The only other medal event in Paris is women's duet.

Minisini specializes in the mixed duet event which is not yet on the Olympic program,

and missed selection to the team event.

May was on the U.S. Team that won silver and bronze medals in team acrobatic routine at the past two world championships. At age 45, he did not make the Olympic team last month.

"All of us in the artistic swimming community need to work even harder to progress opportunities for male athletes in the sport," said World Aquatics, which hopes to add a mixed duet event for the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

Even with restrictive rules, swimsuit wars heat up in an Olympic year

PTI ■ PARIS

The iconic LZR Racer, the swimsuit that Michael Phelps wore while winning eight gold medals at the Beijing Olympics, is still revered around Speedo's design center.

It serves as a reminder of just how much a suit can push a swimmer to greater heights.

"In so many ways, that was the golden era," said Coora Lavezzo, the head of innovation at Speedo's Aqualab in London. "We've got those suits upstairs, and even though I wasn't there at the time, I'm fascinated by them and just how we can get back to a smidge of that former glory." Of course, the rules these days are much more of a hindrance to swimsuit designers, the result of a wild summer 15 years ago in which rubberized attire was all the rage, leading

to 43 world records being set at the championships in Rome.

The international governing body, now known as World Aquatics, decided the polyurethane suits - many of them covering nearly the entire body - were making a mockery of the sport. So the organization hastily imposed strict new rules requiring textile fabrics and limiting the amount of body coverage from the hip to just above the knees for men, while women's racing attire cannot extend past the shoulder or cover the neck.

For coaches such as Bob Bowman, who worked with Phelps over his entire career and was on hand in Rome for a speed show that bordered on a farce, the rules are just fine the way they are.

"Everybody is on a level playing field," he said. "We're still breaking world records in these suits. The sport is

moving forward." But major swimsuit designers such as Speedo, TYR and arena are pushing for the guidelines to be liberalized.

They pump millions of dollars into the sport, and would love nothing more than to be allowed to come up with revolutionary new designs that lead to vastly improved performances. But as things stand now, their hands are largely tied. Faster times come in tiny increments.

The suits remain an important element for any swimmer's performance, but the impact is nothing like it was during the rubber era. "I think a lot of our sport is just mental," U.S. Olympian Hunter Armstrong said. "It's just about feeling good in the water."

The manufacturers are desperate to do more. "When the pushback came



after those world championships in Rome, (World Aquatics) freaked out and they said we need rules quickly, we need to do something," said Greg Steyger, the head of innovation and design at Italian-based arena. "Unfortunately, that was in such a hurry that those rules are not the right rules for sure. But they've stuck to them,

they've defended them, they've done everything to keep them." Rachel Ripley, the director of merchandising at TYR, said her company is constantly lobbying for an easing of the restrictions. "It's been pretty status quo for 15 years," she said. "There hasn't really been much push or shake-up. It's something that I think we constantly talk

about, but it requires more than just the manufacturers to make that change happen."

Even with rules as they are, the swimsuit manufacturers say they are still able to come up with innovative creations that can make a crucial difference in a sport where races are often decided by mere hundredths of a second.

For Speedo, the new Fastskin LZR Intent and LZR Valor suits were developed through a partnership with Lamora, a company better known for protective coatings that are used to extend the life of satellites in outer space.

Then there's TYR's Vanzo suit, which is made with a frictionless yarn that evolved from military uses, most notably in socks worn by infantry soldiers who do a lot of marching. Not to be outdone, arena has come up with the

POWERSKIN Primo that it bills as the "world's first tensoelastic suit," made of a trademarked fabric known as Hyperforce that supposedly provides the maximum amount of body compression - a key element in buoyancy - but far more flexibility than previous designs.

"You're talking about maybe a 1% difference in a race," said Olympic gold medalist Ryan Murphy, America's top men's backstroke swimmer and a longtime Speedo-endorsed athlete. "Any little thing we can get to improve times, improve body position in the water, assist your technique, you're really looking for that."

Most swimmers seem content with the state of affairs, though everyone is looking for ways to go a bit faster to gain that little extra edge. "The innovation should be in other areas, like maybe the

starting blocks," Italian swimmer Nicolò Martinenghi said.

Sarah Sjöström of Sweden certainly had no complaints about the polyurethane suits allowed back in 2009, which she wore while winning the 100-meter butterfly in a world-record time a few weeks before her 16th birthday. But she also remembers the downside.

"The biggest stress for me back then and as well as other swimmers was like getting the suit on," Sjöström said. "It's a lot easier nowadays to put on the suit, but they still give a good compression, which is really important to have a good feeling in the water." She said the current guidelines also keep prices more affordable for a wider range of swimmers, though a high-tech female suit can still go for around \$650.

INDIA BEGIN WOMEN'S ASIA CUP DEFENCE WITH CLASH AGAINST PAK

PTI ■ DAMBULLA

The Women's Asia Cup is set for a blockbuster start when defending champions India take on arch-foes Pakistan in a prime-time clash here on Friday, with the eight competing teams hoping to firm up their combinations ahead of the T20 World Cup in October. Harmanpreet Kaur's India are the team to beat going into this iteration of the Asia Cup, having won the competition three out of four times in the T20 version and each of the four times in 50-overs format. Additionally, India are also the most successful team in the Women's Asia Cup T20 with 17 wins in 20 matches. They beat Bangladesh in the final of the last edition in 2022.



May when the hosts blanked them 3-0. Smriti Mandhana's rich form with the bat will be India's greatest weapon at the top of the order but the biggest gain from recent all-format outings has been the way their bowling has shaped up, with pacers and spinners putting on a combined show. India pacer Pooja Vastrakar's eight wickets across three outings against South Africa indicate her form but additionally, Radha Yadav's successful return to the mix of

spinners has been encouraging. The spin attack also includes Deepti Sharma, Sajeevan Sajana and the sprightly Shreyanka Patil. Even though Pakistan retained Nida Dar as skipper for the Asia Cup, the squad has undergone significant overhaul since the debacle in England. Three players, Iram Javed, Omaira Sohail, Syeda Aroob Shah, who have not played any matches so far this year, were included with the uncapped Tasnia Rubab

while six others were dropped. **Nepal, UAE look to make their mark** Also placed in Group A are Nepal and the United Arab Emirates who will face off here earlier in the day at the Rangiri Dambulla International Stadium. The top two teams from the group will play in the semifinals. While Nepal are returning to the competition for the first time since 2016, UAE are set

for their second consecutive appearance and will be high on confidence having won more than half of their matches this year. The lack of game-time will be a concern for Nepal whose last outing was in mid February when they lost to Malaysia in the Asian Cricket Council's Women's Premier Cup. UAE were last seen in action in May when they lost in the T20 World Cup Qualifier semifinal to Sri Lanka. Teams (from):

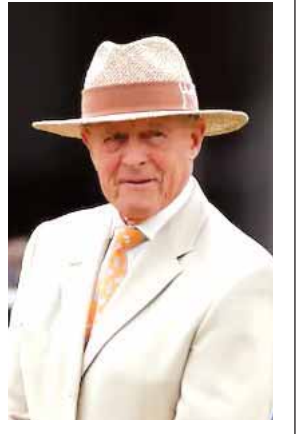
India: Harmanpreet Kaur (c), Smriti Mandhana, Shafali Verma, Jemimah Rodrigues, Richa Ghosh (wk), Uma Chetry (wk), Pooja Vastrakar, Deepti Sharma, Arundhati Reddy, Renuka Singh, D Hemalatha, Asha Sobhana, Radha Yadav, Shreyanka Patil, Sajeevan Sajana. **Pakistan:** Nida Dar (c), Aliya Riaz, Diana Baig, Fatima Sana, Gull Feroza, Iram Javed, Muneeba Ali, Najiha Alvi (wk), Nashra Sandhu, Omaira Sohail, Sadia Iqbal, Sidra Amin, Syeda Aroob Shah, Tasnia Rubab, Tuba Hassan.

Match starts at 7pm (IST) **Nepal:** Indu Barma (capt), Sita Rana Magar, Rajmati Airee, Rubina Chhetry, Dolly Bhatta, Mamta Chaudhary, Kabita Joshi, Kabita Kunwar, Kritika Marasini, Puja Mahato, Bindu Rawal, Roma Thapa, Sabnam Rai, Samnjana Khadka, Kajal Sreshtha (wk). **UAE:** Esha Oza (c), Theertha Satish (wk), Emily Thomas, Samaira Dharnidharka, Kavisha Egodage, Lavanya Keny, Khushi Sharma, Indhujha Nandakumar, Rinitha Rajith, Rishitha Rajith, Vaishnav Mahesh, Suraksha Kotte, Heena Hotchandani, Mehak Thakur, Rithika Rajith.

Geoffrey Boycott undergoes successful surgery

PTI ■ LONDON

England cricketing great Sir Geoffrey Boycott has undergone a successful surgery to remove a tumour from his throat, his daughter Emma said. The former England batter had undergone extensive chemotherapy for the same in 2002. But in May, the 83-year-old learnt his cancer had returned. "Just to let everyone know my Father, Geoffrey, has successfully come out of surgery this evening after a 3 hour operation to remove his throat cancer. "Yet to see him but surgeon says it went well. He asked that I post an update," Boycott's daughter Emma tweeted from the cricketer's account on Wednesday. In his illustrious career spanning 1964 to 1982, Boycott scored 100 first-class hundreds while amassing over 8,000 runs in 108 Tests at an average of nearly 48. Former Australia player and head coach Darren Lehmann reacted to the news along with ex-England players Alan Butcher and Michael Vaughan, who posted a red heart on X. "Thanks for the update, please pass on our thoughts to the whole family and



glad the surgery went well," Lehmann wrote, while Butcher wrote, 'Great news'. While announcing his diagnosis last month Boycott had said, "In the last few weeks, I have had an MRI Scan, CT Scan, a PET Scan, and two biopsies, and it has now been confirmed I have throat cancer and will require an operation." "From past experience, I realize that to overcome cancer a second time I will need excellent medical treatment and quite a bit of luck, and even if the operation is successful, every cancer patient knows they have to live with the possibility of it returning. So I will just get on with it and hope for the best," he added.



Quintal becomes 1st Indian rider to compete at World Superbike

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Rider Kavin Quintal is all set to make a historic debut at the WorldSBK SSP300 competitions and become the first Indian rider to participate in a World Superbike Championship. Thanks to the opportunity provided by the Irish team, Team#109 Retro Traffic Kawasaki and its management company Gaman Racing Global Service, Quintal's entry was accepted for the SSP event in the fourth round which begins at Most, Czech Republic on Friday. SBK, founded in 1988, is an event for heavily modified production sports motorcycles and consists of a series of rounds held on permanent racing facilities. The 19-year Chennai star, Quintal, will be filling in for the Irish team's main rider, Spaniard Daniel Mageda, who suffered an injury after leading the Supersport 300 class, in an unfortunate crash that paved the way for the Irish team to rope in the

Indian. Quintal, a world-class rider, is currently competing in the European Stock Championship within the FIM JuniorGP and in the Asia Road Racing Championship. In the three rounds of JuniorGP, Quintal had a top-10 finish. As a rider, who took his baby steps at 13, he was the youngest to earn points in the Indian National events. He went on to win the Talent Cup twice, in 2021 and 2023, in India. Later, after the Asia Talent Cup events, he soon blossomed into a mature rider, moving to Europe. "It is a great opportunity that I will try to learn and enjoy at the same time. I will be able to show my maximum level together with a great team that surrounds this structure. I would like to thank the team for this opportunity," Quintal said. The practice sessions will be on Friday followed by a race each on Saturday and Sunday at Most, Czech Republic.

Mandaviya to inaugurate phase 2 of talent identification programme

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Making use of the buzz around the upcoming Paris Olympics, Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya will inaugurate the second phase of the government's ambitious Khelo India Rising Talent Identification (KIRTI) programme here on Friday. The first phase of KIRTI was launched by Mandaviya's predecessor in the post, Anurag Thakur, in

Chandigarh on March 12. KIRTI aims to conduct 20 lakh assessments across the country throughout the year to identify promising athletes through notified Talent Assessment Centres. A scouting and assessment programme of this scale is a first in India. KIRTI's athlete-centric programme is conspicuous by its transparent selection methodology based on Information Technology, it



was stated in a press release. Data analytics based on Artificial Intelligence are being used to predict the sporting acumen of an aspiring athlete, the release said. In its first phase, out of 3,62,683 registrations across 70 centres, close to 51,000 assessments in 28 states and union territories have been made. Maharashtra and Haryana, two states which have always done well in Khelo India meets, have had the maximum

number of assessments - 9168 and 4820 -- respectively. Assam was third with 4703 assessments. Evaluation of aspiring athletes has happened in 11 disciplines - archery, athletics, badminton, boxing, football, hockey, kabaddi, kho-kho, volleyball, weightlifting and wrestling. Maximum assessments have happened in athletics (13804) and football (13483). Mandaviya will lay emphasis

on the project that aims to achieve 20 lakh assessment in the financial year 2024-25 by "onboarding all states and treating the district as a unit of assessment". The press release said this is in line with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "vision to take sports to every child in the country through mass participation and ultimately achieve excellence through Khelo India's structured pyramidal programmes".

We are on way to making it to next Olympics: CFI secretary general Maninder Pal Singh

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Cycling Federation of India (CFI) secretary general Maninder Pal Singh on Thursday said the COVID-19 pandemic dashed their hopes of participation at Paris Olympics but asserted they "have plans in place" for 2028 Los Angeles Games. The country has won three medals in cycling at the Asian Games but is yet to see representation at the Olympics. When asked about India's failure to qualify for cycling at the Paris Games, Maninder said COVID-19 affected their plans during the qualification campaign. "Cycling is not a sport that you can equate to others when it comes to Olympic qualification. It takes two and a half years to qualify for the Games. Besides taking part in the qualifiers, one needs to



attain points from events of various classes," he told PTI in an interaction arranged by HCL. "This year, we were hopeful of our riders qualifying. But, because of COVID, events in Asia took a hit, unlike Europe, where the riders took the required points to qualify. "Nonetheless, we are well on our way to making it to the next Olympics (in Los

Angeles). We have our plans in place and are both hopeful and confident of qualifying for the first time." Maninder further explained the challenges faced by the sport in the country and said infrastructure has a massive role to play in preparing cyclists. "Cycling alone cannot thrive on its riders, but it is hugely dependent on its

infrastructure, not only the equipment but also the coaches. And, it's not easy to get since the infrastructure is very expensive. "About 4-5 years back, there were some velodromes that were not being utilised due to some problems. While Chennai already has one, there's one coming up in Kolkata and also one in the state of Odisha. Currently, we have about 16-17 velodromes in the country," Maninder was in the city on Thursday to launch a cyclothon event, an initiative of the CFI to promote the sport in the country. Besides the cyclothon, he affirmed that plans were in place to produce certified coaches along with some talent hunt programmes. "Other than cyclothon, we have a huge programme in place for the coaches' development.

FIFA RANKINGS

India remain on 124th position, toppers Argentina consolidate position

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Success-starved India held on to the 124th position in the FIFA men's rankings released on Thursday, even as reigning world champions and Copa America winners Argentina strengthened their grip at the top of the pecking order. In the FIFA rankings released in June, the Indian men's national football team dropped down three places in the list after its failure to qualify for the third round of the 2026 World Cup Qualifiers after losses to Qatar and Afghanistan. Since December last year, India have been sliding down. They had broken into the top 100 last year, with a best ranking of 99, but since then it has been a downward spiral. In Asia, India remained on the

22nd position, behind the likes of Lebanon, Palestine, and Vietnam. Having successfully defended their Copa America crown, Argentina (1st) tighten their grip at the top of the table. France (2nd) remained their closest challengers, after reaching the semi-finals of EURO 2024. Newly crowned European champions Spain (3rd, up 5) have yet more reason to celebrate after hauling themselves into the top three of the ranking, while beaten finalists England (4th, up 1) were just behind the leading pack, having leapfrogged Brazil (5th, down 1). Belgium (6th, down 3) now find themselves outside the top five, with the Netherlands (7th) and Portugal (8th, down 2) just behind them.

Prannoy focussed on increasing speed ahead of Paris Olympics

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

His body has been ravaged by a spate of illnesses, the most recent being a bout of chikungunya, but seasoned Indian badminton player H S Prannoy is unwilling to let it come in the way of a dream Olympic debut that is happening a tad late in his career. He is focussed on building his stamina for the grind that awaits him in Paris later this month and helping him is his coach and former player RMV Gurusaidutt. The 32-year-old Kerala shuttler, a 2022 Thomas Cup title winner and a world and Asian Games bronze-medallist, has battled past a chronic stomach disorder, a nagging back injury, and more recently a week-long bout of the mosquito-borne viral disease. "The preparations that we started after the Australia Open, those are on point, we are on the right track," Gurusaidutt told PTI. "The best thing about Prannoy in this entire journey is that though he was struggling, he was showing

up for training and giving his best. Of course now, since he had another rough patch, it is not easy to get into the winning momentum," he explained. But Gurusaidutt is confident nonetheless and does not feel that the latest illness will trigger "too many changes" in Prannoy's training routine. "He has been that kind of a player who steps up on big occasions. He's done that multiple times over the last three or four years. So, as a coach, me and Gopi sir (national coach Pullela Gopichand) have that confidence in him." Following the high of his world championship bronze in 2023, Prannoy was laid low by another stomach disorder, a condition which was similar to the chronic acid reflux problem that he had suffered in the past. Such was complexity of his illness that it was difficult for him to have a meal without wanting to throw up later. The result was six first-round exits and a semifinal and a quarterfinal appearance this year. But he has



persevered. Gurusaidutt said the coaching team has introduced some specific drills to address the minor issues,

mainly related to speed and enduring long rallies. "We wanted to introduce a few programs. Gopi sir thought he needed to play

longer matches...Based on the last 3-4 tournaments, I particularly felt people were trying to push him at the pace in terms of making him

move quickly. "...There is not too much time for him to get space between the shots. So that was something that we thought we could make it easier for him in training. Otherwise, it was about getting him confidence, and getting his fitness levels up. Those were the major aspects," he said. Elaborating on the need to step up his pace, Gurusaidutt said, "...We wanted work on it to prepare him for somebody playing some sharp shots, and cross-courts. So, it was meant to make him feel comfortable for those things. "So, once he picks those up, he gets into his style, that's where the game changes usually. If somebody is pushing at him constantly, once he is out of that, once he survives it then he gets into his zone again."

"Flexibility and unpredictability will be key" Gurusaidutt, a 2014 Commonwealth Games bronze-medallist, feels Prannoy also needs to mix things up, be flexible but

not predictable. "We should have a counter when someone is attacking him but also we need to make sure that he's not too defensive. He has to mix up a lot, not be predictable in one style of play." **Want to be a little pressure-free: Prannoy** It will be Prannoy's maiden Olympics and he said he wants to keep things "simple and usual" without taking unnecessary pressure. "I think everyone just wants to talk about Paris. But I just want to be a little bit more pressure-free, kind of enjoy it a little bit more and just take it as one more tournament in my career," Prannoy had said during an earlier interview with PTI. "So from a preparation point of view, I think for me it's really important to kind of get back to basics...I was not there mentally in a lot of matches. So I think that's what I tried to do and just try to be a little bit more simple and usual."