



OPINION 6 THE RISE OF RADICAL REBELS IN PAKISTAN

WORLD 9 HEZBOLLAH FIRES OVER 200 ROCKETS INTO ISRAEL

MONEY 10 SENSEX, NIFTY HIT NEW LIFETIME HIGHS

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SWIMMER DHINIDHI GOING TO OLYMPICS AT 14 11 SPORTS

CHAMPION OF CHAMPIONS COME HOME

PNS ■ MUMBAI

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

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

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

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

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



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

cricket team's title triumph last Saturday. After arriving in the city, Rohit's team and its support staff made their way to the southern tip of the city which houses the

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

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

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

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

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

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

Soon after, Wankhede came alive with its customary chants of 'Sachin... Sachin' followed by 'Mumbaicha Raja, Rohit Sharma' and 'India... India'.

Earlier in the day after meeting the world champions, Modi posted on 'X' along with pictures of him with the team. "An excellent meeting with our Champions! Hosted the World Cup winning team at 7, LKM and had a memorable conversation on their experiences through the tournament," wrote Modi.



India script cricket history in England

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

"When the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha kept on lying on many things, including facts and figures, a notice was put to the Speaker and we have requested the Speaker to take appropriate action. We are waiting for the action," Rijiju said in response to questions on the issue. The Minister said rules apply equally to everyone as no

member is above the Chair in the House.

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

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

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

He also challenged the Prime Minister over the claim that the Congress didn't give fighter jets to the Army. "We had Jaguar, Mig 29, SU- 30, Mirage 2000," the letter read. Tagore also pointed out alleged inaccuracies in Thakur's July 1 speech in the Lok Sabha. The Congress MP said Thakur claimed that the Army was not given arms and fighter jets when the party ruled the country.

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CBI files first FIR under new laws in Delhi

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The CBI has registered its first FIR under newly enforced Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) against two Delhi Police officers for allegedly demanding ₹10 lakh bribe to help the release of a person lodged in Tihar Jail. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) has replaced the British era Indian Penal Code (IPC).

The FIR registered on Wednesday evening booking Head Constables Ravindra Dhaka and Parveen Saini both posted in Narcotics Cell, Maurice Nagar, under BNA 61(2) related to alleged criminal conspiracy and provisions of bribery under the Prevention of Corruption Act.

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Naidu bats for raise in Andhra's Central aid

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Ahead of the full annual Budget of third tenure of BJP-led NDA Government at the Centre, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the national Capital on Thursday and described their discussions on key development issues concerning the State as "constructive".

Naidu's assertion has come a week after another significant ally of the NDA, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar-led JD(U) had pressed for special package and grants for Bihar during the meeting of party's national executive. Sources said during the



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

meeting at the PMO, Naidu advocated for increased assistance to Andhra Pradesh

in lieu of special category status. The chief of Telugu Desam Party (TDP), which is

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

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

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Hathras stampede site reeks of death, destruction

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ HATHRAS

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

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



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

Ranjan Dimri/Pioneer

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

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

Victims rue medical neglect

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ HATHRAS

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

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

"A reward of ₹ 1 lakh will be announced soon and non-bailable warrant (NBW) will also be issued against the key accused Devprakash Madhukar," Inspector General of Police (Aligarh Range) Shalabh Mathur said. In the village of Sokhana, four people lost their lives including three from a single family. Binod, a 40-year-old labourer, was in Bareilly in search of a job when he heard the news of his mother's death in the stampede.

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Jaishankar for isolating countries harbouring terrorists

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/ASTANA

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



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

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

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Hemant Soren back in saddle

PNS ■ RANCHI/NEW DELHI

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

He was administered the oath of office and secrecy by



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

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

Acid attack: Accused lands in police net

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Reprimanded by senior officials for lax patrolling in the morning hours following an acid attack, a team from the west zone of Lucknow police intensified their efforts on the case and arrested an alleged stalker responsible for injuring a BBA student and her male cousin near Gulala Ghat late Wednesday night.

The accused, identified as Abhishek Verma aka Abhay Verma from Lakhimpur Kheri, was apprehended following a police encounter during which he sustained a bullet wound to his right leg. The police admitted him to a hospital late at night and interrogated him throughout Thursday. Details of his confession have not been disclosed, as he is still hospitalised.

The police revealed that the accused had been making phone calls to the victim for the past four to five days from different numbers. He sent a threatening message demanding she unlock his number and speak to him at his convenience, threatening her with dire consequences if she didn't comply. He also pressurised her to meet him.

However, the question as to where did the accused obtain the acid, and what type of acid did he use remains unanswered. The victim's family is equally perplexed about how he acquired her phone number. During the attack, the girl suffered injuries to her eyes as some acid droplets fell into them. Fortunately, her younger cousin shielded her from the acid, resulting in less severe burns. In a state of shock after the incident, she pleaded to be shot dead, feeling she had lost everything.

Her family members are also in shock and hope the police will provide security. DCP (West) Durgesh Kumar, in a video statement, said four teams were assigned to capture the perpetrator. "We received a tip-off that the accused was near Gulala Ghat. A team cornered him there and asked him to surrender. He chose to open fire, and was injured in the return fire. He was apprehended and hospitalised. The accused has confessed to his crime," the DCP said. Kumar stated that two empty bottles, one containing concentrated sulfuric acid and the other hydrogen peroxide solution, a country-made pistol, live cartridges, and a motorcycle were recovered from the accused. He added that the accused had been hiding in the Gulala Ghat area and was planning to flee the city.

The accused had been pursuing the girl for the past 3-4 months, coercing her into submission after obtaining her mobile number through social media and developing an infatuation with her. Following the incident, the Lucknow police surveillance team promptly investigated the girl's mobile records and discovered two recently blocked numbers. Further investigation into the blocked numbers led to the apprehension of the perpetrator. According to police reports, the accused admitted to being upset after the girl blocked his mobile number.

Woman duped with porn site access claim

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

A cybercriminal tricked a woman into believing her mobile phone was used to access a porn site, and subsequently duped her of Rs 35,000 as a penalty fee for an apology letter, in Jankipuram on Thursday. According to reports, the woman received a call from an unknown number. The caller introduced himself as a police officer from Charbagh and claimed her mobile number was used to access a porn site. Shocked, the woman was initially speechless and denied the accusation. The caller then threatened her with legal action and public defamation, which led her to plead for leniency.

The fraudster demanded Rs 35,000 through her UPI number, which she paid in two transactions. After receiving the money, the caller claimed that his senior officials were preparing her apology letter and demanded an additional Rs 13,500. "I sensed foul play and refused to pay the money. Later, I lodged a complaint with the police," she said. In another incident, a woman investor was deprived of Rs 2.35 lakh in the name of an investment in Husainganj police station area. Sapna Panjwani of Udayganj stated in her complaint that she came across an advertisement on Facebook about an investment opportunity and joined a WhatsApp group to improve her financial situation.

Dist administration gears up for Muharram

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

District Magistrate Surya Pal Gangwar on Thursday held a meeting with officials concerned to discuss the preparations for Muharram. The district magistrate stated that depending upon the sighting of the moon, Muharram will commence on the July 7 or 8. As processions are taken out by members of the Shia community on first, seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth of Muharram, these dates are particularly sensitive.

The district magistrate said that all preparations by the Lucknow Municipal Corporation, LESA, Jal Sansthan, Medical and PWD, Jal Nigam, LDA, and other departments for Muharram processions must be completed promptly. He emphasised the need for adequate road lighting for the processions. Officials from LESA and Lucknow Municipal Corporation were directed to survey the routes with the ADM (East) and ensure the replacement of faulty street lights. Considering the rainy season, he also stressed the importance of arranging pumps for drainage on routes prone to waterlogging.



The district magistrate underscored the necessity of maintaining peace and order during the Muharram processions. He urged the officials concerned to perform their duties with sensitivity and promptness and to complete any necessary repairs within the stipulated time. He also directed that any posters, banners, or flags pasted in public places be removed promptly. "If construction material is found collected anywhere on the roadside, it should be removed," he said. He further said that as in previous years, all arrangements should be made to prevent any disturbance to law and order due to lack of departmental preparations. Senior officials of the departments concerned were told to deploy responsible officers and employees in three shifts in the control rooms established at Nakkhas and Hussainabad police stations, ensuring that all details are provided to the ADM (East) in a timely manner.

LDA takes steps to check epidemics in residential colonies

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The Lucknow Development Authority has initiated preventive measures to check the spread of epidemics during the rainy season in its residential colonies, apartments, and commercial estates. Engineers are focusing on preventing water seepage to ensure strong and stable foundations, which are crucial for preventing health hazards and potential loss of lives.

Free bus travel for dependents of freedom fighters

Lucknow (PNS): Minister of State for Transport (Independent Charge) Daya Shankar Singh said on Thursday that free travel had been allowed for eligible dependents of freedom fighters in buses operated by Uttar Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation. He said that in this regard, under the Uttar Pradesh Loktantra Senani Samman Adhiniyam 2016, it was arranged that after the death of freedom fighters, their eligible heirs would be provided free travel by UPSRTC.

The minister said that after the death of freedom fighters, there would be a provision for free travel to the eligible dependent along with an attendant on the basis of the identity card provided by the district magistrate to their eligible heirs. He said that in this regard, all necessary instructions had been given to the officers and employees of UPSRTC. The minister added that departmental officers had been directed to ensure strict compliance of the order.

Rly safety inspected between Maijapur, Gonda Kachhari

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Railway Safety Commissioner, Northeast Circle, Pranveer Saxena conducted a safety inspection between Maijapur-Gonda Kachhari on Thursday. The North Eastern Railway, Lucknow division, is upgrading passenger facilities and expanding the basic infrastructure for operational ease in the first phase of the third rail line construction project on Gonda Budhwal section (61.72 km).

On the second day of safety testing of the third rail line section with new traction of 25,000 volt AC capacity of Gonda Kachhari-Karnailganj section (23.65 km), chief administrative officer (construction) of Northeast Railway Abhay Kumar Gupta, chief electrical engineer (construction) OP Singh, chief electrical distribution engineer Suresh Kumar and Divisional Railway Manager of Lucknow Aditya Kumar, ADRM (Infrastructure) Rajiv Kumar along with officials of the division and construction organisation were present.

Certain food items exacerbate joint pain, says study

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

A recent study conducted by the State Ayurveda College & Hospital shows that patients with autoimmune joint pain are sensitive to certain food items such as curd, cold drinks, ice cream, and rice. Head of the research centre at the hospital Sanjeev Rastogi said on Thursday that this is a groundbreaking study because modern medicine does not typically associate joint diseases with food. "No such cross-sectional study has been conducted globally. We screened around 885 patients at the OPD, which represented 6.1 per cent of the total patients. Sixty-eight food variants were identified by the patients as causing sensitivity. Among these, 76 per cent reported sensitivity to curd, 78 per cent to cold water, 71 per cent to cold drinks, 65 per cent to ice cream, and 61 per cent to rice," he said. Providing some background, Rastogi explained that it is a common concern among individuals with joint symptoms that certain foods may exacerbate their condition. "They observe that when they consume specific foods, their joint symptoms worsen. This is a common observation, but it was neither noticed nor reported in modern medicine. In Ayurveda, patients often ask about which foods to avoid and which to consume for joint problems. However, there was no solid information available, and what was available was empirical," he said.

Hence, this study represents the first observation of its kind and was based on self-reporting by patients, he noted. "We consistently monitored patients for their reporting patterns and asked them if they noticed certain foods exacerbating their symptoms, and whether this occurred more than once," he said. Rastogi emphasised that the study clearly shows an association between certain foods and joint diseases, though not everyone experiences this issue. "It is a subpopulation that is sensitive to certain foods. Fortunately, these foods had been previously recommended for avoidance by Ayurvedic practice. We used to advise people to avoid these foods based on conventional knowledge, and now this has been documented," he said. He added that this knowledge could enhance the treatment of patients with autoimmune joint pain.

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Be it known to all that due to Misconduct & misbehavior of my Son Deepak Mishra, I evict him from all my properties from 28/06/2024. Now onwards I will not be responsible for all his conducts. Father Satya Prakash Mishra, S/o Late Uma Shankar Mishra R/o 21/337, Indira Nagar, Lucknow-16

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I Huma Shafta W/o Zafar Alam, R/o 89/195- A, Dalel Purwa, Kanpur, have changed my name to Huma Zafar for all future purposes.

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I, Shabeena R/o 102/97, Colonelganj, Kanpur hereby declare that I have changed my name to Shabeena Khatoon W/o Abid Husain Henceforth. I shall be known as Shabeena Khatoon for all future purposes.

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I have changed my name from Varnika Gupta to Varnika Gupta Vaish. In future, I should be known and identify with this name. Varnika Gupta Vaish W/o Abhishek Vaish R/O E 805 Ratan Orbit Apartment, Mukherjee Vihar Kanpur 208026

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Jayant writes to CM for modernisation of Morna sugar mill

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) and Rashtriya Lok Dal chief Chaudhary Jayant Singh wrote a letter to Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, highlighting the request of RLD's MP from Bijnor, Chandan Chauhan's demand of expansion and modernisation of Ganga Kisan Sakhari Chini Mill in Morna, Muzaffarnagar. In the letter addressed to Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Jayant said the Bijnor MP had written about the sugar mill and had urged immediate and appropriate action to increase the daily crushing capacity of this mill and improve the sugar production process as per the



government announcement made on 16-12-2021. "If this demand is met, farmers will get relief and their problems would be resolved," he said. The information was given by an RLD leader in Lucknow.

BSA suspends teacher for 'indecent' behaviour

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Basic Shiksha Adhikari of Lucknow Ram Pravesh suspended a class teacher, Radha Singh, from Sikrori Prathamik Vidyalaya in Kakori for her alleged indecent behaviour with children and teachers. A viral video showed the teacher threatening the students and 'shiksha mitra' with a slipper in her hand. Another viral video showed her misbehaving with teachers of the school. The basic shiksha adhikari said that the teacher was suspended on the report of the block education officer. Regarding the viral videos, the basic shiksha adhikari said its authenticity was yet to be verified.

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Traffic snarls on Ayodhya road a perpetual problem

SHARMILA KRISHNA ■ LUCKNOW

As one moves along the flyover towards Kamta-Chinhat and Matiyari intersections during peak hours, they encounter areas of perpetual traffic snarls. At Kamta crossing, Shaheed Path, Awadh Bus Depot, and High Court lie on the right side, leading to heavy traffic. Buses from the Awadh depot, traffic from the High Court, and vehicles coming from Polytechnic side contribute to a constant traffic flow here.

Additionally, the large number of vehicles heading towards Ayodhya exacerbates the traffic issues for commuters. Proceeding another kilometre brings one to Chinhat intersection, which also experiences heavy traffic due to Chinhat market on the right side. The traffic on Faizabad Road remains clogged with all kinds of vehicles, including two-wheelers, four-wheelers, three-wheelers, and buses. These traffic snarls persist till Matiyari, where one takes Dewa Road. Commuters said that it takes no

less than 25 to 40 minutes to travel from Kamta to Matiyari, with traffic moving at a slow pace. Anurag Rathore, who works with the Basic Education department and travels this route to visit a government school, says he regularly faces traffic snarls. "It takes anywhere between 20-30 minutes to cross this stretch from Kamta to Matiyari," he said. Another commuter points out that the roadways buses have been a major cause of traffic snarls at Kamta, while encroachments and haphazard

parking of autos and temples cause jams at Matiyari. "Roadways buses from Awadh depot moving towards Faizabad Road from the bus station are a cause of traffic snarls at Kamta crossing," he said. Incidentally, it should be noted that in response to the traffic issues, the department concerned sent a proposal to the state government last year for relocating the Awadh Bus Station, which is currently in process. Regional Manager of Uttar Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation RK

Tripathi said the volume of traffic at Kamta crossing is the main reason for the traffic issues there. "Traffic snarls are not primarily caused by the buses since they remain inside the station. All the vehicles that come down from Shaheed Path and those coming from Faizabad Road increase the traffic load. Since there are traffic lights at the crossing, any halt causes traffic snarls," he said. Tripathi explained that the bus station was constructed to aid the lawyers of the nearby High Court. He pointed out

that nearly 400 buses operate from the station, with very few using the underpass area; the rest are diverted from the sweet shop adjacent to the bus station towards Shaheed Path. "The traffic department often puts barriers at Kamta crossing to stop the buses. The issue for us is that if we drop passengers on Faizabad Road, private buses pick them up. We have been requesting a shelter on Faizabad Road where four to five buses can stand and pick up passengers heading to Ayodhya and Barabanki," he

said. He suggested that extending metro services to Barabanki would ease traffic at this point. "The bus station is within the city to aid passengers," he added. Deputy Commissioner of Police (Traffic) Kamlesh Dixit said there are two issues at the Kamta crossing: "Traffic lights have not been working for several days, so vehicles have to be controlled manually. When the traffic personnel move away, the traffic is impacted. Second, buses disturb traffic when passengers board. However, Kamta has improved

significantly due to the efforts of the traffic department. The situation was worse a few years back," he added. He said that the crossing was their focus due to the presence of the High Court and because it is a main route for Ayodhya. Dixit mentioned that they had submitted a proposal to relocate the Kamta bus station, and it is in process. He noted that similar issues are faced at the Chinhat and Matiyari crossings. "Situation has improved, though during office hours or school timings, people still face problems," he added.

Slums to be replaced with multi-storey buildings

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has announced a series of transformative measures aimed at improving urban life in Uttar Pradesh with replacement of slums with multi-storey buildings. In a meeting with the Urban Development department, the chief minister outlined several key initiatives, emphasising the need for systematic and organised urban growth. The chief minister has mandated the replacement of slums with multi-storey buildings. Each municipal corporation is to identify one slum area for redevelopment into residential complexes equipped with essential facilities such as schools, markets and parks.

These will be allocated to the families currently residing in the slums, and the responsibility for park maintenance will also be handed to them. This phased rehabilitation is expected to significantly enhance living standards across the state. Waterlogging caused by encroachment on drains is another pressing issue. Chief Minister Yogi instructed officials to initiate a state-wide campaign to remove such encroachments, ensuring minimal inconvenience to affected families. To tackle parking woes, the state government will develop a comprehensive Parking Manual. Chief Minister Yogi stressed the need for designated parking spaces and strict enforcement against roadside parking. Multi-level

parking lots, incorporating commercial spaces, are to be planned, based on local requirements. Immediate action will be taken against illegal taxi stands, and the use of electric buses in urban transport will be encouraged. Advertising hoardings, which often cause accidents and spoil urban aesthetics, will be regulated. The chief minister has ordered that no hoardings be placed atop buildings. Instead, LED displays will be promoted, providing a safer and more organised advertising system. Recognising the need for adequate manpower in urban bodies, Chief Minister Yogi emphasised filling all vacancies from executive officers to sanitation workers. He also called for cadre reorganisation based on

population to ensure efficient urban management. Further, the state government is set to announce an urban green and garden development policy, aiming to increase green cover and enhance the quality of life. Public participation will be crucial in making cities more environmentally friendly. Lastly, Chief Minister Yogi highlighted the progress under the Smart City Mission, which aims to upgrade 17 cities with smart infrastructure and services. Special centres for senior citizens and extensive CCTV coverage for crime control are among the key projects nearing completion. These initiatives reflect the chief minister's commitment to creating a more organised, efficient and livable urban environment in Uttar Pradesh.

CM hails PM's call to plant 'Ek Ped Maa Ke Naam'

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath voiced strong support for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's innovative call to plant 'Ek Ped Maa Ke Naam' across the country to combat challenges like global warming. During a media interaction at his official residence, where he planted a tree as part of the campaign, the chief minister expressed his heartfelt gratitude to the prime minister on behalf of the state's residents. He also congratulated the prime minister for initiating this meaningful campaign, which seeks to involve every citizen in environmental conservation efforts. Chief Minister Yogi has appealed to everyone in the state to be part of the 'Vriksharopan Mahabhiyan' and plant a tree in their mother's name on July 20. He pointed out that the state government has prepared 54 crore plants in the state's nurseries for this purpose. These include various environmentally beneficial plants like Peepal, Pakar,

Yogi plants sandalwood plant

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath planted a red sandalwood tree at his official residence here on Thursday under the 'Ek Ped Maa Ke Naam' campaign. The chief minister also appealed to everyone to participate in this tree planting campaign. Forest Minister Dr Arun



Kumar Saxena, Additional Chief Secretary (Forest) Manoj Kumar Singh, Principal Secretary (Chief Minister) Sanjay Prasad, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and head of department Sudhir Kumar Sharma, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife) Sanjay Srivastava among others were present on the occasion.

Neem, desi mango, jamun, guava, shisham, and teak. Chief Minister Yogi mentioned that moringa plants are being provided for free to the beneficiaries of the PM Awas Yojana. "Moringa is highly beneficial for everyone. Consuming its pods or soup can help fight malnutrition. Two years ago, we planted a moringa tree at each beneficiary's home under the PM Awas Yojana. These trees have now grown significantly. This time, we are expanding the campaign

and have obtained approximately 5.5 million moringa plants," he remarked. The chief minister further said that various types of saplings would be planted across the state during the campaign. This extensive campaign will involve carrying out plantations in village panchayat, municipal bodies, parks, alongside roads, and in vacant spaces. He expressed confidence that the residents of the state will come forward to tackle environmental challenges by partic-

ipating in the Vriksharopan Mahabhiyan and the Van Mahotsav. Chief Minister Yogi stated that under this mega campaign, 30-35 crore saplings will be planted. The programme has already begun, and on July 20, everyone will participate in the grand festival of tree planting by setting a record. Regular programmes will be held to ensure the care of these plants. He urged that those who plant a tree should also ensure its protection.

UP expediting rollout of e-PoS devices in fair price shops

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The Yogi Adityanath government in Uttar Pradesh is expediting the rollout of e-PoS devices in all ration shops of the state. On the government's instructions, the Food and Civil Supplies department has entrusted the responsibility of developing software for its monitoring to Uttar Pradesh Development Systems Corporation Limited (UPDESCO). In this sequence, the UPDESCO has started appointing an agency to ensure that all ration shops in the state are equipped with e-PoS machines and to ensure their automation and regular monitoring processes. According to the plan of the Yogi government, e-PoS devices integrated

with weighing scales will be installed in ration shops. The automation process of ration shops will gain momentum after UPDESCO appoints the agency. UPDESCO has initiated the process and invited applications from empanelled agencies. Notably, the selected agency will not only ensure that electronic Point of Sale (e-PoS) devices are installed in all ration shops across the state, but also their operation, maintenance and regular monitoring framework. These e-PoS devices installed in ration shops will be based on electronic weighing scales (EWS). After installing e-PoS devices and automating all ration shops across the state, a dedicated software will be developed for their regular monitoring. To

ensure consistent oversight, the development of the PoS application will be accompanied by completion of a proper framework and training of the Food and Civil Supplies department staff. It is noteworthy that there are 79,500 fair price shops in the state benefiting 3.59 crore families. These shops distribute ration, including approximately 80 lakh quintals of food grains, to beneficiaries under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana every month. Therefore, the Yogi government is speeding up the implementation of this process to protect beneficiaries from adulteration and black marketing, as well as ensuring complete transparency. The process of installation and automation of e-PoS devices as well as soft-

ware development will be completed in two phases. In Phase-1, the implementation of all EWS equipped e-PoS devices in the state will be monitored. Following this, Phase-2 will focus on completing the project management process for the operation of e-PoS devices in ration shops. To ensure the success of this initiative, Service Level Agreement (SLA) monitoring and reporting of the system integrator will be ensured in all ration shops across urban and rural areas of Uttar Pradesh. The status of implementation of various processes will be monitored by preparing progress reports along with analysis of Management Information Systems (MIS) reports from time to time.

HATHRAS STAMPEDE

Govt cannot run away from its responsibility, says Akhilesh

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav on Thursday said there cannot be a conspiracy behind the Hathras stampede but it can definitely be a conspiracy that the government wants to run away from its responsibility on this matter. The Samajwadi Party chief was reacting to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's remarks that he suspected a "possible conspiracy" behind the Hathras incident. "Look, there can't be a conspiracy in this. The conspiracy could be that the government wants to run away from its responsibility," he said. The former Uttar Pradesh chief minister said the "government cannot run away from its responsibility". "The govern-

ment should take a decision based on the pictures that have come from the media cameras. The real issue is that it was the responsibility of the administration and the government," said Yadav. "The officers arrived when the incident happened. Why were they not sent earlier so that so many people do not gather there. What was the responsibility of the administration?" he asked. Yadav also said that many people lost their lives due to lack of treatment. The Uttar Pradesh government on Wednesday formed a three-member judicial commission headed by a retired high court judge to probe the Hathras tragedy, also looking into the possibility that a "conspiracy" was behind the stampede. The panel will submit its report in

two months. The stampede at self-styled godman Baba Bhole's satsang in Hathras on Tuesday left 121 people dead and 28 injured. Talking to reporters after former Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) MP from Saharanpur Haji Fazlur Rahman joined the Samajwadi Party at the party headquarter here, Yadav also raised questions on the health services of the state. He alleged that Deputy Chief Minister Brajesh Pathak, who is holding the Health portfolio wants to become the chief minister by improving his "political health". Due to this tug of war, Chief Minister Adityanath has reduced the budget of the Health department, alleged Yadav. "When the health minister wants to improve his political health, then who will pay

attention to the department? He wants the chief minister (Yogi Adityanath) to step down and he himself (Pathak) become the chief minister. The chief minister also knows that he (Pathak) is after him, so he is not giving any budget to his department," he said. Yadav said the Samajwadi Party has been continuously raising the point that the "health services of Uttar Pradesh have been completely destroyed". "Those who claimed that new medical colleges are being built are the same people, who have ruined the medical colleges started during the SP government," said Yadav. "The BJP government has not built a single district hospital where the poor can get treatment and at such a time when there is an emergency, no one gets treatment at all," he added.

Govt to make Maha Kumbh a grand and divine event

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The Yogi Adityanath government is vigorously preparing to make the Maha Kumbh 2025, scheduled to be held early next year in Prayagraj, a grand and divine event. The administration is working in mission mode to ensure extensive beautification and cleanliness of the city, as well as security and convenience of the devotees and tourists visiting the Prayagraj to attend the event. The Yogi government has initiated a comprehensive plan to beautify the urban area. Prayagraj's rejuvenation will mirror the elaborate decorations seen during the Pran Pratishtha of the new idol of Ram Lalla in Ayodhya. Hundreds of pillars, green belts, horticultural enhancements, and thematic developments will be installed throughout the city, reflecting the richness of Sanatan traditions.

Preparations are being made to leave the visitors awestruck by the splendour of the city immersed in religious faith. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath recently reviewed the preparations for the Prayagraj Maha Kumbh and provided essential guidelines to various departments involved in its management. He emphasised ensuring that the Maha Kumbh sets a benchmark for cleanliness, convenience and security. According to the chief minister, Maha Kumbh 2025 presents a significant opportunity to showcase Sanatan Indian culture to the world. It will serve as a platform for global branding not just of Uttar Pradesh, but the country at large. He stressed the importance of contributing our best to its successful organisation, as Maha Kumbh symbolises India's ancient culture. "The entire city should be adorned to reflect its grandeur,

depicting Kumbh stories and symbols of Sanatan culture. Kumbh logos should be installed at intersections and efforts should be made to create theme-based gates, pillars and lighting," he stated. In line with Chief Minister Yogi's vision, the beautification of 38 junctions is underway in Prayagraj. The Prayagraj Mela Authority has collaborated with an agency to develop designs based on traffic density analysis. Additionally, green belts and sculptures will be established with a five-year maintenance plan. Of the total junctions, 19 are being constructed by the PDA, 15 by the PWD, and two by Setu Nigam. Urban routes are also undergoing beautification, with 38 routes (totaling 75 kilometres) being enhanced. The Mela Authority has engaged eight architects to oversee green belt, horticulture, landscaping development, thematic develop-

ment, and gap analysis for each route. Of these, 36 routes are beautified by the PDA and two by the PWD. Street art and murals will also be created on approximately one million square feet of walls. The Prayagraj Mela Authority will fund work on 5,00,000 square feet from the Kumbh Mela fund, with the remaining 5,00,000 square feet funded by the NMCG. There are also plans to construct four thematic gates, named Saraswati Dwar, Shiv Dwar, Ganga Dwar and Yamuna Dwar, and the tender process currently underway. Furthermore, 108 decorative pillars are planned for construction along river roads, thematic gates, and various sites. Specifically, eight pillars will be installed at Bhardwaj Ashram, 48 at the four thematic gates, and 52 along River Front Road. The implementing agency for this project is C&DS.

Hathras incident due to jungle raj in UP, says UPCC chief

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Congress President Ajay Rai on Thursday said that the Hathras incident was the result of jungle raj prevalent in the Yogi Adityanath-led government in the state. Congress Member of Parliament Rahul Gandhi is expected to pay a visit to Hathras on Friday and he will interact with the victims of the stampede. Attacking the administration, Rai said that the officers got information about the incident two hours after it happened. "The injured did not even get ambulance service while the hospitals lacked medical facilities," he said. Rai said that he visited the spot first but Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath went there later. "After some time, Deputy Chief Minister Brajesh Pathak also arrived. This proves that there is a rift in the government. This is proof of the internal fighting within the government," he said. Rai demanded that the families of the deceased be given a compensation of one crore rupees. He said there was some error in the list of the deceased and it should be corrected after investigation as the bodies of many people were sent to another

Rahul to visit Hathras today

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi will visit Hathras on Friday following the stampede in which 121 people were killed, party officials in Uttar Pradesh Congress chief said on Thursday. UPCC president Ajay said that Rahul Gandhi would also meet the family members of the victims. "Our leader Rahul Gandhi will visit Hathras on Friday. He will meet the family members of the victims of the incident," Rai said.

Bodies of victims identified, handed over to families

PTI ■ HATHRAS

The bodies of all victims of the Hathras stampede have been identified and handed over to their families, District Magistrate Ashish Kumar said here on Thursday. A total of 121 people, mostly women, died and 31 were injured in the stampede at the preacher Baba Bhole's satsang in Hathras on Tuesday. After the stampede, 21 bodies were taken to Agra, 28 to Etah, 34 were in Hathras and 38 in Aligarh, according to officials. "All the bodies have been identified and handed over (to respective families)," Kumar told PTI here on Thursday. He said of the three bodies that were unidentified till Wednesday, two were recognised late in the night and one through video call on Thursday morning. "The last body was identified by the family over a video call. They are on their way to Aligarh hospital (to get the body)." The district magistrate added. Kumar, a 2015-

batch IAS officer who joined as Hathras DM barely a week before the stampede, said there is no report of any missing person now. "We had deployed district administration personnel to count the number of people who had gone to the event (satsang) and returned," he said. The Uttar Pradesh government has announced a monetary relief of ₹2 lakh to the kin of the dead and ₹50,000 for those injured," the officer said. The Uttar Pradesh government on Wednesday formed a three-member judicial commission headed by a retired high court judge to probe the Hathras tragedy, also looking into the possibility that a "conspiracy" was behind the stampede. The panel will submit its report in two months. The police have filed an FIR against the organisers of the 'satsang' near Phulhari village in Hathras, accusing them of cramming 2.5 lakh people into the venue when they had obtained permission for only 80,000.

Four of a family die in road accident

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

In a tragic incident, a Roadways bus collided head-on with the car of people returning from Haji in Mundha Pande on Delhi-Lucknow Highway in Moradabad district early on Thursday morning, killing five people. The car driver along with the father and three sons of a family died in this accident. The deceased include Haji Ashraf (65), his three sons Nakseh Ali (42), Arif

Ali (24) and Intekhab Ali (20) and the car driver Ahsan (32). Hajjan Zaitoon and his son Asif Ali were injured in the accident. All of them are from Mukarampur village of Swar Kotwali. Ashraf Ali and his wife Zaitoon of Mukarampur village in Swar Kotwali area of Rampur district, had gone to Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj. After Hajj, the couple landed at Delhi airport on Wednesday evening. On Wednesday, his three sons, Nakseh Ali, Arif Ali,

Asif Ali and Intekhab Ali reached the airport to receive them in Delhi and bring them home. The car belonged to Ahsan of the same village and he was driving it. All of them were left for village Mukarampur late in the night. When the car reached Mundhapande at around 6 am on Thursday, a Roadways bus coming from the opposite direction, collided with it. The collision was so powerful that the car was badly damaged. While Ashraf, his

sons Nakseh Ali and Arif and driver Ahsan died on the spot, the third son Intekhab died in the hospital. After the accident, a crowd gathered at the spot. Haji Ashraf's wife and son Asif, who were injured in the accident, are being treated in a hospital in Moradabad. Meanwhile, in another tragic incident in Mirzapur, three people, who had gone for a morning walk in front of Chunar railway crossing on Varanasi-Mirzapur national highway on Thursday,

Minister reviews preparations for Kharif crops

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

A review meeting was held with the departmental officers and in charges of Krishi Vigyan Kendras regarding preparations for Kharif crops at the Circuit House Auditorium here on Thursday under the chairmanship of Uttar Pradesh Agriculture, Agricultural Education and Agricultural Research Department Minister Surya Pratap Shahi. While reviewing the financial and physical progress, the minister issued the guidelines in which the last date for applying for the establishment of Agri Junction centres has been fixed as July 15. The minister said after the applications, the beneficiaries should be selected and trained and licenses should be issued to them as per rules for the sale of fertilisers, seeds and agricultural protection chemicals. He directed that under the Namami Gange Scheme being run in Varanasi and Chandauli districts, cluster work and training should be given to the farmers after selection in time



Uttar Pradesh Agriculture Minister Surya Pratap Shahi reviewing preparations for Kharif crops in Varanasi on Thursday.

under which organic farming should be promoted. He said that under soil health, 100 per cent samples should be collected as per the targets achieved and L-1 and L-2 analysis should be done to inform the farmers about the nutrients lacking in their fields so that farmers can earn more profit at a lower cost. In Kharif-2024, 100 per cent of the allocation of different types of seeds like paddy, arhar, urd, moong etc should be done and distributed. Keeping in view the demand for Dhaincha

seeds, farmers should be registered with Seed Development Corporation and encouraged to produce Dhaincha seeds so that they do not have to depend on other states for Dhaincha seeds, Shahi said. According to him, the mini kits allotted for pulses such as arhar, urd, moong etc should be lifted 100 per cent and seeds should be distributed free of cost to the farmers. Under the Millets scheme, availability of seeds of maize, jwar, millet, rangi, etc should be ensured and cultivation of millets

should be encouraged. Also, hybrid seeds of paddy, maize, jwar and millet should be distributed by setting up stalls at government agricultural seed stores in the division. All fertilisers are available in sufficient quantity in the division. He directed all the district agricultural officers to keep doing intensive checking in their respective districts as per the instructions of the district magistrates (DMs) so that along with black marketing, the sellers cannot sell fertilisers at higher prices. The government tube wells installed at the divisional level which are not working due to some reason should be repaired immediately and made operational. The work of farmer registry will be done under the campaign on July 8, he informed. The minister said under the same work of Aadhar feeding and e-KYC should also be completed in the districts where the work is pending under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana. Also the distribution of KCC

and crop loan should be increased and the farmers who have taken loan from the banks should publicise through seminars and kisan pathshalas that if the bank loan is deposited on time, then the farmers will get four per cent interest rate. Hundred per cent fulfillment should be done as per the target received for the installation of solar irrigation pumps in the division. Assurance was given to establish service centres in the division/district. In the division, 100 per cent fulfillment of targets received under RKVY, Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyay Kisan Samridhi Yojana, RAD and WDC schemes was directed as per rules. Shahi directed the Deputy Director (Land Resources) Officer, Varanasi Division to conduct on-site inspection of the districts/units of the division and ensure immediate convening of district committee meetings in those districts where it has not been held till now. Weather indicator instruments will be installed in every

development block and automatic water sets will be installed at every gram panchayat level. Along with this, deputy agriculture directors/district agriculture officers were expected to provide information about 10 to 20 hectares of barren or vacant land in their respective districts for expansion of new farms through the DMs so that new farms can be expanded and quality seeds can be produced. Deputy Director of Agriculture (Agriculture/Land Resources/Research), Deputy Directors of Agriculture, Varanasi, Ghazipur, Chandauli, District Agriculture Officers, Agriculture Protection Officers of Varanasi, Jaunpur, Land Conservation Officer, Varanasi Division, Varanasi, Fertiliser Analyst, Soil Survey Officer, Varanasi, Assistant Director (Agriculture), IPM Laboratory, Assistant Director (Soil Testing/Culture), Regional Soil Testing Laboratory, Varanasi and Sub Divisional Agriculture Extension Officer, Jaunpur were present in the meeting.

Drive to demolish illegal plotting

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

The Kanpur Development Authority (KDA) launched a massive drive to demolish illegal plotting on arazi Nos 610, 611, 612, 613, 614, 616 and 616 under zone 2 in Chakarpur on Thursday. It was led by the OSD Sat Shukla. The squad removed illegal plotting on these arazis belonging to Rajesh Singh, Ramesh Singh and others; Manager, Shri Ma Pitambara, Royal City Pvt Ltd. It demolished the boundary walls, drains, roads and electric poles on the spot. The process for lodging FIR against the guilty after investigation was on. Assistant Engineer JN Pandey, staff of KDA enforcement squad, security personnel, police force of Panki and other police stations, PAC force, fire brigade etc were present during the drive. As many as five backhoe loaders were pressed into service. Vice-Chairman (V-C) Madan Singh Garbaly



has directed to continue the drive against illegal construction/plotting in future also. **CASTING WORK:** The casting work of U-girders intended for the 4.5 km long elevated section under the Corridor-2 (CSA to Barra-8) of the Kanpur Metro Rail Project commenced on Wednesday at Naubasta casting yard. Director of Works and Infrastructure, CP Singh, and other senior officers from the Uttar Pradesh Metro Rail Corporation Ltd. (UPMRC) were among those present on the occasion. Under Corridor-2 of the Kanpur Metro, a 4.5 km elevated section is currently under construction.

NCL inks MoU with UPRVUNL for 250 MW solar power capacity

CORRESPONDENT ■ SONBHADRA

In a groundbreaking step towards renewable energy, Northern Coalfields Limited (NCL), a Miniratna Company under the Ministry of Coal inked a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Uttar Pradesh Rajya Vidyut Utpadan Nigam Limited (UPRVUNL) on Wednesday for the installation of additional solar power capacity of 250 MW in Sonbhadra region. Director Sunil Prasad Singh on behalf of NCL and Ashwini Kumar Tripathi, Director (Technical) on behalf of UPRVUNL signed the MoU in Lucknow. This MoU will pave the path to establish a 100 MW floating solar power plant and 150 MW ground mounted solar power plant for NCL. Speaking on the occasion, NCL CMD B Sairam reiterated the company's commitment to become net zero and adopting renewal sources of energy for



sustainable mining. He stated that with this initiative, NCL will not only align its vision with Coal India and the Ministry of Coal but also demonstrate its commitment to cooperate in reducing carbon footprints and fostering green energy in line with the nation's vision. The NCL has already commissioned the 50 MW ground mounted solar power plant in its Nigahi

Area, Singrauli, Madhya Pradesh. NCL will become a net zero company with this concrete step meeting its requirement of about 290 MW energy. NCL annually produces more than 135 million tonnes of coal with its 10 highly mechanised open-cast coal mines located in Singrauli and Sonbhadra districts of MP and Uttar Pradesh respectively.

Three killed as truck overturns on tea shop

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

A woman and her two children were killed when a rice-laden truck suddenly overturned on their tea shop on Hardoi-Unnao road in Unnao district late on Wednesday night. At the time of incident which took place around 2 am, all the three were fast asleep in their shop situated along the road. Reports said that Sarla (33), a native of Samaudha under Kachhaun police station, Hardoi, was living in her parents' house in Behta Mujawar for the past six years. Her father Parmeshwar and mother Deoki had already died. She used to run a tea and sweet shop on Sandila-Bangermau road near old building of Behta Mujawar police station. As usual Sarla slept with sons Karan (15) and Vicky (13) at the shop on Wednesday night while her husband Rajkumar, due to rains, was sleeping in the verandah of a market complex situated opposite the road.



Around 2 am, a truck laden with rice coming from Bangermau suddenly overturned on their shop. Station House Officer (SHO) Phool Singh rushed to the spot who, after getting the rice sacks removed, sent all the three injured to the Bangermau community health centre (CHC) where they were declared dead by the doctors. Truck driver escaped after the incident. A massive jam prevailed up to 4 km on both sides of the road for about three hours. Circle Officer (CO) Arvind Kumar also reached the spot and said on the complaint of Rajkumar, a first information report (FIR) was being lodged against the truck driver.

New secretary of UP Board assumes charge

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

After Dibyankant Shukla, now the new secretary of UP Board will be Bhagwati Singh. The new secretary assumed the charge at the board headquarters here on Wednesday evening. Outgoing secretary Dibyankant Shukla handed over the charge to him. The new secretary is a resident of Lakhimpur Kheri and is a 1995 batch officer. Before being transferred to the post of secretary, he was working as Joint Director of Education (Camp) in the office of Director of Secondary Education. After taking charge, he met the officials. He was welcomed by the officials at the board headquarters. Outgoing secretary Dibyankant Shukla took charge as UP Board Secretary on June 30, 2020. During his tenure, he conducted the class X and XII examinations for three years. For the first time, new records



were made by establishing command control in the board headquarters and regional offices and conducting the examination in a fair manner without re-examination. Along with conducting the examination in a short time, Dibyankant Shukla has also made a record of releasing the results in a short time. **MEETING:** A meeting was held in the office of Divisional Railway Manager (DRM) under the chairmanship of

Additional Director General of Police Railway Prakash D in view of the preparations for Kumbh 2025. During its security arrangements were reviewed to conduct the Kumbh Mela successfully. Before the meeting, Additional Divisional Railway Manager General (Administration) Prayagraj Sanjay Singh informed ADG/Railways Prakash D about the plans related to the preparations for Kumbh at Prayagraj Junction.

KVC sees 45.76 pc rise in number of devotees

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

The inauguration of Shri Kashi Vishwanath Dham, popularly known as Kashi Vishwanath Corridor (KVC) and strengthening of the infrastructure and connectivity of Kashi with the places across the world have made the way easier for religious tourists coming here. In Varanasi there has been a record increase in both the number of tourists and the income of KVC in the first half of 2024 as compared to the corresponding period last year. In this January-June period this year, the income of the KVC has increased by 24.66 per cent (pc) as compared to 2023, while the number of devotees has increased by 45.76 per



cent. Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust Vishwa Bhushan Mishra said that in the first six months (January to June) last year, 22,97,9137 devotees had visited KVC, while this year i.e. 2024 in the same period 33,49,4933 devotees have

offered prayers at the Kashi Vishwanath Temple (KVT) which was 1,05,15,796 more than last year. At the same time, the KVC had income of Rs 38,29,77,214 in the first half of 2023, while in the first half of 2024, the same has increased to 47,74,1389 which was 9,44,36,676 more.

Health parameters of over 350 students checked

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

The Rotary Club of New Kanpur continued its welfare campaign for healthy children on Thursday by ensuring their dental check-up besides of their eye sight and height weight parameters. During its health check-up camp held at BNSD Balika Vidyalaya, Meston Road, the health parameters of over 350 students from classes III to VIII were checked. Dr Gaurav Dubey, Dr Swati Gupta and a team from Medical College, Kanpur, examined students from 10 am to 1 pm. President Sangeeta Gupta, secretary Shikha Gupta, Vinod Rishi, Anurag Gupta and Preeti Gupta were present on the occasion.

SP workers pay tribute to Hathras victims

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

The Samajwadi Party (SP) workers paid tribute to the devotees who died at the 'satsang' organised in Ratibhanpur (Sikandra Rao) area of Hathras district of the state by lighting candles. Under the leadership of former city SP president Vishnu Sharma, SP workers paid tribute to the victims by lighting candles in Gulab Bagh Park located in Sigra here on Wednesday evening. In the 'Shradhanjali Sabha', city chief of Samajwadi Minority Sabha Haider 'Guddu' said the Hathras incident is a big tragedy in Uttar Pradesh and we are all saddened to hear the news. After the Shradhanjali Sabha, Vishnu Sharma alleged that the BJP government is responsible for the death of 121 devotees during the 'satsang' in Hathras. He said that most of the victims were Dalits and backward class



SP workers paying tribute to Hathras victims at Sigra in Varanasi on Wednesday

people. He asked that if more crowd than expected had gathered during the 'satsang', then why did the local administration not send the LIU report to the government. "Hathras is a tragic accident due to the negligence of the administration. It is the responsibility of the government that if such big events are being organised, then it should be alert", he said, adding that the

local district administration was negligent in making timely medical arrangements as many injured were not able to get ambulances, medicines and oxygen on time due to which a large number of devotees died. He demanded a fair investigation by a panel of retired Supreme Court judges in the Hathras 'satsang' incident and financial assistance of Rs 25 lakh to the family of each

victim and ₹10 lakh to the injured. Shamim Ansari, Mohsin Ansari, Mohammad Azfar alias 'Guddu Master', Javed Ansari, Hifazat Ali, Sajid Khan 'Chintu', Waqif Hussain, Shamsir Alam, Arshad Khan, Shahzade Khan, Arbaaz Ansari, etc were also present. Meanwhile, the SP workers expressed concern over road cave-in incident on Kabir Chaura-Lahurabir road. Vishnu Sharma complained to the Public Works Department's superintending engineer Gagan Singh that a serious accident can happen anytime due to the road sinking very deep on the road near Nagari Natak Mandali. He said about six months ago also, due to the road sinking at the same place, the repair work was done on a single lane for about two months. Later, the PWD SE directed the subordinate officers get the road repaired immediately.

LIC embarks on ambitious mission

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

To continue its proud legacy of agency-led growth, LIC has embarked on an ambitious mission 'Jeevan Samarth' that aims on future-proofing its entire 14 lakh agent workforce to meet the rapidly evolving needs of customers. To achieve this, LIC has partnered with globally renowned strategy consulting firm M/s AT Kearney which will undertake this agency transformation project by reviewing the existing agency framework of LIC on an end-to-end basis. It will



also entail revamping the agency operations at the branch, division and zonal level directed towards establishing global best practices in the wake of fast-changing

industry and regulatory landscape of the insurance sector in India. Speaking on the occasion, CEO & MD of LIC, S. Mohanty said, "Through the 'Jeevan Samarth' project, we aim

to transform our agency ecosystem to align with the rapidly evolving needs of millions of Indian families and providing them suitable long-term savings, protection, health insurance,

ULIP and pension solutions." Highlighting the importance of enabling and empowering the agents, CEO & MD of LIC said, "This transformation exercise should result into giving our already very committed agents more tools and additional skills thereby making our bond between agents and LIC much more stronger." CEO & MD also called upon the young men and women of India to join hands with LIC by choosing life insurance marketing as a rewarding career and participate in shaping the future of insurance industry in India.

Postal dept connecting people with welfare schemes: PMG

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

Postmaster General (PMG) of Varanasi region Krishna Kumar Yadav said that the Postal department is connecting people with all the welfare schemes of the government. Addressing the 'Financial Inclusion Fair' organised in Ghazipur on Thursday as the chief guest, Yadav said the post offices are playing the role of mobile banks today to connect the last person of the society with the concept of financial inclusion, Digital India and Antyodaya. "The Postal department is now delivering all the public welfare schemes of the government and their benefits to the people along with letters and parcels", the PMG said. Yadav provided passbooks and policy bonds to the beneficiaries of Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, Mahila Samman Savings Certificate and Postal Life Insurance in the 'Financial Inclusion Fair'. He also encouraged the postal workers who



PMG of Varanasi region KK Yadav distributing Sukanya Samridhi account passbook to a girl at Ghazipur on Thursday.

did excellent work by honouring them. While distributing the passbook of 'Sukanya Samridhi Yojana' to the girls, he said that through this, if the girls become self-reliant, then the concept of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' will also be realised. "All the leading schemes of the central government have been implemented prominently through post offices. Along with letter-parcel, the Postal department is doing many people-oriented works like Savings Bank, Postal Life Insurance, India Post Payments Bank,

Post Office Passport Service Centre, Aadhar Enrollment and Update, Common Service Centre, Postal Export Centre", he said. Earlier, welcoming the PMG and other guests, Postal Superintendent PK Pathak gave information about the progress of postal services in Ghazipur. Assistant Superintendent Sanjay Kumar Singh, sub-divisional inspectors Ashutosh Kumar, Vicky Kumar, Dilip Pandey, Aniket Ranjan, Postmaster Ghazipur Head Post Office PK Rai, along with many officers and employees were also present.

Retired IB inspector duped of ₹52.30 lakh

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

A retired IB inspector was duped of ₹52.30 lakh by cyber thugs. The cyber thugs had collected all his data. His photo, documents were already available. After this, many people talked to him posing as custom commissioner, CBI officer. They told him that a case has been registered against him in

Vasant Kunj police station of Delhi under various sections of money laundering and human trafficking. The court has issued an arrest warrant, order for property confiscation. They also showed him all the documents, photos and letterheads of the action. It was even said that a copy of the order is uploaded on the official website.

The cyber thugs even gave the website to the retired IB inspector. The retired IB inspector got scared. He gave all the information including his bank accounts. After this, the fraudsters got ₹52.30 lakh transferred to several accounts. The retired IB inspector who was cheated realised after several days that something was wrong. Now the matter has

reached the cyber crime police. The team is engaged in investigation. Srinath, a resident of Colonelganj, has retired from the post of IB inspector. He has given a complaint in the cyber cell that he received continuous calls from several numbers. Colonelganj police station in-charge PK Singh said that the police is investigating the mat-

ter after registering a case in this connection against the fraudsters on the basis of name and mobile number. In another incident, an 18-year-old youth was stabbed to death during a scuffle between two groups over dancing to DJ songs during a marriage procession late on Wednesday in an area under Khiri police station of Meja here. The police have filed an FIR.

2024 winners' average vote share down by 2 per cent

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The winners of Lok Sabha elections 2024 won an average of 50.58 per cent votes, down by 2 per cent as compared to the last general elections, according to an analysis by the poll rights body Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR).

Among the elected MPs with declared criminal cases, 42 per cent won with a vote share of 50 per cent and above, the ADR report said.

The ADR and National Election Watch (NEW) have released a comprehensive analysis of the vote share in the Lok Sabha Elections 2024, examining 542 out of 543 constituencies. The Surat constituency in Gujarat was excluded from the analysis as its candidate was elected unopposed.

Winners in the 2024 elections secured an average of 50.58 per cent of the total votes polled, a decrease from 52.65 per cent in 2019.

Notably, 279 winners (51 per cent) achieved more than half of the total votes in their constituencies, while 263 winners (49 per cent) failed to reach the half-way mark.

Among the major parties, the



BJP had 75 out of 239 winners (31 per cent) securing less than 50 per cent of the vote share. For the Congress, 57 out of 99 winners (58 per cent) won with less than 50 per cent votes.

Among regional parties, 32 out of 37 winners (86 per cent) from Samajwadi Party, 21 out of 29 winners (72 per cent) from All India Trinamool Congress, and 14 out of 22 winners (64 per cent) from Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam won with less than 50 per cent of the vote share.

Out of the 251 winners with declared criminal cases, 106 (42 per cent) won with a vote share of 50 per cent and above,

while 173 out of 291 winners (59 per cent) with clean backgrounds secured more than 50 per cent of the vote share. Among the 503 crorepati winners, 262 (52 per cent) won with a vote share of 50 per cent and above, while 17 out of 39 non-crorepati winners (44 per cent) achieved the same.

The winners of the Lok Sabha elections in 2024 represent, on average, 33.44 per cent of the total electorate, down from the 35.46 per cent in 2019. This indicates a decrease in the representativeness of elected candidates when compared to the number of eligible voters.

Five winners had a margin of victory of less than 2,000 votes, and another five won with

Modi to visit Russia, Austria next week: MEA

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will pay an official visit to Russia and Austria on July 8-10 July, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said here on Thursday. This will be the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister to Austria in 41 years, it said.

Giving details about his schedule, MEA said Prime Minister will be in Moscow on 8-9 July 2024 at the invitation of the President Vladimir Putin to hold the 22nd India-Russia Annual Summit.

The leaders will review the entire range of multifaceted relations between the two countries and exchange views on contemporary regional and global issues of mutual interest. Prime Minister Modi, will thereafter travel to Austria during 9-10 July.

This will be the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister to Austria in 41 years. He will call on President of Austria Alexander Van der Bellen and hold talks with Chancellor of Austria Karl Nehammer.

Prime Minister Modi and Chancellor Nehammer will also address business leaders from India and Austria. Modi will interact with members of the Indian community in



Moscow as well as in Vienna. Modi last visited Russia in 2019 when he attended an economic conclave in the Far East city of Vladivostok.

The annual summit between the Prime Minister of India and the President of Russia is the highest institutional dialogue mechanism in the strategic partnership between the two countries.

So far, 21 annual summits have taken place alternatively in India and Russia.

The last summit was held on December 6, 2021, in New Delhi. President Putin had visited India to attend the summit.

The summit saw both sides sealing 28 MoUs and agreements, besides coming out with a joint statement titled "India-Russia Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity". Prime Minister Modi and President Putin last held bilateral talks on the margins of a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) at Samarkand in Uzbekistan on September 16, 2022.

In the meeting, Modi had famously pressed Putin to end the conflict in Ukraine saying "today's era is not of war". "I know today's era is not of

war. We discussed this issue on phone several times that democracy, diplomacy and dialogue touch the entire world," Modi had said.

Since the Russian military action in Ukraine in February 2022, Modi has held several telephonic conversations with Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

In reflection of its strong friendship with Russia, India has refrained from condemning Moscow's military action in Ukraine and it has been maintaining that the crisis must be resolved through diplomacy and dialogue.

India's import of Russian crude oil has also gone up significantly notwithstanding the G7 price cap and increasing disquiet over the procurement in many Western countries.

In December 2022, the G7 grouping and its allies announced a cap on the price of Russian oil as part of a series of punitive measures against Moscow in view of its invasion of Ukraine.

The price cap restricts countries to pay more than USD 60 a barrel. Russia has been a long-standing and time-tested partner for India. Development of India-Russia relations has been a key pillar of India's foreign policy.

PM pays tribute to Vivekananda on his death anniversary



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid homage to Swami Vivekananda on his death anniversary on Thursday and said that "we reiterate our commitment to fulfill his dream of a prosperous and progressive society".

In a social media post, Modi said, "I pay homage to Swami Vivekananda on his Punya Tithi. His teachings give strength to millions. His profound wisdom and relentless pursuit of knowledge are also very motivating." "We reiterate our commitment to fulfill his dream of a prosperous and progressive society," he said.

CBI ready to help States, stakeholders implement new laws: Director Sood

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) Director Praveen Sood on Thursday said the Central agency is geared to help States and other stakeholders implement the three new criminal laws which came into force earlier this week. He also said the CBI is working with the Law Ministry to successfully implement the three new laws.

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam (BSA) replaced the Indian Penal Code (IPC), Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) and the Indian Evidence Act respectively from July 1.

Addressing an event at the CBI academy, Ghaziabad where Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal presented the President's Police Medal (PPM) for Distinguished Service and Indian Police Medal (IPM) for Meritorious Service to 39 CBI personnel, Sood said the agency and the Law Ministry are working in synergy to prioritise more efficient prosecution along with investigation.

According to a ministry statement, he noted that CBI's role has been evolving with the passage of time, from handling primarily anti-corruption cases in the beginning to special and economic crimes, cyber crimes and bank frauds. Addressing the gathering, Meghwal said



the new criminal laws will usher in "ease of living" with citizenry contributing to the progress and development of the nation. Appreciating CBI, he observed that its importance is being recognised in the society due to its investigative skills which is reflected in the high conviction rate. Referring to the new criminal laws, Meghwal asserted that they will bring in ease of living in a big way for the citizenry and will expedite delivery of justice and save crucial time of all the stakeholders spent in litigation. The minister stressed that this will prove highly productive for the nation as the energies would be channelised towards the process of development of the society and eventually lead to higher progress.

Meanwhile, former senior police officers, including a former Central Bureau of

Investigation (CBI) chief, have said new criminal laws, which came into force on Monday will ensure speedy justice to the victims. Former Maharashtra DGP Sanjeev Dayal said the three new criminal laws are a "welcome change" from the colonial mindset of previous laws.

"They bring necessary emphasis on crime against women reflecting concerns on rape, molestation and child trafficking. The use of scientific aids to investigation should help in securing better conviction rates and a cap on adjournments by the courts should get faster justice to victims," he said.

Dayal was part of a committee, which also included senior police officers, including Satish Sahney, MR Reddy and S S Puri besides three young officers nominated by the then Maharashtra DGP in 2020.

The committee had made recommendation to bring victimology to the centre of criminal justice system.

"It is very satisfying to see many of the recommendations codified. Now it is over to implementing agencies and courts," he said. Echoing Dayal, another former Maharashtra police DGP AN Roy also said that new laws take victim-centric approach compared to the British Era Penal Code. "The provisions in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita aim to provide timely justice to women and children with increased punishment under these cases. It introduces digital electronic evidence reviews along with more focus on national security," Roy said.

Former CBI chief and Mumbai Police ex-Commissioner Subodh Kumar Jaiswal said the new laws represent a tectonic shift towards a people centric approach to justice.

"This will ensure justice is served rightly, timely and swiftly. Indian criminal justice system is now more victim friendly and justice oriented, a transformation achieved through extensive deliberation," he said. Jaiswal said the new laws will address the challenges arising due to cyber enabled crimes.

Former SPG Director MR Reddy said the new laws will bring "paradigm shift" in enforcing scientific investigation and speeding up disposal of cases.

Armed forces should be technology ready, says CDS General Chauhan

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan on Thursday said the form of war is transforming rapidly due to technological advancements and the country's Armed forces will have to be ready to accept this change.

He made the remarks while addressing a gathering of Army officers, junior commissioned officers (JCOs) and soldiers drawn from 18 Grenadiers to mark 25 years of the battles of Tololing and Tiger Hill fought during the Kargil war in 1999. Tiger Hill top was captured by the Indian Army on July 4, 1999.

The 18 Grenadiers battalion played a pivotal role in the Kargil conflict.

"Vijay Diwas" is celebrated on July 26 every year to mark India's victory over Pakistan in the 1999 Kargil war.

"People of the country have faith in our capabilities and due to that, we have this immense prestige. The legacy that has been bequeathed to you has been earned by our ancestors. We may not have made a direct contribution but we are reaping its fruits," Gen Chauhan told the gathering.

This also "entrusts on us responsibilities", both individually and as a community, he said. One cannot make a mistake as a soldier and as a community, the trust can never be lowered, the CDS added.



In his address, General Chauhan said, "We are going through an age of transformation. In today's era, the form of a war is rapidly changing. Therefore, we will always have to be ready to accept this change."

"We want to become a professional armed force and a superpower... India. It is our desire. This can happen only if we work with new energy, new zeal and new thoughts."

Quoting scientists and philosophers, the CDS underlined that change is the only constant and the Indian armed forces "cannot stay away from this change".

"Due to rapid technological developments, the form of the war is changing rapidly. In the past, it was found that valour was an essential element in winning a battle. But in future wars, valour alone is not enough... We will have to be flexible and

imaginative and keep an open mind," he added.

As many weapons get upgraded with better technology, tactics and strategies also change and it is very rapid now, the CDS told the gathering.

"Today we are talking of a multi-domain warfare. Instead of just conventional domains like land, sea, maritime and air, the cyber, electromagnetic spectrum and space domains are also added to augment our military strength," he said.

The CDS said people love and trust the armed forces and if "we have to maintain it, we will have to bring change."

"We cannot fail in a war," he asserted, adding that unlike sports, there are no runners-up in war as winner takes it all. "To maintain that trust, you will have to understand and adapt to these new things."

This is the main reason why the government has made the post of a CDS and it is part of reforms that we are endeavouring to implement," General Chauhan said.

He said as CDS, his mandate is to bring jointness and integration among the three Services, that all must work in consonance.

"A unit works like a human body where any ailment impacts overall health," he said. General Chauhan extended his greetings to members of the 18 Grenadiers battalion and also the Veer Nari, whose sons or husbands made the supreme sacrifice for the nation.

India, UK to deepen cooperation between cyber agencies

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Sixth Cyber Dialogue between India and the United Kingdom (UK) was held here on Wednesday, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on Thursday.

Discussions during the Dialogue included cyber threat assessment, internet governance, data protection, protection of critical infrastructure, capacity building and cooperation in multilateral fora, including the latest developments in the cyber realm at the United Nations.

Both sides agreed to deepen cooperation between their respective cyber agencies in order to build a safe and robust cyberspace.

The dialogue was co-chaired by Amit A. Shukla, Joint Secretary, Cyber Diplomacy Division, Ministry of External Affairs of India (MEA) and Kat Jones, Head of Strategy and Engagement, Cyber Policy Department, The Foreign, Commonwealth and



Development Office (FCDO) of the UK.

The Indian delegation consisted of officials from the MEA, Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Indian Cybercrime Coordination Centre (I4C), Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY), Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO), CERT-In and National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC).

The delegation from the UK comprised of officials from National Cyber Security Centre, the Cyber Policy Department of the FCDO, and representatives of the Cyber Policy Team of the British High Commission.

NEET candidates move SC to restrain NTA from cancelling exam

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Over 50 successful Gujarat-based NEET-UG candidates, including several who have been ranked first, have moved the Supreme Court seeking a direction to restrain the Centre and the National Testing Agency from cancelling the controversy-ridden exam.

They have sought a direction from the top court to the Union Education Ministry to probe, identify and take strict action against students and others who indulged in unfair practices like paper leak and impersonation in the NEET-UG exam conducted on May 5 this year.

The fresh plea by 56 students has been filed days before a top court bench headed by Chief Justice DY Chandrachud is scheduled to hear as many as 26 petitions seeking reliefs like re-test and probe into the conduct of the examination plagued by allegations of malpractices.

The National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test-Undergraduate (NEET-UG) is conducted by



the National Testing Agency (NTA) for admission to MBBS, BDS, AYUSH and other related courses in government and private institutions across the country. NEET-UG, 2024 was held across 4,750 centres on May 5 and around 24 lakh candidates appeared in the exam. Allegations of irregularities, including paper leaks, have led to protests in several cities and sparring between rival political parties.

The pleas seeking cancellation of the exam, re-test and high-level probe are listed for hearing on July 8 in the SC.

The fresh plea of Sidhharth Komal Singla and 55 other students was filed through lawyer

Devendra Singh. It said "The Hon'ble court may further direct the respondents (Centre and the NTA) not to re-conduct NEET-UG ... As that would not only be unreasonable and harsh for the honest and hardworking students but also would lead to the infringement of the Right to Education and therefore violative of Article 14 (right to equality) of the Constitution."

The plea sought a direction to the Centre and the NTA to identify and punish the examinees who adopted unfair means, identify the centres and take appropriate action where any "compromise to the established guidelines for NEET-UG 2024 examinations has been done."

The Petitioners are young students around 17-18 years of age, and to achieve their dream of becoming a doctor, they have given their 100 per cent and have cleared the exam after consistent hard work of more than 3-4 years, it said.

However, the continuous coverage of news regarding the cancellation of the exam and

possibility of a re-test for all is creating mental pressure and causing unnecessary stress, it said. If the re-test happens as a result of "hype created due to the misleading coverage by media", the honest successful students will have to face hardship, it added.

Singla, the lead petitioner, ranked 778 in the merit list of NEET-UG 2024, the plea said, adding, "He has always been an outstanding student who in class 12th has topped in his school with 96.60%."

It is further stated that amongst the other co-petitioners, there are students who have scored even the 1st Rank..."

On June 11, while hearing a plea seeking holding of the exam afresh on grounds of alleged question paper leak and other malpractices, the top court had observed that the sanctity of the NEET-UG has been affected and sought responses from the Centre and the NTA on the petition.

It, however, refused to stay the counselling of the successful candidates.

India, Australia to review bilateral defence ties

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India and Australia on Thursday reviewed the entire spectrum of their bilateral defence and strategic ties during telephonic talks between Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and his counterpart Richard Marles. He is also Deputy Prime Minister of Australia.

In a social media post, Rajnath stated that a range of issues pertaining to bilateral defence cooperation were reviewed, with focus on closer collaboration between the two countries in the Indo-Pacific. "We place great value on India-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," he said. Both Ministers noted the transformative progress in defence cooperation under the comprehensive strategic partnership, and appreciated the momentum achieved in the ties since the last India-Australia 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, which the two Ministers attended in November 2023.



Australia considers India as a top-tier security partner in their National Defence Strategy document which was released in 2024.

Marles congratulated Rajnath for taking charge as the defence minister for a second consecutive term, and appreciated the functioning of the Indian democratic system wherein people voted in large numbers. He also congratulated Rajnath on Team India becoming the T20 world champions.

India, US, Japan and Australia are part of Quad to safeguard interests in the strategically important Indo-Pacific region. China has all along criticized this grouping claiming it will lead to militarization of the region.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Litmus test

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

The UK voted yesterday to elect 650 representatives to the House of Commons who in turn would elect its next prime minister. The UK is at a crucial juncture. It is battling myriad issues ranging from economic downsides, healthcare and post Brexit hardships. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has made a fervent appeal to voters, urging them to put an end to what he describes as Labour's dominance in British politics. Interestingly, for the last 14 years, the Conservative Party has been in power but has not delivered on its promises in full measure. The centre-right Conservatives took power amid the global financial crisis. However, their tenure has been plagued by economic stagnation, declining public services, and multiple scandals, leaving them vulnerable to criticism from both the left and right. The general election marks a pivotal moment in UK politics, with the Conservative Party, led by Rishi Sunak, pitted against the Labour Party under the leadership of Keir Starmer.



The two parties have diametrically opposite views on tackling the country's problems. The UK is still coming to terms with Brexit which did not go well for it and led to many hardships for the Government and the people. Besides, once a world power, the UK is reduced to just another ally of the US in the world arena seriously jeopardizing its international standing. So the battle is not just for seats in Parliament but for the very direction of the nation.

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

PICTALK



Villagers catch fish in flood water, in Morigaon district

The rise of radical rebels in Pakistan



BHOPINDER SINGH

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

Clergy has always played a pivotal role in the Pakistani narrative. The indelible impact of the 'Mullahs' has historically cut across institutions of power like the Military 'establishment', political parties, civilian society, academia et al. Each has, in their own way succumbed to puritanical displays and appropriations to posture alignment befitting the 'land of the pure' or Pakistan. However, it must be said that many of these institutions have also privately harboured the exact opposite instincts and preferences, from what has been prescribed by the clerical order. These institutions have pandered to religiosity only to tick in the box their own false, and publicly fronted sense of piety to legitimise their relevance, whilst indulging in vices, degeneracies, and excesses. A cursory look at the long list of the Pakistani infamous in the Pandora Papers or Panama List is a veritable who's-who of the Pakistani elites, who posture simplicity, austerity, and god-fearing honesty in the public sphere. This has led to the elites leading notoriously duplicitous lives with ill-gotten properties and excesses across the world, whilst injecting toxic-religiosity and religious extremism back home. The bunny of religion is essentially for public consumption to be invoked whenever everything else fails e.g., beseeching Arab Sheikhs or Turkey for life-sustaining aid in the name of a "brotherly muslim nation". The personal lives of the ruling Sharif family and the feudal Bhuttos are hardly the modicum of religious idyls, and the same discomfort applies to the Westernised Generals who are increasingly facing the wrath of the angry, long-bearded, armed, and madrasa-educated tribals. Today, it seems the ability of Pakistan's ruling elite to successfully play the patented double game has run its course. Not only have the radicalized masses (generously fanned by the elites in 'Olive Green' or Servants) refused to take orders, but far worse, they have turned on their begetters! Creations like the "Taliban" which was a joint



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



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

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

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PM'S REMARKS ON MANIPUR

Madam — The Congress has strongly criticized Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his remarks in the Rajya Sabha, where he claimed that the situation in Manipur was returning to normal. The Congress argues that this statement is far from the reality on the ground, pointing out that the Prime Minister has yet to visit Manipur since violence erupted between the Meitei and Kuki communities in May of the previous year. Congress MP Jairam Ramesh accused the Prime Minister of making light of the situation and not acknowledging the continuing violence and tension in Manipur. Despite more than 200 deaths and thousands of people displaced due to ongoing ethnic violence, the Prime Minister's comments suggested a lack of serious engagement with the issue. The Congress also criticized the Prime Minister for not listening to voices from Manipur and for focusing more on political jobs than addressing the concerns of those affected by the violence. The party emphasized that the Prime Minister's response is insufficient given the severity of the crisis in Manipur and accused him of turning a blind eye to the plight of the state's residents. **Bhagwan Thadani | Mumbai**

HATHRAS TRAGEDY

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

Bowing to elders is a sign of respect



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

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

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

UNSUNG HEROES IN INDIAN CRICKET

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

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

Balancing motivation and misuse in India's research landscape

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



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

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



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

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

government sectors, banks, or even as a school teacher, to cite a few. To change people's minds, we must keep fighting for equal rights for women, spreading the word that education should be accessible to everyone and dispelling myths about women's abilities and goals. It's essential for prospective PhD candidates to carefully consider their motivations and the potential impact of their research. Pursuing a PhD solely for recognition or prestige, without a genuine commitment to contribute meaningful research or knowledge, offers little benefit to society or the nation. People who do research for name sake are involved in many unethical practices, like outsourcing the work and outsourcing their thesis writing and paper writing to other agencies. Unfortunately, these people reach higher positions through their influence, overtaking genuine researchers who have toiled their lives for research. (The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

STRATEGIC DYNAMICS
AT THE SCO SUMMIT

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



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

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

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



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

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

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

Railway accidents expose neglect, systemic failures



SHIVAJI SARKAR

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

rendering the automatic signals defunct since 5.50 am.

In such a situation absolute block comes under restriction. When signals are not operational it is covered with paper or a piece of cloth. Railway Minister Ashwani Vaishnav had told Rajya Sabha on July 21, 2023, that the rear collision at Balasore was due to lapses in the signalling-circuit alteration carried out in the past and during the execution of the signalling work related to the replacement of the electric lifting barrier for a level-crossing gate. Two months before this, the Railway Board had flagged the issue of signalling staff resorting to short-cut methods.

Referring to five alarming incidents where trains entered the wrong path due to short-cut methods adopted by the signalling staff, the Railway Board in a letter to General Managers of Zonal Railways expressed "serious concern" that despite repeated instructions the ground situation was not improving and "signalling staff continue with short-cut methods for clearing signals".

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

1. Officials Overlooked Multiple Violations Earlier,

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

3. Mismatch of Two Sets of Rules - general rules peg speed at 10km in case of signal failure and subsidiary rules at 15 km, 4. Every Passenger Train's Last Two Coaches Need Crash-Worthy Features, 5. Record Walkie-Talkie Conversations Between Station Masters and Loco Pilots In yet another incident the South Western Railway Zone official wrote: "on 08.02.2023 the loco pilot of Up Train No: 12649 Sampark Kranti Express, had stopped the train before Point No: 65 A, while observing that the point was set to down main line (wrong line), while as per PLCT, the train was supposed to pass through Up main line."

An audit report of the last year flagged serious lapses in rail safety. In a 2022 report focusing on derailments within Indian Railways, the CAG sought to investigate how preventive measures were implemented by the railway ministry against derailments and collisions.

The Kavach system of bringing the trains to a halt has a cost of Rs 50lakh per km and Rs 70 lakh per locomotive. It may take longer than the railway has planned. The eastern region alone needs Rs 3000 crore. Even if Kavach implemented the railways to improve on signal and track maintenance, accidents would not be easy to prevent. Even now it is not too late to divert funds from station demolitions to safety aspects.

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

Women suffer in silence as violence against them keeps increasing

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

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



KAVITA DHAMEJA

was listed as the fourth most unsafe city for women. Rajasthan is the third state with the highest number of cases of violence against women in 2022. Notably, Rajasthan had the highest number of recorded rape cases, with over 31,000 incidents reported across the country and 5,399 cases registered in the state. The report also reveals that most incidents of violence or discrimination against women are

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

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

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

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

To contribute to the household income, my two daughters and I collect trash daily, and I had to stop their schooling." She further revealed, "My husband used to beat me after getting intoxicated, which also affected my daughters. One day, I gathered the courage to call the police, and since then, he has significantly reduced the violence." This settlement, predominantly inhabited by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, is located about 10 kilometres from the city in the Gurjar Ki Thadi area.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PM2.5 leads to rise in mortality in metros

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

The unrelenting rise in vehicular and industrial emissions has turned India's bustling urban centers like Delhi and Bengaluru into veritable hotbeds of air pollution with daily mortality rates soaring on average 7.2% due to PM2.5 levels exceeding WHO-recommended safe thresholds.

This lethal phenomenon underscores the urgent need for robust environmental policies and collective action to mitigate the profound impact of air pollution on public health, as highlighted in a first multi-city study to examine the association between short-term exposures to air pollution and daily mortality in India. The study is published in The Lancet Planetary Health journal on Thursday. Particulate matter (PM) consists of a mixture of solids and liquid droplets and can either be emitted directly or



form when pollutants from various sources react in the atmosphere. PMs less than 10 micrometers in diameter pose the greatest problems, because they can get deep into the lungs, and some may even get into the bloodstream. Researchers of the study "the first multi-city, time series analysis of short-term exposure to PM2.5 and daily mortality in India," said that daily exposure to PM2.5 pollution in Indian cities is linked with a higher risk of death, and locally created pollution could be possibly causing these deaths. The international team

included researchers from Varanasi's Banaras Hindu University (BHU) and the Centre for Chronic Disease Control, New Delhi. They found that an increase of 10 micrograms per cubic metre in the average of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) pollution measured over two days (short-term exposure) was related to 1.4 per cent higher daily mortality. The death risk was found to be doubled (2.7 per cent) per a 10 microgram per cubic metre increase, when the researchers restricted their analysis to observations below Indian standards of air

quality, less stringent than WHO guidelines for safe exposure, which prescribe 15 micrograms per cubic metre of PM2.5 over a 24-hour period, said the study. Indian air quality standards prescribe 60 micrograms per cubic metre of PM2.5 over a 24-hour period. City-wise, the authors found a 0.31 per cent rise in daily mortality per a 10 micrograms per cubic metre increase in PM2.5 in Delhi, while in Bengaluru, the rise was 3.06 per cent. The links between daily exposure to PM2.5 pollution and locally created pollutants were found to be stronger in models which the researchers used to explore cause-and-effect relationships. Therefore, it was possible that the locally generated pollutants were causing these excess deaths, the authors said. "The causal effects were especially strong in cities with lower concentrations of air pollution, such as (Bengaluru), Chennai, and Shimla," the authors wrote.

Mumbo Jumbo politics in Kerala's Congress

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

Though the Congress swept all but one seat it contested in Kerala in the recent Lok Sabha polls from the State, the party is embroiled in mumbo jumbo politics much to the embarrassment of the High Command.

On Thursday, a group of party workers and sorcerers traced materials from the Nadal residence of K Sudhakaran, MP and president of KPCC. The materials retrieved on Thursday are reportedly remnants of sorcery and black magic performed for the annihilation of Sudhakaran, said one of his aides who was present during the probe. Copper sheets, pancha loha (made of five metals) pendant and bones of birds form the materials dug out from various corners of Sudhakaran's house. "These are all materials which are nearly two years old and I do not have anything to say about this," Sudhakaran told the media which had turned up in large numbers for an on the spot assessment. Though he refused to tell any



details of the persons suspected behind the black magic, the needle of suspicion points towards a woman leader from the State who was waiting anxiously before the Lok Sabha polls for the announcement from High Command that Sudhakaran may not contest the election due to poor health. But things did not work out as she had planned and the party's central leadership insisted that Sudhakaran should contest from Kannur which he did and won with a big majority defeating the CPI(M) strongman M V Jayarajan. Rajmohan Unnithan, MP was with Sudhakaran when the probe was underway at his house. "Thank God, I am alive

despite this witchcraft," Sudhakaran was heard telling the reporters after the investigation. A sorcerer from Pathanamthitta had been summoned to find out the possibility of any witchcraft and he replied in the affirmative. Interestingly, Sudhakaran had some ailments in his legs which the sorcerer attributed to witchcraft. The Malabar region in Kerala that includes the northern districts is known for sorcery and black magic. Services of sorcerers in the region are hired by all including Marxists and Congress to weaken their rivals. As the saying goes, all is fair in love and war. Politics too is a form of war.

NBCC to oversee development at Ravenshaw University, Cuttack



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

NBCC is overseeing the comprehensive development of Ravenshaw University in Cuttack, Odisha. The project, valued at approximately 250 crore, aims to enhance infrastructure across the university's main campus and Mahanadi campus. The scope of the project includes the construction and development of various key facilities with more than 45,000 sqm of built-up area. The main campus of Ravenshaw University will include the construction of two research scholar hostels (G+3), each accommodating 150 students and spanning approximately 8,000 sqm. Additionally, a comprehensive mess facility, complete with dining areas, kitchens and essential amenities to serve 1,000 students shall be built.

Recommend Article 355: LoP to Bengal Governor

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Bengal Opposition Leader Suvendu Adhikari has urged Governor CV Ananda Bose to recommend imposition of Article 355 in the State on grounds of deteriorating law and order situation. Adhikari's demand comes close on the heels of a number of violent incidents including the one at Chopra in Islampur where a couple was publicly flogged by a Trinamool Congress strongman and a series of attacks on the BJP workers in Cooch Behar and other districts taking place. "I can give the name of 40-50 police stations in the State where the law and order

situation has completely collapsed and there is no rule of law and safety of the people," Adhikari who has repeatedly expressed concern over the deteriorating law and order situation of the State said. "Goons are on rampage in Bengal. It is not only the case of Chopra or Cooch Behar ... the TMC backed criminals have taken control of the administration and with the help of the ruling party and taking advantage of a servile police force they are torturing the common man ... today no one is safe ... there is no law and order in the State ... the Governor as the constitutional head of the State should take immediate steps and write to

the Centre about the falling law and order situation," Adhikari said. "I know that law and order is a State subject ... I don't recommend dismantling of an elected Government ... Let the Mamata Banerjee Government complete its full term and continue till 2026 ... my only appeal is to take the police administration from the hands of the State Government under Article 55 so that the law and order situation can be restored and the innocent people can be saved from falling victims of the TMC goons," he said adding "the State is in a situation where the people in constitutional posts should act" so as to establish



rule of law and democracy in Bengal. Article 355 of the Constitution says "It shall be the duty of the Union to protect every State against

external aggression and internal disturbance and to ensure that the Government of every State is carried on in accordance with the provisions of this

Constitution," implying thereby that the Centre in the case of internal disturbance (read deteriorating law and order situation) can take control of the police administration. Curiously the Opposition Leader's statement comes close on the heels of the Governor himself writing to Home Minister Amit Shah seeking action against three senior bureaucrats of the State including Chief Secretary BP Gopalika. In his letters to the Home Minister a few weeks ago Bose wrote, "Governors do send reports to the Centre... But I haven't seen anything like this in 20-plus years in service. It is unprecedented." Writing against the Chief

Secretary, Kolkata Commissioner of Police and another Deputy Commissioner of Police the wrote, "the course of conduct adopted by a senior member of the Indian Administrative Service, who is presently working as the Chief Secretary to the Government of West Bengal, and two officers of the Indian Police Service working as the Commissioner of Police, Kolkata, and the Deputy Commissioner, Central Division, Kolkata, clearly reveals how these officers have been brazenly violating the provisions of the Constitution and the Conduct Rules in particular. In case no action is taken

against these erring officers, it could send a wrong signal down the line resulting in further deterioration of the Services and consequentially harm the interests of the Nation." The relationship between the Raj Bhavan and Nabanna (State secretariat) had hit its nadir with the Governor filing a defamation suit against the Chief Minister for allegedly making disrespectful remarks against him. The case is likely to be heard on Friday. Meanwhile, the Calcutta High Court has granted permission to the Leader of Opposition to hold a day-long dharna in front of the Raj Bhavan pressing for his demands.

Dhirendra Ojha appointed principal spokesperson of Government

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Senior Indian Information Service (IIS) officer Dhirendra K Ojha was on Thursday appointed the principal spokesperson of the central government. Ojha, a 1990-batch officer, will also hold the charge of the principal director general, Press Information Bureau, an official order said. Ojha succeeds Sheyphali B Sharan, who has been appointed as the director general of the Publications Division. Sharan, also a 1990-batch IIS officer, was given the charge of principal director general, PIB on April 1 this year. Ojha served as the director general, Central Bureau of Communications (CBC), PIB Director General YK Baweja succeeds Ojha in the CBC, which looks after the advertising of all central government organisations and acts as an advisory body to the government on media strategy.

Hathras stampede...

From Page 1 However, destiny had worse in store for him as upon return he got to know that his wife and his nine-year daughter had also lost their lives in the tragedy. "Barbad hogya mai," were the few words he could utter while sharing his grief. Even recovering the bodies was a traumatic experience for the kin as mortal remains of the victims were sent to hospitals in different neighbouring towns with the family members being unaware of the exact locations. "My mother's body was in Agra, my daughter's in Aligarh and that of wife's in Hathras," he said in between sobs, explaining how difficult it was to even get their bodies. His elder son of 20 years remembers how he went to find his grandmother's body in Hathras' district hospital but found his mother's body instead. No officials have yet come to meet the grieving family or extend any support to them. Locals tell how many still come to the location where

the stampede had occurred to find the bodies of their near and dear ones but all in vain. On the day of tragedy, bodies were stuffed in vans and sent to different hospitals. People narrate how bodies were lying around in the hospitals in large numbers, making that day the most horrific for them. Meanwhile, in the Sikandra Rao district hospital only a few injured are left to be discharged. Among them was also a five-year-old boy Lovey who had gone to the satsang with his grandmother, who too suffered injuries to her stomach and chest. Police deployment was skeletal despite the huge size of the crowd gathered. Among them was also a UP Police constable Sheela Maurya who was on duty. She suffered injuries to her back, making her unable to walk, while trying to save women and children during the stampede. Her son told how many stepped on his mother as she was trying to save others.

India script cricket history...

From Page 1 "It marks a significant milestone for deaf cricket in India, showcasing our capability to compete and succeed at the highest levels of the sport. We are thrilled to see our team's hard work and determination pay off, and we look forward to continuing our journey of excellence in deaf cricket." Felicitating the team, Dr. Virendra Kumar, Union Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment, remarked, "This victory is a moment of pride for the entire country. The team's determination has turned the impossible into possible, and this win belongs to the entire nation. Our deaf players have proven that given the opportunity, they can always rise to the occasion, inspiring us to overcome the harshest circumstances." Rajesh Aggarwal, Secretary of Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities under the Ministry expressed, "Immensely proud and happy to see the Indian Deaf

Cricket Team's incredible victory over England! A true testament to their hard work and determination." Dr. Himanshu Singh, Director of CRC Lucknow under PDUNIPDD, DEPwD, also hailed the victory, noting that such achievements reflect the hidden talent among these individuals. "Given the opportunity, the sky is the limit for them despite their physical limitations. Our department is undertaking various programs to boost the morale of the sector and help challenge societal perceptions, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity in sports," he added. Similarly, a wheelchair-bound Meenu Mani of the NGO 'Yes We Can,' who has cerebral palsy, termed such moments as an inspiration not only to people with disabilities but to everyone. "This shows that determination and hard work can lead to success, no matter the obstacles," she said while Roma Balwani, CEO of IDCA, emphasised, "This victory underscores our team's resilience and

commitment to excellence in cricket. It gives me immense pride to highlight the power of sports to unite and inspire, showcasing the immense talent within our country. This win is remarkable, as the team played in a new environment and succeeded with immense guidance from their coaches and skipper, Virender Singh." The accomplishments of the deaf cricket team also help raise awareness about the need for better support and opportunities for athletes with disabilities, highlighting the importance of providing equal opportunities and resources for all sportspeople, emphasised Rajeshwari Iyer, a well-known mental health professional. For instance, in this case, partners like Serum Institute of India, KFC India, Hero MotoCorp Ltd., APL Apollo Tubes Ltd., Shiv Naresh Sports Pvt. Ltd., Impact Measurement, and Kaizzen, played a crucial role in supporting the Indian deaf cricketers to achieve their remarkable feat.

CBI files first FIR...

From Page 1 The complainant alleged that his brother Koshinder has been implicated in a false NDPS case and he was arrested on 23.05.2024 by Narcotics Cell, Maurice Nagar. Koshinder is currently in judicial Custody at Tihar Jail. The complainant alleged that the NRX medicines has been falsely shown in the possession of his brother Koshinder. The complainant told the CBI that medicines have been falsely shown in the possession of his brother Koshinder. Dhaka and Saini allegedly demanded the bribe to provide the details of the NRX medicines to the complainant for preparing fake bills and to submit the same before the competent Court, which subsequently would be verified as genuine by them and it would help in release on bail of his brother from his judicial custody, the CBI has alleged. During verification proceedings, the CBI sent the complainant with concealed recorder to ascertain the claims. Dhaka allegedly told the complainant that IO of the case would settle for Rs 2.50 crore.

Jaishankar for isolating...

From Page 1 As regards boundary dispute in Ladakh, India and China vowed to redouble efforts to resolve the remaining issues in eastern Ladakh at the earliest and "stabilise and rebuild" ties during the meeting between the two foreign ministers on the sidelines of the SCO summit. In the talks, Jaishankar underlined the need for fully abiding by relevant bilateral agreements and protocols reached between the two sides in the past for the management of the border. In a statement, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said Jaishankar and Wang had an in-depth exchange of views on finding an early resolution of the remaining issues along the LAC in eastern Ladakh to "stabilise and rebuild bilateral relations." In the meeting, the external affairs minister also reaffirmed India's persistent view that the relations between the two sides must be based on mutual respect, mutual interest and mutual sensitivity. "Met with CPC Politburo member and FM Wang Yi in Astana this morning. Discussed early resolution of remaining issues in border areas. Agreed to redouble efforts through diplomatic and military channels to that end," Jaishankar said on X. "Respecting the LAC and ensuring peace and

tranquillity in the border areas is essential. The three mutuals - mutual respect, mutual sensitivity and mutual interest - will guide our bilateral ties," he said. India has been maintaining that its ties with China cannot be normal unless there is peace in the border areas. "Both Ministers agreed to continue and step up meetings of the diplomatic and military officials of the two sides to take forward their discussions to resolve the remaining issues at the earliest," the MEA said. "To that end, they agreed that the Working Mechanism on Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) should hold an early meeting," it said. The MEA said Jaishankar reiterated that the India-China relationship is best served by observing the three mutuals -- mutual respect, mutual sensitivity and mutual interests. It said the two ministers agreed that the prolongation of the current situation in the border areas is not in the interest of either side. "The external affairs minister highlighted the need to redouble efforts to achieve complete disengagement from the remaining areas in eastern Ladakh and restore border peace and tranquillity in order to remove obstacles towards the return of normalcy in bilateral relations," the MEA said.

BJP vs Cong over Rahul's...

From Page 1 "We had Jaguar, Mig 29, SU-30, Mirage 2000...We had nuclear bombs, missiles like Agni, Prithvi, Aakash, Nag, Trishul and later Brahmos," he said. Tagore also dubbed as "factually incorrect" Thakur's remarks that Prime Minister Modi has not taken a single holiday and asked which category of leave is taken for election campaigns. After Rahul's speech on Monday on the Motion of Thanks on the President's address, Union Ministers Ashwini Vaishnav and Rijiju accused the Congress leader of making "untruthful" claims about a host of issues, including the Agnipath

scheme and the compensation paid to locals in Ayodhya. Under Direction 115 of the Speaker, a member wishing to point out any mistake or inaccuracy in a statement made by a Minister or any other member can, before referring to the matter in the House, write to the Speaker pointing out the particulars of the mistake or the inaccuracy and seek permission to raise the issue. The member may place before the Speaker such evidence that she or he has in support of the allegation. The Speaker can bring the matter to the notice of the minister or the member concerned to ascertain the factual position.

Victims rue medical...

From Page 1 The lack of proper care and the hasty discharge of patients have left the victims' families feeling abandoned and deeply frustrated during this difficult time. Son of 80-year-old Maya Devi, who has been experiencing severe pain in her chest and has high BP, Dharam Singh, who works as a rickshaw puller, expressed his anguish with the government. He stated that despite being in severe pain and high BP doctors are telling them to get his mother discharged today. "They have been unable to reduce her chest pain and her BP is not coming down from 200. In this situation, why are they asking us to leave? In fact some people who were discharged yesterday didn't look well to

me and still were sent. If they can't take care of us in government hospitals, why don't they let us know," he said. When asked about the monetary assistance promised by the government of 50,000 rupees to the injured, Singh said no one has offered him anything yet. 20 year old Shikha was the only person in her family who got injured in the stampede. While she was brought to the hospital, doctors discharged her later the same day. However, her condition became worse in the night at home and her family had to rush her to the hospital again. "She got discharged at night the same day. At night while we were sleeping and lights went off, her condition deteriorated. We had to rush her to the hospital," her mother stated.

Naidu bats for raise in Andhra's Central...

From Page 1 The PMO confirmed the meeting between Naidu and Modi via social media. The Andhra Pradesh chief minister's two-day Delhi visit included meetings with several Union Ministers. He discussed national highway projects with Union Road Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari and praised the "spirit of cooperative federalism" after talks with Minister Piyush Goyal. Naidu also met Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan to discuss state-specific issues. The visit is seen as crucial for securing Central support for Andhra Pradesh's development following its 2014 bifurcation. Naidu's engagements in the capital

underscore the TDP's importance as an NDA partner and the state's push for accelerated growth. In regards to his party stand, JD(U) working president Sanjay Kumar Jha on Thursday brushed off speculations that the party's push for grant of special status to Bihar could lead to a confrontation with the NDA government at the Centre. "The resolution has also made it clear that we want help, be it in the form of special status or special package. The prime minister is sensitive towards our concerns. In the next five years, Bihar would be among the developed states, powered by ample central assistance," said Jha.

Hezbollah fires over 200 rockets into Israel

AP ■ BEIRUT

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

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



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

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

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

Nasser was of great importance to Hezbollah, which said he took part in battles in conflicts in Syria and Iraq from 2011 until 2016 and fought in the group's last war with Israel in 2006. Two other senior Hezbollah commanders have also been killed. The US and France are continuing to scramble to prevent the skirmishes from spiraling into an all-out war, which they fear could spill over across the region. Washington in its shuttle diplomatic efforts initially hoped for calm along the Lebanon-Israel border in a deal that is not linked to the war in Gaza. However, since the US has called for Hamas to agree to a cease-fire proposal

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

The relatively low-level conflict erupted shortly after the outbreak of the war in Gaza. Hezbollah says it is striking Israel in solidarity with Hamas, another Iran-allied group that ignited the war in Gaza with its October 7 attack into southern Israel. The group's leadership says it will stop its attacks once there is a cease-fire in Gaza, and that while it does not want war, it is ready for one. Israeli officials, meanwhile, say they could decide to go to war in Lebanon if efforts for a diplomatic solution fail. Hezbollah's retaliation comes a day after a senior adviser to US President Joe Biden, Amos Hochstein, met with French President Emmanuel Macron's Lebanon envoy, Jean-Yves Le Drian, in Paris.

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

Israel, 16 soldiers and 11 civilians have been killed. In Lebanon, more than 450 people — mostly fighters but also dozens of civilians — have been killed. Israel sees Hezbollah as its most direct threat and estimates that it has an arsenal of 150,000 rockets and missiles, including precision-guided missiles. In 2006, Israel and Hezbollah fought a monthlong war that ended in a draw. Meanwhile, the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said Thursday that the Palestinian death toll from nearly nine months of war has surged past 38,000. The ministry said that in the last 24 hours, the bodies of 58 people had been brought to hospitals, bringing the overall death toll to 38,011. It said more than 87,000 people have been wounded in the fighting. The ministry does not distinguish between fighters and noncombatants in its count, but many of the dead are said to be women and children.

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

AP ■ TEL AVIV

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

Fighting, meanwhile, intensified between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah, with the militant group saying it fired more than 200 rockets and exploding drones into northern Israel to avenge the killing of a senior commander in an Israeli airstrike the day before. The relatively low-level conflict has literally set the border ablaze and raised fears of a potentially even more devastating war in the Middle East. Hezbollah has said it will halt its attacks if there is a cease-fire between Hamas — a fellow Iran-backed ally — and Israel. The United States has rallied world support behind a plan that would see the release of all of the scores of hostages still held by the militant group in return for a lasting truce and the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza. But until now, neither side appears to have fully embraced it.

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

US officials have said the latest proposal has new language that was proposed to Egypt and Qatar on Saturday and addresses indirect negotiations that are set to commence during the first phase of the three-phase deal that US President Joe Biden laid out in a May 31 speech. The first phase calls for a "full and complete cease-fire," a withdrawal of Israeli forces from all densely populated areas of Gaza and the release of a number of hostages, including women, older people and the wounded, in exchange for the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. The proposal called for the parties to negotiate the terms of the second phase during the 42 days of phase one. Under the current proposal, Hamas could release all of the remaining men, both civilians and soldiers, during the second phase. In return, Israel could free an agreed-upon number of Palestinian prisoners and detainees. The releases would not occur until "sustainable calm" takes effect and all Israeli troops withdraw from Gaza. The third phase would see the return of the remains of hostages.

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

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

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

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

wounds he suffered in the assassination attempt on May 15 when he was shot in the abdomen as he greeted supporters after his government's session in the town of Handlova. The assailant was immediately arrested and a court ordered him to remain behind bars.

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

As millions vote in UK polls, Sunak and his party hangs in balance

PTI ■ LONDON

The future of Rishi Sunak as Britain's first Prime Minister of Indian origin and the leader of the Conservative Party — fighting anti-incumbency of 14 years — hangs in the balance as millions cast their ballots in a historic general election on Thursday. The British Indian leader and the man who wants his job — Labour leader Keir Starmer were among the early voters from an estimated 46 million registered voters as around 40,000 polling booths opened across the country at 7 am local time. Sunak and his wife Akshata Murty walked hand-in-hand to their local polling booth on a sunny day in his constituency of Richmond and Northallerton in Yorkshire, northern England. A little later, Starmer and wife Victoria were at their polling station in Camden, north London, sporting Labour red colours. "Today, Britain can begin a new chap-



ter," Starmer told voters in a statement. "We cannot afford five more years under the Conservatives. But change will only happen if you vote Labour," he said. Sunak, meanwhile, took to social media to drive home his message: "Polls are open. It's time to stop the Labour supermajority that would mean higher taxes for the rest of your life." Sunak, 44, is up against voter angst towards the incumbent Tories after 14 years in power and has had to contend with

trailing far behind 61-year-old Keir Starmer-led Labour Party throughout the six-week campaign. Earlier, both leaders wrapped up their six-week-long campaign with contrasting messages — Sunak urging voters not to hand "tax-raising" Labour a "supermajority" and Starmer playing down the prospect of a landslide win for fear of a low turnout impacting the final outcome.

Candidates are being fielded for 650 constituencies across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, with 326 required for a majority in the first past the post system. Besides the two main parties, voters will be choosing from a list of candidates representing the Liberal Democrats, Green Party, Scottish National Party (SNP), SDLP, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Sinn Fien, Plaid Cymru, the anti-immigration Reform Party and several contesting as Independent. Polling experts have forecast

a low turnout, which stood at 67 per cent in the last general election in December 2019 when Johnson won a solid majority on his get Brexit done message.

If opinion polls are to be believed, the incumbent Tories are in line to win anywhere between 53 and 150 seats, with Labour projected to win a landslide. This will lead to Starmer taking over as Prime Minister, the first Labour leader after Gordon Brown to enter 10 Downing Street since 2010.

Since this year, carrying an identification document to the polling booth has become compulsory in UK elections, which are open to all registered adult voters resident in the UK including Indians as Commonwealth citizens. Once the votes are cast and the booths officially close at 10 pm local time, the focus shifts to the definitive exit poll soon after, which would give a fair snapshot of what can be expected UK-wide.

Hurricane Beryl roars toward Mexico after leaving destruction in Jamaica

AP ■ PLAYA DEL CARMEN

Hurricane Beryl ripped off roofs in Jamaica, jumbled fishing boats in Barbados and damaged or destroyed 95 per cent of homes on a pair of islands in St. Vincent and the Grenadines before rumbling toward the Cayman Islands and taking aim at Mexico's Caribbean coast after leaving at least seven dead in its wake. What had been the earliest storm to develop into a Category 5 hurricane in the Atlantic, weakened slightly but remained a major hurricane. Its eye was forecast to pass just south of the Cayman Islands overnight. Mexico's popular Caribbean coast prepared shelters, evacuated some small outlying coastal communities and even moved sea turtle eggs off beaches threatened by storm surge, but in nightlife hotspots like Playa del Carmen and



Tulum tourists still took one more night on the town. Mexico's Navy patrolled areas like Tulum telling tourists in Spanish and English to prepare for the storm's arrival. Early Thursday morning, the storm's centre was about 500 miles (800 kilometres) east-southeast of Tulum, Mexico. It had maximum sustained winds of 125 mph (205 kph) and was moving west-northwest at 21

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

der. The storm had already shown its destructive potential across a long swath of the southeastern Caribbean. Beryl's eye wall brushed by Jamaica's southern coast Wednesday afternoon knocking out power and ripping roofs off homes. Prime Minister Andrew Holness said Jamaica had not seen the "worst of what could possibly happen."

"We can do as much as we can do, as humanly possible, and we leave the rest in the hands of God," Holness said. Several roadways in Jamaica's interior settlements were impacted by fallen trees and utility poles, while some communities in the northern section were without electricity, according to the government's Information Service. The worst perhaps came earlier in Beryl's trajectory when it smacked two small islands of the Lesser Antilles.

Putin, Xi among others attend SCO summit

AP ■ MOSCOW

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping on Thursday attended the summit of a security grouping created by Moscow and Beijing to counter Western alliances.

Putin and Xi joined the leaders of other countries that are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation at its annual meeting in Kazakhstan's capital of Astana.

The grouping was established in 2001 by China, Russia and the four ex-Soviet Central Asian nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to promote regional security and economic cooperation. It was later joined by India, Pakistan and Iran. Russia's western neighbour and ally, Belarus, joined the SCO on Thursday. Observer states and dialogue partners include Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Addressing the summit, Putin emphasised the group's focus on ensuring security of its members and said the SCO will form a



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

Besides Putin and Xi, and summit host Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, attending Thursday's meeting are Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif of Pakistan, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan, President Emomali Rakhmonov of Tajikistan, President Sadyr Zhaparov of Kyrgyzstan and President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus. Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India has sent his foreign minister S Jaishankar. Iran is still choosing a successor to President Ebrahim Raisi, killed in a helicopter crash in May, with acting President Mohammad Mokhbar is attending. Other guests of the SCO include President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey and President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan. Also present is UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who is visiting Central Asia. For Putin, the summit offered another venue to demonstrate the failure of Western efforts to isolate Russia over its 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

dedicated centre that will coordinate response to various security challenges. He added that the group's members will also endorse a special program to fight separatism and extremism. Xi called on the SCO members to show solidarity in the face "the

real challenges of intervention and polarisation," according to a readout of his speech by the official Xinhua news agency. "In the face of the real threat of the Cold War mentality, we have to safeguard the security bottom line," he added.

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

PTI ■ LONDON

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



Malcolm Pein, manager of the England chess team, described the schoolgirl as one of the most remarkable British chess prodigies he has ever seen. "It's exciting — she's on course to be one of the best British players ever," he said. Her father, Siva Sivanandan, says he remains mystified about where his daughter got her talent. "I'm an engineering graduate, as is my wife, but I'm not good at chess," he said. Bodhana first picked up chess during the pandemic lockdown when Siva's friend was going back to India and gave her a few bags which also had a chess board. "I was interested in the pieces, so I started playing," she recalls. Last December, Sivanandan won the European Blitz Chess Championship in Zagreb, Croatia, and was dubbed "super talented" at the time. Soon after, she was among a group of young chess enthusiasts invited by British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to 10 Downing Street to mark the government's major new GBP 1 million investment package for the game. The package has since been in place to support children attending schools in disadvantaged areas across England to learn and play chess, improve the visibility and availability of the game, and fund elite playing. As part of the package, the UK's Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) said it would invest GBP 500,000 in the English Chess Federation (ECF) over two years to develop the next generation of world-class talent. Funds will support expert coaching, training camps and cutting-edge computer analysis for international events to assist current grandmasters and up-and-coming players.

Verdict expected for man charged in Oslo LGBT+ festival attack

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

Prosecutors said Matapour, 45, a Norwegian citizen originally from Iran, has sworn allegiance to the Islamic State group. Extensive video material of the attack was presented in court. The verdict will

not be read in court but will be sent out electronically. Matapour will have the verdict read to him in prison, the court said. Matapour was overpowered by bystanders after the attack and arrested. Following the attack, a Pride parade was cancelled, with police saying they could not guarantee security.

The shooting shocked Norway, which has a relatively low crime rate but has experienced a series of "lone wolf" attacks by individuals in recent decades, including one of the worst mass shootings in Europe.

In 2011, a right-wing extremist killed 69 people on the island of Utoya after setting off a bomb in Oslo that left eight dead.

Keir Starmer: Human rights lawyer turned Labour Leader

PTI ■ LONDON

Keir Starmer, the human rights barrister turned Labour Party Leader, has made it a manifesto pledge to pursue a "new strategic partnership" with India, including an FTA, if handed a mandate to form a Labour-led government in Thursday's general election. Sir Keir, who was knighted by the late Queen Elizabeth II for his services to law and criminal justice, spent much of his career in the legal profession before stepping into the world of politics, first elected as Labour's member of Parliament from London in 2015.



The 61-year-old father of two teenage kids, who he and his National Health Service (NHS) employee wife Victoria have chosen to keep out of the political spotlight, has been credited with reversing the party's fortunes from one of its worst poll performances in the 2019 general election to the edge of government. The other turnaround Starmer worked on was to try and rebuild Labour's connect with the Indian diaspora, alienated under former leader Jeremy Corbyn over a perceived anti-India stance on Kashmir.

"I have a clear message for you all today: this is a changed Labour Party," declared Starmer at the India Global Forum (IGF) last year, setting the tone for the party's India-UK outlook. "What my Labour government will seek with India is a relationship based on our shared values of democracy and aspiration. That will seek a free trade agreement (FTA), we share that ambition, but also a new strategic partnership for global security, climate security, economic security," he said.

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

Sensex, Nifty hit new lifetime highs

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ticked higher to scale fresh all-time high levels on Thursday, following buying in market heavyweights ICICI Bank, Infosys and TCS amid a largely positive trend in global equities. The 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 62.87 points or 0.08 per cent to settle at a new closing peak of 80,049.67. During the day, it rallied 405.84 points to hit a fresh all-time high of 80,392.64. The Nifty rose 15.65 points or 0.06 per cent to settle at a record closing peak of 24,302.15. Intra-day, it surged 114.5 points to hit a fresh lifetime high of 24,401. Among the Sensex pack, HCL Technologies, ICICI Bank, Tata Motors, Sun Pharmaceuticals, Tata Consultancy Services, Infosys, Kotak Mahindra Bank and Mahindra and



Mahindra were the gainers. In contrast, HDFC Bank, Bajaj Finance, Larsen & Toubro, Tech Mahindra, UltraTech Cement and IndusInd Bank were among the laggards. In Asian markets, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Seoul ended in the positive territory, while Shanghai closed in the red. European markets were trading in the green territory in mid-session deals. US markets ended higher on Wednesday during the

shortened trading session. Stock exchanges will remain closed on Thursday on account of Independence Day. Global oil benchmark Brent crude fell 0.52 per cent to USD 86.89 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth Rs 5,483.63 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. On Wednesday, the 30-share index hit the historic 80,000 mark for the first time intra-day trade. It surged 632.85 points or 0.79 per cent to a record intraday high of 80,074.30. The index later closed near the 80,000 level at 79,986.80, up by 545.35 points or 0.69 per cent over the last close. The Nifty climbed 162.65 points or 0.67 per cent to end at an all-time high of 24,286.50. During the day, it zoomed 183.4 points or 0.76 per cent to hit a fresh intraday record peak of 24,307.25.

Sebi mandates institutional mechanism for fraud prevention in stock broking

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Sebi on Thursday issued a circular requiring stock brokers to establish an institutional mechanism for prevention and detection of fraud or market abuse in a bid to protect the interest of investors in securities market. The circular mandates the implementation of systems for the surveillance of trading activities and internal controls, introduction of a whistle-blower policy, among other obligations. These requirements are part of Sebi (Stock Brokers) (Amendment) Regulations, 2024, which aim to ensure higher standards of market integrity and investor protection. The standards for implementation of the same, including operational modalities will be formulated by the broker's Industry Standards Forum (ISF), in consultation with the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), the regulator said in the circular. The implementation will be based on the size of the stock brokers. Brokers with more



than 50,000 active Unique Client Codes (UCCs) are required to comply by January 1, 2025. Further, those with 2,001 to 50,000 active UCCs have to comply by April 1, 2025, and brokers with up to 2,000 active UCCs must comply by April 1, 2026. In addition, qualified stock brokers must comply with these requirements by August 1, 2024, considering their existing obligations for governance and client behaviour surveillance. Sebi directed the stock exchanges to bring the provisions of this circular to the notice of stock brokers and also disseminate the same

on their websites. It also directed them to amend their bye-laws, and ensure that brokers notify the obligation/ requirement on the stock brokers to follow the standards adopted by the ISF, and issue a joint notice which indicates the date of applicability of the circular to various stock brokers based on the criteria. The provisions of this circular shall come into force in a risk-based, staggered manner to ensure smooth adoption, and effective implementation for all the stock brokers by providing enough time for stock brokers, based on their size, for making necessary changes, Sebi said.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The coal sector has registered a growth of 10.2 per cent among all eight core industries of the economy in May, the government said on Thursday. The index of coal industry has reached 184.7 points during May as compared to 167.6 points during the same month last year. "The coal sector has demonstrated highest growth of 10.2 per cent (provisional), following the electricity industry among the eight core industries for the month of May, 2024 as per the Index of Eight Core Industries (ICI) (Base Year 2011-12) released by Ministry of Commerce & Industries," the coal ministry said in a statement. The driving force behind growth can be attributed to a considerable rise in coal production during May. This increase in production underscores the sector's capacity to meet growing demand of energy and manufacturing industries.

SBI announces initiatives to mitigate risks in agri loan portfolio

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The country's largest lender SBI on Thursday announced 11 new initiatives -- including enhancement of its digital banking features and opening of 35 new Agricultural Centralised Processing Cells -- to mitigate risks in its agricultural loan portfolio. On the occasion of the 69th Foundation Day, State Bank of India announced these initiatives to widen the bank's accessibility to address the banking needs of its potential customers, the lender said in a statement. SBI has enhanced its digital payment

experience, with the introduction of two exciting features like tap-and-pay on the BHIM SBI PAY app and end-to-end digital loans against mutual funds on the YONO app, it added. The bank has also announced an initiative, which is a fully digital end-to-end journey for SBI Surya Ghar Loan, it said, adding that the users can opt for credit to install solar rooftops under the central government's PM Surya Ghar Scheme, offering loans for up to 10 KW capacity. The entire process will be managed on SBI's digital platform from applicant registration on the MNRE/REC portal to



loan disbursement. Acknowledging the significant contributions and global presence of the Indian diaspora in shaping the nation's growth story, SBI opened a second Global NRI Centre (GNC) in Patiala, Punjab. To enhance its service to NRI clients, its Chairman Dinesh Khara inaugurated the second Global NRI Centre (GNC) in Patiala on Bank Day. SBI's dedicated GNCs reflect the bank's unwavering commitment to strengthening its ties with the global Indian community. "These centres serve as hubs of

excellence, providing specialised services to NRI customers. With a network of 434 specialised NRI branches in India, foreign offices in 29 countries, and partnerships with 45 exchange houses and 5 banks in GCC countries, SBI is well-equipped to offer comprehensive services to its NRI clientele worldwide," the statement said. In another move, SBI has launched comprehensively redesigned High Court branches aimed at enhancing services for the legal community. This initiative underscores SBI's commitment to providing tailored financial solutions that cater specifically

to the unique needs of lawyers and legal professionals, it added. The redesigned branches are equipped to offer top-tier services, including financial management, transaction facilitation, and personalised financial advice. With regard to home loans, the bank has made processing such loans more transparent. Home loan borrowers will now receive automated email and SMS notifications regarding the status of their loan application at various processing stages. This initiative aims to enhance customer satisfaction and convenience, it said.

Rupee falls 1 paisa to close at 83.50 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee pared its initial losses and settled for the day on an almost flat note at 83.50 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, resisting pressure from elevated crude oil prices. Forex traders said a positive trend in domestic equities, wherein benchmark indices touched all-time high levels, and significant foreign fund inflows supported the rupee and restricted the fall. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.52 and hit the intraday high of 83.48 and a low of 83.56 against the American currency during the session. It finally settled at 83.50 (provisional) against the dollar, 1 paisa lower than its previous close. On Wednesday, the rupee settled 1 paisa lower at 83.49 against the US dollar. "We expect the rupee to trade with a slight positive bias on softness in the US dollar amid weak economic data and rise in risk appetite in global markets," said Anuj



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

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.15 per cent lower at 105.24. Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, were trading 0.47 per cent lower at USD 86.93 per barrel. In the domestic equity market, Sensex breached the historic 80,000-mark and

Nifty scaled a fresh lifetime high. The 30-share BSE Sensex ended the day 62.87 points, or 0.08 per cent, up at its all-time high of 80,049.67 points. The broader NSE Nifty settled 15.65 points, or 0.06 per cent, higher at a fresh peak of 24,302.15 points. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net buyers in the capital markets on Wednesday, as they purchased shares worth Rs 5,483.63 crore, according to exchange data. Meanwhile, according to an official of S&P Global Ratings, a sovereign rating upgrade for India in the next 24 months is possible if the central government is able to prudently manage its finances and bring down the fiscal deficit to 4 per cent of GDP. S&P Global Ratings Director, Sovereign Ratings, YeeFarn Phua, said the trigger for an upgrade would be the government (Centre + states) deficit falling below 7 per cent of the GDP, and a lot of this would have to be driven by the Central Government.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

To tap the potential of the country's air cargo sector, the focus should be on further improving processes as well as ensuring faster turnaround time, a senior government official said on Thursday. The government is working on developing logistics hubs. Piyush Srivastava, Senior Economic Advisor at the Ministry of Civil Aviation, said the air cargo sector has a bright future and the number of freighters in the country is expected to rise. Currently, Indian carriers have around 18 freighters. There will be a focus on further improving the ease of doing business and faster turnaround time in the air cargo sector, he said while speaking at the conference organised by the ACFI (Air Cargo Forum India) in the national capital. While passenger traffic has recovered after being hit by the coronavirus pandemic, air cargo is yet to fully recover to the pre-Covid levels. In 2023-24, the air cargo handled in the country was a little over 3.36 million tonnes.



Surendra Kumar Ahirwar, Joint Secretary at DPIIT, a lot of movement is happening on the logistics side, including the skilling of people. He also said there is substantial utilisation of existing air cargo facilities and emphasised the need for developing hubs as part of the logistics infrastructure. According to ACFI President Yashpal Sharma, the air cargo sector accounts for nearly 10 per cent of domestic carriers' revenues. Citing market research reports, he said the country's air freight market is estimated to grow to USD 16.37 billion by 2027. Also, the plans to establish air transport shipment hubs at major airports are expected to drive the industry's growth, he added.

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

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Office space leasing absorption in Kolkata surged 33 per cent year on year to 0.4 million square feet in the April-June quarter of 2024, according to the CBRE India Office Figures Q2 report. The key sectors driving absorption in Q2 2024 were technology (40 per cent), BFSI (21 per cent), and flexible space operators (10 per cent). "The office space leasing absorption in April-June 2024 was 0.4 million square feet against 0.3 million square feet in the YoY period, a CBRE official said. Another real estate consultant, Knight Frank India, also said that Kolkata's office market saw a significant increase in office leasing volume, with 0.7 million square feet of office space transacted in H1 2024 (January-June 2024). This represents a 23 per cent growth compared to H1 2023, according to Knight Frank India's report "India

Real Estate: Residential and Office" (January-June 2024). Average office space rents increased by 6 per cent year-on-year (YoY) during H1 2024, it said. Knight Frank also reported that Kolkata's residential real estate market experienced strong homebuying demand, with 9,130 residential units sold in H1 2024, marking a 25 per cent YoY growth in sales volume. The continued stamp duty rebate and new launches across various price segments contributed to the market's sustained upward sales momentum. However, the state government withdrew the stamp duty and 10 per cent rebate in circle rate effective July. According to CBRE, pan-India office leasing remained robust, with gross office leasing reaching 32.8 million square feet during Jan-Jun'24, a 14 per cent increase year-on-year across nine cities.

Healing hands, caring hearts



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

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

India among most active countries for Meta's Threads

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India is one of the most active countries for Threads, which has notched over 175 million monthly active users globally, according to social media giant Meta. The update assumes significance as it marks the completion of nearly one year since Meta officially launched rival to Twitter (now X). "With a 175 million actives, we're seeing Threads become a place where people feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas. India is one of the most active countries for Threads globally," Meta said in a release. In India, some of the most

popular tags and topics on Threads are centred around film, TV and OTT content, celebrity-related conversations and sports. Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced that Threads has over 175 million monthly active users as the social media giant asserted that Threads was launched with the belief that "everyone has something valuable to say." "It's been a year now, and we're seeing it become a place where people feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas. In fact, India is one of the most active countries for Threads globally," the release said. Among the other major takeaways are creation of 50 million topic tags on Threads till date, globally.



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

former cricketers like Akash Chopra and Suresh Raina, experts like Ridhima Pathak and international cricketers like AB de Villiers sharing their passion for the game," Meta said. The T20 Cricket World Cup, IPL, and Women's Premier League 2024 have been some of the moments that have sparked cricket conversations on Threads this year, it further said, adding that over 200 creators shared updates about the concluded IPL season on Threads. Threads scaled highs immediately after it was unveiled in July 2023 — it snapped up 100 million user sign-ups within a week of its launch. The initial euphoria, however, wore off and according to industry watchers, the app struggled subsequently with steady decline in engagement metrics.

AI-powered ROI calculator introduced

PNS ■ Mumbai

Jaro Education, a name in online higher education and upskilling, recently introduced a game-changing tool: The AI-powered ROI (Return on Investment) calculator for upskilling. This innovative feature is designed to help working professionals make informed choices about their upskilling journey. This is one of the first innovations of its kind launched by any online higher education and upskilling company in India. In today's fast-paced world, staying updated with the latest skills is more important than ever, according to the company.

Office leasing in Gurugram

PNS ■ New Delhi

Leading real estate developer M3M has leased 220,000 sq ft in Gurugram to Flexible workspace provider Incuspaze in their boutique office project - M3M Urbana Premium on the Golf Course Extension Road, people aware of the deal said. "M3M is looking at Office leasing as a major drive this year and aims to lease 20 lakh sq ft of Grade-A office space in the most sought after locations in Gurugram. As part of this focus, we have signed a mega deal with Incuspaze - a leading flexible workspace provider where 2,20,000 sq ft space has been provided on lease to them," said Sudeep Bhatt, president M3M.

RONALDO VS MBAPPÉ: CLASH OF GENERATIONS AT EURO 2024

AP ■ HAMBURG (GERMANY)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

AP ■ BERLIN

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



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

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

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



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

PTI ■ BENGALURU

At times, she misses the carefree pleasures her peers enjoy and occasionally experiences a sense of solitude, but all of that has been worth it for 14-year-old swimmer Dhinidhi Desinghu, who is gearing up to fulfil her dream of competing at the Olympics later this month. The Bengaluru swimmer, who studies in class ninth, is set to be the youngest member of the Indian contingent at the Paris Olympics. "Sometimes I miss the fun generally kids of my age have. I do not go out much with friends and feel lonely. But then I wanted to swim and I wanted to go to the Olympics," Dhinidhi told PTI Bhasha in an exclusive interview at her residence. "I am the one who chose this path for me. With that comes a lot of sacrifices but I do feel different, extraordinary and proud. At 14, I am going to the Olympics, so all the sacrifices are worth it," she added. The Olympic cycle has been an underwhelming one for Indian

swimming as none of the swimmers were able to breach either the 'A' or 'B' qualification time. But Dhinidhi has been on a roll, winning medals at the National Games and the senior National championships last year. Her performances this season made her the top-ranked Indian female swimmer with the Swimming Federation of India handing her one of the two Universality places and an opportunity of a lifetime. "I knew that I had a chance (of making the Olympics) because I have been working really very hard but it was surprising that I got this chance so early in my career. Being the youngest one in the Indian contingent is a big honour." "I am super excited to be a part of the Indian Olympic contingent as I will get a chance to meet the greatest athletes," said Dhinidhi, who will compete in the women's 200m freestyle event. Having got the opportunity to compete at the Olympics at such a young age, Dhinidhi wants to soak in everything and gain experience.

"This is just the beginning and I have a long long way to go. I am really excited to know what more I can do in 2028 and 2032. "I want to experience the feeling of staying at the Olympic village. What kind of races are being held there as the competition in India is totally different from what we get at international level. I want to see the dedication, the focus and the preparation of world class athletes. "I am not thinking about performance as it is just about learning this time. I am sure whatever learnings I have here, that will make me a better athlete." She is excited to meet her idol - seven-time Olympic gold medalist swimmer Katie Ledecky. "I made a greeting card last year for her. I used to think that whenever I get a chance to meet her, I will give this to her. I looked up at her from a very young age and luckily, I got this chance. Hopefully I can give it to her in Paris. I will be on the seventh moon if I get a chance to even see her," she said.

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

PTI ■ LONDON

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

"It's exciting - she's on course to be one of the best British players ever," he said. Her father, Siva Sivanandan, says he remains mystified about where his daughter got her talent. "I'm an engineering graduate, as is my wife, but I'm not good at chess," he said. Bodhana first picked up chess during the pandemic lockdown when Siva's friend was going back to India and gave her a few bags which also had a chess board. "I was interested in the pieces, so I started playing," she recalls. Last December, Sivanandan won the European Blitz Chess Championship in Zagreb, Croatia, and was dubbed "super talented" at the time. Soon after, she was among a group of young chess enthusiasts



invited by British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to 10 Downing Street to mark the government's major new GBP 1 billion investment package for the game. The package has since been in place to support children attending schools in disadvantaged areas across England to learn and play chess, improve the visibility and availability of the game, and fund elite playing. As part of the package, the UK's Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) said it would invest GBP 500,000 in the English Chess Federation (ECF) over two years to develop the next generation of world-class talent. Funds will support expert coaching, training camps and cutting-edge computer

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

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

AP ■ KANNAPOLIS (US)

Oliver Bearman has been signed on a multi-year deal by the Haas Formula 1 team from 2025 onward. Haas announced the signing in a statement Thursday, without giving more details. The 19-year-old British driver will take the seat vacated by German driver Nico Hulkenberg, who is joining Sauber at the end of the year ahead of its rebranding to Audi for 2026. "It's hard to put into words just how much this means to me. To say out loud that I will be a Formula 1 driver for (the) Haas F1 Team makes me so immensely proud," Bearman said. "To be one of the very few people who get to do the thing that they dreamed of as a child is something truly incredible." Bearman impressed with a stunning seventh-place finish at the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix in March, when he stood in for Carlos Sainz Jr. He got the



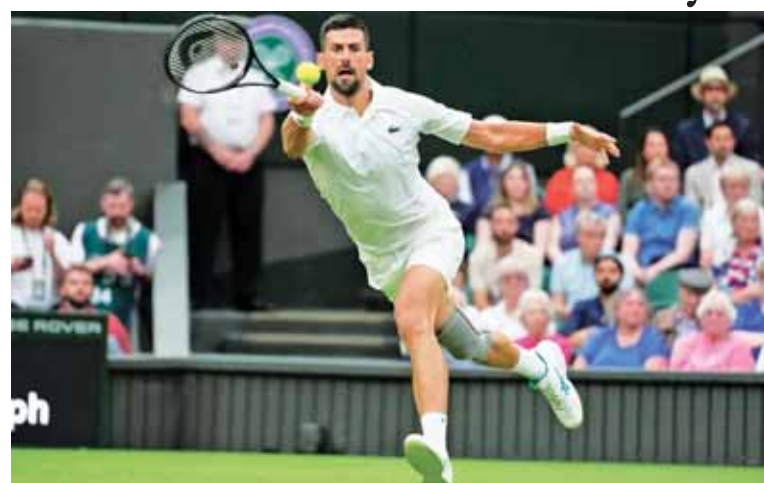
unexpected F1 debut after Sainz was diagnosed with appendicitis and needed an operation. Bearman, who was 18 at the time, became the third-youngest driver in F1. He had only had two practice sessions with Haas - in 2023 - yet produced a commanding drive on a tricky circuit that was way beyond his limited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

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

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

AP ■ LONDON

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



matches from July 27 to August 4 on the clay courts at Roland Garros, the site of the French Open - where Nadal is a 14-time champ. The leading women on the entry list are No. 1 Iga Swiatek (Poland), No. 2 Coco Gauff (United States) and No. 4 Elena Rybakina (Kazakhstan). No. 3 Aryna Sabalenka decided not to go to the

Olympics; her nation, Belarus, aided Russia in its invasion of Ukraine. So, she would have competed as a "neutral" athlete, like Medvedev. Swiatek is a five-time Grand Slam champion - including at the French Open in four of the past five years - and Gauff and Rybakina have won one major apiece. Gauff made the US team

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



Rajawat stuns Gemke, enters second round of Canada Open

PTI ■ CALGARY (CANADA)

Promising Indian shuttler Priyanshu Rajawat stunned higher-ranked Rasmus Gemke of Denmark in a hard-fought three game contest to advance to the second round of men's singles event at the Canada Open here.

World No.39 Rajawat had to dig deep to get the better of eighth seed Gemke of Denmark 17-21 21-16 21-14 in

his opening round match that lasted one hour and 10 minutes on Wednesday night.

Rajawat, thus, remained the only Indian surviving player in the men's singles competition and will take on Takuma Obayashi of Japan in the next round.

The two other Indians in the fray, Ayush Shetty lost 14-21 11-21 to sixth seed Koki Watanabe of Japan, while Sankar Muthusamy Subramanian was shown the

door by France's Alex Lanier 16-21 17-21.

In the women's singles, Tanya Hemanth and Anupama Upadhyay also progressed to the second round.

While Tanya beat Jackie Dent of Canada 21-13 20-22 21-14, Anupama defeated Rachael Darragh of Ireland 21-11 21-11. Tanya will be up against third seed Busanan Ongbamrunphan of Thailand, while Anupama will play Canada's Michelle Li.

Moreeng appointed as USA women's cricket team coach



PTI ■ NEW YORK

Former South Africa cricketer Hilton Moreeng has been appointed as the coach of USA's national women and Under-19 teams, the country's governing body announced.

Moreeng will take over from West Indian legend Shivnarine Chanderpaul, and will prepare the team for the T20 World Cup which will be held later this year in Bangladesh.

The 46-year-old, who served as South Africa women's team coach for over a decade, said he wanted to contribute to the growth of cricket in the USA. "I am eager to collaborate with both current players and emerging talent. My goal is to methodically build a competitive squad capable of

rivaling the best in women's cricket globally," said Moreeng, who stepped down as SA coach this March.

USA Cricket Chairman of the Board, Venu Pisike said Moreeng's vast experience will benefit the nation's progress at top-flight cricket.

"Hilton brings a rich background and vast experience to USA Cricket having been a critical part of the transformation of South African women's cricket.

USA women are also at the beginning of a transformative period with an Olympics in four years' time and we believe Hilton's successes, diverse experiences and understanding of challenges in an emerging cricket nation is well-suited for our program," he added.



Plenty of intrigue, even if Messi, Vinicius can't participate

AP ■ LOS ANGELES

Lionel Messi's leg injury was the only major obstacle that fell into Argentina's path while it rolled through group play and into the Copa America quarterfinals.

Bigger challenges await the defending champions, and they're hoping Messi will be there to lead the way in perhaps his final international tournament.

The 15-time Copa America champion Albiceleste are still the undeniable favorites in the Americas' biggest soccer tournament when quarterfinal play gets underway, but the other 15-time Copa champs - Uruguay - top the list of challengers capable of taking them down.

With the host Americans and Mexico eliminated in group play, the spotlight shifts firmly to the South American powerhouses determined to raise the trophy.

ARGENTINA VS ECUADOR In Houston, it's unclear whether Messi will play in the opening quarterfinal due to a leg injury that sidelined him in the team's most recent match against Peru. Coach Lionel Scaloni said Messi's availability will be a game-time decision.

"Depending on how he responds, we will decide," Scaloni said Wednesday before training. "There are ramifications when Leo is not able to play. We'll try to make sure that he can play. If not, we'll try to find the best solution for the team. I will talk

to him today. It's only fair that he can take his time and be able to train as much as he can."

Argentina has been sturdy even without a goal from Messi in the tournament, winning all three group stage matches by a combined 5-0.

Inter Milan's Lautaro Martinez has four goals in a spectacular effort despite coming off the bench twice, while Manchester City's Julián Alvarez got the other goal. If Scaloni decides to play both center forwards together, it could be more than enough to make up for Messi - and a nightmare for underdog Ecuador, which earned its unexpected quarterfinal spot by holding Mexico scoreless last weekend.

VENEZUELA VS CANADA In Arlington, Texas, it is a matchup of pleasant surprises. Venezuela has enjoyed an outstanding tournament so far, winning its three matches by a combined 6-1 with offensive leadership from Salomon Rondon and Eduard Bello.

Canada got out of Copa group play for the first time despite scoring just one total goal in three games before losing Inter Milan's Tajon Buchanan to a broken leg in training Tuesday. Reaching the semifinals would be a massive achievement for either of these teams.

COLOMBIA VS PANAMA In Glendale, Arizona, the quarters move west for a pair of games held in air-conditioned stadiums amid a continent-wide heat wave. Colombia is now unbeaten in

26 consecutive matches after holding Brazil to a draw to win its group. Led by veteran star James Rodríguez, Los Cafeteros will be favored to eliminate Panama, which knocked off the host U.S. Team to advance from group play.

BRAZIL VS URUGUAY The Sin City will host easily the most tantalizing matchup of the round, featuring a faltering powerhouse against a team known for perennially punching above its weight. No quarterfinal team looked as shaky as Brazil, which stumbled into the next round with a thoroughly unimpressive effort. Colombia and Costa Rica both held the Seleção to draws, and fan discontent is roiling.

Even worse, Real Madrid star Vinicius Junior is suspended for the quarterfinal after accumulating two yellow cards. Yet Brazil is still laden with individual talent that's barely touched the field in this tournament, so it's far too early to write off the five-time World Cup winners.

Uruguay looks just as good as advertised under brilliant coach Marcelo Bielsa, winning three times by a combined 9-1 in group play led by Liverpool striker Darwin Nunez.

After beating Brazil and Argentina in recent World Cup qualifying matches, La Celeste probably would be the tournament favorites if not for Argentina's similarly strong form - but Brazil has the pure talent to end those dreams in a hurry.

Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag signs contract extension until 2026

AP ■ MANCHESTER (ENGLAND)

Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag has signed a contract extension through to 2026, the Premier League club said Thursday. The Dutchman has won back-to-back trophies in his first two years at Old Trafford, but faced uncertainty over his position after leading it to its worst league finish in 34 years last season.

After a performance review, United decided to stick with Ten Hag and he has now agreed on a new deal, which is a one-year extension on his previous contract, which was due to expire at the end of the upcoming season.

"Looking back at the past two years, we can reflect with pride

on two trophies and many examples of progression from where we were when I joined," Ten Hag said. "However, we must also be clear that there is still lots of hard work ahead to reach the levels expected of Manchester United, which means challenging for English and European titles.

"In my discussions with the club, we have found complete unity in our vision for reaching those goals, and we are all strongly committed to making that journey together."

Ten Hag joined United from Ajax in 2022 and won the English League Cup in his first year in England. He followed that up last season with a victory over Manchester City in the FA Cup final.



He stays on in the face of a major overhaul of United's soccer operations by new co-owner Jim Ratcliffe.

British billionaire Ratcliffe bought a 27.7% stake in the club in February and has hired a new CEO, sporting director

and technical director in a bid to return the 20-time English champions to the top of European soccer.

"With two trophies in the past two seasons, Erik has reinforced his record as one of the most consistently

successful coaches in European football. While the club's review of last season highlighted areas for improvement, it also reached a clear conclusion that Erik was the best partner for us to work with in driving up standards and outcomes," said United Sporting Director Dan Ashworth.

Spain face hosts Germany in quarterfinals with potential record on line

AP ■ STUTTGART (GERMANY)

Spain meet host nation Germany on Friday in the quarterfinals of the European Championship in an eagerly-anticipated match between two of the best performing sides at the tournament.

There is also a potential record on the line as Spain and Germany have each won three European Championships, better than any other nation.

Two of the most exciting talents will be on show in Spain teenager Lamine Yamal and 21-year-old Germany forward Jamal Musiala.

MATCH FACTS: The winner will advance to face France or Portugal in the semifinal in Munich on Tuesday.

□ Spain and Germany are the leading scorers at Euro 2024, having netted nine and 10 goals respectively in their four matches. They have also conjured the most attempts on target.

□ Spain has never eliminated a host nation, either at a European Championship or at the World Cup.

□ La Roja is the only team to have won all its matches at Euro 2024, beating Croatia, Italy and Albania in the group stage before thumping Georgia 4-1 in the round of 16. Germany beat Scotland and Hungary but drew against Switzerland before eliminating Denmark.

□ Germany hasn't beaten Spain in a major tournament since a group-stage victory at Euro '88.

TEAM NEWS: Lamine Yamal, Nico Williams and Fabian Ruiz all missed Spain's training session on Tuesday, while Aymeric Laporte only jogged once around the field. However, all are expected to be fit for Friday's match.

□ Germany defender Jonathan Tah returns from suspension and coach Julian Nagelsmann has reported no injury concerns.

BY THE NUMBERS: Spain and Germany have only conceded three goals between them. The only time Spain goalkeeper Unai Simón had to pick the ball out of his net was against Georgia, while Germany conceded against Scotland and Switzerland.

□ The teams have met 26 times, with Germany winning nine to Spain's eight. Spain edges Germany slightly on goals scored with 32 compared to 31.



□ Three of the last four encounters have finished in a 1-1 draw with the exception being a 6-0 thrashing of Germany by Spain in a UEFA Nations League match in November 2020.

□ Germany has won all six of its European Championship quarterfinals. Spain has lost five of its nine.

□ Germany goalkeeper Manuel Neuer will likely make a national record 39th appearance in a major tournament, having matched Bastian Schweinsteiger's mark in the previous round.

□ Germany has won the last six penalty shootouts it has been involved in, losing only its first in the 1976 final. Spain has won seven of its 13.

WHAT THEY'RE SAYING: "I am not at all nostalgic and I don't feel like this will be my last-ever match." - Germany midfielder Toni Kroos, who will be retiring after the tournament.

"We're aiming for the trophy and even though it's been a pleasure playing with Toni Kroos - because he's been a teammate (at Real Madrid) and a friend - I'd still like to retire" him on Friday!" - Spain forward Joselu.

"I don't know if Spain are all that happy having to face Germany; likewise, there could have been easier opponents for us. If you want to win this tournament, you have to go through Spain." - Germany midfielder Joshua Kimmich.

Tvesa T-24, Diksha T-46 in London Aramco Series

PTI ■ LONDON

Tvesa Malik Sandhu was unable to hold on to her early gains and finished at even-par 73 to be tied-24th at the end of the first round of the Aramco Team Series London here.

Fellow Indian Diksha Dagar, who will play in the Major Evian Championships next week, shot 2-over 75 to be tied-46 at the Centurion Club, while Pranavi Urs carded a disappointing 7-over 80 and looks unlikely to make the cut.

Tvesa, who lost a play-off last week and missed out on a maiden win on the Ladies European Tour (LET), began well from the 10th tee. She had a bogey on 12th but it was followed by an eagle, her third in her last three rounds. She



had eagles in the second and third rounds of last week's Swiss Ladies Open. She added a birdie on the 18th to turn in 2-under. She dropped three shots on the second, third and seventh but got one back with a birdie on

the eighth to close at 73. Diksha had three birdies, three bogeys and a double-bogey.

Ireland's Leona Maguire led the individual standings, while her team comprising Solheim Cup winner, England's Liz Young, Spain's Marta Sanz Barrio and amateur Yana Wilson, was joint leader after day 1 at 14-under. Leona's team shared the lead with Team Nuria Iturriz and Team Georgia Hall.

Leona sits at the top of the leaderboard after producing a bogey-free first round. The two-time LPGA winner rolled in back-to-back birdies on her fifth and sixth holes, before making three on the trot from holes 8 to 10 before adding further birdies on the 13th and 15th for her round of seven-under par.

Bopanna-Ebden move to second round

PTI ■ LONDON

India's Rohan Bopanna and his Australian partner Matthew Ebden moved into the second round of the Wimbledon men's doubles event with a smooth win over Robin Haas and Sander Arends here.

Bopanna and Ebden sailed past their Dutch opponents 7-5, 6-4 in an hour and 11 minutes in a rain-interrupted match on Wednesday.

The second seeds, who are the current Australian Open champions, will face Germany's Hendrik Jebens and Constantin Frantzen in the second round. The Indo-Australian pair had reached the semifinals of the season's third Grand Slam last year. Earlier on Wednesday, India's Sumit Nagal and his Serbian partner Dusan Lajovic were ousted in the first round by



Spaniards Pedro Martinez and Jaume Munar.

Martinez and Munar won 6-2, 6-2 in one hour and seven minutes. India will have further representation in men's doubles first round through N Sriram Balaji and Yuki Bhambri later on Thursday.

Balaji will partner Britain's Luke Johnson and will face fourth seeds Mate Pavic of Serbia and Marcelo Arevalo of El Salvador. On the other hand, Bhambri and France's Albano Olivetti will take on the Kazakh duo of Alexander Bublik and Alexander Shevchenko.