

4 % DA hike for Central govt staff

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

The Union Cabinet on Friday increased the dearness allowance and dearness relief by 4 per cent to 42 per cent to benefit 47.58 lakh central government employees and 69.76 lakh pensioners.

The combined impact on the exchequer on account of both Dearness Allowance and Dearness Relief will be Rs 12,815.60 crore per annum, I&B Minister Anurag Thakur told reporters after the meeting of Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA).

The release of the additional instalment of dearness allowance to employees and dearness relief to pensioners will be effective from January 01, 2023. **PTI**

Another 'defamation'; Shekhawat vs Gehlot

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

Delhi court on Friday directed the city police to probe the criminal defamation complaint filed by Union Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat against Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot over his remarks on the alleged Sanjivani co-operative scam.

Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Harjeet Singh Jaspal directed the Joint Commissioner of Police concerned to "investigate the matter either himself or through an officer not below the rank of an Inspector" and file the investigation report on April 25.

"...keeping in mind the facts and circumstances and also keeping in mind the legislative mandate...(considering the fact that the accused is residing outside the local jurisdiction of this court), this court directs an investigation into the matter, through Delhi Police. Keeping in mind the sensitivity of the matter, it is directed that the Joint Commissioner concerned shall monitor the investigation," the magistrate said. **PTI**

Rahul Gandhi disqualified as MP, Cong stunned

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

Former Congress president Rahul Gandhi was on Friday disqualified from Lok Sabha following his conviction by a Surat court in a 2019 criminal defamation case, an action the party termed an attempt to "silence" his voice as it vowed to fight the battle legally and politically.

The BJP dismissed the charges and termed the disqualification "lawful".

The disqualification, which will bar Gandhi from contesting polls for eight years unless stayed by a higher court, saw a shift in the dynamics of Opposition ranks with Trinamool Congress and Aam Aadmi Party also expressing strong support for the embattled leader, along with several other Opposition parties.

Announcing his disqualification, the Lok Sabha Secretariat in a notification said that it was effective from March 23, the day of his conviction. "Consequent upon his conviction by the Court of Chief Judicial Magistrate, Surat...Rahul Gandhi,



Member of Lok Sabha representing the Wayanad Parliamentary Constituency of Kerala stands disqualified from the membership of Lok Sabha from the date of his conviction i.e. 23 March, 2023," the notification read.

Hours before the notification was issued, Gandhi attended Lok Sabha proceedings in the morning session. Before the proceedings commenced, he also participated in a meeting of party MPs in the Parliament complex.

Reacting to Gandhi's disqualification, the Congress said it was "a black day for Indian democracy" and asserted that the battle will be fought both "legally and politically".

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said the BJP made all efforts to get him disqualified as he was speaking the truth. "He has been removed from the House for speaking the truth, fighting for the Constitution and for people's rights," Kharge alleged. **PTI**

Top brass in huddles

NEW DELHI: The Congress' top brass, including party chief Mallikarjun Kharge and former AICC chief Sonia Gandhi, met on Friday to deliberate on the party's strategy going forward after Rahul Gandhi's disqualification from Lok Sabha.

A meeting was already scheduled for Friday evening but after Rahul Gandhi's conviction, top leaders assembled at 6 pm at the party headquarters with his disqualification being top of the agenda.

Besides Kharge and Sonia Gandhi, Congress general secretaries Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, K C Venugopal, Jairam Ramesh, Rajiv Shukla and Tariq Anwar, senior leaders P Chidambaram, Anand Sharma, Ambika Soni, Mukul Wasnik, Salman Khurshid and Pawan Kumar Bansal, among others, were also present at the meeting.

Sources said Rahul Gandhi's disqualification and party's strategy and plans for agitations were top of the agenda at the meeting. **PTI**

Mere membership of banned outfit an offence: SC

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

In a significant verdict having wider ramifications, the Supreme Court on Friday held that mere membership of a banned organisation is an offence liable to be punished with imprisonment under provisions of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

The top court said its three verdicts of 2011 pronounced by two-judge benches, which held that mere membership of a banned organisation will not incriminate a person unless he resorts to violence or incites people to violence

and does an act intended to create disorder or disturbance of public peace by resorting to violence, "is not a good law".

It restored Section 3(5) of the Terrorists and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, 1987 and Section 10(a)(i) of the UAPA, 1967, which made the membership of a banned outfit an offence, liable to be punished with two years imprisonment along with fine.

A bench of Justice M R Shah, Justice C T Ravikumar and Justice Sanjay Karol allowed the petitions filed by the Centre and the Assam government seeking a

review of the three 2011 verdicts of the apex court on the ground that it will impact the sovereignty and integrity of the country.

The bench held that "when an association is declared unlawful by notification issued under Section 3 which has become effective of sub-section 3 of that Section, a person who is and continues to be a member of such association is liable to be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years, and shall also be liable to fine under Section 10(a)(i) of the UAPA, 1967". **PTI**

Garcetti sworn as new US ambassador to India

WASHINGTON, MAR 24

Eric Garcetti, the former Mayor of Los Angeles, was officially sworn in as the US Ambassador to India on Friday by Vice President Kamala Harris during a ceremonial event here.

Earlier, the US Senate confirmed Garcetti's nomination, ending a protracted hiatus of over two years to fill the key diplomatic position. "I can't wait to serve," Garcetti said, when asked about his new diplomatic assignment. **PTI**

'Torn' ordinance haunts Rahul after 10 years

EXPRESS INDIA NEWS NETWORK
CHANDIGARH, MARCH 24

About ten years ago, in 2013 the then Information and Broadcasting Minister Manish Tewari was addressing a press conference in Shastri Bhawan, defending an ordinance that the UPA-II government had brought in, which would have allowed convicted MPs and MLAs to retain their position in the House for 3 months after their sentence.

Right next in the vicinity, in the Press Club of India, Rahul Gandhi, who at that time was the party vice president was

addressing another press conference saying the ordinance was "nonsense" and he tore it off, literally. Tewari, when told that Gandhi had just torn that ordinance apart while he was defending it, dodged the issue in his characteristic style. But his government could not dodge it, the way he did. The UPA government and the Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, who was away in the US, were badly embarrassed running for cover.

And the same ordinance has started haunting the same Rahul Gandhi after ten years. What is interesting is that when the Supreme Court announced the 2013

RAHUL GANDHI STRONGLY OPPOSED THE ORDINANCE OF THE UPA GOVERNMENT AND EVEN TORE A COPY OF THE ORDINANCE IN PUBLIC AT THE TIME

order on the disqualification of politicians over criminal cases, the UPA government had suggested an ordinance that allowed convicted MPs and MLAs to retain their position in the House for 3 months after

their sentence. In that period, they could appeal to higher courts for a stay order on their conviction, and retain their seat in the House.

However, Rahul Gandhi strongly opposed this ordinance of the UPA government and even tore a copy of the ordinance in public at the time. Other Opposition parties including the BJP were also against this suggestion as it alleged that this was a way of protecting convicted legislators. Opposition parties also accused the Congress of attempting to protect its ally Lalu Prasad Yadav who would be disqualified if found guilty in a fodder scam

case in which he later was convicted. He eventually was disqualified.

Gandhi had stated that the ordinance was "complete nonsense" and should be "torn and thrown out". Due to this internal conflict in the views of the Congress, the UPA government had to rescind the ordinance. It is this decision, which has turned the odds against Rahul Gandhi 10 years later as now, he stands disqualified as the Lok Sabha member after having been convicted and sentenced to two years imprisonment. His arrest has however been stayed for a month to provide him time to appeal against it.

PUNJAB

Won't let Punjab become Afghanistan: CM

CHANDIGARH, MARCH 24

Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Friday said that some people were trying to divide the state on sectarian lines but his government was duty-bound to make Punjab a progressive, peaceful and prosperous state by foiling the nefarious designs of the anti-Punjab forces.

"We have to make Punjab, Punjab again, not Afghanistan," he said. He said his government will maintain peace, amity and communal harmony in Punjab at all costs, adding that the youth will not be allowed to "become raw material for those running factories in the name of religion".

His remarks have come amid a police crackdown on pro-Khalistan preacher Amritpal Singh and his outfit 'Waris Punjab De'. The radical preacher is on the run and efforts are on to nab him.

A number of his associates have been arrested or detained and the stringent



National Security Act has been slapped against some of them, including Amritpal Singh. The police crackdown was initiated after Amritpal Singh and his supporters stormed the Ajnala police station near Amritsar wielding swords and weapons to secure the release of one of his associates.

Without taking any names, Mann said in an emotional appeal to people that it's easy to ask children of strangers to take up arms or give up their life, but when those people find themselves on the receiving end they face harsh realities.

The chief minister said he has got

phone calls from a cross-section of people, including mothers, who told him that they want to see their children receive a good education and go on to occupy top posts. Mann thanked people for reposing faith in him and said he will uphold the faith.

According to an official statement, Mann also said that Punjabis should not get swayed by the ideas of such self-proclaimed preachers who have no emotional bonding with the state and its people. Mann said the sole motive of such people was to disturb the hard-earned peace of the state. He said that these people are highly mistaken to think that they can divide people on communal lines.

He said this is the era of education and people with knowledge and expertise are recognised due to which the state government is making strenuous efforts to promote education in Punjab. He said he wants to see books, laptops, and medals in the hands of youth. **PTI**

BSF recovers 5 Glock pistols, 90 bullets dropped by Pak drone

GURDASPUR, MARCH 24

Five Austria-made Glock pistols and more than 90 rounds of different calibre bullets dropped by a Pakistani drone were recovered by the Border Security Force (BSF) on Friday from along the International Border in Punjab, officials said.

The dropping of the weapons and ammunition took place in Metla area of Gurdaspur sector around 2:30 am.

The "infiltrating rogue" drone was fired upon by our troops and later during search of the area a packet was

recovered from the field, a BSF spokesperson said.

Officials said the cache contained five Glock pistols, ten magazines and 91 rounds. Security agencies suspect the consignment was meant for Khalistani separatist groups in the border state.

The Glock is a sophisticated semi-automatic pistol that is used by counter-terrorist forces like the National Security Guard (NSG) and other commando teams. It is used for close-quarter battle scenario and VIP protection duties as it has a range of 35-50 metres. It is manufactured in Austria and the USA. **PTI**

Speaker exhorts students to participate in democratic process

EXPRESS INDIA NEWS NETWORK
CHANDIGARH, MARCH 24

Punjab Vidhan Sabha Speaker Kultar Singh Sandhwan has encouraged the youth to increase their involvement in the democratic process.

Addressing the students of a private school from district Bathinda, who visited to see the Punjab Vidhan Sabha, Sandhwan said that it is need of the hour to encourage the youth in politics to stop the decline in the political sphere and only then the progress of the country can be ensured.

The Speaker said for fulfilling this purpose, Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann has also asked the members to ensure the visit to the assembly of the students of their respective constituencies.



3 teachers, driver killed in Jalalabad accident

EXPRESS INDIA NEWS NETWORK
FEROZEPUR, MARCH 24

Three teachers and a driver were killed while 11 teachers were injured when the multi-utility vehicle (MUV) in which they were travelling collided with Punjab Roadways bus on the Ferozepur-Fazilka road on Friday morning.

MUV driver Ashok, resident of Daroga Chakk village in Fazilka district, and three teachers - Prince Kamboj (29), resident of Peer Mohammad village in Fazilka district, Kanchan (38), resident of Kotli in Jalalabad tehsil of Fazilka district, and Maninder Kaur, resident of Asal ke Hithar village in Jalalabad -- died in the accident, police said.

While Ashok, Kamboj and Kanchan died on the spot, Kaur succumbed to injuries later, they said. The injured have been admitted to a local hospital.

As per reports, 14 teachers from different schools had boarded the vehicle

from Jalalabad. As the MUV neared Khai Feme Ke village, Jalalabad, it collided with a bus leaving three teachers and the driver dead on the spot. The rest of the teachers sustained injuries in the accident.

Eyewitnesses said that the accident occurred when the driver of the overloaded jeep tried to overtake the truck. They added that the driver and teachers had to be pulled out of the vehicle by breaking open the windows.

Meanwhile, Punjab School Education Minister Harjot Singh Bains expressed grief over the deaths. Extending his heartfelt sympathies to the bereaved families, Bains prayed to the Almighty to give them strength to bear this irreparable loss and grant eternal peace to the departed souls.

They will always be remembered for his immense contribution towards the field of education, he added. The Cabinet Minister also directed the district administration to ensure proper medical care for injured teachers. **PTI**

Terror-Gangster Nexus

NIA charge-sheets Lawrence Bishnoi, Goldy Brar, 12 others

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Friday filed a fresh charge sheet against jailed gangster Lawrence Bishnoi and Goldy Brar, the alleged masterminds in the murder of Punjabi singer Sidhu Moosewala, and a dozen others, charging them with criminal conspiracy to unleash a wave of terror and carry out targeted killings of high-profile people.

The prosecution complaint has been filed against these gangsters who, the

federal anti-terror agency said, had "links" with the proscribed Babbar Khalsa International (BKI) and several other pro-Khalistan terrorist outfits.

The charge sheet came in the second of the three terror-gangster nexus cases that are being investigated by the NIA.

"All the 14 accused have been charged with criminal conspiracy to unleash a wave of terror and carry out targeted killings of well-known social and religious leaders, movie stars, singers and businessmen." "Besides having links with

conspirators in Pakistan, the accused were also in contact with pro-Khalistan elements based in Canada, Nepal and other countries," the NIA said.

Apart from Bishnoi and Brar (alias Satwinderjeet Singh), the other accused who were charge-sheeted were Jagdeep Singh alias Jaggu Bhagwanpuriya, Sachin Thapan alias Sachin Bishnoi, Anmol Bishnoi alias Bhanu, Vikramjeet Singh alias Vikram Brar, Sandeep Jhanjariya alias Kala Jatheri, Virender Pratap Singh alias Kala Rana, Joginder Singh, Rajesh

Kumar alias Raju Mota, Raj Kumar alias Raju/Raju Basodi, Anil alias Chippi, Naresh Yadav alias Seth, and Shahbaz Ansari alias Shahbaz.

Bishnoi, who continues to remain in jail after his arrest in 2015, has been operating his terror-crime syndicate from prisons in different states, along with Canada-based Goldy Brar, who is an accused in the killing of 'Dera Sacha Sauda' follower Pradeep Kumar at Faridkot (Punjab) in November, 2022.

"The Lawrence Bishnoi terror-crime-

extortion syndicate was also responsible for providing killers for the RPG attack case on Punjab state intelligence headquarters at Mohali, which was carried out on directions of Harwinder Singh alias Rinda, a Pakistan-based BKI terrorist," the NIA said. Brar was found to have "direct links" with Lakhbir Singh alias Landa, another BKI operative working closely with Rinda, it said. Landa is also an accused in the Mohali RPG attack, as well as the December, 2022 RPG attack on police station Sirhali in the Tarn Taran district of Punjab. **PTI**

PUNJAB

'Khalistan flag' pictures, firearms training videos found on Amritpal aide's phone

CHANDIGARH, MARCH 24

A phone recovered from Tejinder Singh Gill alias Gorkha Baba - an aide of Amritpal Singh, who was arrested on Wednesday - carries pictures of the flag, emblem and currency of "Khalistan" and videos of firearms practice by young men allegedly picked for the radical preacher's Anandpur Khalistan Fauz (AKF), Punjab Police said on Friday.

The statement said the threat posed by the AKF to the state's peace and harmony by the AKF has been "averted by timely action of Punjab Police."

While Amritpal has eluded police since it began a crackdown against him and his Waris Punjab De outfit, several of his alleged aides are now in custody.

Khanna's Senior Superintendent of

Police Amneet Kondal said Gorkha Baba was a part of the "close protection team", entrusted with Waris Punjab De chief's security and was a member of the AKF, being raised by Amritpal to wage an armed struggle for the formation of a separate Khalistan state. He came in contact with Amritpal through one Birkamjit Singh Khalsa, whom he had met during the farmers' agitation on the outskirts of Delhi.

He went to the preacher's native village Jallupur Khera in Amritsar district five months back and was inducted as his gunman.

Baba was given weapons marked AKF and firing practice was conducted at a makeshift range at the village. Police said he was in close proximity of Amritpal during last month's storming of the Ajnala police station by the preacher and his



supporters to secure the release of an arrested man.

During the investigation, police said, he revealed that all AKF members were

assigned belt numbers like AKF 3, AKF 56 and AKF 47 - perhaps based on their seniority or proximity to Amritpal.

The examination of his phone showed that two WhatsApp groups "AKF" and "Amritpal Tiger Force" were created. The members of the AKF were paid salaries, police said. The members were youngsters who came to the de-addiction centres' run by Waris Punjab De and were later indoctrinated and given firearms training, according to police.

"All weapons and bullet-proof jackets had the AKF hologram imprinted on them. Some weapons even had a long-range telescope affixed on them," she said.

Videos of members showing their expertise in assembling, disassembling, cleaning weapons have been recovered, the SSP said. **PTI**

DTF holds protest to oppose NEP-2020

PARMOD BHARTI
JALANDHAR, MARCH 24

The Democratic Teachers' Front (DTF), Punjab, held a state-level awareness seminar at Desh Bhagat Yadgar Hall on Thursday on the occasion of Bhagat Singh's martyrdom day, to protest against the central government's New Education Policy-2020 (NEP) and to question the Punjab government's 'Schools of Excellence' scheme.

The seminar was led by its state president Vikram Dev Singh and general secretary Mukesh Kumar. A protest march was also taken out from Desh Bhagat Yadgar Hall to Press Club Chowk, where the members of DTF along with other teachers sent a letter to Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann through district administration, raising questions over its pilot project 'Schools of Eminence'.

They announced that in the first week of April, DTF will start a campaign to ask questions to the ruling party regarding its demands related to teachers and education in Punjab and will hold a state-level rally in front of the Chief Minister's Sangrur residence on April 23.

Addressing the gathering, Kuldeep Singh, retired Professor, Punjabi University and Government College of Education, Patiala, said that the NEP-2020 has left aside the social and student needs.

He said discriminatory education in the name of 'School of Eminence' and the establishment of such schools within a radius of 40 km is bringing the concept of student to school instead of school to every student, which is a conspiracy to deprive a large number of students of basic education.

44 persons arrested during Amritpal crackdown, released

EXPRESS INDIA NEWS NETWORK
CHANDIGARH, MARCH 24

Punjab Police on Friday released as many as 44 persons, who were taken into preventive arrest during the ongoing operation against those trying to disturb law and order in the state, from police custody.

Additional Director General of Police (ADGP) Law and Order Arpit Shukla said that in the larger interest of the public and keeping in view that youngsters should not suffer, Punjab Police have decided to release those persons who have a minimum role or

AS MANY AS 44 PERSONS, WHO WERE UNDER PREVENTIVE ARREST WERE HANDED OVER TO THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS ON FRIDAY, WITH THE PROMISE OF GOOD CONDUCT IN FUTURE

were just following Amritpal Singh on religious sentiments only. As many as 44 persons, who were under preventive arrest were handed over to their fam-

ily members on Friday, with the promise of good conduct in future.

The development came a day after the announcement by the Inspector General of Police (IGP) Headquarters Sukhchain Singh Gill that Punjab Police might release 177 arrested persons from preventive custody.

Notably, a total of 207 persons have been arrested for disturbing peace and harmony in the state, of which, 30 have been found in substantive criminal activities, while, remaining were under preventive arrest. He had also assured that people involved in baptism and de-addiction will also not be bothered at all.

PPCB celebrates World Water Day

EXPRESS INDIA NEWS NETWORK
CHANDIGARH, MARCH 24

With an aim to sensitize people and government officials towards environment preservation, the Punjab Pollution Control Board (PPCB) celebrated World Water Day today.

On the occasion, two tankers of treated wastewater of STP were used for plantation in the Greater Mohali Area Development Authority (GMADA) office at Airport Road.

The officials of GMADA assured the PPCB that the treated wastewater in place of fresh water will be utilised for plantation to the maximum extent and record in this regard will also be maintained.

Rahul's disqualification

Centre is partisan, dictatorial: SAD

EXPRESS INDIA NEWS NETWORK
CHANDIGARH, MARCH 24

The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) today said the arbitrary disqualification of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi from the Lok Sabha was not in the interest of a healthy democracy and was against the principle of natural justice.

Questioning the haste in which Gandhi had been disqualified, SAD spokesperson Dr Daljit Singh Cheema said, "It is not right to disqualify a member within 24 hours of a court decision especially when

the appeal against the decision is in process."

Asserting that the Congress leader should have been given appropriate time to appeal against the court order, Dr Cheema said the Lok Sabha Speaker should have resisted invoking his powers to disqualify Gandhi in this manner. "This gives the impression that the central government is conducting itself in a partisan and dictatorial manner."

Dr Cheema said parliamentary traditions should be maintained at all costs and an impression should not be given that the opposition is being suppressed in any manner.

Sukhbir demands compensation for farmers

MUKTSAR: SAD president Sukhbir Singh Badal today requested Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann to order an immediate girdwari at all places where standing wheat crop has been severely damaged due to hail storms accompanied by heavy rain. He also demanded a compensation of Rs 50,000 per acre for all farmers whose crops have been severely damaged due to the inclement weather and a compensation of Rs 25,000 per acre for partial damage

of wheat crops.

The SAD president visited affected fields in this district where farmers have reported widespread damage to their standing wheat crop. Farmers told him that they had not been paid damage for losses suffered by them earlier also.

Many farmers who have taken land on lease said they faced an uncertain future and demanded that they be compensated adequately also.

Use of Social Media with 'caution' in J&K

Govt issues fresh guidelines to employees

JAMMU, MARCH 24

In what could be seen as fresh directives on use of social media with 'caution' the UT government in J-K today issued detailed guidelines to around 5 lakh government employees working in various departments. Directives bar employees from publishing, sharing any political or 'anti-secular' content, criticising government policies on the social media.

In a detailed order issued by GAD today, the guidelines further say the government employees cannot post or share any content that is political or anti-secular and communal in nature. It also asks them not to follow or subscribe to pages, communities, Twitter handles and blogs that share or post political or anti-secular content.

According to a 'special notification' issued by the government, the latter has barred all the government employees



of the Union Territory from criticizing the government or engaging in any discussion against the government over social media. The authorities stated that no such discussion or criticism shall be conducted by government employees on social media pages, communities or microblogs. The direction further asks the government employees to stop posting or sharing any content that is anti-secular and communal in nature.

The notification, any employee who would violate the directions shall be charged with the Information Technology Act. "No government

employee shall publish in his name or any other person's name an opinion that might create embarrassment between the Government of Jammu and Kashmir, Government of India or Government of any other state. No opinion shall be criticism of any policy or action of the state or national government," the notification reads.

It adds that any government employee found posting illegal content on social media shall be liable to imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years with fine under the IT Act. Also, the employee may face the risk of premature retirement or lower increments or demotion to lower post under the Jammu and Kashmir Civil Services.

As per the official statement, the notification applies to all the government employees of the UT using any social media platform like Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, Telegram or any other Instant messaging application.

Union minister justifies Rahul's disqualification

JAMMU, MARCH 24

Union minister Ramdas Athawale on Friday claimed Rahul Gandhi would not have been disqualified from Lok Sabha had he apologised for his alleged critical remarks about the Indian democracy.

Gandhi is a senior leader and was the president of the Congress, he should have known he should not speak "against the country" during a visit abroad, Athawale told reporters here.

"Had Rahul Gandhi apologised, the situation would not have reached his disqualification," he said. The minister of state for social justice and empowerment also said that Gandhi had "insulted" a large group of people with his remark, "How come all thieves have Modi as the common surname?"

"Someone moved to the court, which awarded him (Gandhi) two years punishment," he said.

Athawale said the BJP and the NDA had protested over Gandhi's remarks but "there was no effect on Rahul Gandhi". The Congress leader was disqualified as a Lok Sabha member after a Surat court convicted him in a 2019 criminal defamation case and sentenced him to two years in jail. Gandhi has been given bail and 30 days to appeal against the order in a higher court.

Congress has said it will fight the case "legally and politically". **PTI**

Infiltration bid foiled, one intruder killed

SRINAGAR, MARCH 24

An unidentified intruder was killed by security forces during a foiled infiltration attempt along the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir's Kupwara district on Friday, officials said.

Alert troops noticed suspicious

movement along the Line of Control at Jabdi in the Karnah area in the morning, the officials said.

The security forces challenged the intruders and, in the ensuing gunfight, one infiltrator was killed, they added. One AK rifle and some ammunition was recovered from the scene, the officials said. **PTI**

Ramazan 'traditions' alive in Kashmir

Time for 'seharkhans' to wake up people for sehri

SRINAGAR, MARCH 24

Hundreds of men from remote areas of Kashmir come to towns and cities like Srinagar to don the role of a Seharkhwaan, a drum beater, who goes around a town to wake up people for the pre-drawn meal, Sehri.

Mohammad Rafiq Kataria from Kupwara's Kalaroos, who has been a drummer for the last 25 years, wakes up early in the morning to start his work at 3 am. "We wait 11 months for Ramzan to come as whatever people donate to us at the end of the holy month, it provides for our families for the entire year," he said.

Mohammad Mehboob Khatana, who has been coming to Srinagar for the last 20 years during Ramzan, said he is hope-



ful of getting a good reward from the almighty for waking people for the pre-drawn meal.

TB Mukt Abhiyan



PM felicitates J&K for implementation of programme

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, felicitated the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir for successful implementation of Pradhan Mantri TB Mukt Bharat Abhiyaan.

Secretary, Health and Medical Education Department, J&K, Bhupinder Kumar, received the bronze medal for significant achievement of more than 20 per cent reduction (compared with the baseline of 2015) in the TB incidence in J&K during the ONE WORLD TB SUMMIT ("World TB Day 2023") held at Rudraksh International Cooperation & Convention Centre, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh.

On the occasion, Pulwama and Anantnag districts of J&K were also honoured with District Level award for achieving TB free district status for more than 80 per cent reduction in the incidence of TB from the baseline of 2015. These awards were received from the Prime Minister by the respective Deputy Commissioners.

Further, District Srinagar was awarded with gold medal for achieving more than 60 per cent reduction in TB incidence

while Jammu and Kathua districts were awarded with bronze medal for achieving more than 20 per cent reduction in TB incidence.

Pertinently, the Government of India has set the target to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) related to TB Elimination by the year 2025 ahead of the global target of 2030 and has launched National Strategic Plan 2017-25 under the ambit of National Health Mission to end TB by 2025.

Earlier, Budgam achieved the distinction of being the first district in the country to be declared TB Free. During the previous year, three districts namely Kupwara, Anantnag and Pulwama received gold medals for more than 60 per cent reduction in TB incidence whereas District Baramulla and Udhampur bagged bronze medals for achieving more than 20 per cent reduction.

Jammu and Kashmir was one of the only two States/UTs which were felicitated during the event. Also, Pulwama and Anantnag were two of districts of the total of three districts in the country to achieve TB Free status this year. **PTI**

tional drummer, Ghulam Rasool Payar, said "I have been doing this work for the past 50 years. We do not press anyone for payments. We accept whatever people donate to us out of their free will."

Asked if the modern gadgets had diminished the significance of Seharkhwaan, Payar said it has not affected their work. Although alarms on modern gadgets have been introduced, but majority of people even youngsters like to be woken up by the drum beats and sehri call in unique style by the seharkhans.

"Ramzan has started and so have our preparations. This is a month of blessings from the almighty," Maulana Mehmood, an Imam, said, adding that he will pray for peace in Kashmir and everywhere in the world. **PTI**

REGION

HP Cong MLAs stage protest against Rahul's conviction

Allege conspiracy to defame him

SHIMLA/HAMIRPUR, MARCH 24

Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu and all Congress MLAs of the state held a demonstration outside the Assembly on Friday to express solidarity with party leader Rahul Gandhi, who has been convicted in a defamation case.

The unprecedented protest by the entire Congress Legislature Party, including all ministers, took place as the House adjourned for lunch break. Slogans such as "Tanashahi Nahi Chalegi, Gundagardi Nahi Chalegi", "Rahul Gandhi Sangharsh Karo, Hum Tumhare Saath Hain" and "Jo Hitler Ki Chal Chalga, Vo Hitler Ki Maut Marega" were raised.

The protest took place before the news of Gandhi's disqualification from the Lok Sabha came in. The Lok Sabha Secretariat disqualified him as MP from Wayanad in Kerala on Friday, a day after he was convicted by a Surat court in the 2019 criminal defamation case.

Talking to media persons, the chief minister said a conspiracy has been hatched to defame Rahul Gandhi, who has been raising issues of public concern. He undertook a "foot march" from Kanyakumari to Kashmir and is the only



leader raising the true voice of the people and keeping democracy alive, Sukhu said. "The entire CLP is solidly behind him."

He added that the opposition is very important for a healthy democracy but the BJP has throttled democracy by not allowing the Congress leaders to speak inside Parliament or outside it. The biggest issue in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections against the BJP would be the murder of democracy, Sukhu said.

Leader of Opposition in Punjab Pratap

Singh Bajwa, who was in Shimla on Friday, said India is the biggest democracy in the world and the tearing haste in which Rahul Gandhi has been disqualified from Lok Sabha is deplorable and against democratic traditions.

In Hamirpur, Congress members and workers led by their party's district president Kuldip Singh Pathania held a demonstration against the central government. They raised slogans in favour of Rahul Gandhi. PTI

Haryana police on alert after Amritpal's last location traced in Kurukshetra

CHANDIGARH, MARCH 24

Haryana Police Friday said it has stepped up vigil across the state and its personnel have been put on alert after radical preacher Amritpal Singh's last location was traced in the Kurukshetra district.

However, the whereabouts of Amritpal and his associate Papalpreet Singh remain unknown. They were allegedly harboured by a woman at her home in Kurukshetra district's Shahabad on March 19.

A senior Punjab police official on Thursday said, "As soon as we came to know that he has sneaked out of

Punjab, we immediately alerted the other states." Haryana's Additional DGP (Law and Order) Mamta Singh Friday said there is no further input about where Amritpal went from Shahabad.

Baljit Kaur, the woman who allegedly harboured Amritpal Singh and his associate Papalpreet Singh at her home in the Kurukshetra district was nabbed on Thursday. She was being questioned by the Punjab police.

Additional DGP (Law and Order) Mamta Singh said immediately after the Haryana Police got information about the woman who harboured Amritpal and his associate they shared it with their Punjab counterpart. PTI

Viral fever grips Hamirpur, Una districts in HP

HAMIRPUR/UNA, MARCH 24

Cases of viral fever are on the rise in the twin districts of Hamirpur and Una with doctors blaming it on the significant difference between day and night temperatures in the state.

A health department spokesperson said that people, especially children, are visiting hospitals with complaints of fever, vomiting, diarrhoea, cough, cold, sore throat, body pain, headache and body stiffness.

Around 50 people are visiting the regional hospital Una daily with these

complaints, the spokesperson said.

Senior Medical Superintendent at the regional hospital in Una Dr Raman Sharma said a change in the weather in the last few days has led to a rise in cases of viral fever. "People must wear warm clothes in the morning and evening and keep children warm," he said.

At Dr Radhakrishnan Medical College in Hamirpur, people with complaints of fever, vomiting and diarrhoea could be seen standing outside the OPD or squatting on the floor as the number of patients increased. PTI

Interstate gang of vehicle lifters busted in Haryana's Nuh

NUH (HAR), MARCH 24

An interstate gang for vehicle lifters was busted here and five people were arrested, police said on Friday.

At least 10 stolen vehicles, five illegal weapons and three cartridges were recovered from their possession, they said. According to the police, the gang members sold the stolen vehicles after preparing fake documents.

On March 16, a raid was conducted at the house of gang leader Nasim in Satputiyaka village and three people, including the kingpin, were arrested following an encounter. "We had taken three accused on police remand and later nabbed two more members of the gang. The gang was active in Haryana, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan," Superintendent of Police (Nuh) Varun Singla. PTI

Shinku La Pass connecting Lahaul valley to Zaskar reopens

MANALI (HP), MARCH 24

The Shinku La Pass connecting Himachal Pradesh's Lahaul valley to the Zaskar valley in Ladakh's Kargil district has been reopened after two months, an official said on Friday.

Light vehicles from the Zaskar side were allowed to pass towards Manali. Only locally-registered vehicles will be allowed to ply on the stretch between Darcha and Padum till further orders, said Col Vikas Gulia, director of the Border Roads Organisation's (BRO) Project Yojak.

The pass was reopened on Thursday despite the temperature plummeting to minus 25 degrees Celsius, he said.

The Shinku La Pass at 16,580 feet was closed since January 23. The snow-laden pass remains closed during the winter months, snapping links to the Zaskar valley.

The approximately 300-kilometre



Nimmu-Padum-Darcha Road will be turned into an all-weather road and the BRO will shortly begin work on the four-kilometre-long Shinku La tunnel, Col Gulia said.

Lahaul Deputy Commissioner Sumit

Khimta said due to the inclement weather conditions, only locally registered 4x4 vehicles would be allowed on the Darcha-Padum stretch between 9 am and 3 pm.

Tourist vehicles will not be allowed beyond Darcha, he added. PTI

15 persons injured in road accident in Himachal's Una district

UNA, MARCH 24

Fifteen persons were injured after a tempo they were travelling in struck against a hillock near Talai village in Una district on Friday, police said.

They have been admitted to the Una hospital for treatment. A group of about 40 devotees from Kapurthala in Punjab, after paying obeisance at a religious place in Pirmigah on Friday morning, was going to Siddhapeeth Baba Balaknath Deotsiddh when the tragedy struck. The tempo struck a hillock after its driver lost control of the vehicle. As per preliminary investigations, it seems that brake failure led to the accident. Bangana police station Station House Officer (SHO) Baburam said about 15 people were injured in the incident and investigations are underway. PTI

OPINION

The Express India NEWS

Well said, Mr Chief Minister

Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Friday made a clear and categorical statement that Punjab will not be allowed to be turned into Afghanistan. The reference was obvious to the attempts being made in the state to disturb peace and harmony. The parallel was drawn at a time when the Aam Aadmi Party government headed by him has launched a crackdown against the 'Waris Punjab De' activists including its leader Amritpal Singh. The Chief Minister is obviously buoyed and confident after the success of the campaign against WPD. Even the opposition parties cannot find fault with the campaign.

While there is still no clarity about the whereabouts of Amritpal, the Mann government has at least managed to stop his activities while he remains on the run. This was one of the biggest challenges for the AAP government particularly after he had led a siege on Ajnala Police Station and managed to get one of his aides freed. The government did make a tactical retreat at that moment by letting his aide free, only to strike back a few weeks later. It was a wise move at that time as had Amritpal's aide not been released that time, he would have managed to fortify the place and the government would have eventually been forced to beat a retreat.

The government has definitely got an upper hand right now. It is the combination of many things. Deft handling, a competent and thoroughly motivated professional police force plus the support and cooperation of Punjabis who have never got carried away by fake extremist propaganda. Maintaining law and order has always to be the top most priority of the government. At least on this particular count, the government has done well, although there are many more issues related to Punjab that the government will need to tackle. 'Gangster-culture' being one of the serious challenges.

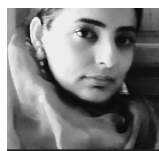
The government will do well by drawing a line between those bent upon sabotaging the peace of the state and those who get emotionally influenced. Several people have been arrested during the crackdown against the WPD. Many of them are said to be quite young and a few even undergraduate students. Obviously they must have been spotted and found involved in one way or the other. Most of them are believed to be active on social media only. The government must scrutinize all such cases and grant amnesty to all of them as long as their activities are restricted to social media.

The government has already ordered release of 44 people arrested during the recent crackdown. It has announced that it will release some more people after reviewing their cases. This is a welcome thing. Such people needed counseling rather than imprisonment. Prisons will end up radicalizing and alienating them further. Good counseling by parents, families and peers can certainly save them from getting radicalized. While acting tough on those trying to sabotage peace in Punjab, the government should be more discreet and cautious in handling youngsters lest they end up more alienated and more radicalized.

Letter from America

Beware of distorting glorious image of Sikhism

A US based NRI looks at the developments taking place in Punjab and abroad in the name of Sikhs, from the point of view of an American Sikh, rooted in 'Panjab' and India.



BY ANUP K
SEKHON-SANDHU

A US based NRI looks at the developments taking place in Patnjab and abroad in the name of Sikhs, from the point of view of an American Sikh, rooted in 'Panjab' and India. One can't help but think of the timing of some recent occurrences like the audacity of a Deep Sidhu by his actions at the time of the peasants' movement, the unbridled lyrics of Moosewala's songs, the lurking of a Lakha Sidhana(s) et al in the background all the while and the emergence of an Amritpal who, I really hope, is in custody to face due process of law.

The migration of radical Sikhs towards the West for decades now has given birth to this sect of Sikhism, if you will, which I want no part of; if people of that kind of mindset are to be considered Sikhs, our religious and political leaders as also intellectuals and well wishers of the community need to step in to correct those distorted images. There is a majority of people in the community, which will never like to be identified with those distorted, 'Talibansique' images of the religion whose foundations otherwise have been laid for universal welfare, "sarbat da bhalla", which has earned us global love and respect.

I still remember the shock I experienced when I entered the Fremont Sikh Temple for the first time in December of 1996. There were framed

photographs of militants all over the walls of the 'langar' hall, not to miss a huge portrait of the central figure; front and center. The India I came from is the land of many religions, the 'Panjab' I came from is the land stood shaken by atrocities committed on her by her very own, the story of many a Panjabi families, as well.

Never for one instance would you ever see an image of a militant being flaunted about, is something we preferred to not even speak about; the massacre of hundreds of thousands innocents. I stood confused, scared, shocked with this wild extreme distortion on play around me, everywhere. It is this feeling of fear that creeps up on you and

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lingers. Even the culture of Sikh families in their homes was something so difficult to stomach at the time. I have harbored such a dislike of these people and their ways within me till someone pointed out about the people born out of India/Panjab looking for a sense of belongingness. Ok, makes sense but this is not the answer!!!

Moosewala, I didn't want to hear of before the mishap but his heinous murder touched me so deeply, making me look into this character closely. I have a lot of respect for him for having reached the height he did, given his background and there is no doubt about his unmatched talent.

However, his role models; Tupac, Ice Cube and many other hip-hop, rap artists from those times-listen to their lyrics. I have them on repeat in my

car all the time. It puts me into a trance just like a Qawwali would and it brings tears in my eyes. It speaks of the atrocities committed against Black Americans to this day even.

There is no comparison! Black people were slaves and still continue to go through a form of slavery in the American prison system to the extent of not knowing if they would live to see another year. Their appeal to their mistreatment, in their songs speaks of their sad history. Slavery is very different from hiding in a landmark iconic holy place of Sikhs and manipulating, grooming, moulding innocents into doing your work for you; for inciting hatred and terror within the minds and lives of people!!!

Sikhs are not the only marginalized ones in India! All the marginalized people need to come forward and stand together in protest against the radical government just like they did around the time of the farmers' mass movement. The tricolor national flag/symbol of India has nothing to do with the government, you may have grievances with! Where is the logic? And where did this Amritpal emerge from? Haven't innocent Sikhs been through so much already in India? All this radical sentiment is going to do is give rise to hatred and incite more riots/cruelties committed against Sikhs. It will mobilize Hindutva supporters. Are you serious?

Be a true Sikh. Don't get misled and misguided. Learn what it is to be a Sikh for the sake of crying out loud!!!

The only solution for India/Panjab is for a woke, unbiased candidate to step up to save the nation.

(Anup K Sekhon-Sandhu has been based in the United States since the mid-1990s. Views are personal)

Haryanvi brides for Punjabi bachelors!

BY VIMAL SUMBLY

Recently, Aam Aadmi Party parliamentarian Raghav Chadha was spotted with Bollywood actress Parineeti Chopra in Mumbai. Chadha happens to be the most eligible bachelor in Punjab and Delhi right now - smart, handsome, intelligent, good looking and the youngest Rajya Sabha member. Being seen with an actress like Parineeti did raise some curiosity. Chadha, when asked about her, remarked with his characteristic wit, "ask me about Rajneeti, not Parineeti", without confirming or denying anything. There are still a few more "eligible bachelors" left with the AAP who are either ministers or legislators.

While it is too early to conclude about the status of Chadha's and Parineeti's relationship, there are already two AAP leaders ahead of him having struck matrimonial alliances. First, it was Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann himself who married Dr Gurpreet Kaur from Haryana, seven years after having divorced his first wife. He was followed by Education Minister Harjot Singh Bains who recent-

ly got engaged to IPS officer Dr Jyoti Yadav, who also hails from Haryana. She is from Gurgaon.

Now, it is Chadha's turn. While Parineeti Chopra is settled in Mumbai right now because she works in the movies, she originally belongs to Ambala city in Haryana. She has done her schooling from Ambala itself. This of course is just a coincidence that all of them, Dr Gurpreet Kaur, Dr Jyoti Yadav and now Parineeti Chopra belong to the neighbouring state

The Express India NEWS

Haryana. Chadha may be from Delhi, but he has Punjabi roots and is an MP from Punjab, besides having scripted the 2022 AAP victory in Punjab.

During the 2017 assembly election campaign, when the AAP had not announced any Chief Ministerial candidate, the Congress and the Akali leaders would question Arvind Kejriwal's origins and intentions as he also hails from Haryana. They would say, if he became Chief Minister of Punjab, as it was rumoured around that time that he was

keen to become Punjab Chief Minister, he would side more with Haryana than with Punjab.

While Punjab did get an AAP Chief Minister and that too, from Punjab, he however, got his bride from Haryana. So did his ministerial colleague Harjot Bains, while there is curiosity about the relationship between Chadha and Chopra.

Punjab and Haryana are congenial twins. They have so much in common between themselves like the common capital, common high court, common secretariat and Vidhan Sabha buildings. And they have some contentious issues pending between them as well, like Satluj Yamuna Link Canal, transfer of Chandigarh and Punjabi speaking areas etc. But people of the two states have never let these issues come in between their personal and social relations. Farmers' agitation was a great example when Haryana farmers stood side by side with their Punjab brethren. They have time and again proved that they have much more to link them together, than merely the SYL. The latest matrimonial alliances between 'Punjabi' bachelors and 'Haryanvi' brides, despite SYL if it really is an issue, is another example.

STATE OF AGRICULTURE

World, India and Punjab Agriculture Part-III

The era of green revolution

This is the 3rd and last part in this series of research based articles written by internationally acclaimed Agricultural Scientist, Dr Rachpal Singh Bajwa, analysing the state of agriculture in Punjab and suggesting remedial measures and putting in national and global perspective.



BY RACHHPAL SINGH BAJWA

During the early 1960's, The Indian Government of India gave priority to the development of its agriculture and livestock sectors and established seven agricultural universities on US land grant universities pattern. Punjab Agricultural University was established in 1962 to look after education, research and extension activities of the Agriculture and Livestock sector of the state.

In order to grow more food for its increasing population, India started "The era of Green Revolution" Dr MS Swaminathan in 1963, invited Dr Norman E Borlaug (Father of world Green Revolution Movement and An Agricultural World Nobel Laureate) to India who had developed high yielding dwarf wheat varieties at the Rockefeller Foundation in Mexico to discuss the program. All modalities were completed and in 1966, seeds of a few good varieties of wheat were imported from Mexico and distributed among agricultural universities to be multiplied and developed under local conditions of various regions of India. Dr Dilbaugh Singh Athwal at PAU developed the first high yielding dwarf wheat "Kalyan" (Named after his village). This was the beginning of the huge wheat production in Punjab and India followed by similar increased research on production of rice (Dr Gurdev Singh Khush, Agricultural World Nobel Laureate). By 1974, India became self-sufficient in grains and four decades later in 2013, passed the "National Food Security Act", Right to Food for all its citizens (16% of world population). The Punjab Model to grow food for millions has earned the state the name of "Food Basket of India" and helped India to get rid of the problem of perpetual food shortages forever. The state produces ~12% of all grains of India and is the largest contributor of wheat and rice to the central pool (Wheat 41.5% and Rice 24.2% - 2014/15). In 2020/2021, the bulk of these grains, 92% of rice and 72% of wheat were sold to the government at MSP prices for 68,800 crores of rupees. The government of India

uses these grains to ensure the food security of India and runs its subsidized food program "The Public-Distribution-System" - PDS for its ~ 83 crores recipients, The world's largest food subsidized program.



Image courtesy: tawatchai07 on Freepik

The overdoing of the green revolution for the last six decades (under the allure of MSP, free electricity, subsidized diesel, fertilizers and pesticides), has deteriorated the environment and natural resources of the state. Punjab soils, water, air, and biodiversity have deteriorated and impacting the health of its residents. Today, Punjab is emblematic of the unsustainability of the Food-Energy-Water-Nexus and a hotspot of environmental degradation in India and around the globe. This is evident from the following facts:

1. Since 1980, Punjab soils are depleted of 51 lakh tons of nitrogen, 47 lakh tons of potassium, and 65 thousand tons of phosphorus.
2. While Punjab has only 1.60% area of India, it is using 33% of all fertilizers (@ 223 kg / hectare compared to the national average of 90 kg / hectare) and 19% pesticides produced in India, way more than the recommended optimal amounts.
3. The state is also extracting way

more groundwater to support excessive rice cultivation resulting in:

- i) Severe drop in groundwater table by many meters and shortages of water in 119 blocks out of a total of 150 blocks.
- ii) Punjab has a total of 320 billion cubic meters (BCM) of groundwater (GW). It extracts 37 BCM per year, but recharges only 20 BCM per year, causing a net annual deficit of 17 BCM.
- iii) A serious water shortage is predicted within the next 20 years if extraction of groundwater continues at the present rate of 173% more than the recharge.
- iv) The excess extraction of groundwater is the result of free electricity (12,000 gigawatts hours every year from 2017 - 2021) to farmers for the last 26 years since 1997. It caused a huge financial burden on the state exchequer besides severe shortages of electricity for residential and industrial users. The industry has moved out of the state to other states (HP, HR and UP) where there is ample and cheaper electricity available along with other economic incentives.

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Rise and fall of Green Revolution of Punjab

Punjab agricultural production has lived a glorious past during the early

heydays of the green revolution (1971 to 1986) and its agricultural GDP grew at 5.7% per year, double that of India's 2.31% during this period. The state of Punjab first produced surplus wheat and then rice and made India self-sufficient in food. The glow of the green revolution of Punjab started slowing during 1984/85 - 2004/05 and Agricultural growth slowed to 3% per year (similar to that of all India).

The real agrarian stress and challenges to Punjab agriculture appeared during 2006 to 2017 when its agricultural GDP crashed to just 1.6% per annum, which was less than half of the all-India agricultural GDP growth of 3.6% over the same period.

Despite achieving a record high crop productivity of 11 tonnes / hectare / year (one of the highest amongst the world), the farmers of the state of Punjab continued a path of downhill slide in its agriculture sector economy. It became apparent in stagnated farm productivity, poor farm incomes, high farm debts and high rates of suicides especially in marginal and small farmers (77% suicides and 88% were in high debts). It was the result of inattention and lack of a sound agricultural by the state government.

Livestock sector of Punjab

Punjab has 1.6% of all livestock of India. Total livestock population of Punjab is ~ 7.5 million. It has 2.53 millions cows (Majority Crossbred), 4.02 millions Buffaloes (Ludhiana district has 9.14% of all the bovines of Punjab). Guru Angad Dev Veterinary & Animal Sciences University (established in 2006) looks after the education, research and extension activities of the livestock

sector of the state. Punjab has 2.1% poultry, 2.5% of cattle and buffaloes of India. It produces ~8% of milk, 4.6% of eggs and 2.54% meat of India. It also produces 13.75% of India's honey from its Bee-Keeping farming and 1.90 lakh tons of fish from its fish farming. The GADVASU at Ludhiana has a college of "Wildlife and Fisheries" that looks after this fastest growing segment of the livestock sector in Punjab and India.

Punjab has more high milk yielding crossbred cows and better buffaloes than many other states of India. The average per-capita availability of milk in India is 427 gm, whereas it is ~ 1281 gm / day / person in Punjab. The contribution of milk and milk products in the livestock economy of Punjab is 82% that is well above that of India (68%). Dairy Industry in Punjab reached INR billion in 2021. Looking forward, the market is expected to reach INR 976 Billion by 2027, exhibiting a growth rate (CAGR) of 14.96% during 2022 - 2027. Punjab dairy market into 18 major product segments (Liquid milk, ghee, curd, paneer, butter, ice-cream, cheese and many more milk and milk product based Beverages. The % share of livestock products in the livestock sector of Punjab, Milk, 82.5%, Eggs 3%, Meat, 11.7%, Animal waste, 2.50%, and 0.30% from all other allied livestock operations. Milk production in Punjab: 13 Lakh Tons / yr or 345 lakh kg / day (2019).

The agricultural economy of the state is in distress and needs urgent attention. The Three Engines of Agricultural Economy, i) The First Main Engine - The crop sector ii) The Second Engine - The livestock sector and iii) The Third Engine - Food Processing Industry need to be revived to turn around the state economy.

The state's most fertile, irrigated lands, highly productive livestock and the most studious and innovative farmers can overcome all challenges provided they are given the new models of agriculture which are economically sustainable. The Punjab government's decision to have a new agriculture policy by March 31, 2023 is a welcome step.

The Punjab state farmer's commission had submitted 2 drafts earlier in 2013 and 2018 with no action taken by the governments of that time. Hope it will not happen this time.

(Dr Bajwa is ex-founder member, Board of Management & Technical Advisor, GADVASU, Ludhiana. Now a TV talk contributor, on JUS TV, New York and California on Agriculture and Environment, presently resides in Chicago (USA))

IN ORDER TO GROW MORE FOOD FOR ITS INCREASING POPULATION, INDIA STARTED "THE ERA OF GREEN REVOLUTION" DR MS SWAMINATHAN IN 1963, INVITED DR NORMAN E BORLAUG (FATHER OF WORLD GREEN REVOLUTION MOVEMENT AND AN AGRICULTURAL WORLD NOBEL LAUREATE) TO INDIA WHO HAD DEVELOPED HIGH YIELDING DWARF WHEAT VARIETIES AT THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION IN MEXICO TO DISCUSS THE PROGRAM

MILITARY AFFAIRS

Ex-servicemen face problems in migrating to SPARSH



COL CHARANJIT SINGH KHERA (RETD)

Adjutant General Branch of AHQ had published a booklet in Nov22 as guide to migration to system for Pension giving out various advantages stating that it is "System for Pension Administration - Raksha" and is an integrated system for automation of sanction and disbursement of Defence Pension. This Pensioner Portal will provide a single window for the Pensioners to avail Pension related services such as facility to view their Pension details, Pension entitlement, Pensioner profile details, Income Tax forms etc. It is also an online facility for grievance redressal and correction of any data/ details of Pensioners with all the salient features, but it has failed practically to be users friendly software there are many Problems Faced by Migrated Pensioners to SPARSH

Problem No 1: Demographic Validation Failure: When a pensioner logs into SPARSH with the given user Id + 01 and password, then he is asked to go for a second line of authentication. The pensioner is asked to enter Aadhaar No. After entering Aadhaar No, the message *Demographic Validation Failure* comes up. The pensioner cannot proceed further.2

On enquiry the pensioner is told to go to his bank and ask them to upload the Aadhaar card a second time.

Suggestion 1: Instead of asking the pensioners to go to his bank second or third or fourth time, there is a need to update the SPARSH server to retain and store the documents collected from the bank at the time of migration of pensioners.

Problem No 2: Advertisement on Submission of Life Certificate by 20 Mar 2023, which is very confusing.

Suggestion 2: One line should have been added in the advertisement stating clearly that those who submitted their life certificate to banks in Nov 2022 are not required to submit a second time.

Problems No 3: SPARSH Nodal Officers. It's not easy to speak with them. No response to a complaint lodged in the given email address.

Suggestion 3: The SPARSH nodal officers are made more responsible to attend to every complaint of the pensioner. They should be able to speak with the pensioner later and tell him how his problem can be resolved.

Problem No 4: When the pensioner wants to change his password sent by SPARSH

it is not possible.

Suggestion 4: There appears to be no link between the SPARSH and the pensioner. The link should be established. What advantage is of getting user id and password if the pensioner cannot interact with SPARSH.

Problem No 5: No Coordination between TCS and SPARSH Team. TCS has been working since Apr 2021. Though 23 months have elapsed not one SPARSH PPO is correct nor one Pension slip is correct.

Suggestion 5: The Def Accts Dept staff and TCS should work in coordination with each other and carry out joint operations.

Problem No 6: Inability of widows to upload death certificates of husbands. Widows have not been getting their pension for months.

Suggestion 6: There should be provision in SPARSH to accept death certificate sent by the pensioner or send it to Record office for updating their records.

Problem No 7: TDS Not Deducted. SPARSH remits monthly pension on the

THIS PENSIONER PORTAL WILL PROVIDE A SINGLE WINDOW FOR THE PENSIONERS TO AVAIL PENSION RELATED SERVICES SUCH AS FACILITY TO VIEW THEIR PENSION DETAILS, PENSION ENTITLEMENT, PENSIONER PROFILE DETAILS, INCOME TAX FORMS ETC. IT IS ALSO AN ONLINE FACILITY FOR GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL AND CORRECTION OF ANY DATA/ DETAILS OF PENSIONERS WITH ALL THE SALIENT FEATURES,

last working day but fails to deduct TDS and remits to Income Tax dept. But banks regularly deduct TDS from pension and remit it to IT dept. SPARSH does not inform the pensioner that TDS is not deducted. It is left to the pensioner to find out whether TDS is deducted from his pension or has to pay the income tax himself.

Suggestion 7: TCS has made software for SBI and their pension slips are accurate. The banks deduct TDS and remit the balance as remittance to the pensioner. SPARSH is unable to do a simple activity.

Problem No 8: Software of SPARSH. It appears novices of TCS have been sent with no knowledge of defence pensions.

Suggestion 8: Middle level (with service of 10 years or above) employees of TCS should be placed in Prayagraj in the office of PCDA (Pensions). Why should TCS take 23 months and yet not be able to produce glitch free software.

Problem No 9: Even the DPDOs are not clear about SPARSH. No help comes to the pensioners when they approach DPDOs.

Suggestion 9: It clearly shows that an adequate number of Def Accts Dept personnel are trained in SPARSH.

Problem No 10: The general impression from the pensioners is SPARSH is an unmitigated disaster.

Suggestion 10: These outreach programs are just photo ops. It will not change the impression in the minds of pensioners that SPARSH has failed on all counts. Not understanding when millions of software are available why only SPARSH has countless problems. Instead of having these futile Outreach programs efforts should be made to correct all the errors in the software to make it user friendly.

PART-II MIGRATION PROBLEMS TO SPARSH

Problem No 11: Pre-7th CPC Pensioners Message is shown that features of SPARSH are not available to pre-7th CPC pensioners.

Suggestion 11: Then why migrate Pre-7th CPC pensioners? It appears Def Accts Dept wants to show how many lakhs of pensioners have been migrated yet not one pensioner has been satisfied with their customer care.

Problem No 12: Monthly pension to some as per OROP-II and some at old pension

rates. Some of the migrated pensioners complain that some got new pensions and many continue to get old Pre-OROP II pension.

Suggestion 12: SPARSH boasts that in the shortest possible time, a new pension has been remitted. It is factually incorrect. There are thousands of migrated pensioners still not getting pension as per OROP-II rates. It is not understood why all migrated pensioners could not get new pensions.

Problem No 13: Not remittance of Arrears of OROP - II. Many pensioners have not got arrears. Not even the first instalment is paid.

Suggestion 13: It clearly shows that SPARSH software does not contain data to show who is paid first instalment and who are not paid. It is suggested the software be made to have these data changes. How will SPARSH work out how many have been given first instalment and how many were not given first instalment.

Problem No 14: Incorrect Data in SPARSH PPO. The SPARSH PPOs show the wife is dead while she is still alive. The service no, the rank, the regiment or corps, the qualifying service are all wrongly reflected.

Suggestion 14: The data of pensioners is available in PPO/E-PPO. Banks have supplied five documents viz (1) Aadhaar card (2) PAN Card (3) Life Certificate submitted in Nov 2022 (4) Mobile No (5) Email address. It is just data entry work. Even this could not be done for the last 23 months. This shows the efficacy of TCS and DAD.

Problem No 15: E-PPOs. Def Accts Dept should have completed the work on the issue of E-PPOs after the same had been introduced at the behest of 7th CPC. Till date lakhs of pensioners have not been given E-PPOs. There appears to be no coordination between PCDA (O) Pune for Army officers to generate LPC cum data sheets and send them to PCDA (Pensions) Pune. The task of generation of LPC of officers is now left to the officers who run from pillar to post.

Suggestion 15: FA (DS) and CGDA must make the DAD staff more responsible and accountable. Even after 7 years from the issue of instruction by Min of Def (ESW) why lakhs of pensioners do not get E-PPOs. Is there any system by which a monthly progress report of generation of LPCs cum datasheets generated by PCDA (O) Pune and by PAO(OR) for JCOs/OR.

printers, scanners, computer accessories and stationery. Their staff should have been trained. Same with staff of Col veterans. Unless these people who interact with Ex-Servicemen and widows are not trained, SPARSH will never give good customer service. The cost of service to CSCs are borne by SPARSH. Then why not allow banks to continue to provide the service which the CSCs are expected to provide.

Problem No 18: Memorandum of Understanding with SBI Having taken away rozi roti from SBI, now asking them to provide service to pensioners migrated to SPARSH is asking a thief to return the money. Why will staff of SBI provide any service when they do not have any documents of pensioners migrated to SPARSH?

Suggestion 18: Pensioner do not mind paying some fees to SBI and other banks to get their problems with SPARSH resolved. The link between banks and SPARSH is not there. Even in cities very few SBI branches have been nominated as SPARSH Nodal Centres. Unless all banks are made SPARSH service centres, this experiment of central pension disbursal is bound to fail. The first point of contact is banks.

Problem No 19: Record Offices. The staff in Record Offices are not trained to handle issues of SPARSH. Record offices are burdened with serving soldiers and Ex-Servicemen. With their limited staff the Record office is not able to provide any satisfactory support to migrated pensioners.

Suggestion 19: There are many volunteer Ex-Servicemen available to help the Record Offices. In Secunderabad ECHS polyclinic, most of the work is done by volunteer Officers and JCOs /OR. The Record Office should seek service of such retired officers to help the migrated pensioners to SPARSH. Most of the volunteers are willing to work in Record Offices.

Problem No 20: SPARSH appears to work only when a problem arises. When most of the migrated pensioners entered their names for second line of authentication it failed as the name in PPO and Aadhaar card did not match. It took Sri Giridhar Aramane, IAS, Defence Secretary on 15 Dec 2022 in Delhi outreach programme on SPARSH to educate TCS staff and SPARSH staff to change the Aadhaar name to Aadhaar number for the second line of authentication. When the Aadhaar number also does not match as SPARSH server did not store the Aadhaar number of pensioner, the same message appears i.e. Demographic Validation Failure.

Then a suggestion given to the pensioner is to go to the bank and request them to get their Aadhaar card uploaded a second time. This clearly shows there is no plan to provide trouble free service to migrated pensioners.

NATION

Rahul, a habitual offender: BJP

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has accused Rahul Gandhi of being a "habitual offender" who believes that he is above the law. The party clarified that it had no role in his disqualification from Lok Sabha, as the Supreme Court has made it clear that a lawmaker loses their membership from the time of their conviction in a criminal case. Union ministers Dharmendra Pradhan and Anurag Thakur addressed a press conference, where they also suggested that a conspiracy within the Congress may have played a role in its leaders not approaching a higher court for relief for Gandhi after his conviction on Thursday.

Thakur questioned who within the Congress is trying to get rid of Rahul



Gandhi, noting that the party has a battery of lawyers and wondering if the former party president was deliberately put on the "wrong path". The Congress has not yet appealed against the Surat court order convicting Gandhi in a 2019 defamation case to two years of imprisonment.

The BJP leaders criticized the Congress for slamming the government over Gandhi's disqualification, claiming that the Congress party wants a separate Indian Penal Code under which they cannot be convicted. Thakur called Gandhi a "habitual offender and loose cannon" and noted that the Congress leader is on bail in seven different cases.

Gandhi has always considered himself above Parliament and the country, the BJP leader said, referring to his recent insulting remarks about Indian democracy in the UK. They claimed opposition parties are angry with Modi because he has brought glory and prestige to India globally, and many foreign leaders have acknowledged his leadership.

The Lok Sabha Secretariat disqualified Gandhi as MP from Wayanad a day after he was convicted in a 2019 crimi-

nal defamation case. He will not be able to contest elections for eight years unless a higher court stays his conviction and sentence. The BJP leaders noted that several lawmakers, in Lok Sabha and state assemblies, have been disqualified on similar grounds in the past.

The BJP leaders hit back at Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge's claim that Gandhi has been punished for speaking the truth on the Adani-Hindenburg issue. Thakur asked if abusing deprived and backward communities means speaking the truth. He also condemned Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal for his "most corrupt" jibe at Modi, saying that the BJP does not need a certificate from someone whose entry into politics was based on "lies," and many of his ministers have been charged in cases of corruption. **PTI**

MCD to clear remaining civic budget by March 31

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) is "exploring options" to ensure the clearance of the remainder of the civic budget by March 31, according to official sources on Friday. The allocation of funds to various departments in the civic budget is crucial for the proper functioning of the civic body, and as per norms, it needs to be cleared by the end of the financial year.

The MCD has also reportedly written to the Delhi government requesting permission to convene a special session for the purpose before March end. "There isn't much clarity now but the MCD is exploring options to have the remainder of the civic budget cleared by March 31," said a source in the civic body, adding that if the budget isn't passed in its entirety by the deadline, things may "get into a limbo."

The Standing Committee, which deliberates on the budget first, is yet to be elected, and therefore, other options are being explored, another source said. The MCD had passed the "schedule of taxes" in the civic budget for 2023-24 on February 15. The taxes, rates, and cesses to be levied in 2023-24 will remain the same that are prevalent as of today, the MCD had said in a statement on February 15.

The municipal commissioner had presented the MCD budget in December, which included the Revised Estimate for 2022-23 and the Budget Estimate for 2023-24, an official source had said. **PTI**

THE MCD HAS ALSO REPORTEDLY WRITTEN TO THE DELHI GOVERNMENT REQUESTING PERMISSION TO CONVENE A SPECIAL SESSION FOR THE PURPOSE BEFORE MARCH END

SC refuses to hear plea against renaming Aurangabad

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

The Supreme Court declined a plea challenging the decision to rename Aurangabad in Maharashtra to 'Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar' on Friday, stating that the Bombay High Court is currently handling the matter. "Appear before Bombay High Court now.

The high court is seized of the matter," said a bench comprising Chief Justice DY Chandrachud, Justice PS Narasimha, and Justice JB Pardiwala to the petitioner's counsel.

Mohammed Mushtaq Ahmed had challenged the approval granted by the state and central governments to the proposal. In a letter dated March 4, 2020, the Aurangabad divisional commissioner proposed the name change. The state government's counsel informed the bench that the high court is scheduled to hear the matter on March 27. **PTI**

70 pc of TB patients adopted by UP govt cured: Yogi

VARANASI, MARCH 24

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath announced on Friday that 70% of the 2.70 lakh tuberculosis patients adopted by the Uttar Pradesh government have recovered and are living healthy lives. Speaking at the 'One World TB Summit' on World TB Day at the Rudraksha Convention Center, Adityanath revealed that the state government has disbursed Rs 422 crore via DBT (direct benefit transfer) for nutritional assistance to TB patients.

"We are committed to keeping the 25 crore population of the state healthy," the CM stated, as per a statement released by his office. Earlier in the day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched several initiatives to eliminate tuberculosis, including TB-free pan-



chayats, pan-India rollout of a shorter TB Preventive Treatment (TPT) and a family-centric care model for tuberculosis. Governor Anandiben Patel was also present on the occasion.

During the inauguration of the three-day seminar, Adityanath stated that the country is progressing at a rapid pace towards fulfilling PM Modi's vision of a TB-free India by 2025. He added that all schemes in Uttar Pradesh have been

implemented with priority over the last six years under his guidance.

The state once accounted for 21% of the country's TB patients. Adityanath stated that over the last five years, a total of Rs 422 crore has been disbursed to 16.90 lakh TB patients in Uttar Pradesh via DBT as nutritional assistance. More than 2.25 lakh TB patients have been adopted, and nutritional materials have been provided to them. "As a result, we have been able to cure 70% of these patients," Adityanath said, highlighting that special attention is being given to TB investigation at PM Ayushman Wellness Center.

The chief minister also cited the state's success in controlling communicable diseases such as Japanese encephalitis virus, which has been reduced by 96%. **PTI**

Bilkis Bano case: SC constitutes new bench

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

A batch of pleas challenging the remission of sentence of 11 convicts in the Bilkis Bano gang-rape case that also involves the killing of seven members of her family during the 2002 Gujarat riots is scheduled to be heard by a bench of Justices KM Joseph and BV Nagarathna on March 27. The pleas have been filed by several political and civil rights activists, and a writ petition has been filed by Bano herself.

On March 22, Chief Justice DY Chandrachud directed the matter for urgent listing and agreed to constitute a new bench to hear the batch of pleas. On January 4, a bench comprising Justices Ajay Rastogi and Bela M Trivedi had

taken up the petition filed by Bano and other pleas. However, Justice Trivedi refused from hearing the case without citing any reason.

Bano had moved the apex court on November 30 last year challenging the "premature" release of 11 lifers by the state government, saying it has "shaken the conscience of society". Besides the plea challenging the release of the convicts, the gang-rape survivor had also filed a separate petition seeking a review of the apex court's May 13, 2022, order on a plea by a convict. The review plea was later dismissed in December last year.

All 11 convicts were granted remission by the Gujarat government and released on August 15 last year. The victim, in her pending writ petition, has said the state

BANO HAD MOVED THE APEX COURT ON NOVEMBER 30 LAST YEAR CHALLENGING THE "PREMATURE" RELEASE OF 11 LIFERS BY THE STATE GOVERNMENT

government passed a "mechanical order" completely ignoring the requirement of law as laid down by the Supreme Court.

"The en-masse premature release of the convicts in the much talked about case of Bilkis Bano has shaken the conscience of the society and resulted in a number of agitations across the country," she has said.

Referring to past verdicts, the plea said en-masse remissions are not permissible and, moreover, such a relief cannot be sought or granted as a matter of right without examining the case of each convict individually based on their peculiar facts and role played by them in the crime.

"The present writ petition challenging the decision of the state/central government granting remission to all the 11 convicts and releasing them prematurely in one of the most gruesome crimes of extreme inhuman violence and brutality," it said. The plea, which gave minute details of the crime, said Bano and her grown-up daughters were "shell-shocked with this sudden development".

"When the nation was celebrating its 76th Independence Day, all the convicts

were released prematurely and were garlanded and felicitated in full public glare and sweets were circulated," it said.

The top court is seized of PILs filed by CPI(M) leader Subhashini Ali, Revati Laul, an independent journalist, Roop Rekha Verma, who is a former vice chancellor of the Lucknow University, and TMC MP Mahua Moitra against the release of the convicts.

Bano was 21 years old and five months pregnant when she was gang-raped while fleeing the riots that broke out after the Godhra train burning incident. Her three-year-old daughter was among the seven family members killed. The investigation in the case was handed over to the CBI, and the trial was transferred to a Maharashtra court by the Supreme Court. **PTI**

NATION

Chhattisgarh:
16 Naxals
surrender, 8 held

RAIPUR, MARCH 24

In a significant development, sixteen Naxalites surrendered in the Sukma district of Chhattisgarh, while eight lower-rung ultras were apprehended in Narayanpur, as per the Chhattisgarh police officials on Friday. Among the surrendered Naxalites, four, including a woman, carried a collective reward of Rs 15 lakh on their heads, as per the officials.

The four surrendered rebels were identified as Kawasi Pale alias Jogi, Padam Soma, Neelam Kawasi alias Neela, and Padam Deva. Pale was an active member of the outlawed outfit's Rast Company Number 3 and carried a reward of Rs 8 lakh on her head.

Soma, who carried a reward of Rs 5 lakh on his head, was the president of the Konta Area agriculture wing and an area committee member (ACM). Deva was the Chetna Natya Mandali (CNM) president of the Elmagunda Revolutionary People's Council (RPC) while Neela was a Jaimer militia commander.

They carried rewards of Rs 1 lakh each on their heads, said Sunil Sharma, Superintendent of Police, Sukma. **PTI**

Adani probe protest: 40
Opposition MPs detained

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

Forty opposition MPs, including members of Congress, were detained on Friday as they took out a protest march from Parliament House, alleging that democracy is in "danger" and demanding a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) probe into the Adani issue.

Prominent leaders, including K C Venugopal, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, K Suresh, Manickam Tagore, Imran Pratapgarhi, and Mohammed Javed, were stopped by the police and detained at Vijay Chowk here for violating prohibitory orders, the opposition said.

The MPs were detained and taken in a bus to the new police lines in Kingsway Camp in GTB Nagar, where they were released hours later, a senior police officer said. The MPs violated Section 144 (prohibitory orders) and were thus detained.

Earlier, addressing the media at Vijay Chowk, several leaders, including Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, raised the issue of Rahul Gandhi's conviction in a 2019 criminal defamation case by a Surat court. They alleged that the government was targeting the opposition with cases to suppress their voices.



After a protest inside the Parliament House complex, a host of Opposition leaders from parties such as the CPI, CPI(M), Shiv Sena (Uddhav Thackeray), JD(U), and Aam Aadmi Party marched to Vijay Chowk, holding placards like 'We demand JPC' and 'Save LIC' and a huge banner in front of them with 'Democracy in Danger' written on it.

"We've been fighting for JPC into Adani issue for months. They have a majority, but the BJP is scared as there's something fishy. We'll keep fighting unitedly for it," Kharge said.

He also hit out at BJP chief J P Nadda

over his allegation that Rahul Gandhi compared OBC communities to thieves and accused the BJP of indulging in "caste politics". AAP's Sanjay Singh said Gandhi's conviction shows that the government wants to finish off the opposition by slapping cases on them.

It is noteworthy that Gandhi was disqualified from Parliament after the court sentenced him to two years in jail in the defamation case.

Security was stepped up around Parliament House and Vijay Chowk area to ensure that no untoward incident takes place, a senior police officer said. **PTI**

Arunachal
to host G20
RIIG meet

ITANAGAR, MARCH 24

A total of 50 representatives from 19 nations are anticipated to participate in the G20 Research, Innovation, Initiative, Gathering (RIIG) meeting scheduled to take place in Arunachal Pradesh on Saturday.

The conference, organized by the Union Science and Technology Department, is one of the 200 G20-related meetings taking place in over 50 cities across India in 32 work-streams. The gathering will be conducted in closed quarters.

During a meeting with Chief Minister Pema Khandu at Raj Bhavan on Friday, Governor Lt Gen K T Parnaik expressed optimism that the G20 conference will be successful. He stated that the event has brought attention to Arunachal Pradesh and will aid in the state's development.

"The arrival of representatives provides a one-of-a-kind opportunity to showcase our rich traditions and culture, tourism potential, and development initiatives. Through visiting delegates, we should aim to draw investment for our state," said Khandu in a tweet. **PTI**

MP: HM Shah to address
public in Chhindwara

BHOPAL, MARCH 24

Union Home Minister Amit Shah is scheduled to address a public meeting in Madhya Pradesh's Chhindwara district on Saturday, where Assembly polls are due later this year, according to sources. Chhindwara, known to be the stronghold of senior Congress leader Kamal Nath, has a significant tribal population of about 35-40 per cent. With the BJP focusing on wooing the community by honouring tribal icons, Shah will visit Anchalkund Dada Darbar,

a sacred place for the tribal community of the region, and pay his respects, as per the sources. Agriculture Minister Kamal Patel, in-charge of Chhindwara district, said that Shah will also have lunch with the tribal community at Anchalkund. Tribal votes played a crucial role in Nath's victory from Chhindwara in the past, but Patel expressed confidence in the BJP's ability to win this time. After worshipping at Anchalkund, Shah will address a 'Jansabha' at Police Lines where a large number of BJP workers will be present, he added. **PTI**

Court directs probe for complaint
against R'sthan CM

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

Delhi court has directed the city police to investigate a criminal defamation complaint filed by Union Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat against Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot regarding his comments on the alleged Sanjivani co-operative scam.

Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Harjeet Singh Jaspal has ordered the Joint Commissioner of Police to conduct the investigation either personally or through an officer

not lower than the rank of Inspector and to file the investigation report on April 25.

"Considering the legislative mandate and the facts and circumstances, and also taking into account that the accused resides outside the local jurisdiction of this court, an investigation into the matter is directed, through Delhi Police. In view of the sensitivity of the matter, it is directed that the concerned Joint Commissioner shall monitor the investigation," said the judge.

The judge also stated that the investigation should attempt to answer three

questions: whether the accused Gehlot referred to complainant Shekhawat as an "accused" in the Sanjivani scam, whether Gehlot stated that the allegations against Shekhawat were proven in the Sanjivani scam, and whether Shekhawat or his family members have been named as "accused" in the scam's investigation.

Union Jal Shakti Minister Shekhawat had filed the complaint on March 4, alleging that senior Congress leader Gehlot had defamed him by accusing him of being involved in the scam. **PTI**

Individuals with income marginally
over 7 lakh get relief

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

Individual taxpayers who earn marginally higher income than the no-tax ceiling of Rs 7 lakh will now receive relief under the new tax regime. The Finance Bill 2023, which was passed by the Lok Sabha on Friday, has

proposed a deduction of income tax payable in excess of the differential income above Rs 7 lakh. The move comes after the budget 2023-24 announced a tax rebate where no tax would be levied on those with an annual income of up to Rs 7 lakh under the new tax regime. The revamped new tax

regime taxes no income up to Rs 3 lakh, income between Rs 3-6 lakh at 5 percent, Rs 6-9 lakh at 10 percent, Rs 9-12 lakh at 15 percent, Rs 12-15 lakh at 20 percent, and income of Rs 15 lakh and above at 30 percent. Additionally, a Rs 50,000 standard deduction was allowed under the new regime. **PTI**

NATION

Priyanka slams BJP, reminds 'hurtful Mir Jafar' remark

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

In a blistering attack on the BJP, Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Friday said Rahul Gandhi, the son of a martyred prime minister, was called 'Mir Jafar' and insults were hurled at his family but he would not bow down as he belongs to a family whose members have nurtured democracy by its blood.

Her attack came after the former Congress president and her brother was disqualified from Lok Sabha, a day after he was convicted by a Surat court in a 2019 criminal defamation case Thursday.

In a series of tweets, Priyanka Gandhi launched an all-out attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, saying in a tweet in Hindi, "Narendra Modi ji, your sycophants called the son of a martyred prime Minister a traitor, Mir Jafar. One of your Chief Minister raised questions as to who is the father of Rahul Gandhi? Following the custom of Kashmiri Pandits, a son wears 'pagdi' after his father's death, maintaining his family's tradition." "Insulting the whole family and the Kashmiri Pandit community, you asked in Parliament why we don't keep the name Nehru. But no judge gave you a sentence of two years. Did not disqualify you from the Parliament," she said.

Stepping up its attack on Rahul Gandhi over his democracy in danger remark in London, the BJP had on Tuesday dubbed him as the "present-day Mir Jafar of Indian polity" who went overseas seeking help from foreign forces to become a 'nawab' in India.

The Congress general secretary said Gandhi is a "true patriot" and has questioned Adani Group's loot, raised questions on Nirav Modi and Mehul Choksi. "Has your friend Gautam Adani become bigger than the country's Parliament and the great people of India that you were rattled when his loot was questioned? You call my family dynasty, do note that this family has nurtured India's democracy with their blood," she said.

This family raised the voice of the people of India and fought for the truth for generations, she said. "The blood that runs in our veins has one specialty... it never bows down before a coward, power-hungry dictator like you and will never bow down. Do whatever you want," she said hitting out at the prime minister. **PTI**

Rahul's disqualification BJP's tactic to divert attention : Akhilesh

LUCKNOW, MARCH 24

Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav on Friday claimed that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's disqualification from Lok Sabha is BJP's tactic to divert people's attention from issues like inflation, unemployment and an "industrialist friend" sinking India's money.

The former Uttar Pradesh chief minister also alleged that since the BJP came to power in UP in 2017, it took help of the government and the administration to get false cases lodged against Samajwadi Party MLAs like Azam Khan and got them disqualified from the state assembly.

Yadav, on a day-long visit to Noida-Greater Noida, said if fairly probed, a lot of BJP leaders would also lose their legislative membership on the basis of the language used by them and the remarks made by them.

Gandhi was disqualified from Lok Sabha on Friday, a day after he was convicted by a court in Gujarat's Surat in

a 2019 criminal defamation case over his "Modi surname" remark. Announcing the opposition leader's disqualification, the Lok Sabha Secretariat in a notification said it was effective from March 23, the day of his conviction. "In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP has taken away membership of several Samajwadi Party leaders. Today the membership of Congress's biggest leader has been taken away. If we look at everything this way, then a lot of BJP members would also be disqualified. If fairly probed, then a lot of BJP members would get disqualified for the kind of language they use and statements they make," Yadav told reporters in Greater Noida. "This has been done to deliberately divert people's attention from real issues like inflation and unemployment, and an industrialist friend who has sunk India's money. They don't want to discuss these issues," he added. Later in a tweet in Hindi, Yadav said, "Political challenges do not end with the hijacking of the membership of Parliament. The biggest movements are won on the streets, not in Parliament." **PTI**

MEA assures justice against economic fugitives

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

The Ministry of External Affairs on Friday said it would continue to make all efforts to get economic fugitives, including Mehul Choksi, to face justice in India.

The name of Choksi, who is wanted in India in connection with the Rs 13,000 crore bank fraud in the Punjab National Bank, was dropped from the Red Corner Notice list, a move that grants him freedom to freely travel out of Antigua and Barbuda, where he is holed up after fleeing from India in 2018.

"On the issue of Mehul Choksi...let me just take the larger point. Our focus is on getting economic fugitives to face justice in India and we will continue to make all efforts in this regard," External Affairs Ministry spokesman Arindam Bagchi told reporters here.

In a statement on Tuesday, the CBI said it has taken up with the Commission for Control of Interpol's Files (CCF) the serious shortcomings, procedural violations, overreach of mandate and mistakes committed by CCF in the manner of reaching this unfounded and perfunctory decision.

On the issue of the presence of radical Islamic preacher Zakir Naik in Oman, Bagchi said the ministry did not have any confirmation of his presence in Muscat. **PTI**

UP moving from hopelessness to hope under BJP govt: PM

VARANASI, MARCH 24

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday said Uttar Pradesh is rising from the earlier hopelessness towards a state of hope and aspiration under the Yogi Adityanath government.

Modi was addressing a public meeting shortly after laying foundation stones and launching 28 development projects worth over Rs 1,780 crore in Varanasi, his parliamentary constituency. "Uttar Pradesh is rising from hopelessness and moving towards hope and aspirations. Where security and facilities are made available, prosperity is certain," Modi said, appreciating the efforts of Uttar



Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath who completes the first year in office in his second term on Saturday.

During a programme at the Sampurnanand Sanskrit University ground here, Modi termed himself a

"sewak (servant)" and said, "The development of Kashi is being discussed all over the country and the world." "Whoever is coming to Kashi is taking new energy from here. Nine years ago, people had apprehensions that there would be no change in Banaras, nothing would happen in Kashi. But the people of Kashi proved every apprehension wrong with their hard work," he said.

"Today, in Kashi, both the old and the new forms are simultaneously seen," the prime minister said. He added that people in India and abroad appreciated the development of the Kashi Vishwanath temple corridor and the Ganga ghat. **PTI**

Youth Cong stages protests in Delhi

NEW DELHI, MAR 24

The Indian Youth Congress on Friday held a protest at its office here against the disqualification of party leader Rahul Gandhi from Parliament after he was convicted by a Surat court in a defamation case.

The protest was started around 6 pm where several workers of the IYC carrying placards raised slogans against Prime Minister Narendra Modi. They also burnt an effigy of the PM which

was doused and removed by the police force.

Adequate police and paramilitary personnel were deployed and they have erected barricades at the back gate of the IYC.

National general secretary of the IYC and Delhi in-charge Coco Padhi said, "The PM has tried to stifle Gandhi, who is raising the voice for the country and the youth, from the street to Parliament." Former Congress president Gandhi was disqualified from the Lok Sabha on

Friday, a day after he was convicted by a Surat court in a 2019 criminal defamation case for his alleged remark, "How come all thieves have Modi as the common surname?"

The court of Chief Judicial Magistrate HH Varma, which held Gandhi guilty under Indian Penal Code sections 499 and 500, also granted him bail and suspended the sentence for 30 days to allow him to appeal in a higher court, the Congress leader's lawyer Babu Mangukiyaa said. **PTI**

50pc cases admitted to hospitals are of H3N2: Govt

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

An ICMR survey has shown that 50 per cent of the respiratory infection cases admitted to hospitals in over two months are of H3N2 influenza, the government told the Lok Sabha on Friday.

A total of 1,161 cases of H3N2, which is a subtype of seasonal influenza virus, have been reported between January 1 and March 20, Minister of State for Health Bharati Pravin Pawar said in a written reply.

She said most of these cases showed symptoms of cough and fever. The minister said H3N2 is a viral respiratory infection and antibiotics have no role in its treatment.

However, she added, sometimes in a respiratory infection a bacterial infection may also occur and therefore physicians may prescribe an antibiotic to take care of the secondary bacterial infection.

According to the data shared by her, Delhi (370) reported the highest number of H3N2 cases followed by Maharashtra (184), Rajasthan (180) and Karnataka (134).

Pawar said the Health Ministry is monitoring the situation and taking steps to support states and UTs in management of influenza cases, including H3N2, which include issuing an advisory for closely following the trend of influenza-like illness (ILI) or severe acute respiratory infection (SARI). **PTI**

MISC

‘Disqualification setback for now, may turn into advantage for Rahul’

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's disqualification from Lok Sabha following his conviction in a criminal defamation case appears to have come as a setback at the moment but experts say it may turn out to be an advantage for him and his party.

The Lok Sabha Secretariat on Friday notified Gandhi's disqualification from the Lower House of Parliament, a day after a court in Surat convicted the Congress MP in a 2019 criminal defamation case and awarded him two years' imprisonment.

The Congress, however, put up a brave face and called it "a black day for Indian democracy", asserting that the battle will be fought both "legally and politically".

"It is big blow to Rahul Gandhi and the Congress at this moment, although one could also argue that his disqualifica-

THE CONGRESS, HOWEVER, PUT UP A BRAVE FACE AND CALLED IT "A BLACK DAY FOR INDIAN DEMOCRACY", ASSERTING THAT THE BATTLE WILL BE FOUGHT BOTH "LEGALLY AND POLITICALLY".

tion from Lok Sabha can be turned into an advantage against the background of the growing popularity of the 'Bharat Jodo Yatra', Zoya Hasan, Professor Emeritus at the JNU's School of Social Sciences, told PTI when asked for comment.

"His disqualification for the rest of the term of the current Lok Sabha is not a big deal because it is already going to be April and this session of Parliament has been washed out anyway, and two or

three more sessions are left to be held," she said.

Sushila Ramaswamy, a political science professor at Jesus and Mary College, said Gandhi's disqualification could result in public sympathy for him. "The matter of Rahul Gandhi's comment on Modi surname should have been overlooked as such a development will open up a Pandora's box," she said.

Reacting to Gandhi's disqualification, former Congress leader Sanjay Jha said the BJP has united the entire Opposition ahead of the general elections next year. In a tweet, he said, "2024 comes closer. The BJP has united the entire Opposition."

"It is time every political party works to defeat this brutal regime and brings to an end India's darkest age since 2014," Jha added. Mayank Jain, director of Route Stawk Films Pvt Ltd, also felt that with his disqualification from Lok Sabha, Gandhi may attract sympathy "without much merit or effort". **PTI**

Unsolicited commercial communication

Violation of norms led to 32,032 disconnections in 2022: Minister

NEW DELHI, MAR 24

Telecom operators disconnected 15,382 and 32,032 connections during 2021 and 2022, respectively over violation of regulations, meant to curb Unsolicited Commercial Communication or pesky marketing calls and messages, Parliament was informed on Friday.

Till date, TRAI has imposed financial disincentives of Rs 34.9 crore on the access service providers for failing to curb unsolicited commercial communications in their networks from Registered Telemarketers, Telecom Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said in a written reply in Rajya Sabha.

Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has issued Telecom Commercial Communication Customer Preference Regulation - 2018 to curb the Unsolicited Commercial Communication (UCC).

"The Access Service Providers have disconnected 15,382 and 32,032 con-



nections during the calendar year - 2021 and 2022, respectively for violating TCCCPR-2018," Vaishnaw said.

To another question in Rajya Sabha on domestic production of telecom equipments, Minister of State for Communications, Devusinh Chauhan, informed that for including design-led manufacturing under PLI, the scheme guideline was amended in June 2022, effective since April 1, 2022.

"42 companies have been approved under PLI Scheme which includes 17 design-led manufacturing companies. As on 31.01.2023, sales of Rs 20,446 crore have been reported under PLI scheme," Chauhan said. **PTI**

‘Mentally disturbed’ stabs three neighbours to death in Mumbai

MUMBAI, MARCH 24

A 54-year-old man allegedly stabbed three neighbours to death at a residential building in south Mumbai on Friday, police said.

Two others were injured in the attack and the condition of one of them was serious, they said.

Earlier, a senior police official had put the death toll at four. The grisly incident took place around 3.30 pm at Parvati Mansion on Grant Road, an official said, adding that the accused, identified as Chetan Gala, was soon arrested.

His wife and children had left him two months ago, and he suspected that his neighbours had instigated them, the official said. He had been mentally disturbed ever since, and on Friday, upon spotting his neighbours, he went to his house, picked up a knife and allegedly attacked five persons from neighbouring families.

The injured were rushed to a private hospital in Girgaum and civic-run Nair hospital where Jayendra Mistry (77), his wife Ilaben Mistry (70) and Jenil Brahmabhatt (18) died during treatment, the official said.

Prakash Waghmare (53), a house help, and Snehal Brahmabhatt (44) were undergoing treatment. **PTI**

Mata Baderkali Asthapan celebrates Zang Trai with great zest

EXPRESS INDIA NEWS NETWORK
JAMMU, MARCH 24

Mata Baderkali Asthapan trust Thalwal today on third day of Navratri organised a valedictory function to mark the celebrations of Zang trai. As a tradition on this day every year special programmes and social functions are held for women.

Prominent spiritual guru Dr Shiv prasad Raina while addressing the session spoke about the rich traditions of Sanatan dharma and the significant role of the women of our society to maintaining our cultural ethos and our centuries old traditions. He appreciated the efforts of the KP samaj especially its women folk in maintaining their traditions despite living in exile from last more than three decades.

MBAT this year celebrated zang trai function at the deviangana of newly constructed Mata Baderkali temple which was attended by hundreds of women and children from the displaced KP community who had gathered to participate in an interaction session which included an impressive talk by prominent women KP social worker Santosh shah who spoke at length about the rich traditions and Culture of the KP samaj and the role of the NariShakti to preserve the same.

A special session was conducted by Kiran Raina, Urmila Pandita, Sunita Raina, Sunita Koul, Pooja ji and their



group about the essence of "Thal barun" and women headgear known as "Targa" and it was shown to the gathering as to how the same needs to be prepared with an aim to ensure that our traditions remain intact for generations to follow.

On the occasion a melodious bhajan recital was presented which made the

audience spell bound. The speakers expressed their dismay over the some social evils prevalent in the society and Mata Baderkali Asthapan trust was urged to launch a crusade for their eradication by way of organising seminars and group discussions with the community members.

HC sets aside BJP MLA's suspension from Delhi Assembly

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

The Delhi High Court on Friday set aside the one-year suspension of BJP MLA Vijender Gupta from the Delhi Legislative Assembly and permitted him to attend the remaining Budget Session while directing him to maintain the dignity of the House.

Justice Prathiba M Singh allowed Gupta's petition in which he had challenged his one-year suspension from the assembly, but made clear that the court had not examined the merits of the suspension. "A perusal of the summary of proceedings (of assembly) shows that there was disturbance caused during the sitting of the House both by the petitioner, as also by ruling party members.

There is no gainsaying that the Members of the Legislative Assembly or any other elected House have to maintain dignity of the House in order to play a positive role owing to the mandate of the people," the court said, adding that "the petitioner shall also maintain the dignity of the House".

On March 21, Delhi Assembly Speaker Ram Niwas Goel had suspended Gupta till the next Budget Session for allegedly obstructing the proceedings of the House. **PTI**

WORLD

Fact-finding report on Leicester clashes warns of ethnic enclaves in UK

LONDON, MARCH 24

A fact-finding report into the violent clashes between groups of men on the streets of Leicester following an India-Pakistan Asia Cup cricket match in Dubai last year has warned of ethnic enclaves or ghettos of migrants in the eastern England city as a key factor behind communal tension.

The Delhi-based Centre for Democracy, Pluralism and Human Rights (CDPHR) think tank, which launched its report at a Committee Room in the House of Commons on Thursday, sheds light on the events that took place in August-September last year and their human rights implications.

In its 'Fact-finding report on Leicester Violence 2022 - The rise of territorial majoritarianism and Hinduphobia', the think tank calls for immediate action to address the underlying issues that led to

"WHAT WE FOUND WAS THAT DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN EAST LEICESTER, GROUND ZERO OF THE UNREST, ARE LIVING IN ETHNIC ENCLAVES - WITH SOME ETHNICITIES CLUBBED UP IN SOME SPACES MORE THAN OTHERS."

the Leicester violence such as the rise of extremism and hate speech.

"There were two kinds of stories circulating around the violence that occurred, which is the motivation behind this fact-finding report," explained Rashmi Samant of the ATMAH non-profit organisation and one of the co-authors of the report.

"What we found was that different religious groups in east Leicester, ground

zero of the unrest, are living in ethnic enclaves - with some ethnicities clubbed up in some spaces more than others. This phenomenon is not common in the United Kingdom but we found it continues to happen in Leicester because of the spillover effect involving migrants from countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh," she said.

The report claims that the presence of these ethnic enclaves gave rise to territorial tensions and localised majoritarianism, which were witnessed both before and during the unrest in east Leicester - the ethnic enclave of the Muslim community residing in Leicester with a minority presence of the Hindu community. Conservative Party MP Bob Blackman, chair of the India (Trade and Investment) All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG), said at the launch event that "fake news" spread on social media has been identified as a major factor behind the escalation of the clashes. **PTI**

World Bank President nominee Ajay Banga tests Covid positive

NEW DELHI/WASHINGTON, MARCH 24

US nominee for World Bank president, Ajay Banga, has tested positive for COVID-19 following which the meetings scheduled during his two-day visit to India have been cancelled.

According to a Finance Ministry statement, Banga's meeting with Nirmala Sitharaman would not happen as he is in quarantine. "During routine testing, Ajay Banga tested positive for COVID-19 but remains asymptomatic. In adherence with local guidelines, he is quarantining in isolation," the US Treasury Department said on Thursday.

Besides meeting with the Union finance minister, Banga was scheduled to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar and top officials during his two-day visit from March 23 to 24. Banga's New Delhi visit is the final stop on his three-week global tour that began in Africa before progressing to Europe, Latin America, and Asia to drum up support for his candidature for the World Bank's top



position. According to the US Treasury Department statement, Ajay Banga was to discuss India's development priorities, the World Bank, and global economic development challenges with the Indian leaders during his two-day visit. India endorsed Banga's candidacy soon after his nomination was announced.

Since then, a diverse coalition of governments has expressed their support for Banga, including Bangladesh, Cote d'Ivoire, Colombia, Egypt, France, Germany, Ghana, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, the Republic of Korea, and the United Kingdom. During his global listening tour, Banga met with senior government officials, stakeholders, business leaders, entrepreneurs, and civil society. **PTI**

Pak defence minister blasts ex-PM Imran's 'hypocrisy' for seeking help from US

ISLAMABAD, MARCH 24

Pakistan's defence minister Khawaja Asif on Friday lashed out at former premier Imran Khan's "hypocrisy" for seeking help from the United States after accusing Washington of toppling his government last year.

Addressing a press conference, Asif said that the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) chief's aide sent a letter to the US, seeking its help, after Khan named a top US diplomat of plotting to oust him from power last year. This shows the "total sum of Imran's journey," Asif said.

"His political journey started with a cypher - in which he had accused the US of conspiring against the PTI government," Asif said. "And today, Shireen Mazari (former human rights minister) has written a letter to the US for him the country he once accused of conspiracy he is now seeking help from them," the minister said. Khan, 70, has previously demanded the sacking of US Assistant Secretary of State for Central and South Asia Donald Lu for "sheer arrogance and bad manners". Lu is the central figure in Khan's claims about a US-backed regime change plot that toppled his government through a no-confidence motion in April last year. The US has repeatedly rejected Khan's allegations. Asif also criticised Khan for creating a cult of violence and vowed to counter his followers with full force if they challenge the writ of the state. **PTI**

Starbucks CEO's new role: To work as barista in stores every month

NEW YORK, MARCH 24

Starbucks' new Indian-origin CEO Laxman Narasimhan has said he will work as a barista once a month in stores to stay close to the company's culture, customers, challenges and opportunities.

Narasimhan, 55, officially became the Seattle-based coffee giant's chief executive on Monday, taking the reins from Howard Schultz about two weeks earlier than scheduled.

He was welcomed as incoming chief executive officer of Starbucks with a coffee tasting in the place where it all began at Seattle's Pike Place market store. In a letter to the employees on Thursday, the Indian-American business executive said he will always be a "fierce



advocate" for the company's partners and its culture.

"With you, I've experienced every aspect of the business to learn what it truly means to wear the green apron. You've welcomed me into our stores,

trained me in how to be a barista all to help me deeply understand what we do, how we do it, and the challenges and opportunities facing us," he wrote.

Barista is a person who serves in a coffee bar. "To keep us close to the culture and our customers, as well as to our challenges and opportunities, I intend to continue working in stores for a half day each month," he was quoted as saying by CNN.

Pune-born Narasimhan joined Starbucks as interim CEO in October and has since spent time getting to know the company including earning a barista certification, which requires 40 hours of training in stores.

He also discussed how he plans to continue the reinvention plan laid out by Schultz over the summer. **PTI**

'Aware of reports on Rahul Gandhi's jail sentence': Spokesperson for UN chief

UNITED NATIONS, MARCH 24

The United Nations is aware of the reports about Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's two-year jail sentence and that his party plans to appeal the verdict, a spokesperson for

the UN chief Antonio Guterres has said.

Farhan Haq, the Deputy Spokesman for the UN Secretary-General, was responding to a question at a press briefing here on Thursday on whether Guterres was "worried about democ-

racy" in India.

"I can say that we're aware of the reports regarding the case of Rahul Gandhi. We understand that his party does plan to appeal the decision. That's as much as I can say on that at this stage," Haq said. **PTI**

Sri Lanka settles part of India's credit line with IMF bailout package

COLOMBO, MARCH 24

Sri Lanka has settled part of India's credit line from the first tranche of the IMF bailout programme it received a couple of days ago, state minister of finance Ranjith Siyambalapitiya said on Friday.

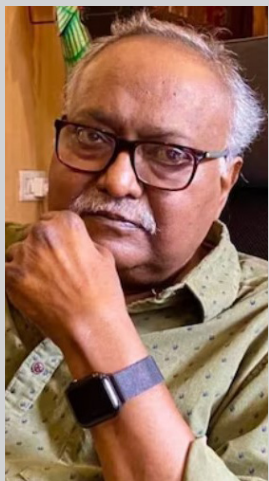
Sri Lanka on Wednesday received USD 330 million as the first tranche of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout programme, which will pave the way for the debt-ridden country to achieve better "fiscal discipline" and "improved governance," according to President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

"We have settled USD 121 million as part of India's credit line using the first tranche of IMF's bailout programme," Siyambalapitiya told reporters.

Earlier this week, the IMF approved a USD 3 billion bailout programme to help Sri Lanka overcome its economic crisis and catalyse financial support from other development partners, a move welcomed by Colombo as a "historic milestone" in the critical period.

Sri Lanka has been hit hard by a catastrophic economic and humanitarian crisis, sparked by years of mismanagement and the raging pandemic. **PTI**

ENTERTAINMENT



Director Pradeep Sarkar dies at 67

Filmmaker Pradeep Sarkar, best known for his movies "Parineeta" and "Mardaani", passed away at a hospital early on Friday, his wife Panchali said. He was 67.

The director was admitted to the ICU of Lilavati hospital in Bandra following a fever. "He was diagnosed with pneumonia, and he had many comorbidities which weakened his immunity," Panchali said.

The filmmaker's last rites were held at Santacruz Hindu Crematorium.

Sarkar started his career as ad-film maker and also directed music videos, which included Shubha Mudgal's "Ab Ke Saawan", Euphoria's "Dhoom Pichak Dhoom" and Sultan Khan's "Piya Basanti".

He turned to direction with 2005's period drama "Parineeta". The filmmaker won the National Award for best debut film of a director for the Vidya Balan-Saif Ali Khan starrer.

He went on to direct "Laaga Chunari Mein Daag" (2007), "Lafangey Parindey" (2010), "Mardaani" (2014), and "Helicopter Eela" (2018).

The news of Sarkar's death shocked the film industry.

Actors Rani Mukerji and Abhishek Bachchan, who had worked with him on "Laaga Chunari Mein Daag", said the news of Sarkar's death came as a shock. Ajay Devgn said he is unable to fathom the news of Sarkar's demise. Actors Manoj Bajpayee and Kangana Ranaut, too, said they were shocked.

PTI

'Ask me about Rajneeti, not Parineeti'



Bollywood actress Parineeti Chopra is speculated to be dating Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Raghav Chadha. The duo was spotted together in Mumbai at least on two occasions this week - for a lunch and a dinner date.

Neither Parineeti nor Raghav has spoken about it, yet.

However, on Friday, Chadha was questioned about the actress, their frequent meetings and

speculations around their wedding.

To this, he smiled and replied, "*Aap mujhse raajneeti ke sawaal kariye, Parineeti ke sawaal na kariye* (Ask me questions about politics, not Parineeti)."

When asked if he was getting married, a grinning Chadha replied, "*Appko batayenge jab karenge* (I will let you know when I will get married)."

The clip of Chadha answering the queries has since gone viral and netizens have pointed out that he blushed while answering queries about Chopra.



Rachel Bilson, Nick Viall admit faking love

Rachel Bilson was never in love with Nick Viall!

The 'O.C.' actress, who sparked romance rumours with Nick in 2019 after they exchanged flirty messages on social media, recently came spilled the beans about her alleged relationship with the 'Bachelor Nation' member.

"No, Nick and I never dated," Rachel admitted on Nick's podcast 'The Viall Files' recently. He added, "We did troll the internet." Rachel clarified that they were just "messing around - not together, but I mean with the internet," while Nick explained that the duo were "epically single and

we wanted the attention." And no, their ruse never "got to a point" where they actually felt inclined to date one another, Rachel said.

Nick explained that the fake relationship idea popped into his head after he "became good friends" with Rachel when she appeared on his podcast in July 2019. Afterward, the two brainstormed the possibility of doing a spin-off podcast. "It was going to be called 'Making Love With Nick and Rachel'," the Viall explained. "But she got some gig, and bailed on me." And with the demise of the podcast came the fall of their bogus romance, which was all a ploy for publicity.



BUSINESS

Sensex, Nifty fall amid weak trend in global equities

Mumbai, March 24

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty buckled under selling pressure for the second straight session to settle nearly 1 per cent lower on Friday as investors pared exposure to the metal, energy and realty stocks amid a bearish trend in Asian and European markets.

Besides, a depreciating rupee against the US dollar and fresh foreign fund outflows also hit investor sentiments, traders said.

In a volatile trade, the 30-share BSE Sensex declined 398.18 points or 0.69 per cent to finish at 57,527.10. During the day, it went lower by 502.3 points or 0.86 per cent to 57,422.98.

BESIDES, A DEPRECIATING RUPEE AGAINST THE US DOLLAR AND FRESH FOREIGN FUND OUTFLOWS ALSO HIT INVESTOR SENTIMENTS, TRADERS SAID.

The broader NSE Nifty fell 131.85 points or 0.77 per cent to end at 16,945.05.

Bajaj Finserv was the biggest loser among the Sensex constituents, sliding 3.81 per cent, followed by Bajaj Finance, Tata Steel, Reliance Industries, HCL Tech, SBI, Larsen & Toubro and Mahindra & Mahindra, Axis Bank and Titan.

On the other hand, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Infosys, Tech Mahindra, Power Grid, Asian Paints and Wipro were the gainers.

In Asia markets, stock exchanges in Seoul, Japan, Shanghai and Hong Kong ended lower.

European markets were also quoting in the red in the afternoon trade. The US markets ended higher on Thursday.

Meanwhile, the rupee declined 25 paise to close at 82.44 against the US dollar.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 1.73 per cent to USD 74.60 per barrel.

Foreign Portfolio Investors offloaded equities worth Rs 995.01 crore on Thursday after a day's breather, according to exchange data. **PTI**

Motovolt acquires stakes in German electric two-wheeler maker eROCKIT AG

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

Electric mobility startup Motovolt on Friday said it has acquired an undisclosed stake in German electric two-wheeler maker eROCKIT AG for 1 million euros (nearly Rs 9 crore).

The company plans to further invest around 10 million euros (nearly Rs 90 crore) in India for industrialisation of the latter's products, Motovolt said in a statement.

"The deal with eROCKIT is going to make a major impact on the Indian markets, and transform the two-wheeler segment. Our aim is to benefit from

eROCKIT's knowhow to develop relevant product solutions for Indian consumers," Motovolt Founder & CEO Tushar Choudhary said.

Motovolt intends to redefine the electric motorcycle category in India

by significantly boosting user experience through usage of eROCKIT's technology platform such as their futuristic drivetrains and the excellence of German engineering, he added. "We will also be focusing on extensively manufacturing eROCKIT's products domestically under the 'Make in India' initiative and setup a global footprint for sales and distribution of our products globally," Choudhary said. **PTI**



Rupee falls 24 paise to close at 82.44 against USD

MUMBAI, MARCH 24

The rupee depreciated by 24 paise to close at 82.44 (provisional) against the US dollar on Friday weighed down by the strength of the American currency and massive selling in the domestic equity market.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened lower by 12 paise at 82.32 as the US dollar rebounded against global currencies.

During intra-day trade, the rupee touched a high of 82.20 and a low of 82.49 against the greenback. The domestic unit finally settled at 82.44 (provisional) against the American currency, 24 paise lower against its previous close. On Thursday, the rupee settled at 82.20 against the US dollar.

According to Anuj Choudhary - Research Analyst at Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, the Indian rupee depreciated due to weak domestic markets and a positive Dollar. Sustained FII outflows also weighed on the domestic currency. Dollar rose on safe-haven appeal amid weak Asian and European currencies and equities. Dollar also gained on upbeat US current account deficit and new home sales data. Bank of England hiked interest rates by 25 bps to 4.25 per cent, the highest in 15 years, Choudhary said. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.67 per cent higher at 103.22.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, fell sharply by 3.23 per cent to USD 73.46 per barrel. On the domestic equity market front, the benchmark BSE Sensex declined by 398.18 points or 0.69 per cent to settle at 57,527.10 points, while the broader Nifty dropped by 138.85 points or 0.77 per cent to 16,945.05 points. **PTI**

ED attaches 'Ambience Tower' in Delhi's Shalimar Bagh

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

The Enforcement Directorate Friday said it has attached a multi-storeyed commercial complex, worth more than Rs 252 crore, located in Delhi's Shalimar Bagh area in connection with a money laundering investigation linked to an alleged bank fraud case against the Ambience Group.

The immovable property is named Ambience Tower and it belongs to a company called Ambience Towers Pvt Ltd, a firm of the Ambience Group promoted by Raj Singh Gehlot, the agency said in a statement.

A provisional order, under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act



(PMLA), was issued by the ED to attach the commercial building worth a total Rs 252.17 crore.

The money laundering case stems from an FIR and chargesheets filed by the Jammu and Kashmir anti-corruption bureau that found that a company named Aman Hospitality Pvt. Ltd, through its promoter director Gehlot, was sanctioned term loan facility of Rs 810 crore

by a consortium of banks led by J&K Bank to part finance its hotel project in Shahdara, Delhi.

Apart from the diversion of funds, it was also found that Gehlot "diverted" materials to the other project sites of the Ambience Group, it said.

Gehlot was arrested by the ED in September, 2021 in this case.

His wife Sheela Gehlot and other directors of the Ambience Group such as Amit Gehlot, Shamsher Singh and Pawan Singh were also named as accused in the chargesheets filed by the ED earlier.

The agency earlier attached assets worth Rs 20.20 crore belonging to Raj Singh Gehlot, his family members and the Ambience Group companies. **PTI**

Govt says 5,642 warehouse projects completed under WIF scheme

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

Around 5,642 warehousing projects have been completed under the Warehouse Infrastructure Fund (WIF) scheme so far, Parliament was informed on Friday. Under the Warehouse Infrastructure Fund (WIF) scheme, under the Ministry of Finance, about Rs 9,393.68 crore funds have been sanctioned till December 2022 for establishment of 7,953 warehouse projects spread across 21 states, Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar said in a written reply to the Rajya Sabha. **PTI**

Pak receives USD 2 bn rollover deposits from China: Report

ISLAMABAD, MARCH 24

Cash-strapped Pakistan has received a rollover of USD 2 billion in deposits for a period of one year from its all-weather ally China to help Islamabad get a much-required bailout from the IMF to stabilise its economy, a media report said on Friday.

The rollover, which basically is not a loan but a financial deposit to be kept at Pakistan's central bank for a period of one year, is one of the requirements of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in meeting its external financing needs in order to move towards inking the staff-level agreement, The News International reported.

Minister for Finance Ishaq Dar confirmed the development.

"Yes," Dar was quoted as saying in a brief response when asked about getting a rollover of USD 2 billion SAFE (State Administration of Foreign Exchange) deposits from China.

Pakistan and the IMF have been negotiating the release of a USD 1.1 billion loan since February but so far without any success due to the tough conditions by the donor which Pakistan is slow to fulfil.

Pakistan is scrambling to increase its forex reserves which are estimated to be at USD 4.8 billion after China refinanced USD 500 million last week. Earlier, a Chinese bank provided USD 700 million to Pakistan. **PTI**

Gold climbs Rs 70; silver jumps Rs 520

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

Gold price climbed Rs 70 to Rs 59,450 per 10 grams in the national capital on Friday amid gains in prices of precious metal internationally, according to HDFC Securities.

The yellow metal had closed at Rs 59,380 per 10 grams in the previous trade. Silver also jumped Rs 520 to Rs 70,500 per kilogramme. "Spot gold prices in the Delhi markets traded at Rs 59,450 per 10 grams, up Rs 70 per 10 grams," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst - Commodities at HDFC Securities, said. In the overseas market, gold and silver quoting higher at USD 1,987 per ounce and USD 23.17 per ounce, respectively. **PTI**

RBI central board discusses global, domestic economic situation

MUMBAI, MARCH 24

Reserve Bank of India's central board on Friday reviewed the global and domestic economic situation as well as the associated challenges.

The 601st meeting of the Central Board of Directors of Reserve Bank of India (RBI) was held at Hyderabad under the chairmanship of Governor Shaktikanta Das. "The board in its meeting reviewed the global and domestic economic situation and associated challenges, including the impact of current global geopolitical developments," RBI said in a statement. **PTI**

SPORT

Rudranksh wins bronze as China extend golden run

BHOPAL, MARCH 24

Reigning world champion Rudranksh Patil won bronze in the men's 10m air rifle, his second of the tournament, even as China extended their golden run at the ISSF World Cup by winning both gold medals on offer for the second consecutive day here.

Tokyo Olympics silver medallist Sheng Lihao of China won gold in the men's 10m air rifle while compatriot Huang Yuting, a double gold medallist at the Cairo World Championships last year, won the women's event. China maintained their top position on the medal tally at the end of competition day three with five gold, one silver and two bronze in their kitty. India lay second with three bronze medals to go with a gold and silver each. Playing back-to-back matches can never be easy, especially in a home World Cup, but the champion shooter that he is, Rudranksh delivered yet again, clinching bronze from what at one point seemed a lost cause. **PTI**

Sindhu exits, Satwik, Chirag duo enters quarters of Swiss Open

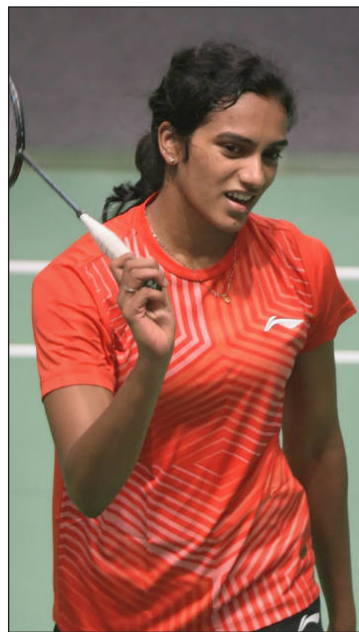
BASEL, MARCH 24

Double Olympic medallist PV Sindhu failed to defend her Swiss Open Super 300 badminton title as she was shocked by unseeded Putri Kusuma Wardani of Indonesia in a thrilling three-game women's singles second round match here.

World No 9 Sindhu, seeded fourth here, was stunned 15-21 21-12 18-21 by the 38th ranked Wardani in their first-ever face-off at the international level on Thursday night.

But second-seeded men's pairing of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty kept India's flag flying by entering the quarterfinals with a hard-fought 12-21 21-17 28-26 win over Taiwanese pair of Fang-Chih Lee and Fang-Jen Lee.

The world No 6 Indian duo will next face Danish pair of Jeppe Bay and Lasse Molhede later on Friday.



Earlier on Thursday, world No 9 and fifth seed H S Prannoy made a shock second-round exit after losing in straight games against unseeded Christo Popov of France. Prannoy, favourite coming into the contest, looked a pale shadow of himself in front of world No 40 Popov as he failed to give any fight, losing 8-21 8-21 to bow out of the men's singles event.

But it was Kidambi Srikanth, who was the first to crash out on Thursday, losing to Hong Kong's Cheuk Yiu Lee.

Going by rankings, there was hardly anything to separate the two as Srikanth is placed 20th in the world as against his rival's 19th position.

It was a hard-fought match, but Lee kept his composure to emerge 22-20 21-17 winner in the singles pre-quarter-final contest.

National champion Mithun Manjunath also bowed out in the second round, losing 19-21 10-21 to Chia Hao Lee of Chinese Taipei. **PTI**

Bengaluru's Shah excels in Dubai National Sportsbike Super Series

BENGALURU, MARCH 24

Bengaluru superbike rider Rushabh Shah created ripples in Dubai, capturing six consecutive podiums at the tough Dubai National Sportsbike Super Series recently. He claimed the feats at the Dubai Autodrome to become the first Indian to excel in the Waleed Alshemais Dubai National Championship season 2022-23 last week. Except in one race, where he had a high-side, the Indian clinched seven podiums with two wins and five second place finishes, from the eight races that he took part in his class. Astride a humble Yamaha R6 in the rookie category, the talented rider punched above his weight and secured many top-5 finishes in the higher Super Stock Experts class, which boasts of experienced riders with highly-engineered bikes. The 27-year made his stunning international debut after three seasons in the Indian National Racing championship. **PTI**

NCA has shared workload monitoring report of India players: Malhotra

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

The BCCI and the Indian team management are keeping a tab on workload management of national team players but there has been no specific directive for the IPL franchises as yet, said Delhi Capitals CEO Dheeraj Malhotra on Friday.

Malhotra, who has worked as a general manager with the BCCI, said that the National Cricket Academy (NCA) has shared a detailed workload monitoring report of all the Indian players asso-

ciated with respective franchises, which obviously helps the IPL team's medical unit to work in cohesion with the parent body. Asked if there is a specific directive on workload management of World Cup prospects, Malhotra told PTI: "Not yet. What NCA has done is, it sent a report on all the contracted players. "We have Axar, Kuldeep and Prithvi. They have given us what they have been doing and what their workload has been. But we still have not been given a directive on what they want from us and what the workload should be for players." **PTI**

Eyes on the prize

Home favourites Nikhat, Lovlina, Nitu and Saweety to punch for gold at Worlds

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

Nikhat Zareen, Lovlina Borgohain, Nitu Ghanghas and Saweety Boora will be buoyed by the home support as they fight hard to change the colour of their medals at the Women's World Boxing Championships here this weekend.

The four Indian boxers are assured of at least a silver after they pulled off

thrilling victories in their respective semifinal bouts on Thursday. For Nikhat, it's a chance to become only the second Indian to win the prestigious title more than once after the legendary MC Mary Kom, who has a record six titles to her name. Nikhat, who has moved down to 50kg from 52kg after the latter was scrapped from the Paris Olympics, has given a good account of herself in the light flyweight category. **PTI**

Salima Tete wins AHF Emerging Women's Player of the Year award

NEW DELHI, MARCH 24

Indian women's hockey team midfielder Salima Tete has been honoured with the AHF Emerging Player of the Year Award for her brilliant performance in 2022.

The 20-year-old was presented with the award at the Asian Hockey Federation's (AHF) Annual General Meeting in Mungyeong, Korea.

"I sincerely thank the Asian Hockey Federation for recognising the hard work that we have done on the ground over the years," Salima said in a statement issued by Hockey India.

"But this journey would not have been possible without the constant support that I have received from my teammates and the coaching staff who have always given me the confidence to play according to my strengths and have given me the freedom to express myself."

Asian Hockey Federation also honoured Hockey India secretary general Bhola Nath Singh with the Emerging Sports Leader award. Salima has been an integral part of the Indian team over the past couple of years and was named the Rising Player of the Tournament at the Women's Asia Cup in Muscat last year.

She made her senior team debut in 2016 in the Test series against Australia, before helping the national junior side



win a silver medal at the third Youth Olympic Games in 2018 in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Meanwhile, Hockey India president Dilip Tirkey congratulated the young midfielder for the award. **PTI**