

OPINION 6  
TIME FOR BJP TO SET ITS HOUSE IN ORDER

WORLD 8  
SUNAK TO PUSH FOR DECISIVE SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

MONEY 10  
SENSEX, NIFTY SCALE FRESH PEAKS AS INFLATION COOLS OFF

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LIONEL MESSI SAYS INTER MIAMI WILL BE MY LAST CLUB  
11 SPORTS



Residents of Anand Parbat area fill drinking water from a Delhi Jal Board tanker amid a water crisis in the national Capital  
Photo: Ranjan Dimri / The Pioneer

## Delhi remains hot, thirsty; neighbours plough water

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

As Delhiites are reeling under the double blow of a relentless heatwave and water crisis, blame game continued between Delhi, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh in the Supreme Court on Thursday. In a twist in the Supreme Court battle over Delhi's spiralling water crisis, Himachal Pradesh has said it does not have surplus water to send to the national Capital, a day after the hill State said it

had released water for Delhi and the supply needs to go through Haryana while the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)-led Delhi Government filed a fresh affidavit saying it "cannot" take action against tanker mafia as they are operating on the "Haryana side of the Yamuna River." Haryana should explain why action was not taken," the Delhi Government said in the affidavit shifting the responsibility. After hearing all stakeholders,

a vacation bench of Justices Prashant Kumar Mishra and Prasanna B Varale said sharing of Yamuna water between States is a complex and sensitive issue and this court does not have the technical expertise to decide on it even on an interim basis. The bench, therefore, left it to the Upper Yamuna River Board to examine if some relief can be extended to Delhi in terms of releasing additional water supply.  
Continued on Page 2

## NEET-UG for 1,563 candidates on June 23

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Amid a raging row over the NEET-UG examination, the National Testing Agency (NTA) will re-conduct the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test, Undergraduate (NEET UG) 2024 exam for over 1,563 aspirants on June 23 while the result will be declared on June 30. For those who do not wish to appear, their original scorecards (without the grace marks) will be considered.

The NTA informed a vacation bench of justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta that all 1,563 candidates who suffered as they got less than the allotted time to write NEET 2024, will be given the option for the re-test. "If they choose to take the re-exam, their earlier NEET score will stand cancelled (and the new score after the re-exam will be counted instead). If these students choose not to take the retest, their original scores would remain but without counting grace marks awarded earlier on account of the loss of time," the NTA told the court. The NTA conducts the all India pre-medical entrance test. The development has come amid controversy that the "arbitrary" award of grace marks led to a shocking surge of top scorers during



the NEET, with several claims being made of malpractices, cheating and irregularities in the conduct of the exam. Scores of students and their parents are protesting at the Jantar Mantar against the irregularities in the NEET-UG examination and demanding a probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). Refusing to stall the counselling for NEET-UG, 2024, scheduled to commence from July 6, the bench said, "As per the recommendations it has been suggested that scorecard of affected 1,563 candidates will be cancelled and withdrawn and actual scores will be informed without grace marks and re-exam will be conducted for them. Result of those who do not take the retest will be the exam's actual scores without grace marks."  
Continued on Page 2

## Centre cancels grace marks

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In his first statement after taking over once again as Union Education Minister, Dharmendra Pradhan, on Thursday rejected allegations of paper leak in the medical entrance exam NEET-UG, saying there is no evidence to substantiate the claims and added that the Government is ensuring no student is at a disadvantage. Pradhan said the Opposition-led by Congress is spreading lies on sensitive issues without knowing facts. Soon after a series of developments during the day, the number of top rankers in NEET-UG is to come down to 61 from 67 after the NTA's decision to withdraw grace marks awarded to 1,563 students. Six of these 1,563 candidates who appeared in the medical entrance exam from a centre in Haryana had shared the top rank with 61 others. "There is no evidence of paper leak in NEET-UG. The allegations of corruption in NTA are unfounded, it is a very credible body," said the Minister.  
Continued on Page 2



## Deal with J&K terror with iron hand: PM

MOHIT KANDHARI/PNS ■ JAMMU/NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday directed officials to deploy a full spectrum of counter-terror measures in Jammu and Kashmir in a high-level meeting attended by National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval and other senior officials. The review was held in the backdrop of four terror attacks in as many days in Reasi, Kathua and Doda. Given this development, Modi also spoke to Home Minister Amit Shah and Jammu and Kashmir Lt Governor Manoj Sinha and discussed the deployment of security forces and anti-terror operations. Sinha briefed Modi on the efforts being undertaken by the local administration. In the wake of a sudden upswing in the terrorist violence across different districts of the Jammu region, the security forces deployed

in Jammu and Kashmir are bracing for a bigger challenge of peaceful conduct of the 52-day-long Amarnath yatra starting June 29. The meeting, meanwhile, also took stock of deployment of security forces and counter-terror operations and Modi was given a comprehensive overview of the security situation in Jammu and Kashmir, including the ongoing counter-terrorism efforts. The Prime Minister directed officials present at the meeting to deploy the full spectrum of the country's counter-terror capabilities to restore peace in the region. Terrorists struck at four places in Reasi, Kathua and Doda districts over the past four days, killing nine pilgrims and a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) jawan and leaving seven security personnel and several others injured.  
Continued on Page 2



## BJP shows might at Khandu's oath-taking

PNS ■ ITANAGAR/NEW DELHI

BJP leader Pema Khandu took oath as the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh for the third consecutive term on Thursday. Khandu, who was re-elected unopposed from the Mukto constituency in the border district of Tawang, was sworn-in by Governor KT Parnaik in the presence of Union Home Minister Amit Shah, BJP president JP Nadda, Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma and Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang, among others. Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Khandu and said his team will ensure that the state develops at an even faster pace. Eleven other MLAs were also sworn-in as Ministers at the function held in the Dorjee Khandu State Convention Centre. Among them were Deputy CM Chowna Mein, former Assembly Speaker PD Sona, BJP State president Biyuram Wahge, and Dasanglu Pul and other leaders.

## High airfares pinched Minister, vows to check flyaway prices

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Reiterating Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of 'hawai chappal se hawai jahaz tak', the newly appointed Civil Aviation Minister Kinjarapu Rammohan Naidu on Thursday vowed to review the surging prices of air fares so that it becomes 'affordable' for the common man. Naidu said to make it a reality, the ticket prices have to be affordable and that benefits of the aviation sector should reach every corner of the country, with focus on Tier two and Tier three cities. "I am going to hold review meetings. Definitely, my intention would be to bring down the (ticket) prices because that is a challenge for the common man. Our intention is to take air travel to the common man, unless you make it affordable, it is not going to happen," Naidu, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) MP said soon after he assumed the charge of Civil Aviation Minister. The 36-year-old three-time MP is the youngest Cabinet Minister in the Modi 3.0 Government. Increase in airfares is an important issue and it has been a talking point. Dynamic pricing and fluctuating airfare prices have been an issue with travellers across India. Over the past few months, ticket prices have seen sharp increases, impacting the ease



of flying for both domestic and international routes. Besides, due to Go First's insolvency, flight suspension, high demand during the busiest travel season, and capacity issues, travellers now have to pay more for their tickets. Additionally, Indian airlines do not have enough aircraft to launch new routes right now. Naidu said the key priorities of the Ministry would be to create an 'ease of flying' scenario, making air travel more accessible and convenient for every citizen. In February, a parliamentary panel proposed that the Government should frame guidelines to control sudden surges in airfares, adding that a route-specific fare ceiling can be examined, keeping in mind the interests of both the airlines and the customer. Moreover, the country's aviation sector has been grappling with global supply chain disruptions, which

have delayed plane deliveries and pushed fares higher. Domestic air traffic has grown by 23 per cent in 2023, reaching a record 153 million passengers, with analysts forecasting this number to climb to 300 million by 2030. Naidu expressed his gratitude to Prime Minister Narendra Modi for entrusting him with the crucial responsibility of leading the Ministry of Civil Aviation. He emphasised that the choice of a young and energetic leader signifies a forward-looking approach, focused on shaping the future of the aviation industry for the next 25 years. Naidu acknowledged the support of the people of Srikakulam and Andhra Pradesh, thanked Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu and recalled the role of his father, Late Kinjarapu Yerran Naidu, a distinguished politician from Andhra Pradesh.  
Continued on Page 2

## DNA tests on to identify Kuwait victims

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

An IAF plane is on standby to bring back the mortal remains of Indians killed in a devastating fire in southern Kuwait's Mangaf area on Wednesday. Forty of the 49 killed were Indians including 24 from Kerala. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced an ex-gratia payment of ₹two lakh each to the families of the deceased. The Kerala Government also announced payment of ₹five lakh each. Most of the Indian victims are from Kerala. Minister of state for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh left for Kuwait following a



direction from Modi to oversee assistance to Indians injured in the fire and to ensure early repatriation of mortal remains of those killed, officials said here on Thursday. They also said Kuwaiti authorities are conducting DNA tests on the bodies of those killed adding total number of people killed in the Al-Mangaf building is 49 and 42 of them are learnt to be Indians; the remaining ones

are Pakistani, Filipino, Egyptian and Nepali nationals. "In an unfortunate and tragic fire incident earlier today in a Labour housing facility in Mangaf area of Kuwait, around 40 Indians are understood to have died and over 50 injured," the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) had said in a statement late on Wednesday night. Prime Minister Modi, who described the incident as "saddening", reviewed the situation at a meeting with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, NSA Ajit Doval, Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra and Principal Secretary to PM PK Mishra among others.  
Detailed report on Page 4

## NEWS BRIEFS

### Ex-IPS officer Doval reappointed NSA

New Delhi: The Government on Thursday reappointed former Indian Police Service (IPS) officer Ajit Doval as the National Security Adviser (NSA), according to an official order. His appointment will be co-terminus with the term of Prime Minister Narendra Modi or until further orders, it said. "The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet has approved the appointment of Ajit Doval, IPS (Retired) as National Security Adviser with effect from 10.06.2024," said the order.

### Modi leaves for Italy to attend G7

New Delhi: India will focus on artificial intelligence, energy, Africa, and the Mediterranean at the outreach session of the G7 summit in Italy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Thursday. Modi left for Italy in his first foreign trip after becoming Prime Minister for the third term. He will attend the outreach session on Friday and is scheduled to hold bilateral talks with a number of world leaders on the margins of the summit.  
Detailed report on P4



Traffic congestion on a road owing to tourists' rush near Rohtang Pass, in Manali, on Thursday

PTI

# Frozen thumb flavour in butterscotch cone, Mumbai ishtyle

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Enjoying a cone of ice cream turned out to be a bitter experience for a Mumbai-based man as he was appalled to find a piece of flesh, apparently a severed human thumb, in the frozen dessert that he ordered online, police said on Thursday. The incident occurred on Wednesday afternoon, following which the man lodged a complaint with the police, they said. The complainant, Brendon Ferrao (26), is a doctor with an MBBS degree and is a

resident of Malad area in the metropolis. "In his complaint, he said he ordered a butterscotch ice-cream cone from Yummo company through an e-Commerce app. While consuming the ice cream after lunch, he found a piece of flesh with a nail in it," a police official said. The man, who is pursuing his post-graduate studies, then took up the matter with the ice cream company by complaining about it on its Instagram page. But since there was no proper response from the

firm, the complainant put the piece of flesh in an ice bag and approached went to the Malad police station, where he lodged a complaint, the official said. Based on his complaint, the police registered a case under Indian Penal Code (IPC) sections 272 (adulteration of food or drink intended for sale), 273 (sale of noxious food and drink) and 336 (act endangering life or personal safety of others), against Yummo ice cream company officials, he said. "The piece of flesh, suspected



to be a piece of human finger, has been sent for forensic examination to ascertain whether it is a part of the human body," the official said. Speaking to media persons about the incident, complainant Ferrao said while eating the ice cream, he found a big piece in his mouth and initially thought it to be a nut. But as he suspected that something was wrong, he took out the piece from his mouth and was appalled to find a piece of flesh, he said. He said since he is a doctor,

he knows the human body parts well and figured out that the piece of flesh that he found was of a thumb. "After finding the piece of flesh in the ice cream, I was almost trembling. It left me traumatised," he said. Senior police inspector Ravindra Adane said the piece of flesh with a nail measured around one-and-a-half centimetres. After registering the case, the police have launched a probe to find out from where the ice cream was brought, and where and when it was manufactured, he said.

Security upped for Amarnath yatra amid rising terror threats

MOHIT KANDSHARI ■ JAMMU



In the wake of a sudden upswing in the terrorist violence across different districts of the Jammu region, the security forces deployed in Jammu and Kashmir are bracing for a bigger challenge of peaceful conduct of the 52-day-long Amarnath yatra starting June 29.

Chattargalla in Baderwah on June 12. Two foreign terrorists were eliminated in the operation by the joint team of security forces while one CRPF jawan attained martyrdom during the encounter.

the safety of pilgrims along the entire yatra route including Jammu-Srinagar National Highway the Union Home Ministry has already given its nod to rush additional companies of the central paramilitary forces for the exclusive yatra duty.

Yatra route. The shrine board is expected to provide boarding and lodging facilities to a rush of 10,000 pilgrims across three yatri niwas complexes of Jammu, Srinagar and Ramban during transit.

holding security review meetings to fine-tune their ground strategy and improve coordination to ensure peaceful conduct of the yatra. Special emphasis is laid on ensuring foolproof security of camps, communication network, regulation of traffic management on the national highways and other roads.

Football coach TK Chathunni passes away, leaves a legacy

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI



The residents of Chalakkudy, a small town in Kerala's Thrissur district bid a tearful farewell to T K Chathunni, one of the frontline football coaches in India on Thursday.

Periera, Shyam Thapa, and Ranjit Thapa, he was a regular player of the Indian national side that had played in various tournaments in Asia.

Five-year integrated M Tech programme in AI launched

PNS ■ DELHI

The Department of Mechanical Engineering is delighted to announce the launch of five-year Integrated M Tech. Programme in Artificial Intelligence and Robotics Engineering. Students will be awarded with B. Tech. Degree after completing four years.

Massive fire engulfs Chandni Chowk shop, no injuries reported

New Delhi: A major fire broke out in a shop in Chandni Chowk area of north Delhi on Thursday while no one was reported hurt, according to the Delhi Fire Services (DFS) officials.

JK police chief warns against enemy's tactics

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU



Jammu and Kashmir Police Chief RR Swain on Thursday came out strongly against the neighbouring country while accusing it of trying to disturb the peaceful atmosphere through its mercenaries and asserted that the Indian forces were determined to give a befitting response to the enemy.

neutralize terrorists involved in recent attacks in the union territory. So far Reasi police have detained 50 individuals in connection with the recent terrorist attack on a pilgrims' bus in the Kanda area of police station Pouni.

the adversary is that if they cannot motivate locals for subversive activities to disturb the peaceful atmosphere in Kashmir, send their people, Pakistanis, after recruiting them there and forcibly pushing them into this side".

Adhikari refuses to own up loss liability

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA



Facing attack from a section of the State BJP and having received a reported rap on his knuckles from the national leadership for his party's poor show in Bengal, State Opposition Leader Suvendu Adhikari has refused to take responsibility for the BJP's uninspiring performance in the recently concluded parliamentary elections.

and Rajmata Amrita Roy for Krishnagar seat — both of which were lost by huge margins.

that I visited areas where I was invited to attend public rallies and programmes ... I only gave my opinion of candidates in my own East Midnapore district when I was asked to do so and the party won there," Adhikari said holding the organizational weakness responsible for the defeat.

responsibilities. Adhikari who had gone to Delhi for a brief period to attend the swearing-in ceremony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi was reportedly sent back by the national leadership with an instruction to contain the party leaders including MLAs from joining the TMC particularly ahead of the upcoming Assembly by-elections to four seats.

Deal with J&K terror with iron hand: PM

From Page 1 Massive search operations were launched by security forces in forest belts of different districts of Jammu and Kashmir to track down and neutralise the ultras involved in the recent terror attacks in the Union Territory.

leading to their arrest. "Jammu and Kashmir Police have released sketches of four terrorists who are believed to be in the upper reaches of Baderwah, Thathri, Gandoh and carrying out terror-related activities," a police spokesperson said.

from Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi, plunged into a deep gorge following the gunfire, killing nine people and injuring 41 others.

This year's annual pilgrimage to the cave shrine of Amarnath is expected to attract over 5 lakh pilgrims. In 2023, over 4.45 lakh pilgrims paid obeisance inside the cave shrine.

NEET-UG for 1,563 candidates on June 23

From Page 1

Taking note of the submissions, the bench said all the pleas, including the one filed by Alakh Pandey, the chief executive of EdTech firm Physics Wallah over the issue of award of grace marks, will be taken up for hearing on July 8.

withdrawn. These affected 1563 candidates will be informed of their actual scores without compensatory marks. Further, re-examination will be conducted for the affected 1563 candidates.

examination process and results of NEET (UG) 2024." He has, in his plea filed through lawyer Rohit Jain, the managing partner of law firm 'Singhania & Co', also sought a direction to the expert panel he has mooted "to come up with improvement in the process of conducting NEET examination and without hampering the interest of the other students".

The allegations have led to protests in several cities and filing of cases in seven high courts as also the Supreme Court. Scores of students protested in Delhi on June 10 seeking a probe into alleged irregularities.

NFR inaugurates renovated retiring rooms at Guwahati railway station

PNS ■ DELHI

Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) continues its commitment to enhancing passenger comfort with the inauguration of 12 renovated retiring rooms at Guwahati Railway Station.

High airfares pinched Minister, vows to check flyaway prices

From Page 1 In line with Prime Minister Modi's vision for Viksit Bharat, he said "we are going to formulate and implement a 100-day action plan to drive immediate progress in India's aviation sector. This plan will serve as a stepping stone towards achieving the long-term Vision of Viksit Bharat as India celebrates 100 years of its independence in 2047".

Centre cancels grace marks

From Page 1 He said, "It conducts exams for more than 50 lakh school students annually, besides exams at the higher education level."

Delhi remains hot, thirsty; neighbours...

From Page 1

The bench has asked the Delhi government to submit an application to Upper Yamuna River Board (UYRB) for water supply, seeking water for the national capital on humanitarian grounds.

"Since UYRB has already directed Delhi to submit an application for the supply of additional 150 cusecs of water on humanitarian grounds, such an application be made, if not already made, today by 5 pm, and thereafter the board shall convene a meeting tomorrow and take decision in the matter at the earliest. If need be, the board can convene on a day to day basis," the bench said while disposing of the plea filed by the Delhi government.

supply even as residents continue to scramble for the supply. Exhausted women and children could be seen walking long distances and standing and sitting in serpentine queues for a few buckets of water that the tanker would bring.

national capital. The national capital was in for a huge disappointment when the Himachal Pradesh government took U turn on Thursday and told the court it does not have surplus 136 cusecs of water, recanting an earlier statement.

withdraw their earlier response. In an affidavit filed before the top court, the Delhi government said water tankers are needed to cater to areas not connected to water supply lines or where the supply is inadequate.

Lieutenant-Governor of Delhi (who is at present in charge of ensuring action)."The tanker mafia is operational on the Haryana side of the Yamuna river over which DJB has no jurisdiction," it said.

Lined Channel (CLC) and the losses reduced from 30 per cent in the river course to 5 per cent.

Senior advocate Shyam Divan, appearing for the Haryana government, disputed his claim and asserted that the requisite water level was being maintained in Wazirabad. Divan said since the matter involves highly technical aspects of water allocation, it should be left to UYRB to decide. Additional Solicitor General Vikramjeet Banerjee, representing UYRB, agreed with him and said the issue can be resolved by the board.

# Cops patrol Munak canal to check activities of tanker mafia

## Minister Atishi inspects pipeline network supplying water to South Delhi residents

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Water Minister Atishi on Thursday inspected a pipeline network supplying water to South Delhi residents in the national Capital while the police began patrolling the Munak canal area to check the activities of tanker mafia as the water crisis in the city worsened. A senior officer said police teams have set up pickets and started patrolling the 15-kilometre stretch of the canal on the Haryana borders, supplying water to the national capital. The canal enters Delhi from Bawana and reaches the Haiderpur Treatment Plant. Teams from Bawana, Narela Industrial Area, Shahbad Dairy and Samai Pur Badali police stations have been



tasked with patrolling the Munak Canal and its nearby areas. "Police personnel have been asked to prevent anyone from taking water from the canal in their tankers," the officer said. Lieutenant Governor V K Saxena on Wednesday directed the Delhi Police chief to ensure a strict vigil along the Munak canal to prevent the theft of water and sought an action taken report within the week. According to sources, police are also inspecting the posh colonies of Delhi, asking about their water consumption. Meanwhile, Atishi, accompanied by senior officials of Delhi Jal Board and Revenue Department, inspected the South Delhi Mains pipeline network that supplies water from the Sonia Vihar WTP to millions of people across South Delhi. The Delhi Government is ensuring through patrolling by ADMs and SDMs across the city that

millions of people across South Delhi. "Along with senior officials of Jal Board and Revenue Department, inspected the South Delhi Mains pipeline network that supplies water from the Sonia Vihar WTP to millions of people across South Delhi. The Delhi Government is ensuring through patrolling by ADMs and SDMs across the city that not even a single drop of water is wasted due to leakage from the main pipelines. During the water crisis, when Delhi is getting less water, the production of WTPs has decreased. In such a situation, wastage of water will not be tolerated," she said on X (formerly Twitter). The plight of Delhiites braving an unprecedented high summer heat has been further aggravated by an acute shortage of water supply. Delhi is getting less water and the production at water treatment plants has decreased. In such a situation, wastage of water will not be tolerated, she said. During the inspection, Atishi said that the production of water has gone down by 40 MGD in Delhi and unless Haryana releases more water for the city through the Yamuna, the shortfall cannot be met. She stated that the government is ensuring that not even a single drop of water is wasted due to pipeline leakage in this hour of crisis. "Efforts are also being made to get additional water from Haryana and Himachal because in the current situation as Delhi is not getting enough water, which has affected the production of our water treatment plants. In such a situation, it is very important that not even a single drop of the water available is wasted," added Atishi.

# BJP raps AAP Government over water crisis, seeks answers from Kejriwal over DJB loss

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP on Thursday attacked the AAP Government over the water crisis in the national Capital, demanding an answer from Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal government about how Delhi Jal Board, which was in a profit of Rs. 600 crores ten years ago, is in a loss of Rs. 73000 crores. It accused the AAP of failing to prevent wastage of water and misleading people on the issue. Addressing a press conference, New Delhi MP Bansuri Swaraj and Delhi BJP Media Head Praveen Shankar Kapoor said due to the shortage of water, people are being fleeced by the tanker mafia. "The Kejriwal Government is answerable that the Delhi Jal Board which was running at a profit of 600 crores during the tenure of the then Chief Minister of Delhi Sheila Dikshit, has today reached a loss of 73000 crores. This question needs to be properly discussed," she said. Earlier in the day, Delhi Police here began patrolling the Munak canal area to check the activities of the tanker mafia and Water Minister Atishi inspected a pipeline network



supplying water to south Delhi residents. Hitting out at Atishi, Swaraj alleged that instead of ensuring action against the tanker mafia, the minister is extending protection to them. "Atishi says that even if the tanker mafia is stopped, not much water would be saved. This is very unfortunate because people facing water shortage are being fleeced by the tanker mafia," she said. The BJP leader also criticised the AAP government for "failing" to prevent wastage and leakage of water and "misleading" people on the issue. "I want to ask the AAP government and Atishi how long will they continue to come up with excuses and mislead people. They should come out of their air-conditioned press conference rooms and see the plight of the people," Swaraj said. On Atishi's letter to Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena seeking a probe into alleged collusion between senior officers and the tanker mafia, Swaraj said the Delhi government faced the Supreme Court's wrath on the issue of the tanker mafia but it was trying to shift the blame on the officers. "It is regrettable that the Kejriwal government, which failed to stop water theft and wastage in Delhi, tried to put the problem arising out of its own mistakes on the neighbouring states by calling it a water shortage crisis," she said, adding that Supreme Court's statement that if the Delhi Government cannot stop tanker theft, then it should be handed over to the Delhi Police is a slap on the Kejriwal Government. The Supreme Court on Thursday directed the Delhi government to approach the Upper Yamuna River Board (UYRB) for water supply as Himachal Pradesh took a U-turn and told the top court that it did not have surplus water to spare. The court asked the Delhi government to submit an application to the UYRB by 5 pm seeking supply of water to the national capital on humanitarian grounds.

# From Tihar, Kejriwal directs Ministers to take action to address water, power woes

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Amidst the persisting water and power crises in the national Capital, Delhi Water Minister Atishi and AAP Rajya Sabha MP Raghav Chadha on Thursday met Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal lodged in the Tihar jail and were directed to take measures to curb the problems as soon as possible. The AAP convener is lodged in Tihar jail's number 2 in the excise policy-linked money laundering case. "Today I met Kejriwal, who is lodged in Tihar jail in a fake case by the central government. But, he still worries about the people of Delhi, more than himself," Atishi said. "He inquired about the issues



related to power and water and he told me that he watched the water crisis in Delhi on television in Tihar," she stated, adding that Kejriwal has directed them to take all necessary steps and arrangements that could be made to overcome the water crisis as soon as possible. "He has directed all the AAP

legislators to go on the ground and take all possible steps to provide water to the people in their areas," she said. Atishi further said that Kejriwal inquired about the power cuts in Delhi which had occurred due to a fire incident in Uttar Pradesh two days ago. "He told us to hold the meetings with the concerned department officials to prevent the power crisis from happening in the future," she said. The education minister further said that Kejriwal only thinks about the people of Delhi and their problems, even while staying behind bars. According to Tihar sources, both Atishi and Chadha met Kejriwal for half-an-hour in the visitor's room (Mulakati Jangla) in Tihar.

# Delhi Congress president seeks probe into ₹17,575 crore DJB scam

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Congress president Devender Yadav wrote to the Central Vigilance Commissioner (CVC) seeking a probe into the Rs 17,575 crore scam in the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) over leakage of water from the DJB being diverted for the 'tanker mafia' to misappropriate. Following AAP and Congress not continuing their alliance for the Delhi Assembly elections in 2025, Yadav, in his letter to the CVC, pointed out that there has been a "significant uptick" in the volume of leakage of water in recent years, as indicated by Government-provided data. Highlighting the figures climbing from 42 per cent in 2019-20 to 58.28 per cent in 2022-23, he said "This 16.28 per cent surge in the leakage of water over a span of three years is deeply worrisome,



despite the fact that the Delhi Jal Board had made substantial spend from its budgetary allocation for the replacement and installation of supply lines. With an annual allocation of approximately Rs 30 crore for metering and plugging the water leakage, the escalation of water leakage has become more perplexing." He added that even if 10-20 per cent leakages are justified due to transmission and distribution loss, the approximate loss of Rs 17,575 crore suffered by the DJB is much bigger. "In the three areas where Public Private Partnership (PPP) projects are operational, leakages stand at just 26 per cent, and such a significant disparity has raised suspicions of organised malpractice by the tanker mafia, officials and ruling party politicians in the water supply," he stated.

# LG approves MACP benefits to 194 principals, education officers



STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Lieutenant Governor (LG) Vinai Kumar Saxena on Thursday approved the grant of financial upgradation under Modified Assured Career Progression (MACP) scheme in the pay scale of Rs. 37400-67000/- with Grade Pay of Rs. 8700/- (pre-revised) to 194 serving / retired Principals, Vice Principals, Education Officers and District Education Officers. Taking decision in a long pending matter of government servants, not belonging to organized services, last year, Saxena had ruled that the benefits of MACP Scheme must be given to retired Principals / EOs/DEOs/DDEs of the Education Department. After the decision they were entitled to draw salary in the higher grade pay from the date of

implementation of the scheme i.e. 01.09.2008 or their respective entitlement, whichever is later. Despite this, retired officers eligible for financial upgradation from year 2008, and such eligibility being upheld by various courts including the Supreme Court, these officers had to go through trauma and harassment all these years for no fault of theirs due to indifferent and inhuman attitude of the Education Department. With the decision of LG, they get their due benefits pending for 15 years. While approving the file in this respect, LG also took a serious note with respect to inordinate delay in providing information regarding cost involved in litigation and fixing responsibility of officers in the matter. Earlier in February, Saxena had approved proposal of grant of MACP to 151 serving / retired Principals, Vice Principals, Education Officers and District Education Officers of Education Department and also directed to provide information regarding ascertaining the cost involved in litigation in the matter, fixing responsibility of officers involved and details of Show Cause Notices issued in the matter. In order to provide relief to government employees due to stagnation in their post, central government had brought MACP Scheme effective from 01.09.2008 under which financial upgradations are granted to government employees after completion of 10, 20 and 30 years of their service. The benefits under the scheme are granted from the date an employee becomes eligible and he is also eligible for arrears on the benefits in case of delays. The Education Department has been directed to furnish the compliance report with respect of Litigation cost, fixing responsibilities of Officers involved and details of Show Cause Notice issued within seven days.



# Haryana earns ₹1,756 crore from liquor shop auctions

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

The Haryana Government has earned Rs 1,756 crore from the auction of 162 liquor shops in East and West zone, via e-tenders in Gurugram, officials said. According to the new excise policy, online tenders were opened on Wednesday for 162 shops in the East and West zone. The East area is an upscale locality of the city. Officials said earlier, that there were a total of 69 sectors in the east zone, which have now been reduced to 40. Liquor traders can now open four liquor shops in one zone. There are around 342 liquor shops in Gurugram, and the excise department in the city is divided into two zones - East and West. The wine shop located

on the golf course road in East zone attracted the highest bid of Rs 50.57 crore. A liquor vend located near Bristol Chowk was sold for Rs 48.28 crore. "Tenders were opened for wine shops under the online tender process on behalf of the headquarters, the department has collected revenue of Rs 1,756 crore from 162 shops in East and West zones," a senior officer of the, Excise Department, Gurugram said. "The auction of two zones in the west and 20 zones in the east is scheduled to take place in the second phase on June 14. After the auction of all the liquor shops, the amount of revenue will increase further," Deputy Excise and Taxation Commissioner (East) Amit Bhatia said.

# Cops launch NashaMukt Bharat Pakhwada with grand event at Red Fort

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police launched 'NashaMukt Bharat Pakhwada' on Thursday at Red Fort with hundreds of enthusiastic participants gathered to support the cause of a drug-free India. The inauguration ceremony was a vibrant and engaging affair, setting the tone for the two-week-long campaign aimed at eradicating drug abuse and raising awareness across the nation. "Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Government of India is vigorously pursuing a policy of 'Zero Tolerance' against drugs. The Union Home Minister Amit Shah is committed to eliminating the drug problem and has repeatedly stressed and ordered to take the strongest possible measures for detection and demand/harm reduction. The same is being sincerely implemented by Delhi Police under the guidance of Commissioner of Police Sanjay Arora," Special Commissioner of Police (crime) Shalini Singh said. The Delhi Police has planned several impactful events and activities, promising widespread community involvement and education. The event includes district-wise awareness campaigns, pantomime shows, Delhi Police band performance, mega e-pledge events and painting competition. "One of the standout events will be a Walkathon at India Gate on 23 June to be graced by the presence of the Commissioner of Police, Delhi. This event aims to bring together thousands of Delhi residents in a united front against drug abuse, promoting health, fitness, and community spirit. We warmly invite all Delhi residents to participate in this noble cause," Singh stated.



# Minister orders third party audit of drain desilting ahead of monsoon

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Urban Development Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj on Thursday directed the Chief Secretary Naresh Kumar to immediately provide the list of drains desilted by June 10 and ensure an independent third-party audit of these works is conducted by June 30. On June 5, Bharadwaj had instructed Kumar to send a report of the desilting progress reminding him of the water logging situation in the national capital of the last monsoon season. In the review meeting dated June 10, concerning the desilting process, PWD had claimed that out of 2156 km drains about 61 per cent of drains i.e. 1293 km drains have been completely de-silted. Similarly, Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) had also claimed that 87.14 per cent of drains taken under Ph.-I have been completely de-silted. "Therefore, it is directed that all the claims of the desilting by the agencies like PWD and MCD should be audited by the third party independent agencies. It is also worth noting that these claims must be verified well before the monsoon arises in the City because once it rains in the city, the department will take excise that the silt in the drains has been deposited recently due to rains," Bharadwaj stated. He said a few years back the Petitions Committee of Delhi Legislative Assembly had taken up this matter of desilting of drains.

# Vector borne diseases increased during monsoon season last year: Report

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The breeding of vector-borne diseases like dengue, malaria and chikungunya expected to arrive in the national capital by the end of this month, around June 27. Delhi recorded 3,25,875 cases of mosquito breeding at home in 2023, nearly 90 per cent higher than 1,71,931 in 2022, the data in the report shows. The year 2022 also saw a considerable dip in the number of house breeding cases by over 24,000 cases. In

2021, Delhi recorded 1,96,303 instances of such breedings. In 2020, instances of mosquito breeding at homes in Delhi stood at 1,09,550. The report also shows, the number of legal notices issued by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) to owners of households where the breeding of vector-borne diseases was found also increased to 1,72,481 in 2023 from 1,22,282 in 2022, which is a 41 per cent jump in a year. Furthermore, the MCD



conducted 41,476,581 house inspections in 2023 to look out for the breeding of vector-borne diseases in the city, which was ramped up by nearly 15 per cent than the previous year. In 2022, 36,076,419 house inspections

were conducted, up from 30,795,251 in 2021 and 12,286,481 in 2020. Of the total number of legal notices sent to the householders in 2023, the MCD launched prosecution against 74,342 people for violation of the MCD (Malaria and other vector-borne diseases) bye-laws 1975. In 2022, legal action was taken against 45,934 people, up from 27,427 people in 2021 and 10,372 people in 2020, data shows. The MCD has not released its weekly data on the number of cases, dengue deaths, and status of vector-borne diseases since August 7, 2023. The exercise was stalled in the run-up to the G-20 summit in Delhi, the civic body officials had said. When asked for the tally, the MCD officials refused to provide data stating it was not ready. However, sources at the municipal corporation said that the records were regularly maintained and the numbers are believed to be high.

Kuwait fire: IAF aircraft on standby to bring back victims' mortal remains to India

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

An IAF plane is on stand by to bring back the mortal remains of Indians killed in a devastating fire in southern Kuwait's Mangaf area on Wednesday. Forty of the 49 killed were Indians including 24 from Kerala. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced an ex-gratia payment of Rs two lakh each to the families of the deceased. Kerala government also announced payment of Rs five lakh each. Most of the Indian victims are from Kerala.

Minister of state for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh left for Kuwait following a direction from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to oversee assistance to Indians injured in the fire and to ensure early repatriation of mortal remains of those killed, officials said here on Thursday. They also said Kuwaiti authorities are conducting DNA tests on the bodies of those killed adding total number of people killed in the Al-Mangaf building is 49 and 42 of them are learnt to be Indians; the remaining ones are Pakistani, Filipino, Egyptian and Nepali nationals. "In an unfortunate and tragic fire incident earlier today in a Labour housing facility in Mangaf area of Kuwait, around 40 Indians are understood to



Minister of State for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh on his arrival in Kuwait PTI

have died and over 50 injured," the Ministry of External Affairs(MEA) had said in a statement late on Wednesday night. Prime Minister Modi, who described the incident as "saddening", reviewed the situation at a meeting with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, NSA Ajit Doval, Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra and Principal Secretary to PM PK Mishra among others. The prime minister announced ex-gratia relief of Rs 2 lakh to the families of the deceased Indian nationals from the PM Relief Fund and directed that the government should extend all pos-

sible assistance. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar spoke to his Kuwaiti counterpart Abdullah Ali Al-Yahya on phone and urged him for the early repatriation of the mortal remains of those killed. "Spoke to Kuwaiti FM Abdullah Ali Al-Yahya on the fire tragedy in Kuwait. Apprised of the efforts made by Kuwaiti authorities in that regard. Was assured that the incident would be fully investigated and that responsibility will be fixed," Jaishankar had said in a social media post. "Urged the early repatriation of the mortal remains of those who lost their lives. He emphasized that those injured were

getting the requisite medical attention," he had said. The officials had said most of the Indian victims are from Kerala. In a related development, the Kerala government on Thursday said it will provide Rs 5 lakh financial assistance to the families of the people from the state who died in the Kuwait fire tragedy that claimed 49 lives and left 50 others injured. The decision was taken at an emergency cabinet meeting chaired by Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan in the morning, a statement issued by his office said. The Cabinet also decided to provide Rs one lakh financial assistance to those injured in the incident, it said. A decision was taken to immediately send state Health Minister Veena George to Kuwait to coordinate the efforts to provide treatment for the injured people as well as to ensure the earliest repatriation of the mortal remains of the deceased to Kerala, it further said. The minister will be accompanied by Jeevan Babu, State Mission Director (NHM), it added. The statement also said prominent businessmen M A Yusuff Ali and Ravi Pillai have informed the Chief Minister that they will provide Rs 5 lakh and Rs 2 lakh, respectively, to each of the families of the Keralites who died in the fire.

Rajnath sets ₹50,000 crore defence equipment export target by 2028-29

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Assumed charge here on Thursday and said the target for his Ministry is to export Rs 50,000 crore worth of defence equipment by 2028-29. He also chaired review meeting on first 100 days' action plan with focus on ex-servicemen welfare. Earlier, Rajnath was welcomed at South Block by Minister of state for defence Sanjay Seth, who was accompanied by Chief of Defence Staff(CDS)General Anil Chauhan, Army chief General Manoj Pande, IAF chief V R Chaudhari, Navy chief Admiral Dinesh Tripathi and Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane besides Defence Research and Development Organisation(DRDO) chief Samir Kamat besides others. National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval called on Rajnath. Talking to reporters on the occasion, Rajnath outlined his vision for the next five years and stated that focus would be on carrying forward the priority areas with renewed thrust to establish a more secure, self-reliant and prosperous nation. "Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, our aim will be to further strengthen the security apparatus of the country, with focus on achieving self-reliance in defence manufacturing. Armed Forces modernisation and the wel-



fare of the soldiers, both serving and retired, will continue to be our main focus," he said. Rajnath added that the objective will be to increase defence exports in the times to come. "Defence exports had touched a record Rs 21,083 crore in Financial Year 2023-24. It was historic. Our target will be to export over Rs 50,000 crore worth of defence equipment by 2028-2029," he said. He asserted that the Armed Forces are being equipped with state-of-the-art weapons and platforms and they are ready to face every challenge. He commended the military personnel for protecting the unity, integrity and sovereignty of the nation with valour and commitment. Immediately after assumption of charge, Rajnath chaired a review meeting on the first 100 days' Action Plan of his ministry. The meeting focused on the welfare of veterans, wherein major issues pertaining to the

Department of Ex-Servicemen Welfare were discussed. He instructed the officers to re-dedicate themselves to fulfill the agenda laid out in the 100 days' Action Plan. With a view to enhance defence preparedness and continued thrust on Aatmanirbharta in defence, Rajnath stated that he will be conducting regular review meetings to fast-track the progress of the flagship schemes and the initiatives of the defence ministry. Emphasising the growing salience of the Indian Ocean Region in the defence calculus, he has decided on his first visit in this tenure to the Eastern Naval Command, Visakhapatnam, wherein he will be interacting with the officers and sailors. After being elected to the Lok Sabha from Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh for the third consecutive time, Rajnath Singh took oath as a Union Cabinet Minister on June 9.

India has ample wheat stocks, no plans to alter import duty: Govt

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

India has sufficient wheat stocks to meet domestic requirements and undertake market interventions, if required, to keep prices stable, the Government said on Thursday, adding that it has no plans to alter the import duty on the grain for now. The Department of Food and Public Distribution under the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, is closely monitoring the market price of wheat, it said in a statement. "Suitable interventions, as warranted, shall be undertaken to ensure that there is no hoarding by unscrupulous elements and the price remains stable," the statement said. During the 2024 rabi marketing season, the department reported wheat production of 112 million tonnes. The state-run Food Corporation of India (FCI) has procured around 26.6 million tonnes of the grain until June 11. After meeting the requirement for the public distribution system and other welfare schemes, estimated at around 18.4 million tonnes, sufficient wheat stock will be available for market interventions when needed, it said.

Modi heads for G7 summit in Italy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said in his departure statement during the G-7 summit in Italy the focus would be on artificial intelligence, energy, Africa and the Mediterranean. Before leaving for Italy, he also said "it will be an opportunity to bring greater synergy between the outcomes of the G20 Summit held under India's Presidency and the forthcoming G7 Summit, and deliberate on issues which are crucial for the Global South. I am also looking forward to meeting other leaders participating in the Summit. At the invitation of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, I am travelling to Apulia region in Italy to participate in the G7 Outreach Summit on 14 June 2024. I am glad that my first visit in



the third consecutive term is to Italy for the G-7 Summit. I warmly recall my visit to Italy for the G20 Summit in 2021. Prime Minister Meloni's two visits to India last year were instrumental in infusing momentum and depth in our bilateral agenda. We remain committed to consolidate the India-Italy strategic partner-

ship, and bolster cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and the Mediterranean regions." Giving details of his schedule, Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra had said here on Wednesday that Modi's participation in the G7 summit would provide an opportunity to follow up on outcomes of the G20 summit held under India's presidency

last year. The G7 summit, to be held in the luxury resort of Borgo Egnazia in Italy's Apulia region from June 13 to 15, is likely to be dominated by the raging war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza. US President Joe Biden, his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau are among the top leaders attending the summit. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is also scheduled for a session on the Russian invasion of his country. "We have always maintained that dialogue and diplomacy is the best option to resolve it," Kwatra said when asked about the Ukraine conflict. The foreign secretary said India's regular participation in the G7 summit points to increasing recognition of New

Delhi's efforts to address global challenges. Prime Minister Modi will be accompanied by a high-level delegation that is likely to include External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra and National Security Advisor(NSA) Ajit Doval, it was learnt. The prime minister is set to hold a number of bilateral meetings including with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. Modi had attended the previous G7 summit in Hiroshima in May last year. On the sidelines of the summit, he had held talks with Zelenskyy and a number of other leaders. The G7 comprises the US, the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Canada and Japan. Italy is holding the current presidency of the G7 (Group of Seven) and is hosting the summit in that capacity.

DMI HOUSING FINANCE PRIVATE LIMITED ("COMPANY") Public Notice regarding branch relocation from 3rd Floor, 9-10, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi-110002 to 2-A, Block - R, Third Floor, Uttam Nagar West, New Delhi - 110059.

PUBLIC NOTICE from JAY SAFE VAULTS (a division of Vansh Impex Pvt. Ltd.) regarding defaulters of lockers/vaults held at E-11, Kailash COLONY New Delhi 110048.

Table with 6 columns: Sr. No., Name, Address, Locker No., A/C No., Default Since. Lists names like Dr. Manmohan Singh, Amiteshwar Singh, Koshy Alexander, Kafil Bhateja, Prabha Manchanda & Sunil Manchanda, Nitin Gupta & Goldy Gupta, Ramneet Kaur, Rajiv Anand, Shelesh Prasad & Sandeep Anand, Shelesh Prasad & Sandeep Anand, Anoop Mamtani & Amita Mamatani, Shirley Sinclair & Nasreen Sinclair, Vishnu Lamba, Amit Seth & Neena Seth, Randheer Kapoor & Sunita Kapoor.



Union Minister for Education Dharmendra Pradhan assumes charge of his office in Shastri Bhawan, New Delhi, on Thursday. Ministers of State for Education Jayant Chaudhary, Sukanta Majumdar also assumed the charge Ranjan Dimri

Muslims told to follow Government guidelines on Eid-ul-Azha

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

Prominent Muslim organisation Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind on Thursday urged Muslims to strictly follow government guidelines while offering sacrifice on Eid-ul-Azha and not share pictures of slaughtered animals on social media. Eid ul-Azha, also called the festival of sacrifice, will be celebrated on Monday. In his message to Muslims on Eid-ul-Azha, Jamiat president

Maulana Arshad Madani said there is no substitute for sacrifice in Islam and it is a religious duty which is obligatory on every Muslim for whom it is prescribed. "It is important that Muslims take precautionary measures while offering sacrifice. Avoid advertising, especially sharing pictures of slaughtered animals on social media," Madani said. He also urged Muslims to strictly follow government guidelines while performing

'Qurbani' and avoid sacrificing prohibited animals. "If mischievous elements, at any place, prevent the sacrifice of a buffalo also, some sensible and influential people should take the administration into confidence and then sacrifice should be offered," he said. "If, however, there is no way to fulfil this religious obligation, then a sacrifice should be offered in a nearby place where there is no difficulty," Madani said.

Kargil Vijay Diwas: Army flags off motorcycle rally

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE NEW DELHI

In a poignant tribute to bravehearts who made the supreme sacrifice during Operation Vijay during the Kargil war, Dras Thunder Motorcycle Rally was ceremoniously flagged off here by Army Vice Chief Upendra Dwivedi. Dras Thunder Motorcycle Rally comprises of an Officer and 19 soldiers of 13 JAK RIFLES (KARGIL). Subedar Mehar Singh, Vir Chakra and Naib Subedar Kewal Kumar, Sena Medal, had shown immense courage and valour against adversary and had actively participated in capture of strategic peaks during Kargil War, which turned the tide against the adversary. To pay lasting tributes to the sacrifices made by Veer Naris and next of kin, Rahul Manhas, son of late Lance Naik Ranbir Singh, who fought gallantly in Kargil War and made the supreme sacrifice during the capture of Pt 5140, is also part of this motorcycle rally. 13 JAK RIFLES (KARGIL) has actively participated in two major wars, the 1971 Indo-Pak War and Operation Vijay. The unit achieved its peak of glory during Operation Vijay, when only after three days of acclimatisation, the unit hoisted the tricolour on Pt 5140 and Pt 4875, the most dominating features of Dras and Mushkoh Valleys respectively. This unique journey symbolises the enduring bond between the armed forces and the nation, that resonate with the spirit of courage, sacrifice and patriotism.

veterans and Veer Naris enroute and convey gratitude for their contribution in Op Vijay. The Motorcycle Rally will culminate at historic Kargil War Memorial, Dras on June 20. Twenty-five years ago on the same day, Indian Army etched an indelible mark in the annals of history by capturing Pt 5140. Subedar Mehar Singh, Vir Chakra and Naib Subedar Kewal Kumar, Sena Medal, had shown immense courage and valour against adversary and had actively participated in capture of strategic peaks during Kargil War, which turned the tide against the adversary. To pay lasting tributes to the sacrifices made by Veer Naris and next of kin, Rahul Manhas, son of late Lance Naik Ranbir Singh, who fought gallantly in Kargil War and made the supreme sacrifice during the capture of Pt 5140, is also part of this motorcycle rally. 13 JAK RIFLES (KARGIL) has actively participated in two major wars, the 1971 Indo-Pak War and Operation Vijay. The unit achieved its peak of glory during Operation Vijay, when only after three days of acclimatisation, the unit hoisted the tricolour on Pt 5140 and Pt 4875, the most dominating features of Dras and Mushkoh Valleys respectively. This unique journey symbolises the enduring bond between the armed forces and the nation, that resonate with the spirit of courage, sacrifice and patriotism.





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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Looming catastrophe

The ongoing heat and water crisis across north India is claiming lives, and there is no relief in sight

A serious heat and water catastrophe that has already claimed lives and is threatening many more is plaguing the northern parts of India, including the Capital. An unfavorable weather pattern marked by extreme heatwaves and weak rainfall is making it worse. For millions of people, the situation is getting unbearable as temperatures rise and water supply becomes scarce. North India is experiencing one of the worst heatwaves in recorded history. Many locations have regularly seen temperatures above 45 degrees Celsius, with some recording considerably greater values. Many occurrences of heatstroke, dehydration and other heat-related ailments have been reported. There is an increased danger for vulnerable groups, especially for youngsters and the elderly. The number of people enduring the heat in hospitals is overwhelming, and the availability of healthcare resources is limited. Compounding these problems, the monsoon season has started abnormally slowly. Rain, which usually provides much-needed relief, has been irregular and delayed. There are serious ramifications for both urban and rural communities from this delay. The lack of rain in cities like Delhi makes the heat unpleasant and living conditions nearly intolerable. The delayed monsoon in rural areas is disastrous for agriculture as it greatly depends on timely rainfall. Food security and livelihoods are expected to be threatened by crop failures and lower yields. There is severe water deficiency in northern India as a result of the heatwave and delayed monsoon. The levels of major rivers and reservoirs are perilously low, and groundwater has fallen.



Delhi's water supply is significantly impacted by the historically low levels of the Yamuna river; in fact, some areas get water for only a few hours a day. Concerns over waterborne illnesses have been raised, which has led to disputes over access to water and forced many people to rely on contaminated sources. Water rationing, the establishment of cooling facilities and the distribution of drinking water to communities badly impacted by the problem are just a few of the steps the administration has taken. However, because of the situation's seriousness, these actions have not seen much success. Long-term fixes are necessary to preempt disasters. This entails making investments in infrastructure for water conservation, such as effective irrigation systems and rainwater collection, as well as encouraging the groundwater resources to be used sustainably. To counter the urban heat island effect, green spaces and cooling strategies must be included in urban planning. Furthermore, raising people's knowledge of climate change and its effects helps promote a resilient culture. Millions of people are starkly reminded of their vulnerability in the face of climate change by the heat and water crises in north India. The people of this country continue to be its greatest strength as it fights this humanitarian and environmental crisis.

### PICTALK



A boy follows the cooling water mist released by an anti-smog gun, in New Delhi

## AI's influence on India's e-commerce industry

AI reshapes Indian e-commerce with personalisation, efficiency, security and stronger customer bonds, revolutionising shopping

In the bustling landscape of Indian e-commerce, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a transformative force, reshaping the industry in profound ways. From personalised shopping experiences to efficient logistics, AI has emerged as a cornerstone of success for online retailers in India. AI has a multifaceted impact on e-commerce and has implications for businesses, consumers, and the overall economy. One of the most noticeable effects of AI in Indian e-commerce is the enhancement of the shopping experience for consumers. Through advanced algorithms and data analytics, online retailers can now offer personalised product recommendations tailored to individual preferences and purchase histories. This level of customisation not only increases customer satisfaction but also drives sales and fosters brand loyalty. Moreover, AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants provide round-the-clock customer support, addressing queries and concerns in real time, thereby improving overall customer



engagement and retention. AI has also revolutionised the way products are discovered and marketed in the Indian e-commerce landscape. Sophisticated search algorithms powered by Natural Language Processing (NLP) enable users to find products more efficiently, even with vague or misspelt search queries. Additionally, image recognition technology allows consumers to search for products using images, streamlining the search process and enhancing the user experience. Furthermore, AI-driven targeted advertising helps businesses reach their target audience more effectively, maximising the return on investment for marketing campaigns. In the realm of supply chain management, AI has emerged as a game-changer

for Indian e-commerce businesses. By analysing vast amounts of data, including sales trends, inventory levels, and external factors like weather and transportation conditions, AI algorithms optimise inventory management, forecasting, and logistics operations. This results in reduced costs, minimised stockouts, and faster order fulfilment, ultimately leading to improved operational efficiency and customer satisfaction. Moreover, AI plays a pivotal role in enhancing security and mitigating fraud risks in Indian e-commerce transactions. Advanced fraud detection systems leverage machine learning algorithms to identify and prevent fraudulent activities in real time, safeguarding both businesses and consumers from financial losses. Additionally, biometric authentication technologies, such as facial recognition and fingerprint scanning, provide enhanced security for online payments, bolstering consumer trust and confidence in the e-commerce ecosystem. Despite its numerous benefits, the widespread adoption

of AI in Indian e-commerce also presents certain challenges and concerns. Data privacy and security remain paramount, with the need for robust regulatory frameworks to protect consumer information from unauthorised access and misuse. Moreover, the increasing reliance on AI-powered systems raises questions about algorithmic bias and fairness, highlighting the importance of transparency and accountability in algorithm development and deployment. In conclusion, the impact of Artificial Intelligence on Indian e-commerce is undeniable, revolutionising the way businesses operate and consumers shop in the digital age. As AI continues to evolve and permeate every aspect of the industry, it is essential for businesses to embrace innovation, adapt to technological advancements, and prioritise ethical considerations to harness the full potential of AI while ensuring inclusivity, fairness, and security in the e-commerce ecosystem. (The author is BU head at Snapdeal; views expressed are personal)



AISHANI VIJ

## Time for BJP to set its house in order

The party must ponder Venkaiah Naidu's advice and start working towards repairing its ties with the RSS, besides looking for a proactive president



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

The swearing in of Narendra Modi 3.0 is over and it is now business as usual. But there is an eerie uncertainty pervading across India as the BJP Government is dependent on the life-support system provided by the TDP's Chandrababu Naidu and the JD(U)'s Nitish Kumar. The BJP had won 282 seats on its own in the 2014 elections (31 per cent) while the party had a dream run of scoring 303 seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls (37 per cent) despite Naidu's best efforts to defeat the party. This is the first time in his tenure that Modi is dependent on allies for Government survival. The old slogan "Minimum Government and Maximum Governance" has been dusted out of the cupboard. The BJP's mission to enact the Uniform Civil Code, 'One Nation, One Poll' and its dream Agniveer project too would come a cropper without the support of Naidu and Nitish. The speech delivered by M Venkaiah Naidu, former Vice-President, at the Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) should be noted seriously. "There is a message in the election. I hope people understand the message. The ruling BJP failed to reach the majority mark in the Lok Sabha on its own though it emerged as the single largest party while the Opposition put up an impressive performance," Naidu said. A discernible feature of this election was the absence of RSS volunteers from the campaign. What upset the RSS was the declaration made by party president JP Nadda that the BJP has no relation with the Bhagwa Dhvaj, the saffron flag that is emblematic of Sanatana Dharma. "Our flag was apparently created by lord Indra himself. The flag carries the saffron color of the lord. We chose the flag for our kingdom. The flag represents humanity and we need to ensure that we live up to its representation," Shivaji, the great Maratha emperor, told his ministers and commanders. It is time for Nadda to move out of party presidentship. He has neither inspired nor enlightened



people through his words or actions. Nadda should read and learn about two gentlemen from south India, K Kamaraj and S Nijalingappa, both former presidents of the Congress who were rated as titans of Indian politics. Public memory is not that short as they remember the efforts undertaken by Naidu to topple Modi in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. The nation saw Naidu holding hands with Sonia Gandhi, Mamata Banerjee, MK Stalin and, above all, the two most intelligent persons in the world; viz, Sitaram Yechury and D Raja as a prelude to oust Modi and Amit Shah. No political parties have absolute majority of their own to form the Government though the National Democratic Alliance (also termed as Non-Dependable Allies) has nearly 300 MPs, 27 more than the half way mark. Though the Congress, the main player in the Opposition, could not touch the three-digit mark, together with its allies, the party has emerged as a striking force. This year presents an entirely different scenario. The charismatic, uncompromising and powerful Modi is at the mercy of two satraps



THE BJP'S MISSION TO ENACT THE UNIFORM CIVIL CODE, 'ONE NATION, ONE POLL' AND ITS DREAM AGNIVEER PROJECT WOULD COME A CROPPER WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF CHANDRABABU NAIDU AND NITISH KUMAR

with national ambitions. Even before the NDA held its first meeting, Kumar and Naidu have put forward a set of demands, including conducting the caste census and scrapping of Agniveer scheme. It was Jagan Mohan Reddy, leader of YSR Congress and the outgoing Chief Minister, who forced Naidu to take refuge in the BJP camp. Reddy had launched a thorough probe into the charges of corruption against Naidu, for which he was arrested and imprisoned. When it was time for the 2024 Assembly elections, Naidu felt the need to cast his lot with BJP and Modi. Having got more than what he aspired for, Naidu is eyeing bigger rewards. We cannot expect anything better from a person who backstabbed his father-in-law NT Rama Rao, the founder of the TDP, and usurped the party proprietorship. Nitish is no different from Naidu. He is a living example of the Aaya Ram, Gaya Raam politics. Naidu and Nitish are two deceiving crutches and can lead Modi to "no-man's land". The current political imbroglio is BJP's own making. How many of us remem-

ber the five-day long crisis in Maharashtra when Devendra Fadnavis, the then leader of the Opposition, was sworn in as Chief Minister in 2019 with Ajit Pawar (NCP) as his deputy, only to make an ignominious exit after two days. Fadnavis and the other senior BJP leaders had termed Ajit as the embodiment of corruption but they found no qualms in forming a coalition Government with him. Despite Ajit returning to the Pawar Parivar within two days of swearing in, Fadnavis solicited him again and the former is now back in the Hindutva fold. How come BJP, which claims from rooftops that it is always against dynasty politics, forge an alliance with a purely family-run enterprise? Fadnavis' hurry forced him to commit the political harakiri. His case reminds us of the kamikaze by Chaudhary Charan Singh in 1979, ostensibly to teach the then Prime Minister Morarji Desai a lesson. Chaudhary Saheb went down with the Janata ship and could not stage a comeback even at a later stage. (The writer is a special correspondent with The Pioneer; views are personal)

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### INADEQUATE PENALTIES FOR CRUELTY

Madam — Apropos the news story "Animal laws need more teeth say activists," published on June 12, this is my response. Reading about the brutal beating of a dog in Pune, resulting in a mere ₹50 fine, is both disheartening and infuriating. This case, alongside similar instances in Mumbai and Delhi, highlights the urgent need for stricter laws against animal cruelty in India. The proposed Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Amendment) Bill, 2022, seeks to address these issues by introducing harsher penalties, including fines up to ₹75,000 and imprisonment for severe offences. This amendment is crucial, as the current laws are woefully outdated and ineffective. Strengthening these laws is not just about protecting animals; it's about fostering a compassionate society where brutality is not tolerated. It's high time for the government to act, ensuring that offenders face appropriate consequences and that we cultivate a culture of empathy and respect. Our future generations deserve to grow up in a world where cruelty to animals is met with swift and severe justice. Devansh Khatri | Jaipur

#### SURGE IN GREEN ENERGY

Madam — Apropos the news story "India's green energy rise, including 'Green Coal,'" published on June 12, this is my response. Reading about the Reserve Bank of India's latest report brings a sense of optimism about India's economic future, particularly in the energy sector. With green energy projects worth Rs 700 billion set to start this year and projected investments reaching Rs 765.2 billion by 2025-26, it's clear that sustainable energy policies are paying off. India's achievement of full electrification, with significant hours of power for rural and urban areas, coupled with its position as the third-largest renewable energy producer, is commendable. The innovation of green coal, which reduces CO2 emissions significantly, exemplifies India's commitment to sustainability. NTPC's ini-

#### Lansdowne's rich military legacy



Apropos the news story "The Garhwal Regiment's glorious military heritage," published on June 12, this is my response. The still air of Lansdowne's Bhawani Dutt Joshi Parade Ground reverberates with the historic war cry "Jai Badri Vishal Ki Jai" from the Agniveers of the Garhwal Regiment. Established in 1887, the regiment boasts a legacy of val-

our, earning numerous military honours, including Victoria Crosses and Ashoka Chakras. Lansdowne, named after a British Viceroy, remains a testament to colonial heritage with its scenic ridge-top cantonments and hill stations. Colonel Mianwar's bungalow, now MES property, and the Darwan Singh War Museum reflect the regiment's storied past. The Garhwali Officers Mess, with its Victorian charm and unique artefacts like the Sun Dial and the billiards table, epitomises the regiment's historical opulence. Despite attempts to rename Lansdowne, locals cherish its colonial past and its connection to military excellence. The Garhwal Regiment's symbols—Lord Badrinath, the Unknown Soldier, and the Royal Rassi—continue to inspire courage and pride among its soldiers. Aadhya Chawla | Chandigarh

tiatives, especially the Varanasi Harit Koyla Pariyojna, showcase impressive advancements. The green coal project, part of the "Make in India" initiative, symbolises a major stride towards the "Atmanirbhar Bharat" mission. MBL's success in converting municipal waste into eco-friendly coal is not just a technological breakthrough but also an effective solution to waste management, marking an important milestone in India's green energy journey. Arya Sundaram | Chennai

#### DREAMS OF A BETTER WORLD

Madam — Apropos the news story "Blueprint for a Better Society," published on June 12, this is my response. We all envision a world filled with peace, happiness, and harmony. Nobody desires environmental degradation, the loss of lives through violence, or the erosion of the human spirit due to crime, corruption, and poverty. Instead, we seek a life defined by health, wealth, and happiness. To achieve this, we must identify the values necessary to create a socio-politico-

economic system that fosters such a society. Most would agree that reducing wars, violence, poverty, unemployment, pollution, corruption, crime, and social injustices is crucial. Additionally, fostering freedom, reducing hunger, and promoting love and cooperation are essential. A survey would likely reveal that people expect scientists to embrace spirituality, religious leaders to adopt a scientific approach, and doctors to treat both body and soul. Education should include moral and spiritual development and societal attitudes towards women and children need to improve. Achieving these goals requires each societal segment to fulfil expectations and contribute time and talent. Global cooperation is essential, possibly through a new kind of bank where individuals and institutions can contribute towards building a better world. Rohit Kapoor | Kolkata

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



## FIRST COLUMN

## INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY UNDER MODI 3.0

Modi's G7 debut amidst global turmoil underscores diplomatic finesse



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

In less than a week of assuming office as the Prime Minister for the largest democracy in the world, Mr Modi is back where he excels. He was in Italy this week, meeting the leaders from the powerful group of nations also known as the G7. On the sidelines were several bilateral meetings with leaders of African, and Arab nations, besides several clear messages to the primarily American and European groups leaders.

This was PM Modi's first trip abroad, after assuming office for a third time (a remarkable feat in itself), where nearly 670 million voters patiently waited in queues under an extremely harsh summer sun over a period of nearly two months to choose the leader of the largest democracy. PM Modi and his party, despite setting ambitious expectations, could not manage a majority by themselves and are now dependent on a bunch of pre-poll alliance political parties to lead the National Democratic Alliance government. This assumes significance at a time when several parts of Europe, not to mention the US are going their own set of democratic churns. The US goes to poll end of the year, and voices on either side of the aisle, are getting harsher and louder. Similarly, the elections to the European Parliament have thrown a resurgence of far-right parties, which is likely to have an impact on the geopolitical dynamics for a long time. What Mr Modi may be comforted by is the fact that he may not need to look around for carefully worded diplomatic statements while explaining the state of Indian democracy to the Western nations.



In the past few years, several questions have been raised across the Western nations and in the US regarding the health of the Indian democracy, its report card on minority rights, religious freedom, the existence of the press etc. The near majority verdict, by the Indian electorate, with ample scope of checks and balances to keep the party with the highest seats under leash, a robust opposition presence in the parliament would be a clear talking point for the PM and his set of diplomats to set out a gold standard for democracy when engaging with several nations. Mr Modi, with his nearly three decades of experience as head of the state and nation, is not new to diplomacy and in several interviews, leading up to the general elections, has articulated his target of enhancing India's global image. The grand spectacle around G20 (not to forget backroom diplomatic negotiations to arrive at a joint statement), several high-level state visits, a bunch of rescue operations carried out for citizens and neighbours from war-torn areas, supply of emergency medicines during COVID are all pointers towards the focus the Prime Minister's Office attaches to global reputational management. PM's third-term visit to G7 assures continuity and explores fresh engagement strategies with current and potential allies, emphasizing continuity and innovation.

Mr Modi's visit to Italy comes at a time when the Ukraine war is unrelenting, and despite severe reluctance, there seems to be chinks in the united European approach towards the aggressor Russia. Many of them, would have, similar concerns regarding Israel's war on terror, which has refused to die down in months. It may be recalled that both Israel and Russia are close allies of India, and India has so far walked a tightrope when commenting on both of these volatile situations. The dynamics of the past relationship, while building deeper relations with recent allies such as the US are likely to be a sensitive diplomatic trope. It is no wonder, that PM Modi has picked up S Jaishankar, a seasoned diplomat as the External Affairs minister for a second term, to retain the continuity and foreign policy focus achieved during his last term. The evolving geopolitical landscape and India's role in global affairs would continue to be tested and chiselled in days to come.

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

## Populism cripples revival of discoms

The twin problems of AT&amp;C losses and under-recoveries on sale to certain households or farmers in some States have existed for close to a quarter century



UTTAM GUPTA

The Centre is planning to launch 'another' scheme to enable public sector power distribution utilities (discoms) to cut technical losses via "transition financing" of the required capital expenditure. The discoms stand at the core of the power supply and distribution network in the country. Mostly owned and controlled by State Governments, they buy electricity from the generating companies (call them gencos) in the public sector such as National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) etc and gencos in the private sector commonly referred to as independent power producers (IPPs) and supply to the consumers. Technical losses to be more precise, the aggregate technical and commercial (AT&C) losses are a sophisticated nomenclature for leakage from the system or power theft. According to Union Power Minister RK Singh, AT&C's losses used to be high at 27 per cent. When, out of say 100 units of electricity that leaves the generating stations/power dispatch centre, 27 units are stolen and hence not paid for, this is bound to have a debilitating effect on the discoms' operations.

The discoms could charge more on sale of the balance 73 units to compensate for the 'nil' revenue on the 27 stolen units. But this is theoretical. So, the discoms would end up making a loss to the extent of revenue lost on stolen units. There is another potent factor that exacerbates their losses.

The Electricity Act (2003) and the Guidelines issued by the Ministry of Power require the discoms to fix the tariff on electricity supplied to consumers in a manner such that the average revenue realisation (ARR) from its sale is equal to the average cost of purchase, transmission and distribution (ACS). Yet under dictat from the State Government, either they don't bill certain households (HHs) at all (on consumption up to 200/300 units a month in Delhi/Punjab) or a flat subsidy of ₹800 on consumption (between 201 and 400 units a month in Delhi), besides free supply to farmers as in Punjab.

The discoms seek to make up for the resulting under-recoveries by charging more from industries and businesses for which the tariff can go up to a high of ₹16 per unit (this indeed is a major reason for making Indian products and services uncompetitive in both the domestic and international markets). While the States also promise to compensate for a good portion of the under-recoveries, most of them make only partial reimbursement and that too after considerable delay. This further adds to discom losses.

The twin problems of AT&C losses and under-recoveries on sale to HHs/farmers have existed for close to a quarter century. Since the beginning of 2000, the Centre has come up with four financial restructuring packages (FRPs) to help discoms. While, the first two (2002, 2012) merely sought to condone their losses, the third namely Ujwal DISCOM Assurance Yojana (UDAY) launched in November 2015 required discoms to set their house in order and achieve certain milestones in exchange for financial assistance.

Under UDAY, discoms' staggering debt of about ₹400,000 crore was condoned. Of this, while 75 per cent was taken over by the States, for the balance, they were allowed to issue bonds at a concessional rate of interest. In lieu of the FRP, discoms



WHILE STATES ALSO PROMISE TO COMPENSATE FOR A GOOD PORTION OF THE UNDER-RECOVERIES, MOST OF THEM MAKE ONLY PARTIAL REIMBURSEMENT AND THAT TOO AFTER CONSIDERABLE DELAY

were required to reduce AT&C losses from 20.7 per cent during 2015-16 to 15 per cent by 2018-19. Further, they were to reduce the ACS-ARR gap from ₹0.59 per unit of electricity during 2015-16 to 'zero' by 2018-19. But, the discoms failed to deliver.

During 2019-20, their AT&C loss were 18.9 per cent against the 15 per cent target for 2018-19. The ACS-ARR gap during 2019-20 stood at ₹0.42 per unit against target of 'zero' for 2018-19. During 2020-21, even these limited improvements were reversed as ATC losses zoomed to 22.3 per cent and ACS-ARR gap ₹0.69 paise per unit. As a consequence, discoms losses which had decreased from ₹52,000 crore during 2015-16 to ₹17,000 crore during 2017-18 (courtesy, FRP) increased to about ₹30,000 crore during 2019-20 and further to ₹58,000 crore during 2020-21.

Correspondingly, this has led to their ballooning debt which at the end of FY 2021-22, stood at ₹620,000 crore. This prompted the Centre to come out with a fourth package called 'Reforms-Linked, Result-Based Scheme for Distribution' (RLRBS-D). The scheme was unveiled by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her Budget speech for FY 2021-22. Involving an outlay of ₹300,000 crore, it was aimed at trimming discoms AT&C losses to 12-15 per cent and gradually narrow the ACS-ARR gap to 'zero' by March 2025. This was to be achieved by upgrading the distribution infrastructure and capac-

ity building, thereby improving the reliability and quality of the power supply. It had a provision for compulsory pre-paid and smart metering component to be implemented across the power supply chain, including in about 220 million households.

Apart from gross budgetary support (GBS) of close to ₹100,000 crore by the Centre, implementation of the Scheme involves funding by State-run sector-specific lenders; viz, Power Finance Corporation (PFC) and Rural Electrification Corporation (REC) under irrevocable State Government guarantee. The funds release is subject to discoms meeting the pre-qualifying criteria and achieving the basic minimum benchmark in reforms.

The RLRBS-D launched in FY 2021-22 talks of achieving the targets, which should have been achieved by 2018-19, by March 2025. This by itself is laughable. What about the progress? According to the Power Ministry, the Government has so far identified 57 discoms from 32 States and Union Territories under the scheme and has prepared detailed project reports (DPRs) for these. Further, in reply to a question in Parliament given by then Power Minister RK Singh in December 2023: "Till today, DPRs having total outlay of ₹120,000 crore has been approved for loss reduction works and ₹130,000 crore for smart metering works."

Beyond this paperwork, as of January 2024, the total loan disbursed by PFC-REC under the

scheme was ₹112,000 crore for 16 States, while sanctioned amount was ₹133,000 crore.

As for the gross budgetary support, the release of funds by the Centre during FY 2023-24 was a mere ₹6,000 crore against budget allocation of ₹12,000 crore. That things are moving at a snail's pace may be seen from the fact that 'against the sanctioned smart meters of around 220 million, only about 0.8 million have been installed so far'. One wonders whether the money is being used by discoms to merely pay back the loans taken earlier to fund their recurring losses --- as happened under UDAY.

Now that the tenure of this scheme (launched in 2021-22) will end in just about 10 months on March 31, 2025, the Government is keen to launch its second version call it RLRBS-D-II with similar aggregate outlay of ₹300,000 crore. Who knows, even the funds garnered under this scheme could end up being used to clear the continuous pile up of discoms' debt. The vicious cycle continues.

The problem is entirely political. In a bid to win elections (these are held round the clock), almost every political party promises sops which include, among others, power supply to farmers and poor households at throwaway price or even free; they even ignore theft happening in slums/jhuggis that promise votes en masse. They use discoms as guinea pigs for achieving these populist goals.

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

## Govt must reboot its 'Neighbourhood First' policy

Modi's top priorities should include strengthening of bilateral ties with neighbours and herald a new era of dialogue to counter China's influence

The Narendra Modi Government must give priority to wean away neighbours who have drifted towards China. The presence of leaders from the neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean region at the inauguration of Narendra Modi's third term as Prime Minister highlights the significance New Delhi accords to these countries. Notable attendees included Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe. The swearing-in ceremony also witnessed the participation of Bhutan Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay, Nepal Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, Mauritius Prime Minister Pravind Kumar Jugnauth, Seychelles Vice-



KS TOMAR

President Ahmed Afif and Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu. The inclusion of President Muizzu is being interpreted as a good diplomatic move, especially when both nations currently have strained ties. It may be recalled that Modi invited leaders from the eight member States of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to his swearing-in ceremony in 2014. For his 2019 inauguration, the guests included leaders from the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIM-STEAC), along with Mauritius and Kyrgyzstan.

The Modi-led Government will have its plate full of national and international issues, which will warrant



immediate attention and formulation of strategy and action plan. Experts feel that India must resolve the US threat to impose sanctions if the Chabahar Port deal with Iran was not scrapped. Interestingly, the US did not raise any objection when India took up the construction of the port because it suited the US owing to its occupation of

Afghanistan. But now that the US has moved out, it has no interest in the port. Former Prime Minister Pt Jawaharlal Nehru's Indian National Congress achieved a remarkable victory, securing 44.7 per cent of the vote and winning 361 out of 494 seats in 1962. In contrast, the BJP, under Narendra Modi, won 238 seats out of 543, with the

NDA collectively securing 294 seats. Unlike the BJP, which relies on coalition partners like the TDP and others, the Congress under Nehru stood strong on its own. This scenario isn't unique to India. In Britain, leaders like Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair also managed to secure three terms. However, managing a coalition Government with a thin majority presents its own challenges. The reduced strength can increase the bargaining power of smaller coalition partners.

The Modi Government's foreign policy has alienated neighbours like the Maldives, Nepal etc. Hence it needs a 'relook' as they have drifted towards China, which is using them to expand its influence. Regarding Pakistan,

India should respond to its initiative to have trade ties by keeping the political issues aside. The Sharif brothers may not be averse to it. China's expanding ties in the region are evident, and India needs to tread cautiously to counter its influence, as seen in the case of Nepal. The recent political shift in Nepal towards a communist Government ideologically aligned with China is concerning, especially considering China's 'Debt Trap' strategy.

Pakistan serves as a stark example, with China extending a massive debt of \$23 billion, a substantial portion of which is tied to the Belt and Road Initiative. Pakistan's mounting debt to China, totalling \$67.2 billion from

2000 to 2021, underscores the risks associated with this debt dependency.

Regarding neighbours, India needs to be worried as Maldives has already moved in the lap of China, and Nepal has also shown red flag as the communist Government led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' has moved closer to China. Modi will govern India for the next five years with a relatively weakened position but he has shown resolve to carry on economic reforms to make India a world power. In this backdrop, the Opposition is expected to play a constructive role in the interest of people of the country.

(The writer is a political analyst and senior journalist based in Shimla; views are personal.)

# G7 summit opens with deal to use Russian assets for Ukraine

AP ■ BORGIO EGNAZIA

A Group of Seven summit opened on Thursday with agreement reached on a US proposal to back a USD 50 billion loan to Ukraine using frozen Russian assets as collateral, giving Kyiv a strong show of support even as Europe's political chessboard shifts to the right.

Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni welcomed the heads of state of the G7 leading industrialised nations to a luxury resort in southern Italy, saying she wanted the message of the meeting to be one of dialogue with the global south and unity.

She likened the G7 to the ancient olive trees that are a symbol of the Puglia region, "with their solid roots, and branches projected toward the future". Beyond discussions on Ukraine, the war in Gaza and China's industrial policy, Pope Francis will become the first pope to address a G7 summit, adding a dash of celebrity and moral authority to the annual gathering. He'll be speaking on Friday about the promises and perils of artificial intelligence, but is expected to also renew his appeal for a peaceful end to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza.

The G7 includes Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States. Italy, which is hosting the summit, has invited several African leaders — Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, Kenyan President William Ruto and Tunisian President Kais Saied — to press Meloni's development and migration initiatives on the continent.

Other guests include Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, fresh off his own election, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

With Biden, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and now

French President Emmanuel Macron facing elections in the coming months, pressure was on the G7 to get done what it can while the status quo lasts. Frozen Russian assets to support Ukraine The US proposal involves engineering a USD 50 billion loan to help Ukraine in its fight against Russia that would use interest earned on profits from Russia's frozen central bank assets, most of them held in the European Union, as collateral.

A French official, briefing reporters on Wednesday, said a political decision by the leaders had been reached but that technical and legal details of the mechanism to tap into the assets still had to be worked out. The issue is complicated because if the Russian assets one day are unfrozen — say if the war ends — then the windfall profits will no longer be able to be used to pay off the loan, requiring a burden-sharing arrangement with other countries.

Zelenskyy listed the asset deal as one of many arrangements he hoped to see finalised during the summit, including a bilateral security agreement with the US.

"I am grateful to our partners for their belief in us and our victory," he said in a post on social media platform X.

Sunak, for his part, announced up to 242 million pounds (286 million euros or USD 310 million) in nonmilitary aid to Ukraine and a new round of sanctions against suppliers of munitions and other aid to Russia's military located in China, Israel, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey.

Washington also sent strong signals of support, with widened sanctions against Russia to target Chinese companies that are helping its war machine.

**EUROPE'S NEW POLITICAL CHESSBOARD**

Meloni goes into the meeting fortified at home and abroad after her far-right party had an even stronger showing in the

European Parliament election than in the national general election in 2022 that made her Italy's first female premier. Known for its revolving-door governments, Italy is now in the unusual position of being the most stable power in the EU.

The leaders of the G7's two other EU members, Germany and France, didn't fare nearly as well, rattled after hard-right parties made strong showings in the vote. Macron called a snap election and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz saw his Social Democrats finish behind mainstream conservatives and the far-right Alternative for Germany.

As a result, Meloni is likely to be able to steer the three-day meeting to her key priority items as she further cements her role on the world stage, analysts said. One sign of her flexed far-right muscles: Meloni's office denied media reports that Italy was trying to water down language about access to abortion in the final communiqué.

A French official, speaking anonymously in line with Macron's office's customary practices, said there were diverging views with Italian negotiators on some topics, including on sexual and reproductive health and vaccines.

Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani confirmed abortion was being addressed, but said discussions were continuing.

"While it's unlikely the recent results will radically shift the focus of the upcoming G7 summit, this electoral win offers Premier Meloni additional leverage to frame this as an essentially Mediterranean Summit," said Nick O'Connell, deputy director of the Atlantic Council. That includes pushing her migration agenda as Meloni seeks to leverage her program for a nonexploitative relationship with Africa to boost development while curbing illegal migration to Europe.

The pope and artificial intelligence

Pope Francis has called for an international treaty to ensure AI is developed and used ethically, acknowledging the promise it offers but emphasising the grave and existential threats it poses.

He'll bring that campaign to the world's industrialised countries as wars are raging across multiple fronts. One of his greatest concerns has been on the use of AI in the armaments sector. But Francis is also concerned about what AI means for the poorest and weakest in daily life: technology that could determine the reliability of an applicant for a mortgage, the right of a migrant to receive political asylum or the chance of reoffending by someone previously convicted of a crime.

It's happening here?

The G7 summit is taking place in a sprawling luxury resort that's something of a theater set, a faux town made to resemble one of Puglia's medieval white-stone hamlets but that actually only dates from 2010.

Located next to an actual archaeological park, Borgo Egnazia features narrow streets, villas, restaurants and a town square complete with a clock-tower. A favourite of celebrities, it was sealed off to outsiders for the duration of the summit.

No such five-star accommodations await the 2,000-plus police and Carabinieri forces who have been brought in to provide security. Authorities on Wednesday sequestered the decommissioned cruise ship that had been housing them in Brindisi's port, after the police union complained about unacceptable hygienic conditions on board.

As with any G7, an assortment of anti-global, anti-war and climate activists are staging protests around the summit venue, but far from where the leaders are meeting. One group is staging a "dinner for the poor" on Friday night calling for "peace, the rights of peoples and against the Big 7 who claim to decide the destiny of the world and our planet".



From left: European Council President Charles Michel, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, French president Emmanuel Macron, Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni, U.S. President Joe Biden, Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen pose for a family photo at a G7 world leaders summit at Borgo Egnazia, southern Italy, Thursday. AP/PTI

## Kuwait vows to promptly investigate fire incident

AP ■ DUBAI/ KUWAIT CITY

Kuwait Thursday said authorities have identified the bodies of 45 Indians and three Filipino nationals killed in the tragic fire incident in a building housing foreign workers as the Gulf Kingdom vowed to promptly investigate the incident and assured full support in repatriating the mortal remains of the victims.

At least 49 foreign workers were killed and 50 others injured in the fire on Wednesday at the seven-storey building where 196 migrant workers were staying in the southern city of Mangaf.

Sheikh Fahad Al-Yousuf Al-Sabah, serving as the First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Interior, and Minister of Defence, said that authorities have identified 48 bodies, among which 45 are of Indians and three are of Filipino nationality, English language daily Arab Times reported.

The efforts are still underway to determine the identity of one remaining body, said the first deputy prime minister. Kuwaiti authorities are conducting DNA tests on the

bodies of those killed in the devastating fire incident in southern Kuwait's Mangaf area and an Indian Air Force aircraft is on standby to bring back the mortal remains of Indians killed in the incident, officials said in New Delhi on Thursday.

Minister of State for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh, who reached Kuwait to oversee assistance to Indians injured in the fire and to ensure early repatriation of mortal remains of those killed, met Kuwait's Foreign Minister Abdullah Ali Al-Yahya who assured full support and vowed to promptly investigate the tragedy.

Singh also met some of the Indians injured in the massive fire and assured them all support from the Indian government.

Later, he called on First Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Fahad, who conveyed condolences on behalf of the Emir and his instructions to ensure all necessary assistance and support.

Singh conveyed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's greetings to the Emir and thanked the deputy prime

minister and the leadership of Kuwait for pro-active facilitation being provided by Kuwaiti authorities, the Indian mission said.

Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber al-Sabah has issued directives for the distribution of financial assistance to the families of the deceased, Sheikh Fahad said, without mentioning the quantum of the compensation. Additionally, the Emir has ordered the preparation of military aircraft to repatriate the bodies of deceased Indians back to their homeland.

Sheikh Fahad is heading an overall inspection campaign on illegal properties in many areas in Kuwait on Thursday. The minister, accompanied by the Minister of Public Works and Minister of Municipality Dr. Nora Al-Mashaan began their inspection campaign in Al-Mangaf, Al-Mahboulah, Khaitan, and Jileeb Al-Shuyoukh, the paper said.

The Interior Ministry, Kuwait Municipality, Kuwait Fire Force, Ministry of Electricity and Water and Public Authority for Manpower took part in the campaign.

## Top EU court fines Hungary \$216 mn for flouting asylum law

AP ■ BRUSSELS

The European Union's top court ordered Hungary to pay a fine of 200 million euros (USD 216 million) on Thursday for persistently breaking the bloc's asylum rules despite a previous European Court of Justice ruling, plus an additional 1 million euros for every day it fails to comply going forward.

Hungary had not implemented a 2020 ruling from top EU judges in Luxembourg, the ECJ wrote in a press release.

"That failure, which consists in deliberately avoiding the application of a common EU policy as a whole, constitutes an unprecedented and extremely serious infringement of EU law."

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán slammed the ruling as "outrageous and unacceptable."

"It seems that illegal migrants are more important to the Brussels bureaucrats than their own European citizens," he wrote on the social media platform X.

Hungary's anti-immigrant gov-

ernment has taken a hard line on people entering the country since well over 1 million people entered Europe in 2015, most of them fleeing conflict in Syria.

The case concerns changes Hungary made to its asylum system in the wake of that crisis, when some 400,000 people passed through Hungary on their way to Western Europe. Hungary built fences protected by razor wire on its southern borders with Serbia and Croatia and a pair of transit zones for holding asylum seekers on its border with Serbia. Those transit zones have since closed.

The measures were part of Orbán's increasingly strict anti-immigration policies and the extreme minimisation of Hungary's asylum system.

Back in 2020, the ECJ found that Budapest's policies had restricted access to international protection, unlawfully detained asylum applicants and failed to observe their right to stay in Hungary while their application went through the full due process, the court recalled on Thursday.

## Starmer vows to end era of 'gestures and gimmicks' if he wins power

AP ■ MANCHESTER

The left-of-centre politician aiming to become Britain's prime minister in three weeks' time said on Thursday he will lead a government that's both "pro-business and pro-worker" and restore stability after years of economic and political turmoil.

Labour Party leader Keir Starmer said that if he's elected on July 4, he will end the "desperate era of gestures and gimmicks" of the Conservative Party's turbulent tenure.

Launching Labour's election manifesto in the northwest England city of Manchester, Starmer said a Labour government would "stop the chaos, turn the page and start to rebuild our country."

Next month British voters will elect lawmakers to fill all 650 seats in the House of Commons, and the leader of the party that can command a majority — either alone or in coalition — will become prime minister. Labour currently has a double-digit lead in opinion polls over Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's governing Conservatives, who have been in power for 14 years

under five different prime ministers.

The Conservatives jettisoned two prime ministers without an election in quick succession in 2022: first Boris Johnson, felled by scandals, then Liz Truss, who rocked the economy with drastic tax-slashing plans and lasted just seven weeks in office.

Starmer, a former chief prosecutor who is widely seen as competent but dull, is trying to turn his stolid image into an asset. His core message is that he has transformed Labour from its high-taxed, big-spending days under former leader Jeremy Corbyn into a party of the stable centre.

Starmer said his platform was "a manifesto for wealth creation", and acknowledged that a Labour government would face "hard choices" about public spending. "We cannot play fast and loose with the public finances," he said. He said he rejected the idea that "the only levers are tax and spend", and would get the economy expanding after years of sluggish growth. Starmer's cautious economic approach dismays some in his party, who want bolder change, but has

won the support of many business leaders.

Starmer called the party's platform a manifesto for "wealth creation", and its ambitious goals were largely long-term ones: establishing a new industrial policy, developing a 10-year infrastructure strategy, building 1.5 million new homes.

Labour pledged to improve ties with Britain's former partners in the European Union, but ruled out a return to the bloc's frictionless single market and customs union.

The plan's spending commitments were modest. The manifesto forecasts that taxes will rise by 7.4 billion pounds (USD 9.25 billion) by 2028-29, through measures including by closing loopholes related to the recent abolition of the "non-domiciled" tax status, which has allowed some wealthy individuals to avoid paying UK taxes.

The party is also planning to extend a windfall tax on energy companies. Starmer said personal taxes would not rise under a Labour government, but that did not stop the Conservatives casting Labour as the high-tax party.

## In initial victory for Argentine Pres Milei, Senate gives overall approval to key reform bills

AP ■ BUENOS AIRES

Argentina's Senate has approved key state overhaul and tax bills proposed by President Javier Milei, delivering an initial legislative victory to the libertarian leader in his efforts to deliver on his promises of radical change.

Senators voted 37 to 36 late Wednesday to give their overall approval to the overhaul bill after 11 hours of heated debate as protesters urging lawmakers to reject Milei's harsh austerity clashed with police outside Congress. The lawmakers still must approve individual measures in an article-by-article vote that will stretch throughout the night.

In a reflection of the fierce backlash to the legislation and deep polarisation gripping Argentina's Congress, Vice President and head of the Senate Victoria Villarruel cast the tiebreaking vote in favour



Police fire tear gas at anti-government protesters outside Congress, where lawmakers debate a reform bill promoted by Argentine President Javier Milei in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Wednesday. AP/PTI

of Milei's agenda.

The legislation delegates broad powers to the president in energy, pensions, security and other areas and includes several measures seen as controversial, including a generous incentive scheme for foreign

investors, tax amnesty for those with undeclared assets and plans to privatise some of Argentina's state-owned firms.

If the Senate approves the articles with modifications, the lower house still has to okay them before Milei can claim

passing his first law since entering office last December.

As Senators pored over the bills, protesters in downtown Buenos Aires hurled sticks, stones and Molotov cocktails at police who fired water cannons and tear gas to disperse the crowds.

The fiery right-wing economist rose to power on promises he would resolve Argentina's worst economic crisis in two decades, with annual inflation climbing toward 300 per cent and a recession deepening.

But his political party of relative novices holds just a tiny minority of seats in Congress and he has struggled to strike deals with the opposition.

Senators approved two bills, a tax package that lowers the income tax threshold and a 238-article state reform bill that passed the lower house of Congress in late April after weeks of negotiations.

## Don't let difference become a chasm, Chinese Premier warns NZ as it mulls joining AUKUS

AP ■ BEIJING/ WELLINGTON

Chinese Premier Li Qiang, who is visiting New Zealand amid the country's plan to join the AUKUS alliance, has warned that both countries must stop their differences from becoming a "chasm" between them.

AUKUS, comprising Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, a trilateral security alliance is intended to strengthen the ability of each government to support security and defence interests, building on longstanding and ongoing bilateral ties by promoting deeper information sharing and technology sharing and fostering the integration of security and defence-related science, technology, industrial bases and supply chains.

Beijing avers the partnership is aimed at containing China's

rise. It is "natural" that the two countries "don't always see eye-to-eye with each other on everything", Li told a joint press conference with New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon after their talks in Wellington on Thursday.

"Such differences should not become a chasm that blocks exchanges and cooperation between us," Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post quoted Li as saying.

He added the two countries should use differences to "learn from each other and grow together".

An official text of Li's speech released by the Chinese Foreign Ministry here said: "The two sides should work to remove the disturbance of non-economic factors to bilateral trade and economic relations, and provide stable expectations and a sound busi-

ness environment for the operation and development of companies". He also announced a visa-free policy for New Zealanders to visit China.

The unusually strong words from Li, 64, a close associate of Chinese President Xi Jinping, come in the backdrop of reports that New Zealand plans to join the AUKUS alliance which involves the transfer of nuclear submarine technology and the latest cutting-edge technologies, including quantum computing, artificial intelligence and hypersonic weapons. China regards both Quad, (US, India, Japan, Australia) and AUKUS as alliances aimed at containing its rise and is bitterly critical of both. Reports from Wellington quoted Luxon as saying that he discussed with Li the significant China-New Zealand economic relationship with two-

way trade in goods worth nearly USD 23.43 billion, mainly New Zealand's dairy products. Luxon said he told the Chinese premier he would have "no tolerance" for foreign interference in New Zealand's affairs.

Luxon said Li had raised concern about Wellington's possible participation in a trilateral security pact with Australia, the United States and Britain, the AP news agency reported. New Zealand is among the candidates to join Pillar 2 of an expanded AUKUS, the Post reported earlier. Launched in 2021, AUKUS has two key pillars: Pillar 1 supports Australia's acquisition of conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines, while Pillar 2 focuses on cutting-edge technologies, including quantum computing, artificial intelligence and hypersonic weapons.





# GTRI: Strategic reforms in customs duties, GST, commerce to push India's inclusive growth

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Implementation of key strategic reforms such as simplification of customs duty structure, GST, and not incentivising low value-added electric vehicles would help India ensure its sustainable development and inclusive growth, GTRI said on Thursday. Economic think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) also said that India is standing on the cusp of a transformative era and there is an urgent need for comprehensive economic reforms. "From simplifying the convoluted customs duty structure to pioneering regulatory sandboxes for cryptocurrencies, and from boosting the MSME sector through GST (Goods and Services Tax) reforms to fortifying our energy security, this agenda lays the foundation for a robust, resilient, and globally competitive India," it said. It said that the current basic customs duty structure, which affects USD 680 billion worth of imports, has not been reviewed in 20 years, leading to over 27 different duty rates and over 100 specific or mixed duty slabs. Currently, 85 per cent of customs duty revenue comes from less than 10 per cent of tariff lines (or product categories), while 60 per cent of tariff lines contribute less than 3 per cent of revenue. "With some adjustments, the average import tariff could be reduced from 18.1 per cent to below 10 per cent without



impacting important products. "Simplification is necessary to avoid global criticism, as highlighted by former US President Donald Trump calling India the tariff king," it said. The think tank suggested increasing the GST exemption limit for a firm's annual turnover from 40 lakh to 1.5 crore as this will be transformative for India's MSME sector, promoting job creation and growth. Firms with less than Rs 1.5 crore turnover make up over 80 per cent of registrations but contribute less than 7 per cent of the tax collected, it said adding a yearly turnover of 1.5 crore equals 12-13 lakh monthly turnover, translating to just Rs 1.2 lakh at a 10 per cent profit margin. "The new limit would reduce the GST system's load from 1.4 crore taxpayers to less than 23 lakh, allowing for the

introduction of invoice-matching for 100 per cent compliance, eliminating fake invoices and tax theft. Increased tax collection will offset the 7 per cent tax loss," GTRI Founder Ajay Srivastava said. It also asked the government not to incentivize low value-added Electric Vehicles (EVs). Due to restrictions from the US and EU on Chinese EVs, China is shifting its focus to Southeast Asian markets, including India. "In few years, every third EV on Indian roads, as well as numerous passenger and commercial vehicles, could be made by Chinese firms, either independently or through joint ventures with Indian companies," it said. Since current EVs rely heavily on Chinese batteries and parts, accounting for 60-90 per cent of their cost, India should avoid incentivizing low value-

added EVs," the GTRI said, adding it is crucial to balance increased EV adoption with the need to protect and develop the domestic auto industry. Further, it suggested focusing on developing capacity to produce inputs and intermediates for both chemical and fermentation-based Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs). India imports 70 per cent of its APIs and over 80 per cent of its biosimilars from China, posing a significant risk to the industry and national security. It added that simplification of e-commerce export rules will help in boosting India's exports. India has more than 20 lakh firms that produce good quality products and services but less than a lakh of these export. "Simplifying RBI, banking, Customs, GST and DGFT rules related to e-commerce will help them to start exporting Handicrafts, jewellery, ethnic wear, decorative paintings, Ayurveda and many more products," Srivastava said. He added that India relies on China for 30 per cent of its industrial product imports, with imports soaring tenfold in the past two decades. China is also the top import supplier in each of the major industrial product categories. "As Chinese firms expand their operations in Indian markets, imports are expected to rise further. This escalating dependence calls for a strategic approach to cut reliance on China," he said.

# India's consumer market represents long term structural opportunity: Chandrasekaran

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's consumer market represents a long-term structural opportunity, driven by population, a growing middle class, rapid urbanisation, increasing disposable incomes and raising aspirations, Tata Consumer Products Ltd Chairman N Chandrasekaran said on Thursday. The Tata group's FMCG arm is well positioned to capitalise on the significant opportunity, he said, while addressing the annual general meeting (AGM) of TCPL. Chandrasekaran said the India economy has been growing "very strongly" and the current momentum continues to be high. India is likely to maintain similar growth momentum in the coming years, he said, adding that the global economic landscape has been rather volatile with the geopolitics reshaping supply chains, energy security, and overall resilience. The baseline forecast for the world economy is to continue to grow over 3 per cent during 2024 and 2025. However, "India has been growing very strongly with the economic growth rate of 8.2 per cent for the fiscal 2023-2024. Looking at the future, the momentum continues to be high and India should maintain similar growth momentum in the coming years," said Chandrasekaran. Notably, India's consumer market represents a "long-term structural" opportunity, Chandrasekaran said and noted that this is driven by a



young population, a growing middle class, rapid urbanisation, increasing disposable incomes, and raising aspirations. Chandrasekaran also added that the Indian middle class is growing rapidly, which will create opportunities for the company. "India's middle class is expected to grow from about 30 per cent of the population to 50 per cent by the end of this decade. That is about an additional 300 million people who will be entering the middle class," he said. Apart from this, rapid urbanisation, increasing disposable incomes and ever increasing aspirations of consumers, all bode well for Tata Consumer Products Ltd (TCPL), which is well positioned to capitalise on the significant opportunity. Over the latest acquisition of Capital Foods and Organic India by TCPL, Chandrasekaran said, this is to expand the company's addressable market into high-growth, high-margin segments. "The company has scaled its distribution to reach 4 million retail outlets in India, which

represents a two-fold increase since 2020. The company has also focused on innovation and has replaced a 5x growth in innovation revenue since the fiscal year FY21," he said. TCPL, new innovations contributes 5 per cent to sales distribution, which is in line with the best metrics in the industry. "The company's digital transformation agenda has been progressing well," he said. On Tata Starbucks, its 50:50 JV with Starbuck, he said it has opened 95 new stores in FY24, setting a record for the highest number of stores opened in a single year since inception. "The company's international business has been progressing well," he said. In FY24, TCPL delivered revenue of Rs 15,206 crores, with a growth of 10 per cent. TCPL was formed in 2020, after merging the consumer products business of Tata Chemicals with Tata Global Beverages. It owns brands as - Tata Salt, Tata Tea, Tetley, Eight O'Clock Coffee, Good Earth Tea, and Tata Sampann. It also operates coffee chain Tata Starbucks.

# India's May Palm oil imports jump 74 per cent on rising demand

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's palm oil imports surged 74 per cent to 7,63,300 tonnes in May this year from 4,39,173 tonnes in the year-ago period, as the world's largest vegetable oil buyer stocked up the commodity to meet rising domestic demand, industry body Solvent Extractors Association (SEA) said on Thursday. The total vegetable oil imports rose to 15.29 lakh tonnes in May this year from 10.58 lakh tonnes in May 2023, it added. Palm oil constitutes a major part of imports. Crude palm oil (CPO) imports rose to 5,32,555 tonnes in May this year from 3,48,118 tonnes in the year-ago period, while RBD Palmolein imports surged to 2,25,746 tonnes from 85,205 tonnes. However, Crude Palm Kernel Oil (CPKO) imports fell to 4,999 tonnes from 5,850 tonnes a year earlier. Sunflower oil imports climbed to 4,10,727 tonnes from 2,95,206 tonnes, and soybean oil rose to 3,24,016 tonnes from 3,18,887 tonnes. For the first seven months of the 2023-24 marketing year started on November 1, Palm oil imports fell to 49.77 lakh tonnes from 53.48 lakh tonnes in the year-ago period, while soybean oil imports were down at 85.67 lakh tonnes against 90.55 lakh tonnes in the said period.

# Market share of top five cement makers to rise to 55 per cent by March 2025: ICRA

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Top five domestic cement manufacturers could expand their market share to up to 55 per cent by March 2025, through organic and inorganic expansions, leading to further consolidation, said a report from rating agency ICRA. Helped by a healthy demand prospect, large companies operating in the cement sector are looking to increase their capacity and maintain market share, it said. "ICRA estimates that the market share of the top five cement companies witnessed a steep rise to 54 per cent as of December 2023, from 45 per cent as of March 2015, and

expects it to further increase to 55 per cent by March 2025, resulting in consolidation in the cement industry," it said. While organic growth is expected to continue in the medium-term, cement companies are also preferring the inorganic route to boost capacities rapidly, leading to consolidation in the industry, it added. "Except the ACC and Ambuja acquisitions by the Adani Group, other mergers and acquisitions (M&As) were largely owing to the cash flow-starved nature of the acquired entity or the group's financial stress," it said. According to data from the Cement Manufacturers



Association, the country has installed a cement capacity of 541 Metric Tonnes (MT). The Indian cement market is led by Aditya Birla group firm UltraTech Cement Ltd, which has a consolidated capacity of 152.7 Million Tonnes Per Annum (MTPA). This is followed by Adani Group firm Adani Cement, which owns Ambuja Cement and its subsidiaries ACC Ltd, which has the capacity to produce 77.4 million tonnes of cement annually. Besides, there are other large players such as Dalmia Bharat, Shree Cements and J K Cement. According to the report, bulk of the cement produced within a region is usually consumed

internally and the excess transported to adjacent regions. "The consolidation, taking place across India, is primarily led by the eastern and the western regions. The share of the top five cement companies in the eastern and the western regions is estimated to increase to 76-79 per cent in FY2025 from 54 per cent in FY2015," it said. While the southern region is highly fragmented with only 40 per cent share held by the top five cement players in FY2015. "This may go up to 50 per cent by FY2025," the report said, adding "the northern and central regions were highly consolidated in the past (65-75

per cent in FY2015) and are expected to remain in the range of 75-85 per cent by FY2025," it said. It further added that till March 31, 2024, 947 corporate insolvency cases across the sectors were resolved under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) with an average haircut of 68 per cent. According to ICRA Vice President and Co-Group Head, Corporate Ratings Anupama Reddy said the credit profile of cement producers are likely to remain stable, driven by healthy growth in operating income, improvement in operating margins and comfortable leverage metrics.

# Fund launched to back net zero transition in emerging markets

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Brookfield Asset Management (Brookfield) and ALTERRA Management on Thursday announced the setting up of a fund to support companies' transition to a net-zero entity in emerging markets including India. Brookfield has opened the fundraising for the Catalytic Transition Fund (CTF) with anchor commitment from ALTERRA, a joint statement said. "With the urgent need to cut emissions and accelerate the climate transition, the Brookfield-managed CTF will harness a USD 1 billion commitment by ALTERRA funds (ALTERRA) to catalyze up to USD 5 billion in total capital for deployment into emerging markets," the statement said. "South and Southeast Asia represent a key focus for CTF. The fund will target large and emerging markets like India, which have clear targets and policy directives supporting the transition to a net-zero economy, strong corporate demand for decarbonization, and areas where Brookfield can leverage its platform capabilities to source and execute opportunities. The investments will also be made in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. At least 10 per cent of the Fund's total capital will be contributed by Brookfield ensuring that its interests align with

investment partners. A first close for CTF is expected by the end of 2024. It said the developing economies outside China receive less than 15 per cent of global clean energy investment, despite representing nearly one-third of global emissions and often yielding greater emissions reductions per dollar invested than in developed countries. "The first fund in the Brookfield Global Transition Fund series (BGTF I) raised a record USD 15 billion in 2022. In February 2024, the second fund in the series (BGTF II) announced a first close of USD 10 billion and is on track to be larger than its predecessor. CTF's first close is expected by the end of 2024," the statement said. Mark Carney, Chair and Head of Transition Investing at Brookfield Asset Management, said, "CTF is a private market solution to the global challenge of delivering transition investment to emerging markets. Brookfield is already a leading transition investor in these regions and has first-hand knowledge of the incredible opportunity and impact that is available in these chronically underfunded markets." Nawal Saini, Managing Director, Renewable Power & Transition, Brookfield Asset Management, said, "Emerging markets will require USD 1.6 trillion per annum to help achieve their Paris-aligned decarbonisation targets.

# Indian ship recyclers revenue seen rising 15 per cent this fiscal

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian ship recycling industry will see revenue growth of 15 per cent this fiscal after two years of decline, Crisil ratings said on Thursday. The rating agency said the growth will be supported by the increased availability of ageing vessels for recycling due to addition of new vessel capacity globally and higher competitiveness of Indian ship

recyclers compared to key rival nations - Bangladesh and Pakistan. "The Indian ship recycling industry will see revenue growth of 15 per cent this fiscal after two years of decline - 22 per cent in fiscal 2024 and 8.5 per cent in fiscal 2023," it said. According to the rating agency, the increased availability of ageing vessels will bring down input cost for ship recyclers. "This, along with higher



capacity utilization leading to better efficiency, will improve operating profitability by 75 basis points (bps) to 6.5 per cent this fiscal," it said. Crisil ratings said higher cash generation and absence of capital expenditure (capex), along with healthy balance sheets, will keep credit profiles stable for Indian ship recyclers. Indian ship recyclers are expected to grab a lion's share of the increased volume of

condemned vessels, given their higher competitiveness leading to likely volume growth of around 20-23 per cent, it said. Key competitors - Bangladesh and Pakistan, are facing a severe crisis of foreign currency availability and ship recyclers in these countries are hence taking longer to complete vessel purchases and thus owners of condemned vessels are likely to avoid these markets.

# Rupee falls 6 paise to 83.54 against US dollar in early trade

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee depreciated 6 paise to 83.54 against the US dollar on Thursday, weighed down by the broad strength of the American currency in the overseas market and elevated crude oil prices. Forex traders said the local unit also faced some resistance owing to subdued macroeconomic data on the domestic front. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.52 and lost further ground to trade at 83.54 against the greenback, registering a loss of 6 paise from its previous closing level. On Wednesday, the rupee appreciated 11 paise to close at 83.48 against the US dollar. The dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading at 104.78, higher by 0.14 per



Additionally, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), with substantial reserves of USD 651 billion, is poised to intervene to prevent significant rupee depreciation. "Given these factors, the rupee is forecasted to oscillate within a range of 82.90 to 83.70," Pabari added. On the domestic macroeconomic front, India's industrial production growth slipped to 3-month low of 5 per cent in April 2024, mainly due to poor show by the manufacturing sector, though mining and power segments performed well, according to official data. Meanwhile, retail inflation continued its downward slide to reach a one-year low of 4.75 per cent in May due to a marginal decline of prices in the food basket and remained within the Reserve Bank's comfort zone of below 6 per cent, according to government data released on Wednesday.

# India exports first batch of super sweet pineapples to UAE

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

In what could be called as a sweet and juicy milestone, India has made its debut in the premium pineapple market by exporting its first batch of high quality MD2 'Super Sweet' pineapples to the UAE, a sector traditionally dominated by Costa Rica, Thailand and the Philippines. The Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA), under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, facilitated the successful export of the first consignment of MD 2 variety pineapples to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The consignment, comprising 8.7 metric tons (650 boxes) of the MD 2 pineapples, was ceremoniously flagged off by Chairman, APEDA, Abhishek Dev, in the presence of senior officials from APEDA and the Indian Council of



Agricultural Research - Central Coastal Agricultural Research Institute (ICAR CCARI). "This marks a pivotal moment in India's agricultural export history, showcasing our ability to produce and supply premium quality pineapples to global markets," said Abhishek Dev. "The MD 2 variety is renowned for its exceptional sweetness and quality, and we are thrilled to introduce it to the UAE market," he said. The MD2 or Dinar pineapple is developed through hybridization by Del Monte scientists in Costa Rica and holds great popularity in the international market. Its superiority in terms of color,

flavor, shape, lifespan, and ripeness set it apart from other varieties. As a result, it has become the gold standard in the pineapple industry, with significant cultivation in countries like Costa Rica, the Philippines, and Thailand. An official said that ICAR CCARI provided essential technical support for post-harvest management and development of sea protocol for the MD 2 pineapple produced in the Sindhudurg district of the Konkan region in Maharashtra. A private firm successfully grew this variety on 200 acres in partnership with local farmers, ensuring optimal quality and yield. The harvested pineapples were meticulously graded, sorted, packed, and stored in Panvel, Navi Mumbai. From there, the consignment was transported to Jawaharal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT) for its onward journey to the UAE.

# Quota belongs to country, not to athlete: Bindra backs NRAI's team selection for Olympics

PTI ■ MUMBAI  
Olympics gold winner Abhinav Bindra on Thursday said promising shooter Rudranksh Patil was unfortunate to miss the flight to Paris Games, but emphasised that the quota belongs to the country and not to one athlete. Patil, who had bagged a 10m air rifle quota for the Paris Olympics, could not find a place in the 15-member Indian squad for the quadrennial extravaganza after finishing behind Sandeep Singh and Arjun Babuta in the selection trials organised by the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI). As per the Olympic guidelines, a country can only send top two shooters in one event from trials to the Games. "See, it's not a call. It's a matter of selection. There's a due process laid out and they followed the process," Bindra

told the media here on the sidelines of the IISM Convocation Ceremony 2024. "You'll ask the same question in case the process was not followed. But a fair process was put out for everybody, and it was followed," Bindra added. Bindra further explained his point. "Well, that is the process laid down for the country. Many countries follow that process. It's not just that India is following that process. The quota doesn't belong to an athlete per se. It belongs to the country and a process was put out well in advance," he said. Bindra backed the method which NRAI followed and said a clear system should be followed. "I think credit the Federation for following the process. I think, as athletes, what do we need? We need a clear system. We need a clear process and we need that clear system and policies followed," he said. "That is what has been done, which I think is fair. You know,

when you (an athlete) make (it to the Olympics), when (another) athlete doesn't make it, there will be a few who will be disappointed. It is natural. It is fair. It is a normal thing," he added. Bindra said he was not aware if Patil had reached out to the Federation. The 2022 Asian Games gold medallist has written to NRAI to take his past performances into consideration for selection. "I am not aware of all of this. I just saw a press release of the team being announced so I have no idea of who he's in talks with," he said. "Of course, I feel bad for Rudranksh, who is a good athlete and who's been doing consistently well. But he's young and I'm sure that there will be many more opportunities for him in the future," Bindra said. Bindra admitted that hopes will be high on the Indian shooting contingent in Paris after having notched up seven medals - India's best-ever tally



- at the Tokyo Olympics. "I think (it is) the largest ever (medal haul) in history and I think I'm very positive that we'll do well. Of course, I know very well what your next question is going to be, which is we didn't do too well in Tokyo, but I'm positive of a good performance by our athletes," he said. "There are so many athletes who have qualified with strong performances. They've undergone a rigorous domestic

selection process as well this time. So, I'm quite hopeful and positive that we'll come back with some good results in Paris," he noted. "We won seven (medals) in Tokyo without shooting, firing at all. So, if we come close, or if we, it is realistic to expect close to 10, which will put us in double digits so I'm hopeful of that," he continued. Bindra, however, did not pick any favourite to bring a medal. "I don't want to discuss any particular athlete. But I think all of them who have made the team have the potential to go and do well," he said. "Of course, Manu (Bhaker) has done well. She's experienced. She has experience of competing in Tokyo, and now I think she's competing in three odd events in Paris so I wish her well. "I wish her all the best and hope for good results from her, but also from the rest," he said. Bindra did not read too much into theories like facing mental

blocks on a big occasion. "Well, the event has not happened, so where is the mental block? Let's give them a chance at least," he said. The first Indian to have won an individual Olympics gold medal, Bindra offered a word of advice for star javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra, a gold winner from Tokyo. "It's important and all athletes know, and Neeraj would know for sure, in sport yesterday never counts - you're only as good as what you're on the present day," he said. "The only advice to him would be to focus on his process, to remain in the present and to keep all distractions at bay because obviously with the profile that he enjoys, there will be a lot of eyeballs on him," Bindra said. "There will be a lot of expectations on him. But I think it is for him to put that aside and remain focused on doing what he does so well," said Bindra, adding that he would be travelling to Paris.



# Generational talent Kennedy Blades, 20, seeks Olympic gold in women wrestling

## UEFA promises more clarity for fans and players on refereeing decisions at Euro 2024

AP ■ MUNICH  
Clarity for players and spectators and zero tolerance for serious foul play and dissent - that's what referees have been tasked with at the European Championship. UEFA had already announced last month that it would do more to explain decisions to teams, requiring in turn that only captains can approach the referees to discuss them. And that was emphasized on Wednesday at a media briefing on refereeing guidelines for Euro 2024 that took place at Munich's Allianz Arena, two days before host nation Germany kicks off the tournament in the same venue against Scotland. "Only the captain will approach the referee, the other players they have to think about (playing). That's it, finish," UEFA managing director for refereeing Roberto Rosetti said. UEFA has promised that the referees will attempt to give the captains an explanation of key incidents during the match, including what was discussed with VAR. Any teammate ignoring his captain's role and approaching the referee showing any sign of disrespect or dissent will receive a yellow card. Fans, meanwhile, will also get a better understanding of VAR decisions as they will be

broadcast on the giant screens in stadiums. "This is something new. I think it's very, very, very interesting," Rosetti said. "So we want to give, after the opinion of VAR, a technical explanation for the public. In live, simultaneously, the UEFA expert will prepare the explanation, a technical explanation about what happened in the specific situation. "For example, on-field review, the referee awards a penalty for handball... technical explanation: Germany number nine touch the ball with his left arm which was in an unnatural position above the shoulder and making his body bigger." Rosetti has met with all the teams participating at Euro 2024 and their coaches to present the refereeing guidelines for the tournament, including hammering home that any dangerous tackles will be severely punished. "One of the most important priority in refereeing guidelines is to protect the players," Rosetti said. "To protect the image of the game, but in particular to protect the safety of the main actors of the games. "We showed them a couple of clips that we are asking to the referees to be very strong in these kind of situations," he added. "So for such situations we asked to the referees to be zero tolerant because this is something that we cannot accept.

AP ■ OKLAHOMA CITY (USA)  
Kennedy Blades initially struggled to fully appreciate her biggest moment on the mat. Her mind already was on Olympic gold. Blades, just 20 years old, defeated six-time world champion and Tokyo Olympics silver medalist Adeline Gray at the U.S. Olympic Wrestling Trials in April to qualify for the Paris Games in the 76-kilogram class. Blades barely cracked a smile, already thinking ahead to possibly becoming the third American woman to win an Olympic wrestling gold. "I felt there's something more that I wanted," she said. "And I think I've just manipulated my mind to going for gold, bringing home a gold medal from the Olympics. So that (beating Gray) was just the first step." Women's wrestling made it's Olympic debut in 2004, but the U.S. Didn't earn its first gold until Helen Maroulis won at 53 kg in 2016. Tamyra Mensah-Stock followed by winning 68 kg at Tokyo 2020. Blades, who dominates at nearly 6-feet tall in a sport that often favors stockier athletes, could be the next great star for a country where girls

wrestling is the fastest-growing high school sport. Blades solidified herself as a Paris favorite with the win over Gray, and U.S. Women's coach Terry Steiner believes she has the ability and the confidence to win it all. "We have a generational talent that we just don't see very often," Steiner said. "But it's one thing having that talent and another thing being ready for the stage that she's on. She's just shown us the past few years that she's ready to be on that stage." Blades has been a standout for years. In 2016, the Chicago native became the first Illinois girl to win an Illinois Kids Wrestling Federation championship against boys. She lost to Mensah-Stock in the finals of the Tokyo Olympic Trials in 2021 as a 17-year-old, then won a junior world championship later that year. She said Mensah-Stock overpowered her at the trials, but it was a learning experience that helped set her course for Paris. "It made me feel really good because I was right there," she said. "I did get some shots on her, so my technique and everything's right there, I think I just needed to mature a little bit.



These last three years, I've been focusing on just maturing, wrestling smart, not letting the girls get in my head." As Blades has matured, she has learned how to use her exceptional quickness and reach. Her height makes her difficult to prepare for. Blades said she can surprise opponents with holds in positions where her opponents normally think they're safe. Blades, who is Afro-Latina, said she was happy when Mensah-Stock

became the first Black woman to win a wrestling gold medal. Blades said she is proud to represent several groups, including women and young people - but she wants to inspire all. She noted the importance of representation while telling the story of a young girl who noticed they looked alike and had the same kind of hair. The girl said she wants to be just like Blades and looks forward to watching her in Paris. "It gave me butterflies," Blades said. Steiner said another young person, Amit Elor, has helped Blades reach this point. Elor, the U.S. Olympic qualifier at 68 kg, won world titles in 2022 and 2023. Like Blades, Elor is just 20 years old. Blades said her younger sister, Korina, has also helped her prepare. Korina is 10 months younger and was an under-15 world champion in 2019 and a junior world bronze medalist in 2021. Injuries kept her out of the Olympic trials. "It's always nice because having each other, we kind of make each other a better version by competing," Kennedy Blades said. "But we compete in the best way as far as just to help each other grow.

# Lionel Messi says Inter Miami will be my last club

AP ■ ATLANTA (USA)  
Lionel Messi says Inter Miami will be "my last club." The 36-year-old World Cup champion isn't thinking about joining an Argentine club to write the last chapter of playing career. "I think Inter Miami is going to be my last club. Today I think it is going to be my last club," the Argentina captain said in an interview with ESPN. Messi is preparing with his national team to compete in the Copa America in the United States. Argentina is the defending champion. The former Barcelona star has nothing left to prove in the game and filled the only significant unchecked box on his resume by leading Argentina to the World Cup title in Qatar in 2022. He has won a record eight Ballon d'Or awards and left European football last year to



join the MLS club. Messi's contract with Inter Miami is set to expire at the end of the 2025 season. "It was a difficult step to leave Europe to come here," he said. "Having become a world champion helped a lot, and also to see things differently. But I don't think about it. I try

to enjoy. That's why I enjoy everything much more, because I am aware that there is less and less to go and I have a good time." Many Argentine fans hoped Messi would close his career with Newell's Old Boys, the club where he began his training as a child in his native city of Rosario. The star said he's trying to enjoy the final stretch of his career to the fullest. "I have a good time at the club, I am lucky enough to have teammates and friends (Luis Suárez, Sergio Busquets and Jordi Alba, all former Barcelona players) by my side," he said. "I had a good time in the national team, where I have teammates and friends too. "I enjoy the little details that I know that when I don't play anymore, I'm going to miss," he added. "My whole life I did this. I love playing ball and I enjoy training, day-to-day life and match days.

# New Sports Minister Mandaviya meets IOA chief Usha; takes stock of Olympic preparations

PTI ■ NEW DELHI  
Newly-appointed Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya on Thursday took stock of India's Olympic preparations during a meeting with IOA President P T Usha here. Mandaviya took charge of the ministry on Tuesday after the new NDA government, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was sworn to office on June 9. Mandaviya replaced Anurag Thakur in the position. During the over one hour long meeting, which was also attended by new Minister of State for Sports, Raksha Khadse, Sports Secretary Sujata Chaturvedi, and Sports Authority of India Director General Sandip Pradhan among others, Mandaviya was briefed about country's preparations for Paris Games. "I today visited the IOA officials for the first time where they briefed me about India's



preparation for Paris Olympics. The government is committed to extend all possible support," Mandaviya said in a brief address to the media. Usha said the interaction with the minister went well but did not divulge the details. "The Sports Minister today visited IOA along with the Minister of State for Sports and I am so happy that they wanted to know about IOA and about Paris preparations. "We have done everything good this time and I have briefed him. We will be in contact every week and I hope that this is good for our Olympic athletes," she said. Usha hoped, that like the Tokyo Games, India's contingent would be in excess of 100 even this time. "We have done everything for sports persons. Whatever the players have wanted, we have done this time. So we are expecting more medals than Tokyo. I don't want to put any number and give tension to the players. "Already, 97 athletes have qualified and we are expecting around 115 to 120 athletes in all to represent India in Paris Olympics," the legendary athlete added. The Paris Olympics will be held from July 26 to August 11 this year.



# Diksha to lead strong Indian challenge in Italian Open golf

PTI ■ ROME  
Experienced Diksha Dagar will look to leave behind a rare missed cut, when she leads a strong five-member Indian contingent at the 2024 Ladies Italian Open starting here tomorrow. Diksha will return to action here, after a rare missed cut last week. The Indian star, who is headed to the Olympic Games in Paris, is just outside the Top-10 on the Ladies Order of Merit, where she was third last year. Diksha is one of the five Indians in the field this week, with rookie Pranavi Urs, experienced Tvesa Malik, Vani Kapoor and Ridhima Dilawari also teeing up at the Golf Nazionale, which is hosting the event for the first time. Diksha had nine Top-10s last year including a win in the Czech Ladies Open and a third place finish at the Hero Women's Indian Open. This year she has had two Top-10 finishes, including a third place at Joburg Open. She will tee off in the afternoon session, as will Tvesa, who this

year achieved her first international win on the Sunshine Tour in South Africa, and had her first Top-10 on the LET since 2021. In 2021, Tvesa had five tops, including T-10 at the Italian Open. Also teeing off in the afternoon will be Ridhima, while Pranavi and Vani will play in the morning session. While Diksha is currently 11th on the LET Order of Merit, Pranavi, with three Top-10s this season, is 13th. Her best came in her last start, the Dormy Open in Helsingborg, where finished tied third, after being in lead for a while. Among the locals looking for a win will be Alessandra Fanali, 24, who is hoping to become the first Italian player to lift the famous trophy. She finished runner-up as an amateur last time when she was just out of college. Now she is the highest ranked Italian women's player. This year she was runner-up in the season-opening Magical Kenya Ladies Open before finishing T-14 in the Aramco Saudi Ladies International. She had a back injury after that, but is now ready to go.

