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NEW DELHI WEDNESDAY 7 FEBRUARY 2024



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WINDOWS



Actor Kriti Sanon poses for pictures during the promotion of dance show *Jhalak Dikhhla Jaa* in Mumbai on Tuesday. — PTI

Team Ajit gets EC nod as real NCP in blow to Pawar Sr

New Delhi: The Ajit Pawar faction is the real Nationalist Congress Party, the Election Commission announced on Tuesday, ending months of speculation over the factional fight with his party founder and uncle Sharad Pawar. In an order, the EC also allotted the NCP symbol "Wall Clock" to the group led by Ajit Pawar. The decision followed the laid-out tests of maintainability of such a petition which included tests of aims of party constitution, the EC said.

RLD may dump Opp, is in touch with BJP

New Delhi: Troubles seem to be deepening in the INDIA bloc as the "Jat land" of Uttar Pradesh is abuzz that the Jayant Chaudhury-led RLD is on the verge of striking a deal with the BJP ahead of the Lok Sabha polls.

Pakistan may shut Internet on poll day

Islamabad: The caretaker government in Pakistan will consider shutting down the internet connections on the polling day on Thursday only if there is a request from a district, interim interior minister Dr Gohar Ejaz said.

COUNTERPOINT



Bad luck! You will not get a party ticket this time!

WEATHER

Max: 17°C
Min: 9°C
RH: 53%
Rain: 0%

Forecast: Cloudy

ASTROGUIDE

Shubhakarut: Uttarayana
Tithi: Pushya Bahula Dwadasi till 1.56 pm
Star: Purvashada till 4.36 am
Variyam: 3.18 pm to 4.46 pm
Durmuhurtam: 12.08 pm to 12.53 pm
Rahukalam: 12 noon to 1.30 pm
SUNSET TODAY 6.05 PM
SUNRISE TOMORROW 7.05 AM
MOONRISE TOMORROW 5.52 AM
MOONSET TODAY 3.02 PM

Secularism is ensuring all eligible avail benefits: PM

Panaji, Feb. 6: Attaining saturation of the Central government-sponsored welfare schemes in states by ensuring that all eligible individuals receive their benefits is "real secularism and social justice," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Tuesday.

Addressing the "Viksit Bharat, Viksit Goa" public meeting in Margao town, south Goa, Mr Modi said, "When there is saturation of welfare schemes, differences between people disappear. Every beneficiary gets the entire benefit...people don't have to pay a bribe to get their rights."

The Prime Minister congratulated the BJP government in Goa for attaining 100 per cent saturation in the Central government's flagship schemes.

"Saturation is Modi's guarantee to Goa and the country," he asserted.

The Prime Minister said that to attain this goal, the Central government conducted "Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra".

"Those who were away from the government schemes also benefited from Modi's guarantee after this yatra," he said.

During the meeting, the Prime Minister inaugurated the campuses of the National Institute of Technology at Cuncolim, National Institute of Water Sports at Dona Paula and the Waste Management Facility at Curchorem.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi visits an exhibition during the "Viksit Bharat, Viksit Goa 2047" programme for the inauguration and foundation stone-laying of various projects in Goa on Tuesday. — PTI

ED raids Kejriwal's PA, others over DJB 'scam'

Bid to 'scare, silence' AAP, says Atishi; ED hits back

AMRESH SRIVASTAVA and BHASKAR HARI SHARMA
NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

The Enforcement Directorate on Tuesday searched the premises of Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's personal secretary Bibhav Kumar, AAP Rajya Sabha MP and national treasurer N.D. Gupta, and some persons linked to the Aam Aadmi Party as part of a money-laundering probe into charges that the AAP and some officials received kickbacks of ₹21 crores from a Delhi Jal Board contractor.

Soon after the raid, Delhi minister and senior AAP leader Atishi accused the BJP-led Centre of trying to "scare and silence" the AAP by conducting raids on its leaders.



Delhi minister Atishi addresses a press conference on ED raids in New Delhi on Tuesday. — PTI

The residences of Bibhav Kumar, former Delhi Jal Board member Shalabh Kumar, the office of N.D. Gupta, and the premises of chartered accountant Pankaj Mangal and others associated with the AAP were covered in the search action.

To regulate live-ins ■ House to pass bill today

UCC tabled in U'khand, tribals to be exempted

PRITHVIRAJ SINGH
with agency inputs
DEHRADUN, FEB. 6

The Uttarakhand government on Tuesday tabled the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) bill in the state Assembly. The House discussed various provisions of the bill, which, among others, carries provisions to ban polygamy and unregistered live-in relationships as illegal and will likely be passed on Wednesday. The small tribal community of the hill state is exempted from the proposed law.

On Tuesday, the second day of a special session of the Assembly, chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami entered the House with a copy of the original Constitution.

Ruling party members thumped their desks and chanted "Bharat Mata ki Ji", "Vande Mataram" and "Jai Shri Ram" as Mr Dhami tabled the bill.

The original list of business for the day said the bill will be tabled, debated and passed by the House. But Speaker Ritu Khanduri allowed more time after the Opposition members protested, raising slogans in the House. They wanted time to study the bill and then offer their views.

"It seems the government wants to pass the bill without a debate in violation of legislative traditions," Leader of the Opposition Yashpal Arya said.

The Opposition also protested against the decision of the business advisory committee to sus-



Uttarakhand chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami with others holds a copy of the Constitution of India at Vidhan Sabha Bhavan in Dehradun on Tuesday. — PTI

HIGHLIGHTS	
Marriage to be illegal if the person's spouse is alive	Maximum 6-month imprisonment, ₹25,000 fine for breaking live-in norms
Right to remarry divorced spouse without any condition	Women to have equal rights for divorce
3-year imprisonment for 'halala' accused	Divorce application only after a minimum 1-year conjugal stay
Statement submission to the registrar must for live-in ties	Minimum 2-yr separation needed for divorce
Admin to inform parents of live-in couples less than 21 yrs of age	Men, women to have equal rights of inheritance under the UCC

THE BILL titled 'The Uniform Civil Code 2024' says that it "governs and regulates the laws relating to marriage and divorce, succession, live-in relations and the matters related thereto

pend the Question Hour to table the UCC. The bill applies to the whole of Uttarakhand and to people from the state living outside. The bill titled "The Uniform Civil Code 2024" says that it "governs and regulates the laws relating to marriage and divorce, succession, live-in relations and the matters related thereto."

PM-led panel to meet today to pick new EC

1st appointment after new law passed

AGE CORRESPONDENT
with agency inputs
NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

The Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led selection committee will meet on Wednesday to pick a candidate for the post of election commissioner (EC) in the three-member panel. The new EC will replace outgoing commissioner Anup Chandra Pandey, who leaves office on February 14.

Besides Mr Pandey, Arun Goel is an election commissioner, while Rajiv Kumar is the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC). Mr Pandey will retire at the age of 65, and days before, the Election Commission is likely to announce the schedule

THE NEW EC will replace outgoing commissioner Anup Chandra Pandey, who leaves office on February 14 for the Lok Sabha elections, due in April-May.

This will be the first appointment to be held after Parliament passed the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act following a Supreme Court order that mandated the presence of the Chief Justice of India in the appointment. The Apex Court had ruled that the appointment of CECs and election commissioners

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Bid to centralise: Opp ■ Students not targeted

LS passes anti-cheating bill, with steep fines, 10-year jail

PAWAN BALI
NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

The Lok Sabha on Tuesday passed the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Bill 2024 to sternly deal with malpractice and irregularities in competitive examinations with provisions for a maximum jail term of 10 years and a fine of upto ₹1 crore.

Speaking on the bill, Union minister Jitendra Singh said its provisions are meant to safeguard the interests of meritorious students and candidates. He said the government "will not allow mer-

THE BILL also proposes a high-level national technical committee on public examinations that will make recommendations to make the computerised examination process secure

itorious (candidates) to be sacrificed at the altar of organised crime". He clarified that students and candidates do not fall in the purview of this bill and there will be no harm to job aspirants.

The bill comes against the backdrop of the cancellation of a series of competitive tests such as the teachers' recruit-

ment exam in Rajasthan, the Common Eligibility Test (CET) for Group-D posts in Haryana, recruitment exams for junior clerks in Gujarat and constable recruitment examinations in Bihar following question paper leaks.

The bill also proposes a high-level national technical committee on public examinations that will make recommendations to make the computerised examination process more secure. This panel will look into developing protocols for insulating digital platforms, devising ways

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Govt 'white paper' on UPA eco mishandling

Session may be extended till Saturday

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

Ahead of the impending general election, in the last session of the 17th Lok Sabha, the Modi government plans to table a "white paper" on the UPA government's economic mismanagement and has extended the ongoing Budget Session of Parliament by one day.

Parliamentary affairs minister Pralhad Joshi on Tuesday said that the ongoing Budget Session is being extended till Saturday. The session, which began on January 31, was otherwise slated to end on February 9.

In her interim Budget speech on February 1, Union finance minister

IN HER interim Budget speech, Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman had said that the Central government will release a white paper comparing the state of the India economy before and after 2014

Nirmala Sitharaman had said that the Central government will release a white paper comparing the state of the Indian economy before and after 2014.

Houthis use drones to hit 2 ships; one bound for India

Tel Aviv, Feb. 6: Two ships, including one heading to India from the US, travelling in Middle East waters were attacked by suspected Yemen Houthi rebel drones early on Tuesday, authorities said, the latest assaults in the Iranian-backed fighters' campaign of targeting vessels over Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

A SECOND ship came under attack later Tuesday off Yemen's southern port city of Aden, the UKMTO said

tile causing "slight damage" to the vessel's windows on the bridge, the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations said. A small vessel had been nearby the ship before the attack, it added.

The private security firm Ambrey identified

the vessel as a Barbados-flagged, United Kingdom-owned cargo ship. No one was hurt onboard the vessel, which suffered "minor damage," the firm said.

A second ship came under attack later Tuesday off Yemen's southern port city of Aden, the UKMTO reported. Ambrey identified it as a Marshall Islands-flagged, Greek-owned vessel coming from the US heading to India. — AP

■ More on Page 6



Tourists at the snow-covered Mall Road after a fresh snowfall in Manali on Tuesday. Over 470 roads, including four national highways, remained closed in Himachal Pradesh after snowfall and rain in several parts. — PTI

11 dead in blast at cracker unit in MP's Harda

Bhopal/Harda, Feb. 6: At least eleven persons were killed and nearly 174 others injured in a powerful explosion and subsequent blaze at a fire-crackers factory near Harda town of Madhya Pradesh on Tuesday, a senior official said. Some videos of the incident surfaced on social media showing the massive fire with intermittent explosions taking place.

■ More on Page 4

IN BRIEF

35-year-old slits his friend's throat, held

New Delhi: A 35-year-old man was on Tuesday killed after his throat was allegedly slit by his friend over drinks for not paying a debt of ₹1,500 in southwest Delhi's Kusumpur Pahadi area. The accused, identified as Sanjay, has been arrested. "An information was received at 5:42 am at Vasant Vihar police station where the caller told police that his brother has been murdered by slitting his throat," a senior police officer said. The victim's body was lying in a pool of blood with his throat slit by a sharp object, he added. "The crime team and forensic science team were called on the spot. CCTV footages around the spot were examined. An FIR under Section 302 (murder) was registered and an investigation was taken up," the officer said. The investigation zeroed on one suspect Sanjay of the same locality and he was apprehended, the police said.

Week-old body found flowing in Noida canal

Noida: About a week old body of an unidentified man was fished out from a canal in Greater Noida on Tuesday, the police said. "The body was found in the Changauli canal, which comes downstream from Haridwar. The local police immediately rushed to the spot for inspection," a police spokesperson said. There are no visible marks of injury on the body, which appears to be 7-8 days old. Efforts are on to ascertain the identity of the dead man," the spokesperson added. The man appears to be around 30-year-old, the police said. The official said a probe has been launched into the matter by the Dankaur police station and further legal proceedings are underway. — PTI

V-P to inaugurate WSDS 2024 today

New Delhi: The World Sustainable Development Summit (WSDS) will commence on February 7, 2024, inaugurated by vice-president Jagdeep Dhankhar. Other guests including the Prime Minister of Guyana, H.E. Brigadier (Retd.) Mark Phillips, and Shri Bhupender Yadav, Union minister of environment, forest, and climate change, will also be present during the event. Organized by TERI since 2001, WSDS 2024's theme is 'leadership for sustainable development and climate justice'. With diverse perspectives, the summit will address climate change challenges, focusing on sustainable development, energy, climate action, adaptation, and sustainable consumption. Leaders will foster ambitions for a more sustainable future.

HC DIRECTS CAG TO AUDIT JAL BOARD'S A/Cs EXPEDITIOUSLY

New Delhi: The Delhi high court on Tuesday directed the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) to expeditiously audit the accounts of Delhi Jal Board (DJB) from 2018 to 2021. The high court's direction came while closing the proceedings of a plea seeking direction to CAG to audit the accounts of DJB whose financial audit has allegedly not been carried out for the last several years. The court was informed by the counsel for CAG that they have received annual accounts statements from DJB for 2018-19 to 2020-21 and they are in the process of auditing the accounts. "In view of the statement, the writ petition is closed with a direction to the CAG to audit the accounts of DJB as expeditiously as possible in accordance with the law," a bench of acting chief justice Manmohan and justice Manmeet P.S. Arora said. The petition was filed by Delhi BJP leader Harish Khurana seeking direction to DJB to maintain proper records and other relevant records and prepare an annual statement of the profit and loss with proper balance sheets from 2015 onwards as prescribed under the law and to direct CAG to conduct an audit of the board. Responding to the petition, DJB said it was making every effort to ensure that all final statements and balance sheets were duly prepared and audited in the interest of transparency and compliance with the law. — PTI

Delhi court allows transit remand of accused to J&K police Ex-Armyman-turned-LeT 'terrorist' held

BHASKAR HARI SHARMA NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

A retired havildar of the Indian Army was arrested by the Delhi police for allegedly being a member of the Lashkar-e-Taiba terror module operating in Jammu and Kashmir's Kupwara, the police said, adding that he has played an instrumental role in receiving arms and ammunition from across the Line of Control (LoC). The accused, identified as Riyaz Ahmad Rather and a resident of Kupwara district, was arrested on Sunday from the New Delhi railway station. Additional chief metropolitan magistrate Anuj Kumar Singh granted

transit remand of Riyaz on an application moved by the J&K police, claiming that he was required to be taken to Jammu and Kashmir for investigation. Riyaz was involved in hatching a conspiracy along with one Khurshid Ahmad Rather and Ghulam Sarwar Rather in receiving arms and ammunition from across the LoC by the terrorist handlers, a senior police officer said. The investigating agencies in Jammu and Kashmir received information on Sunday that one Riyaz Ahmad Rather was wanted in the recent terror module case busted by them in which five people were arrested and incriminating material,

RIYAZ was involved in hatching a conspiracy along with one Khurshid Ahmad Rather and Ghulam Sarwar Rather in receiving arms and ammunition from across the LoC by the terrorist handlers, a senior police officer said

including five A-K rifles (short), five A-K magazines, and 16 short A-K rounds, were recovered. These arms and ammunition were sent by Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) based LeT terrorist handlers Manzoor Ahmad Sheikh alias Shakoor, a resident of Gabra Karnah, and Qazi Mohammad Khushal, a resident of Dhanni in Karnah, the

officer said, adding that both were operating from across the border.

It was informed that Riyaz was absconding and would reach New Delhi railway station in the wee hours. A team was constituted and deployed at the railway station. It identified Riyaz and apprehended him when he was trying to flee from exit gate number 1 in the early hours, the officer said.

It was revealed that he, along with his friend Altaf, had boarded the Mahakaulal Express from Jabalpur and reached Hazrat Nizamuddin railway station around 3.00 pm on Saturday. They took an auto-rickshaw and reached New Delhi railway station. Riyaz was

about to go to some other hideout.

Riyaz is suspected of having received a consignment of arms and ammunition from Khurshid Ahmad Rather and Ghulam Sarwar Rather—both already arrested by the Jammu and Kashmir police.

Riyaz and his friend Altaf retired from the Indian Army on January 31, 2023, the police said.

One mobile phone and one SIM card have been recovered from Riyaz's possession. Riyaz has been arrested under appropriate sections of law. The Jammu and Kashmir police officials have been informed for further necessary action at their end, the Delhi police said.

Taxpayers' money utilised to prioritise education: Kejriwal

Inaugurates a new govt school building 'Edu budget doubled since AAP in power'

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 6



Arvind Kejriwal

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal on Tuesday said his government is utilising the taxpayers money to prioritise education, adding the students should make the country proud.

He made the remark while addressing the students at the inauguration of a government school building in Paschim Vihar.

"When we (AAP) came to power, we doubled the budget for education. But it was not possible to build all these schools without the support of Delhi residents. It is the taxpayers money which has helped us to provide free education," Mr Kejriwal said.

"When you grow up and achieve something in life, remember the country paid for your education," he added.

The chief minister said even if he dies he will be satisfied to have worked for the education of the kids from poor families.

Mr Kejriwal said he is doing a virtuous deed to provide free education to the children from poor backgrounds.

The chief minister inaugurated the newly built building of Dr B.R. Ambedkar School of Specialized Excellence A6 in Paschim Vihar.

The government school will provide education to around 1,200 students and will be equipped with state-of-the-art facilities.

MCC violation case: Summons issued to CM quashed by HC

Panaji, Feb. 6: The Goa bench of the Bombay high court on Tuesday quashed the summons issued to AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal by a magistrate in an alleged case of violation of the model code of conduct.

Talking to PTI, the party's Goa unit chief Amit Palekar said the high court quashed the summons issued to the Delhi chief minister on a complaint filed against him during the 2017 Goa assembly election.

The judicial magistrate first class (JFMC) Mapusa had summoned Kejriwal in connection with a chargesheet filed against him under the Representation of the People Act and section 171 (E) of the Indian Penal Code dealing with bribery.

— PTI

'84 riots: City HC gives SIT time to file reply to plea for action against Cong's Kamal Nath

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 6



Kamal Nath

The Delhi high court on Tuesday gave a special investigation team (SIT) time to file its status report on a plea seeking action against Congress' Kamal Nath for his alleged role in a case relating to the 1984 anti-Sikh riots and listed the matter for April 23.

Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma was informed that the SIT set up by the Union home ministry has not yet filed its status report on the petition filed by BJP's Manjinder Singh Sirsa.

The high court had on January 27, 2022, asked the SIT to file the status

report on the plea. On Tuesday, the counsel for the SIT asked the court for more time to file the report as the records had to be traced.

The case is related to a mob of rioters storming the Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib in the city.

Mr Nath had previously denied the charges.

Mr Sirsa sought a direction to the SIT to take action against Mr Nath in the FIR lodged in 1984 at the Parliament Street

police station. Five persons were named as accused in the case and were allegedly accommodated at Mr Nath's house. Those accused were discharged due to lack of evidence. However, Mr Nath was never named in the FIR.

The SIT, in September 2019, decided to reopen seven anti-Sikh riot cases, where the accused were either acquitted or the trial was closed.

After the notification became public, Mr Sirsa claimed that Mr Nath, also the former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, allegedly gave shelter to five people who were accused in one of the seven cases.

The seven anti-Sikh riot cases were registered in 1984 at the police stations in Vasant Vihar, Sunlight Colony, Kalyanpuri, Parliament Street, Connaught Place, Patel Nagar, and Shahdara.

The SIT was set up on February 12, 2015, following a recommendation by the Union home ministry-appointed Justice (retd) G.P. Mathur committee.

The three-member SIT comprises two inspector general-rank IPS officers and a judicial officer.

Riots had broken out following the assassination of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who was shot dead by her Sikh bodyguards on October 31, 1984.

Man arrested for celebratory firing

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

Taking cognizance of a viral video in which a man can be seen firing bullets during a marriage function, the Delhi police has registered a case and launched an investigation into the matter, officials said on Tuesday. "We have registered an FIR and started further investigation into the matter. We got to know that a man fired more than three bullet rounds during a marriage function in Kumhar basti of Gharoli village," said a senior police officer.

According to a purported video, a man can be seen firing bullets from a pistol during a marriage function in Gharoli village under the Ghazipur police jurisdiction. The

video went viral on social media.

It was found during investigation that a marriage was solemnised on February 4 and the alleged person got into an act of celebratory gun fire when the "baraat" was about to leave for Baraut in Uttar Pradesh, the police said.

The person who is seen firing the weapon in the video was identified as Satpal (50), the father of the groom, they said.

"An FIR under relevant provision of the Arms Act and 336 (act endangering life or personal safety of others) of the IPC has been registered against him. The man has a valid pistol license," the officer said.

"Further investigation is on into the matter," the officer added.

Sikkim girl raped, boiling dal poured by her boyfriend

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

In a distressing incident in south Delhi, a woman from Sikkim endured grievous harm, allegedly raped, physically assaulted, and left with over 20 burn injuries from scalding lentils poured on her by a man who had lured her with promises of employment and marriage.

Identified as Paras, he violently attacked her when she refused to marry him due to the lack of a job. Confined for hours, she was rescued by Neb Sarai police following a PCR call and rushed to AIIMS Hospital.

Investigations revealed that the victim, originally from Darjeeling, had befriended Paras over the past few months but wasn't married to him. She had come to Delhi en route to Bangalore but was misled by Paras, who assured her a job in Delhi.

Accordingly, a case under sections 323 (voluntarily causing hurt), 376 (rape), and 377 (unnatural sex) of the IPC has been registered and no physical assault by rod, dhandha etc. revealed in MLC report," a police official added.

MCD proposes to increase financial powers of mayor

Proposes to divert ₹1,500 crores to discretionary fund; BJP opposes

AGE CORRESPONDENT with agency inputs NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

The AAP-led MCD on Tuesday proposed to increase the financial powers of mayor Shelly Oberoi with the diversion of ₹1,500 crore from the 2023-24 budgetary allocation to her discretionary fund, a move that was strongly opposed by Opposition BJP councillors. The cut motion proposing amendments in the revised budget estimates for 2023-24 was moved in the MCD House by Leader of the House Mukesh Goel.

Protesting the motion, BJP councillors stormed into the Well of the House, leading to two adjournments.

The proposal, if approved by the commissioner, will increase the financial powers of the mayor, vesting upon her the right to use the funds at her discretion, BJP members alleged.

The cut motion paves the way to divert funds amounting to around ₹1,500 crore from the 2023-24 budgetary allocation



Shelly Oberoi

reserved for different works, Leader of the Opposition in the House, Raja Iqbal, said.

The transfer of the amount will be done to the discretionary funds allocated to the mayor to undertake urgent works, he claimed.

"The AAP is attempting to run the city in an unconstitutional manner. The mayor is unlawfully being given powers on more than ₹1,500 crore. By bringing the cut motion, AAP's focus is on stripping employees' salary funds and the rights of all committees (in the MCD)," Iqbal said in a statement.

The cut motion is a power given to a member of the House to propose amendments, alteration or deletion in budgetary allocations.

Court allows Sanjay Singh to attend Parl to take oath as MP

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

A Delhi court on Tuesday granted fresh permission to Aam Aadmi Party leader Sanjay Singh, arrested in alleged excise scam, to attend Parliament to take oath as a Rajya Sabha MP. Special Judge M.K. Nagpal allowed Mr Singh to go to Parliament in police custody either on February 8 or 9.

The judge passed the order on the application filed by Mr Singh, seeking directions to the jail superintendent concerned for taking him physically to Rajya Sabha to take oath as its member.

The judge had earlier on February 3 allowed a similar application filed by Mr Singh. However, the Aamdi Party leader could not take oath despite reaching Parliament on Monday.

Official sources cited the direction of Rajya Sabha on August 11, 2023 that Mr Singh's suspension for unruly conduct during the monsoon session will remain in force and he cannot attend proceedings till the privileges committee submits its report and it is considered by the House.



Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan and minister of state Annpurna Devi visit an exhibition of the "ULLAS MeLa" in New Delhi on Tuesday. — PTI

PM-led panel to pick new EC

Continued from Page 1

shall be made by the President based on the advice given by a committee consisting of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha or the leader of the largest Opposition party in the House and the Chief Justice of India.

However, in December last year, the government brought about a change in the law, removing the role of the Chief Justice of India in the appointment of the election commissioners. Before the Supreme Court's order, the President appointed the CECS and the election commissioners on the recommendation of the government. As per the provi-

sions of the new law, the President will appoint the CECS and the election commissioners on the recommendation of a selection committee, which will consist of three members—the Prime Minister, one Union Cabinet minister and the Leader of the Opposition or the leader of the single largest party in the Opposition in the LS.

A search committee headed by the Union law minister and comprising two Union secretaries is learnt to have shortlisted five candidates for consideration by the Prime Minister-led selection committee.

Union law minister Arjun Meghwal and Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, along

with the Prime Minister, are part of the selection committee. This selection panel has the power to consider even those not short-listed by the search committee. The bill was passed in the last Winter Session, when 97 of the Opposition members were suspended for "misconduct." The Opposition protested against the passing of the new law, arguing that the amended bill will lead to the appointment of "yes men" as the CECS, as two of the three members of the selection committee are the PM and a Union Cabinet minister.

The Opposition members dubbed the amendment "one of the biggest blows to democracy".

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

The disruption of India's food systems during the Covid-19 pandemic was associated with a steep rise in malnutrition among children as the lockdown impacted their nutritional status, according to a study.

Researchers from the Tata-Cornell Institute for Agriculture and Nutrition in New Delhi analysed pre and post-pandemic survey data on children's health and nutrition.

The study, published in the Economic and Political Weekly journal, found that the number of children deemed underweight increased by 14 per cent as

THE RESEARCHERS found that the percentage of underweight children increased from 31 per cent in 2017 to 45 per cent in 2021, with children under the age of 2 disproportionately impacted

a result of disruptions caused by the pandemic.

These included supply chain disruptions, price inflation, loss of work, and the interruption of government food safety net programmes.

Previous TCI research on the impact of Covid-19 has found that supply chain disruptions caused food prices to increase and that women's dietary diversity

worsened during the pandemic.

"Researchers long suspected that pandemic-related disruptions to India's food systems reduced access to healthy, nutritious diets, especially for marginalised populations dependent on government programmes," TCI director Professor Prabhu Pingali said.

The team, including TCI researcher Payal Seth, examined survey data collected from 511 households in Bihar and Odisha in June 2017 and July 2021.

The researchers found that the percentage of underweight children increased from 31 per cent in 2017 to 45 per cent in 2021, with children under

the age of two disproportionately impacted.

The study shows a number of factors were behind a child's weight-for-age worsening. These included reduced access to food safety net programmes like Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and the partnerships and opportunities to strengthen and harmonise actions for nutrition initiatives or the mid-day meal scheme.

Household production diversity—the number of crops a farming household grows—was a significant predictor of weight-for-age in the TCI study as it improves resilience to market disruptions, according to the researchers.

SHORT TAKES

LS storm over Baalu's jibe against Murugan

New Delhi: Lok Sabha on Tuesday witnessed a war of words over a remark by DMK MP T.R. Baalu against Union minister L. Murugan, with ruling BJP MPs asking the DMK leader to apologise for "insulting" a Dalit. As Mr Baalu did not heed to the demand, Speaker Om Birla expunged the word from the records, while DMK members along with the Congress and Left MPs staged a walk out. However, Mr Baalu later on told reporters that the word he used against the minister was not un-parliamentary. The incident took place when the House was discussing a question related to flood relief to Tamil Nadu during the Question Hour. After two of his party colleagues asked questions on the subject, Mr Baalu asked a supplementary one. In the mean time, Mr Murugan, who also hails from Tamil Nadu, said Mr Baalu was asking an "irrelevant" question.

Champai: Soren fell victim to conspiracy

Ranchi: Jharkhand chief minister Champai Soren on Tuesday claimed that his predecessor Hemant Soren fell victim to a conspiracy. "His government was given a mandate for five years. However, a conspiracy was hatched against Hemant Babu and the government was toppled in four years," the CM told reporters at the Assembly here. The leadership has undergone a change, but the JMM-led alliance will continue to take forward the schemes launched by Hemant Soren, he said. "I have to complete the unfinished schemes of Hemant Babu," Mr Champai said. On Cabinet expansion, he said, "It will happen soon." Meanwhile, Congress legislature party leader Alamgir Alam said talks about the Cabinet expansion were underway. — PTI

Cong leader seek probe in land deal

Bhubaneswar: Congress Legislature Party (CLP) leader Narasingha Mishra on Tuesday staged a protest in the middle of the House during Zero Hour discussion, demanding Vigilance probe on the land acquisition deal for the Vedanta University project at Puri. He also demanded a ruling from the Speaker Pramila Mallick on the issue. During the Zero Hour discussion on the second day of the Budget Session, Mr Mishra read out all the verdicts on the Vedanta issue — from Lokpal to the Orissa high court and Supreme Court. He alleged that the Odisha government had provided "undue" favour to the firm, citing state government's willingness to provide 15K acres of land for the project despite a mere demand of 3K acres of land by Vedanta Group.

NIA CHARGES 24 OPERATIVES OF TRAFFICKING GANG

AMRESH SRIVASTAVA, NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

The National Investigation Agency on Tuesday said it had chargesheeted 24 operatives of international human trafficking syndicates involved in trafficking of Bangladeshis and Rohingyas of Myanmar origin into India with forged Indian identity documents. The chargesheeted accused include four Bangladeshis and one Rohingya of Myanmar origin. The charge sheet was filed on Monday before the NIA special court at Guwahati under various provisions of IPC, Foreigners Act and Passport Act. So far, 29 persons were initially arrested by the NIA in massive raids conducted across 39 locations in Tripura, Assam, J&K and West Bengal in coordination with the state police agencies. "A large number of incriminating documents, forged Indian identity documents, bank documents and digital devices were seized during the raids. Based on investigational leads, four more accused were apprehended from Tripura, taking the total number to 33," NIA said. The case was initially registered by the Assam Police under Passport Act 1967 against some anti-social elements.

J&K local bodies bill seeks quota for OBCs in panchayats and municipalities

Lok Sabha passes 3 bills on J&K

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

Lok Sabha on Tuesday passed three bills on Jammu and Kashmir, including one to provide reservation to Other Backward Classes in local bodies in the state.

Government on Tuesday passed Jammu and Kashmir Local Bodies Laws (Amendment) Bill-2024, the Constitution (Jammu and Kashmir) Scheduled Castes Order Amendment Bill and the Constitution (Jammu and Kashmir) Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Bill 2023.

Replying to a brief debate on the Jammu and Kashmir Local Bodies Laws (Amendment) Bill-2024, Union minister of state for home Nityanand Rai said the people of Jammu and Kashmir have started reaping the fruits of development ushered in by the government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Currently, there is no provision for reservation of seats for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in panchayats and municipalities in J&K.

The bill seeks to provide reservation to Other Backward Classes in panchayats and municipalities in J&K and bring consistency in the local body laws of the Union territory with the provisions of the Constitution. "With this, justice will be ensured to the citizens of Other Backward Classes of Jammu and Kashmir for the first time after 75 years of Independence," according to the statement of objects and reasons of the bill.

In his reply to the discus-



Congress MPs Shashi Tharoor, Karti Chidambaram and Gaurav Gogoi and others at the Parliament House complex during the Budget session on Tuesday. — PTI

sion on the bill in the Lok Sabha, Mr Rai said, "I wish to make one thing clear, no matter how much you go around in circles, but in Jammu and Kashmir wherever you go you will only hear 'Modi, Modi' and the development ushered in by Modi."

The Constitution (Jammu and Kashmir) Scheduled Castes Order Amendment Bill seeks to include "Valmiki" in the list of SCs in the Union territory. The Constitution (Jammu and Kashmir) Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Bill 2023 seeks to include the communities of "Gadda Brahmin", "Koli", "Paddari Tribe" and "Pahari Ethnic Group" in the list of Scheduled Tribes in respect of Jammu and Kashmir.

BJP member from Jammu and Kashmir Jugal Kishore Sharma said the bill would ensure justice to OBCs.

Opp. members urge Centre to hold J&K elections soon

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

Opposition members in the Lok Sabha on Tuesday urged the government to hold Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir at the earliest.

Participating in a debate on "The Jammu and Kashmir Local Bodies Laws (Amendment) Bill 2024", J&K National Conference lawmaker Masoodi demanded that the polls in the Union territory be held soon.

Noting that the Central government should have decided on the polls before the Supreme Court's intervention in the matter, he referred to the Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement, in which he

had on Monday said his government would take big decisions. Polls in the Union territory should be held before other big-ticket decisions are taken, Mr Masoodi added.

The SC had a few months back asked the Election Commission to hold Assembly polls in Jammu and Kashmir by September this year.

Speaking in the debate, TMC leader Saugata Roy also referred to the SC observation, and pitched for early Assembly polls in Jammu and Kashmir.

In his reply to the discussion on the bill in the Lok Sabha, Mr Rai said he made no reference to the Opposition demand for the government to spell out a time frame for holding of J&K polls.

Minister: No discrimination over Central disaster funds

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

Union minister of state for home Nityanand Rai on Tuesday dismissed allegations that the Central government was discriminating against non-BJP-ruled states while disbursing funds for disaster relief.

Replying to a question on flood relief to Tamil Nadu in the Lok Sabha, he dismissed the allegations that the non-BJP-ruled states were being discriminated against while disbursing disaster relief funds.

"In fact, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is very sensitive to the need of the state governments during any natural disaster, and the Central government provides all kinds of help during any crisis," Mr Rai said, while dismissing the allegation that Tamil Nadu was being discriminated against by the Centre.

He also informed that ₹2,013 crores was still lying with the Tamil Nadu government under the SDRF, which it is free to spend for flood relief.

The minister added that under the present government, an inter-ministerial Central team is being dispatched even before a request from the state government comes.



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi addresses supporters during national flag handover ceremony as the "Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra" enters Odisha on Tuesday. — PTI

Rahul in Odisha, says yatra aims to connect country

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO BHUBANESWAR, FEB. 6

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra entered Odisha on Tuesday evening with formal handing over of the flag at Biramitrapur in Sundergarh district.

Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee (OPCC) president Sarat Pattanayak, campaign committee chairperson Bijay Patnaik, AICC in-charge Dr Ajoy Kumar, former OPCC presidents: Niranjan Patnaik and Jayadev Jena, senior leaders such as Suresh Kumar Routray and Mohammad Moquim, etc. received Mr Gandhi at the entry point.

In his brief address to the public at the reception ceremony, the Congress leader said, "I am feeling good to come to Odisha. You opened a shop of love in the market of hate (Nafrat ke Bazaar

MR GANDHI will hold a road show and a public rally in Rourkela. He will address a public meeting at Jharsuguda on Thursday following which he will leave Odisha for Chhattisgarh

mein Mohabbat ki Dukan). The main objective of this Yatra is to connect India. This journey has come out in protest against injustice meted out to tribals, downtrodden, farmers and women. I will remain in Odisha for the next three days and interact with people."

He raised the issues of unemployment, price hike, privatisation of government companies and social injustice.

On Wednesday, Mr Gandhi will hold a road show and a public rally in Rourkela. He will address a public meeting at Jharsuguda on Thursday, following which he will leave for Chhattisgarh.

Poll body gives Sharad Pawar option to pick his party name

Ajit faction is real NCP, rules EC

VINEETA PANDEY NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

The man who once found a political party in 1999, is no more its custodian. In a major setback to Sharad Pawar — the grand old man of Maharashtra politics — the Election Commission of India on Tuesday said his nephew Ajit Pawar is the real owner of Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) now, as he has got the numbers.

Giving a ruling in favour of Ajit Pawar after 10 hearings spread over six months, the EC said, with a backing of 57 out of 81 legislators, Ajit Pawar's faction can use the NCP name and its poll symbol



Ajit Pawar

"Clock". However, in view of the upcoming Rajya Sabha elections, the EC has given a "one time option" to Sharad Pawar faction to pick a new name for its political outfit and provide three preferences by Wednesday afternoon.

Jubilant with the order Maharashtra deputy CM Ajit Pawar said he accepts this decision with humil-

MAHARASHTRA DEPUTY CM Ajit Pawar said he accepts this decision with humility.

SHARAD PAWAR'S daughter Surpiya Sule said they would fight back, as EC order didn't follow SC ruling.

ty; but his cousin and daughter of Sharad Pawar, Surpiya Sule said they would fight back, as the Supreme Court ruling in deciding such cases was not followed. She even said her father would rebuild the party.

"What was done with Shiv Sena earlier has happened to us now. The names in the order (of

ECI) have changed but the content remains the same. Second, the Election Commission has given us an option to give them three names and three symbols by tomorrow evening, so we will of course do that," Ms Sule said.

Total number of NCP legislators, including MPs, MLAs and MLAs is 81; out of which Ajit Pawar filed 57 affidavits supporting him, while Sharad Pawar — the man who found the party — had 28 by his side.

Ajit Pawar had walked away with a majority of MLAs in July last year and supported the BJP-Shiv Sena government led by CM Eknath Shinde.

YOJNA GUSAI NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

Troubles seem to be deepening in the Opposition INDIA camp as the "Jat land" of Uttar Pradesh is abuzz that the Jayant Chaudhury-led RLD is on the verge of striking a deal with the BJP ahead of the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

Sources disclosed a prominent Jat figure, who is not from any political party, is also playing the role of one of the key negotiators between the BJP and RLD.

Talks between the two parties, sources said, have been ongoing for the past few months as the Jat dominated regional out-



Jayant Chaudhury

fit's feedback from its vote bank since the last Assembly polls in the state was "worrisome". The RLD had contested the last UP polls with the SP. Amidst indications that the Jat-dominated areas of western Uttar Pradesh could see the Muslim vote bank backing mainly the Akhikesh Yadav-led Samajwadi Party candidates or Congress candidates and the Jats supporting the BJP in the Lok Sabha polls, feelers were being sent to the BJP. The BJP leadership is also in

touch with the RLD chief for sometime now. The region was in news over the farmers' protests against the now repealed farm laws and the Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013.

The RLD, it is learnt, wants to field its candidates in Kairana, Baghpat, Amroha, Mathura and Muzaffarnagar.

The BJP, it is learnt, is in no mood to give Muzaffarnagar and Mathura. Union minister Sanjeev Balyan has represented Muzaffarnagar since 2014 and actor-turned-politician Hema Malini is an MP from Mathura for the second consecutive term.

In setback to BRS ahead of 2024 polls, LS MP joins Cong

Hyderabad, Feb. 6: In a setback to the Opposition BRS in Telangana, the party's Lok Sabha member from Peddapalle (SC) B. Venkatesh Netha joined the Congress on Tuesday.

Mr Netha joined the grand old party in Delhi in the presence of AICC general secretary (organisation) K.C. Venugopal, chief minister A. Revanth Reddy and other leaders, party sources said here.

After joining the party, Mr Netha, along with CM Reddy and other leaders, paid a courtesy visit to AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge, they said.

He had earlier served in the state excise department before taking the political plunge in 2018. He had unsuccessfully contested the 2018 Telangana Assembly elections on a Congress ticket.

However, he later joined BRS (then TRS) and got elected to the Lok Sabha from Peddapalle (SC) constituency in 2019.

Chief minister Revanth Reddy, who is also the president of Congress in Telangana, is currently on a visit to Delhi. — PTI

Saffron storm will hit Delhi, uproot dictatorship: Uddhav

'Maha to decide direction of nation'

SONU SHRIVASTAVA MUMBAI, FEB. 6

Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray on Tuesday claimed Maharashtra would decide the direction of the country and a "saffron storm will hit Delhi and uproot the dictatorship".

While addressing the party workers at his residence, the Shiv Sena (UBT) chief said that dictatorship cannot be an option and it should be

uprooted. Maharashtra will decide the direction of the country which will be to overthrow dictatorship.

The people from Marathwada region on Tuesday joined the Shiv Sena (UBT) in the presence of leader of Opposition in the council Ambadas Danve.

Addressing them, Mr Thackeray said he had been touring the coastal areas in Konkan region of the state from the last

three to four days. "During the outbreak of the Covid-19, I had implemented 'my family my responsibility' campaign. I am now checking whether my family is still with me or not," said Mr Thackeray, the former CM of Maharashtra.

He said that the Konkan region had twice witnessed storms. But he had experienced a saffron storm in the last four days. "A saffron storm will hit Delhi and

uproot the dictatorship.... Some people have questions in their minds about the opposition INDIA alliance, Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA), but where is the option," the Sena (UBT) chief said. "There is no alternative to the dictatorship but it should be first uprooted. This is the first option to the dictatorship. "Dictatorship cannot be an option and it should be uprooted," Mr Thackeray added.

Nath says son to contest from Chhindwara after nomination

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY BHOPAL, FEB. 6

Veteran Congress leader and Madhya Pradesh former chief minister Kamal Nath on Tuesday said that his son Nakul would contest from the Chhindwara Lok Sabha constituency in the upcoming polls "after being nominated for the seat by the AICC".

Mr Nath's statement comes a day after son Nakul, who currently represents the Chhindwara LS constituency, declared that he would seek re-election from the seat in the

upcoming elections. Nath Junior's declaration of his candidature for the Chhindwara LS seat before the formal announcement by the AICC has raised many eyebrows within the Congress here, forcing the former chief minister to clarify the issue.

"The Congress has already started preparations for the upcoming LS elections and Nakul Nathji will seek re-election from Chhindwara after being nominated by AICC," Mr Nath said.

Mr Nath's statement comes amid the state Congress leadership mounting pressure on the senior party leaders to join the fray in the coming LS elections to counter the BJP with their experience. Mr Nath, meanwhile, on Tuesday joined the meeting of Pradesh Election Committee (PEC) of the party, called to discuss the prospective candidates of the party in six LS seats. AICC general secretary in-charge of Madhya Pradesh affairs Jitendra Singh chaired the meeting. Meanwhile, several senior leaders reportedly expressed their unwillingness to contest the upcoming LS polls.

Pilot: Could have won Raj polls with more effort

New Delhi, Feb. 6: Congress leader Sachin Pilot on Tuesday said his party could have won the Rajasthan Assembly polls if they had made some more efforts, adding that differences between him and former chief minister Ashok Gehlot had been ironed out and they did not impact the poll results. Speaking at an event, Mr Pilot said the Congress gave a good fight in Rajasthan. However, he regretted that they did not win. "I felt in Rajasthan we had a very good chance. We made a lot of effort. But if we would have done a bit more," Mr Pilot added. — PTI

Deposit passport to police: SC to ex-MP Anand Mohan

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

The Supreme Court on Tuesday asked former Lok Sabha MP Anand Mohan, a murder convict who is out on remission granted by Bihar government, to surrender his passport and record his attendance every fortnight at the police station.

A bench of Justices Surya Kant and K.V. Viswanathan gave the Centre one last opportunity to file its affidavit on the remission granted to Mohan, undergoing life term in the 1994 murder case of then Gopalganj district magis-

trate G. Krishnaiah. "Respondent (Anand Mohan) should deposit his passport immediately in the local police station and record his presence at the police station every fortnight," the bench ordered.

Senior advocate Siddharth Luthra, representing Uma Krishnaiah, the wife of the slain officer, told the bench that this matter has been dragging on for a while as the Centre has not filed its reply to the petition challenging the remission.

The Centre was issued notice in May last year and the government is still seeking time to file an affidavit, Mr Luthra said.



Union home minister Amit Shah with senior BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani during a meeting on Tuesday. — PTI

SHORT TAKES

Amid snow, rains, 473 HP roads shut

Shimla: Over 470 roads, including four national highways, remained closed in Himachal Pradesh on Tuesday after snowfall and rain in several parts, the state emergency operation centre said. As per centre, 473 roads were closed while 398 transformers and 38 water supply schemes were disrupted. In Himachal, January was recorded as the driest in the past 17 years as the state received 6.8 mm rains against normal rainfall of 85.3 mm, a deficit of 92 per cent, according to the MeT department. In January 1996, the rain deficit was 99.6 per cent and in 2007, the rain deficit was 98.5 per cent. Of the total, 153 roads were closed for vehicles in Lahaul and Spiti, 134 in Shimla and 68 in Kullu. — P/TI

4 women labourers die in WB accident

Rampurhat, West Bengal: Four women labourers were killed and several others injured after a mini-truck rammed into a motor van in West Bengal's Birbhum district on Tuesday, the police said. The accident took place at Munsuba More on NH-14 in the district's Rampurhat area, the police said, adding, three women died on the spot, while the fourth woman was declared dead at the hospital. The speeding mini-truck hit the motor van, which was carrying 15 people, from behind and its riders fell on the road. The vehicle, while fleeing the spot, crushed three women labourers under its wheels, and they died on the spot, a police officer said. — P/TI

Modi govt 'white paper' on UPA eco mishandling

Continued from Page 1 fearing that it may add to the then-increasing global pessimism against India. "It is now appropriate to look at where we were then till 2014 and where we are now, only for the purpose of drawing lessons from the mismanagement of those years. The government will lay a white paper on the table of the House," the Union finance minister had announced while presenting the interim Budget for the next financial year. In her Budget speech, Ms Sitharaman said that when the Modi government assumed the reins in 2014, the responsibility to mend the economy step by step and to put the governance systems in order was enormous. The need of the hour, she said, was to give hope to the people, to attract investments and to build support for the much-needed reforms. "The government did that successfully, following our strong belief in 'nation-first'," Ms Sitharaman said. Parliament usually does not function on weekends, but there have been instances in the recent past when the Houses have met on Saturdays.

Toll may rise ■ Panel to probe incident ■ Modi expresses grief
11 dead, over 170 hurt in blast, blaze at cracker factory in MP

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY
BHOPAL, FEB. 6

At least eleven people, including four women, were on Tuesday killed and over 170 others injured in a powerful explosion and subsequent fire that broke out in a firecracker factory in district headquarters of Harda in Madhya Pradesh. The incident took place in Bairgarh on the outskirts of Harda town at around 11 am. The death toll may rise since several people were still feared trapped under the debris of the collapsed building, sources said. Around 60 houses near the factory were completely gutted in the fire, officials said. The National Disaster Response Force and State



An injured person being shifted to a hospital after a massive fire broke out in a firecracker factory in Madhya Pradesh's Harda town on Tuesday. — P/TI

Disaster Response Force were deployed in the rescue operation. More than 230 people who sustained burn injuries were admitted to the district hospital in Harda, authorities said. Eyewitness accounts said that several vehicles passing by the mishap site also caught fire. More than 50 fire tenders mobilised from seven districts were deployed to bring the fire under control. "The factory was found unfit for running the facility. The cause of fire is yet to be ascertained," local SDM K.C. Parte said. Chief minister Mohan Yadav held an emergency

meeting and constituted a 3-member committee to probe the incident. "Strong action will be taken against the guilty in the incident. However, our focus is now to rescue the people and provide proper medical treatment to the injured", he said. He announced an ex-gratia of ₹4 lakh each to the next of the kin of the deceased and free treatment to the injured in the incident. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has expressed his condolences to the families of those who lost their loved ones in the tragedy. The PM announced release of ₹2 lakh each to the next of kin of the deceased and ₹50,000 each to the injured. President Draupadi Murmu also expressed grief over the incident.

Juvenile gets 20-year RI in Pari rape and murder case

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO
BHUBANESWAR, FEB. 6

Odisha's Nayagarh Children's Court on Tuesday sentenced the accused in the sensational Pari (actual name withheld) rape and murder case to 20 years of rigorous imprisonment. The Court also imposed a fine of ₹6,000 on the accused who is a minor. The accused will now remain in the correctional home. He would be sent to jail after attaining the age of 21, prosecution lawyer Chittaranjan Kanungo, quoting the provision of law, said. The accused was arrested on December 20, 2020 by the Special Investigation Team (SIT) constituted by the Odisha government after the incident had created public outrage in the state. As there were no eyewitnesses in the case, the court gave the verdict after going through the circumstantial evidence and examination of over 31 witnesses. Public prosecutor Chittaranjan Kanungo said, "The case could not be detected as the girl went missing on July 14, 2020 and her body was recovered some nine days after. As local police could not crack the case, the case was handed over to the Crime Branch and the SIT headed by IG Arun Botra conducted the probe. As there was no direct evidence, taking the help of scientific and other psychological experts, a charge-sheet was filed."



Artists give finishing touches to paintings of King Charles III with a message of "get well soon" outside an art school in Mumbai on Tuesday. King Charles III has been diagnosed with cancer. — P/TI

Girlfriend kills trader in Guwahati 5-star hotel
Love triangle & intimate pics lead to Pune bizman murder

MANOJ ANAND
GUWAHATI, FEB. 6

A love triangle that started in Kolkata ended in a brutal murder of a resident of Pune at a five-star hotel in Guwahati as a five-star hotel in Guwahati was solved swiftly by the police before the accused could fly back to Kolkata. The victim, Sandip Suresh Kamble, a car dealer from Pune, was found dead in a five-star hotel in Guwahati. Hotel staff, who informed the police, discovered him lying on the floor of his room, bleeding profusely from his nose. The accused Anjali Shaw, who worked at a restaurant at the Kolkata airport, had been in a relationship with Kamble since they met at the airport last year. This caused complications as Anjali

was already in a relationship with her co-accused Rakesh Shaw, who had been pressuring her to marry him. The situation became even more complicated when Anjali revealed during her interrogation to police that Kamble had intimate pictures of her on his phone. In an attempt to resolve the issue, Anjali and Rakesh planned to confront Kamble about the photos. Initially, they had planned to meet at the Kolkata airport, but Kamble changed the location to Guwahati, where he booked a room in a luxurious five-star hotel. The couple flew to Guwahati together but parted ways on reaching there. Rakesh booked a room for himself in the same hotel without

Kambli's knowledge. As per their plan, Anjali was joined by Kamblani in the city and they checked into the hotel together, police said. Meanwhile, Rakesh also arrived separately. During their meeting, Rakesh's arrival enraged Kamblani and a fight erupted between the two. The fight left Kamblani injured, seeing which the couple fled. They also took away two mobile phones belonging to Kamblani - which allegedly had their intimate photos. A phone call from Rakesh later in the day alerted the hotel authorities and they informed the Guwahati city police. The police went through the hotel register, CCTV footage, and airport passengers' list to zero in on the two suspects.

Shah: Entire border with Myanmar will be fenced

10-km stretch of border in Manipur already fenced: Minister

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

Union home minister Amit Shah on Tuesday announced that the government has decided to fence the entire 1,643-km-long India-Myanmar border, which would now end the Free Movement Regime (FMR) that were prevalent along the existing porous border. The 1,643-km-long India-Myanmar border, which passes through Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, currently has FMR. It was introduced in 2018 as part of India's Act East policy. Noting that the Narendra Modi government is committed to building impenetrable borders, Mr Shah in one of his social media posts said, "It has decided to



Amit Shah

facilitate better surveillance, a patrol track along the border will also be paved." He also said that a 10-km stretch of the border in Moreh in Manipur has already been fenced and furthermore two pilot projects of fencing through a hybrid surveillance system are under execution, he said. The FMR facilitates people residing close to the India-Myanmar border to venture 16 km into each other's territory without any document. Imphal Valley-based Meitei groups have long been demanding fencing

along the border, particularly after ethnic violence in the state that started in May last year. They have been alleging that tribal militants often enter India through the porous borders. They also allege that narcotics are being smuggled into India taking advantage of the unfenced international border. Manipur shares around 390 km of border with Myanmar, but only about 10 km has been fenced so far. In July last year, the state government shared data with the Union home ministry that around 700 illegal immigrants entered the state. Mizoram has also seen an influx of anti-Junta rebels in thousands since the military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021.

SC/ST quota issue: SC begins hearing

RAKESH K SINGH
NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

A seven-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud on Tuesday commenced hearing to decide on the legal challenge if state governments have the authority to create sub-categorisation in the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for the grant of reservation in admissions and public jobs. The CJ-led bench is also examining the validity of the Punjab government challenging the 2010 verdict of the Punjab and Haryana high court. The high court had struck down Section 4(5) of the Punjab law, which gave 50 per cent SC quota to "Valmikis" and "Mazhabi Sikhs", as unconstitutional on grounds, including that the provision violated a five-judge Constitution Bench judgment of 2004 of the Supreme Court in the case of E.V. Chinniah versus state of Andhra Pradesh. The Chinniah judgment had held that any "sub-classification" of the Scheduled Castes would violate Article 14 (right to equality) of the Constitution.

Castes (SCs). The bench is hearing a bunch of 23 petitions, including the lead matter filed by the Punjab government challenging the 2010 verdict of the Punjab and Haryana high court. The high court had struck down Section 4(5) of the Punjab law, which gave 50 per cent SC quota to "Valmikis" and "Mazhabi Sikhs", as unconstitutional on grounds, including that the provision violated a five-judge Constitution Bench judgment of 2004 of the Supreme Court in the case of E.V. Chinniah versus state of Andhra Pradesh. The Chinniah judgment had held that any "sub-classification" of the Scheduled Castes would violate Article 14 (right to equality) of the Constitution.

ED raids in 6 WB locations over graft in job scheme

RAJIB CHOWDHURI & PRANMOY BRAH-MACHARI
KOLKATA/BERHAMPURE, FEB. 6

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) conducted marathon raids and searches at six locations in West Bengal on Tuesday to probe allegations of misappropriation of central funds for the 100-day job guarantee under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MGNREGS) for the first time. The six locations, where the raid began from 7 am, included a businessman Sandeep Sadhukhan's residence at Chinsurah in Hooghly, an expelled gram panchayat employee Rathin Dey's house at Berhampore in Murshidabad, a government official's quarters in Jhargram and a former block development officer (BDO) S.K. Pan's home at Salt Lake in Kolkata. All the five individuals were questioned also. According to sources, Mr Dey allegedly produced fake job cards and created bogus bank accounts and transferred ₹17,07,450 to his sister Eti Chatterjee's bank account. Former Beldanga BDO Birupaksha Mitra earlier lodged an FIR against him at Beldanga police station under sections 420, 406, 409 and 34 of the Indian Penal Code in 2019. Later Mr Dey was suspended while his brothers and sisters were arrested by the police for misappropriation of funds.

SC upholds conviction of man for rape of 7-yr-old

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

The Supreme Court has upheld the conviction of a man for raping a seven-year-old girl in a temple in Madhya Pradesh in 2018, sentencing him to 30 years in jail and imposing a fine of ₹1 lakh while noting that his action was barbaric. The victim girl's grandmother lodged an FIR against the man who was aged 40 years at the time of the crime, for kidnapping and raping the minor. The convict took the victim to a temple and raped her. After finding the man

guilty, the trial court awarded him the capital punishment under Section 376 AB (rape on woman under 12 years of age) of the Indian Penal Code. However, the Madhya Pradesh high court commuted the same to life imprisonment for the remainder of the convict's natural life. A top court bench of Justices C.T. Ravi Kumar and Rajesh Bindal took into account the present age of the petitioner and the fact that he has already undergone incarceration and also imposed a fine of ₹1 lakh on the convict.

ED raids Kejriwal's PA, others

Continued from Page 1 officials said. A dozen premises were searched by probe agency's officials from as early as 7 am under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). Hitting out at the AAP, Union minister and BJP leader Meenakshi Lekhi said Mr Kejriwal's government has put the governance model of Delhi on "ventilator" by focusing solely on its "publicity, drama and scams". Listing alleged scams by the AAP, she said those who created space for themselves by projecting themselves as "out-right honest" have now become "synonymous with corruption". In response to the raids, Ms Atishi accused the authorities of attempting to "intimidate" the AAP. The raids came hours before she claimed at a press conference that the ED had "deleted" audio recordings of witness statements in certain cases, including the excise policy probe involving AAP functionaries, a charge denied by the Central agency. The ED officials said the agency was proposing to take legal action against the Delhi minister and that no footage was deleted. It said audio recordings of interrogation began only in October 2023. "Yesterday, I posted on

Twitter about doing a big expose on the ED. In response, to threaten the AAP they raided the residences of people related to the AAP," Ms Atishi charged. "This is the way the BJP is trying to threaten the AAP and intimidate its leaders to suppress their voices. I would like to tell the BJP and PM Modi and their agencies that the AAP is not scared of their threats." She claimed that despite a two-year probe in the Delhi excise policy case, the ED has not been able to recover anything. "For the past two years, AAP leaders have been threatened like this. In the name of 'liquor scam', investigating agencies CBI and ED have been raiding AAP leaders now and then in Delhi. But despite such investigations for nearly two years, the ED has not been able to find anything," she alleged. The Delhi minister also claimed "many accused, witnesses, and government witnesses have come forward and said that they were pressured" to record their statements. She also alleged that one of the accused in the excise policy case had applied in court and sought CCTV footage because he was investigated by the ED once along with a government witness. During

that investigation, statements were given, and there was a CCTV camera installed in the room. "However, it was found that the statement produced in court and what happened during the investigation in the room is completely different. Also, when the ED gave the footage, it deleted the audio of the footage. ED deleted all conversations that happened in that room, and evidence was tampered with," she alleged. Refuting the claims, ED sources claimed the agency will take "legal recourse" against the minister for levelling such allegations. They said the footage was recorded in video-only format during interrogation as the CCTV system did not have an audio recording facility at the time. Audio recordings were added to the video capturing system of the ED interrogation process only in October last year, the sources said. The ED had earlier arrested retired Jal Board chief engineer Jagdish Kumar Arora and contractor Anil Kumar Aggarwal on January 31 and following the ED's assertion that further custodial interrogation was necessary to uncover a "larger conspiracy", a special PMLA court extended their remand by five days on Monday.

Anti-cheating bill passed in Lok Sabha

Continued from Page 1 and means for developing foolproof IT security systems, ensuring electronic surveillance of examination centres and formulating national standards and services for both IT and physical infrastructure to be deployed for conduct of such examinations. In many instances, it was observed that organised groups and mafia elements involved in malpractices deploy solver gangs, use impersonation methods and indulge in paper leaks. The bill primarily aims to deter such nefarious elements. The objective of the bill is to bring in greater transparency, fairness and credibility to the public exam systems and to reassure the youth that their sincere and genuine efforts will be fairly rewarded and their future is safe. Responding to the criticism by some Opposition members that the government was centralising everything, Mr Singh said the Narendra Modi government believes in cooperative federalism and the bill does not attempt to centralise all the systems. He said that whenever any exam is cancelled, the effort would be made to hold the re-examination as early as possible.

However, he added that there cannot be any firm timeline for re-examination of cancelled exams as often such cases are examined by the investigative agencies and they take their own time. The minister also said the UPSC was conducting exams in 14 languages and "we hope to gradually include all 22 languages". Participating in the debate on the bill, Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury said the bill talks about penal provisions and is absent on preventive measures. He also alleged that the entire emphasis of the government was to centralise all authorities. Citing reports, Mr Chowdhury said the country has witnessed a large number of cases with regard to data leaks and asked how the government intends to plug these loopholes. RSP MP N.K. Premachandran claimed that the provisions of the bill are against the principles of criminal jurisprudence and hence it should be referred to the standing committee for scrutiny. TMC leader Kalyan Banerjee said there was no dearth of laws but the real problem was with their implementation.

UCC tabled in U'khand, tribals will be exempted

Continued from Page 1 a ban on polygamy. As it sets out common provisions, the bill effectively bans halala "without naming it. The bill reads: "The right to remarry under sub-section (1) includes the right to remarry the divorced spouse without any condition, such as marrying a third person before such." And includes the provision for three years' imprisonment or a fine of ₹1 lakh or both if the complaint of halala comes to light. On divorce, the bill says that both women and men have equal rights and grounds to nullify the conjugal relationship. However, the bill claimed that a marriage must last at least for a year before a divorce petition is filed in court. "No petition for divorce shall be presented to the court unless, at the date of the presentation of the petition, one year has elapsed since the date of marriage," reads the bill. Besides, the bill stresses that a couple must undergo a separation period of at least two years before taking judicial recourse

to the divorce. Divorce can also be granted "if the other party had voluntary sexual intercourse with any person other than the petitioner or converted to another religion to which the petitioner belonged." The bill advocates for making live-in relations legal but punishable for violations of the norms. The bill states that submitting statements by the partners in a live-in relationship under the given format will be mandatory once the law is enacted. "It shall be obligatory for partners in a live-in relationship within the state, whether they are residents of Uttarakhand or not, to submit a statement of live-in relationship under sub-section (1) of Section 381 to the registrar." Following submission of the statement, the registrar will forward it to the nearest police station for keeping the same on record. In case either of the couple is less than 21 years old, it must be informed to the parents. Like the procedure for registration, live-in cou-

ples could also terminate it through another statement. If only one partner submits the termination statement, the registrar concerned will have to inform the other partner. According to the bill, a child born out of a live-in relationship will be a legitimate baby of the couple. The bill stipulates a penalty of up to a month in prison or a fine of ₹10,000 or both if the partners do not submit a statement on their relationship to the registrar within a month. They will face a higher penalty of up to ₹2,500 if they submit false information. Those who fail to submit statements even after one month will be liable for six months of imprisonment along with a fine of ₹25,000. Interestingly, the legality of live-in relationships will solely lie with the registrar. The Uniform Civil Code bill favours equal rights in property to the sons and daughters of all classes. No difference was made between the legitimate and illegitimate children.

THE ASIAN AGE

7 FEBRUARY 2024

Modi's scathing attack on Cong is not without basis

His combative mood enhanced by his being in his campaign avatar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, making one of his last appearances in the Lok Sabha in his second five-year term, carried out a blistering attack on the opposition, principally the Congress. The general elections being only a few months away, the Prime Minister's use of his reply to the debate on the motion of thanks on the President's address was predictable, but maybe not its ferocity as he demolished the Opposition in pointed denunciation lasting 100 minutes.

The number of seats the ruling alliance expects to win in the oft repeated figure of 400 might seem like pre-poll rhetoric. But it is a measure of the differing perceptions between the alliances that two leaders of the opposition INDIA bloc should have publicised their low estimate of prospects. While West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee ridiculed Congress' chances with her sub-40 seats projection, Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge walked into a trap of his own making in trying to mock the ruling alliance on the floor of Parliament with its own slogan of "Aabki baar 400 paar".

The disunited state of the opposition as its alliance seems to be giving way after negative poll results in three of five states that went to the polls

The Opposition may have lost a few opportunities to put the Centre in a bind and it is that state of ineffectualness that Mr Modi may have been referring to while blaming the Congress also for the implosion of the opposition alliance.

late last year may have further emboldened the undisputed leader of the ruling alliance to take down the Congress and others in scathing criticism of the opposition performance in Parliament, besides knocking it on various counts.

Government intransigence as well as the stubbornness of the Opposition may have led to standoffs and many unproductive hours, even whole sessions in Parliament. The Opposition may have lost a few opportunities there to put the government in a bind and it is that state of ineffectualness that Mr Modi may have been referring to while blaming the Congress party also for the implosion of the opposition alliance.

Given the history of personal attacks on him during everyday politics as well as enhanced assailing in poll campaigns and his own predilection to make personalities of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty his favourite whipping boys in the entirety of his political journey, Mr Modi's assault on the Gandhis was particularly sharp. Even so, there is no denying a modicum of truth may lie in his castigating the negativity of the Congress.

Be it the new Parliament building or the economy that has grown, organically over time as well as from government action in pumping in massive funds into infra building post-pandemic, the Congress has always been displaying a cynical disregard for the nation's progress, from the 11th ranked economy in 2014 to the threshold of becoming the third largest from a current fifth rank with GDP nearing \$4 trillion. Mr Modi highlighted that very air of pessimism at a time his party perceives itself to be at the apogee of performance in its second term.

Notwithstanding the decimation of the Congress, reduced to 44 and 52 seats in the last two elections, a strong opposition is necessary for democracy to function at its best. The party may not be in pole position to lead the opposition charge on the ruling alliance in the coming polls, but the least it can do is to draw something even from withering criticism to realign itself in the matter of making room for regional powers and being the facilitator of opposition unity to face the BJP-led NDA poll challenge.

SC flags threat to democracy

The Supreme Court's intervention in the Chandigarh mayoral election calling it "murder" and "mockery of democracy" is a welcome move but the fact remains that people in responsible positions have no compunction in employing wanton ways of torpedoing democratic process and it would take the apex court to step in and offer an interim relief.

The visuals of the BJP councillor who was elected the presiding officer for the mayoral election on January 30 tampering with the ballots had gone viral on social media. The election saw the BJP candidate win with 16 votes against the 12 of the AAP-Congress combine after eight votes of the combine were invalidated after being defaced.

The Supreme Court was appalled by the act of the presiding officer and ordered his personal appearance to explain his conduct during the next hearing but it is equally appalling that Punjab and Haryana high court had failed to appreciate the gross nature of his act. While the Supreme Court counted "the purity of the election process" "the great stabilising force in the country", the high court had none of it even when the affected party moved it alleging that ballot papers had been tampered with and sought fresh polls under the supervision of a retired judge of the court. The Supreme Court

was constrained to observe that "an appropriate interim order was warranted which high court has failed to do". It may be noted that the apex court has directed the high court administration to take possession of all the records and documents along with the video recordings and ordered deferment of the presentation of the Chandigarh Corporation budget, scheduled for February 7.

Democracy has put in places systems of checks and balances with the understanding that people could go wrong. We must stop and ponder over the functioning of those systems if it takes the highest court of the land to step in and stop what it calls "murder of democracy".

THE ASIAN AGE

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Keep migrants safe as they seek jobs in conflict zones



Patralekha Chatterjee

Dev 360

Workers do not faze the poor. In every country, the desperate vote with their feet. So, it comes as no surprise that thousands of Indian workers are now queuing up for jobs in Israel, even as the war's devastation rages on, and there are serious concerns over ethics and safety.

This rush for construction jobs in war-torn Israel from a country where Italian luxury carmaker Lamborghini met its 2023 target in just one month is an Indian paradox, a telling marker of the grim employment prospects facing millions.

"If it is in our destiny to die, then we can die either here or there..." said Lekharan, a mason. He was among the many who gathered at a recent recruitment camp in Rohtak, Haryana, hoping to be selected for a job in Israel.

We have been down this road before. Indians have risked life and limb for a better deal for themselves and their families. In March 2018, for example, the Iraqi authorities found a mass grave with the bodies of 38 Indian construction workers who had been kidnapped when Islamic State (ISIS) militants overran Mosul in northern Iraq in 2014.

Successive governments have evacuated Indian citizens stranded in war-torn areas, including from Israel last year. The Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, in southern Israel killed Israelis as well as migrant workers. Some migrant workers were among the hostages.

Since then, Israel's fierce air, sea and ground offensive in Gaza has killed over 26,000 Palestinians and wounded more than 65,000. Deaths and devastation continue, even after a damning ruling by the International Court of Justice, further polarising a terrifyingly fractured world.

Indians lining up for work in Israel in 2024 remain

undeterred. Last May, Israel and India officially signed an agreement that allows 42,000 Indians to work in Israel in construction and nursing. Over 3,000 people have already been selected from UP for jobs in Israel's construction sector. Workers in Haryana are also gearing up for work in Israel. Five more states are reportedly keen to leverage war-torn Israel's labour crunch.

Clearly, the main attraction is the money. The promised monthly salary in Israel (more than ₹1 lakh, plus medical insurance) is many times the amount that construction workers can ever hope to earn in India. However, there are legitimate concerns about the safety and security of migrant workers in a conflict zone.

Most Indian migrant workers who go to conflict-prone regions or places without sufficient labour protections need to register with India's e-migrate portal run by the external affairs ministry. This is for their safety and security. Israel is not currently part of this system, point out trade unions and labour rights advocates who have serious reservations about the officially facilitated plan to send Indian workers to Israel.

"While previous government-to-government agreements facilitating the movement of Indian workers to Israel have been commended, the current proposal's timing given the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict raises many concerns," noted a policy brief by the Britain-based Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB).

"The implicit indication that Israel may be considering the replacement of Palestinian workers with Indian labour is particularly troubling," it added.

The IHRB raises some key questions: is it ethically acceptable to authorise the recruitment of Indian workers currently? How do the Israeli and Indian govern-

How do the Israeli and Indian governments intend to ensure the safety of migrant workers? How can they ensure the workers will not be involved in the building of military barracks...

ments intend to ensure their safety and well-being? How can they ensure the workers will not be involved in the building of military barracks or internment camps for prisoners?

Another critical question: how aware are the Israel-bound workers about the extent of the risk they are taking, and what can be done to ensure awareness?

Government agencies must ensure that migrant workers are fully aware of the fine print in their contract. This encompasses not only wages and the modality of their disbursement but also specifics about rest, which include overtime, vacation, medical leave, living conditions and safety.

Government agencies and labourers from India signing up for work in war-torn Israel must pay attention to ongoing conversations about pitfalls and discrepancies between expectations and reality in countries that have sent workers to Israel, like Sri Lanka, Malawi, Kenya, Moldova, Thailand, and China. They also need to pay attention to what Israeli civil society is saying.

In Malawi, for example, the local media has spotlighted complaints that agents have grabbed a large chunk of workers' money. "We do not agree with this arrangement because we are the ones working here, not the agents. We want our money to be sent directly to our accounts," according to Malawi24, a news portal.

Recently, the local media in Moldova reported that the Moldova-Israel agreement for recruitment of construction workers has been temporarily postponed. The specific reason for the postponement remains undisclosed.

While government to government labour mobility pacts offer stronger protection to migrant workers, the key issue is implementation. Bilateral agreements between governments on

labour mobility have partly improved the situation. Recruitment fees have dipped significantly, notes a 2019 report "The Effectiveness of the Bilateral Agreements", brought out by the Centre for International Migration and Integration, Israel.

However, implementation has been patchy across sectors.

"In the care-giving sector, there was an improvement in the wages after the implementation of the pilot agreement. However, part of this may be explained by the increase in overall minimum wage in Israel, and not by the agreement alone. It is important to note that there was no significant improvement in most of the other employment conditions of the migrant workers in care-giving. In the construction sector, there was a deterioration in employment conditions, especially in safety at work... also in the wages of the workers from China, even though the wages were still in compliance with the requirements of the collective agreements in the sector. In the agriculture sector, it is hard to identify a clear trend: some of the employment conditions improved, while others deteriorated and some remained unchanged," says the report.

"The safety requirements for the construction workers in Israel, including the migrant workers in this sector, need to significantly improve," it adds. Bilateral agreements mandate that employers in Israel provide every migrant worker with an employment contract in a language the migrant understands, as well as health insurance and adequate housing. They also mandate pre-departure orientation, booklets about workers' rights, helplines for workers' questions in their mother tongue so that migrant workers know their entitlements in Israel.

These must be followed. Protection mechanisms for migrant workers are paramount. While balancing risks with remittances, their welfare and safety must remain supreme.

The writer focuses on development issues in India and emerging economies. She can be reached at patralekha.chatterjee@gmail.com.

LETTERS
BENGALURU LAKE SCAM

I am writing to draw attention to the significant encroachment at the Junnasandra Lake in Bengaluru. During the tenure of the Basavaraj Bommai government, a decision by the high court led to the conversion of this 25-acre lake, valued at ₹1,000 crores, from government to private ownership. It is now controlled by land mafias. Around 24.33 acres have been encroached upon by individuals using fake documents. The court's ruling upheld a 1930 agreement favouring the descendants of the Jodidar. It did not mention the lake yard as part of the agreement. Mr Bommai, former revenue minister R. Ashok and former MLA Arvind Limbavali have been accused of being involved in this. Urgent action needs to be taken.

Vishal Mayur
Bengaluru

STOP USE OF EVMS

TO PUT to rest the doubts of a large section of the people of India, we must push for the use of ballot papers instead of electronic voting machines in the forthcoming Lok Sabha election. Ballot papers are not obsolete. Like the US, with its powerful economy, conducts voting through ballots for months. Japan, which invented the EVM, conducts voting through ballots in its national elections. So do Ireland and Canada. The top court in Germany has banned voting through EVMs as unconstitutional. How can a nation become stronger through distrust and doubt? Let the EVMs be phased out.

Bhagwan Thadani
Mumbai

STUBBORN HOUTHIS

THE DEADLY drone strike in Jordan, which claimed the lives of three American soldiers, is costing the Houthis dearly. Several countries, including the US, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark and the Netherlands, joined forces to bomb 36 Houthi targets in Yemen. The strikes targeted various underground storage facilities, missile systems, sites for storing and operating UAVs, and other capabilities. However, the rebels refused to be cowed down and have warned of an escalation.

N.J. Ravi Chandar
Bengaluru

Every Monday the best letter of the week wins ₹500. Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com.



Maleeha Lodhi

PAKISTAN goes to the polls this week in an exceedingly fraught atmosphere marked by uncertainty about the future. In the country's 12th general election, a record number of 128.5 million voters will decide who forms the next government.

Punjab has more voters — 73.2 million — than those in the other three provinces put together, which makes it the battleground province that will determine the outcome of the national election.

There are 5,113 candidates in the contest for 266 general seats of the 342-member Lower House. A total number of 12,638 candidates are in the race for Assembly seats in the four provinces. There are 313 female contenders for National Assembly seats, the highest ever, but still only six per cent of the total, while 568 female candidates are in the race for provincial Assembly seats.

What are the key pointers to watch out for on election day? **Voter turnout:** How many people show up at the ballot box will reflect the level of political engagement as well as the health and vitality of Pakistan's democracy. It will also be a significant indicator of how credible and inclusive the electorate sees the polls, especially in view of widespread public doubts about their fairness.

The average turnout in the last two general elections was around 52 per cent. In the past four elections it ranged between 51% (2018), 53% (2013), 44%

(2008) and 41% (2002). In the 1990s, which saw four elections in quick succession starting with the one in 1988, turnout averaged 42%, except in 1997 when it fell to 36%. In general, turnout dropped when people felt their vote would make no difference to the outcome or that the election was 'pre-determined'. This time if turnout is very low it could indicate a lack of confidence in the election's integrity and thus undermine the legitimacy of the result.

Young voters: The youth bulge among registered voters is now a prominent feature of the electoral landscape. The number of young voters (between ages 18 and 35) today is at a record high — 57 million, which is over 47 per cent of the electorate. This is a potential game-changer.

The heavy presence of young people in queues at polling stations might provide an early indication of how well parties with a youth following will do. In past elections, turnout among younger voters has been low. There are no official statistics on this. But a Gallup Pakistan report, relying on exit polls conducted since 1988, found that usually only a quarter of young voters cast the ballot.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests young people are now more motivated to vote. If they do show up in large numbers, it could produce upsets and defy conventional wisdom about the invincibility of "electables" or locally influential candidates.

New voters: Over 23.5 million new voters have been added to the electoral rolls since the 2018 election,

including over 12 million female voters. Thus, new voters constitute 18 per cent of the electorate. They mostly comprise young voters but possibly also older voters not registered before. This could impart a significant swing factor to the election because many of them may be unaffiliated to any party and open to last-minute canvassing by candidates. This could make the outcome unpredictable in several constituencies.

Women's participation: 59.3 million registered female voters comprise 46.1 per cent of the electorate even though they account for 49 per cent of the population. Male voters are 69.2 million or 54 per cent of the electorate. That means there are around 10 million more male than female voters, which lays bare the persisting gender gap. It would be worth watching whether women's polling stations on February 8 will see longer lines to indicate greater participation which could benefit parties with a stronger female base of support.

Marginal seats: A critical area to watch would be the marginal constituencies. There is a sizeable number of tightly fought seats in Pakistan's first-past-the-post system. Well over 100 NA seats were won by a plurality, not majority in the 2018 election. Eighty-seven NA seats were won by a margin of less than 1,000 votes, and 26 seats by a margin of under 2,000 votes. In 51 constituencies, the winning candidate's margin of victory was under 6,000 votes. Most of these were in Punjab — where general

elections are won or lost. With the average size of Punjab's national constituencies around 900,000 today, these are fragile margins of victory. The overall election result could be determined by what happens in these marginal constituencies, where there may be four-cornered fights between the PML-N, PTI-backed candidates, PPP and the IPP. **Sensitive polling stations:** Half of the 90,675 polling stations across the country have been designated as "sensitive" or "most sensitive" by the ECP. Sensitive means there is a security risk; "most sensitive" denotes a higher risk. Around 27,628 are classified as sensitive and 18,437 as most sensitive, the majority of which are in Punjab followed by Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan. That means these polling stations are vulnerable to election violence involving clashes among supporters or attacks by militant groups — the latter principally in KP and Balochistan. Although extra security arrangements are in place for them, they should be closely watched on election day for violence that could disrupt the process.

Of course, the most important aspect of election day would be any instances and evidence of efforts to manipulate the poll result or ballot fraud. That would undermine the democratic exercise, denude the electoral outcome of legitimacy and plunge Pakistan into another period of instability.

By arrangement with Dawn



SHORT TAKES

116 MYANMAR TROOPS TAKE REFUGE IN B'DESH

Dhaka, Feb. 6: Over a hundred Myanmar Army soldiers on Tuesday took refuge in Bangladesh alongside their paramilitary border guards amid escalated armed conflict between the government troops and rebel Arakan Army. Officials of the Border Guard Bangladesh said 116 Myanmar troops crossed the border. This is the first time Myanmar's regular Army soldiers took refuge in frontier Cox's Bazar district alongside personnel from the country's paramilitary Border Guard Police (BGP) and some other government agencies.

191 CHILDREN'S MURDER CHARGE ON CULT LEADER

Nairobi, Feb. 6: Kenyan cult leader Paul Mackenzie and 29 associates were charged on Tuesday with the murder of 191 children whose bodies were found among more than double that number buried in a forest. The defendants all denied the charges brought before a court in the coastal town of Malindi. One suspect was found mentally unfit to stand trial. Prosecutors say Mackenzie ordered his followers to starve themselves and their children to death so that they could go to heaven before the world ended, in one of the world's worst cult-related disasters.

THAILAND TO BAN RECREATIONAL CANNABIS USE

Bangkok, Feb. 6: The Thai government will urgently move a bill to ban the recreational use of cannabis, the health minister said on Tuesday, after the kingdom decriminalised the drug in 2022. Cannabis was taken off the list of banned narcotics in June 2022 under the previous government, which included the pro-legalisation Bhumjaitai party. The move prompted hundreds of cannabis shops to sprout around the country, particularly in Bangkok, provoking concern from critics who urged the need for tighter legislation.

IMMUNOGLOBIN SCAM: LANKA MINISTER QUILTS

Colombo, Feb. 6: Sri Lanka's environment minister Keheloya Rambukwella resigned on Tuesday, days after he was arrested over the controversial human immunoglobulin procurement scandal during his tenure as health minister. Rambukwella was arrested on January 2 after over 10 hours of questioning by the police's crime investigation department. Rambukwella had sent his letter of resignation to the President. The President's Office said that the letter of resignation was accepted by the President, and that it was directed for publication.

RUSSIA ORDERS ARREST OF EXILED WRITER AKUNIN

Moscow, Feb. 6: A Moscow court ordered the arrest on Tuesday of a bestselling detective novelist and dissident on charges of justifying terrorism, two months after he was pranked by two pro-Kremlin activists into expressing support for Ukraine on a phone call. Moscow's Basmany District Court ordered Grigory Chkharishvili, who is known under the pen name Boris Akunin and lives abroad, to be taken into custody once detained. In December, Russian authorities added the Russian-Georgian writer to Russia's register of extremists.

FRESH FIGHTING IN SOUTH SUDAN KILLS 26 PEOPLE

Juba, Feb. 6: Fighting between local groups in western South Sudan has killed at least 26 people, officials said on Tuesday, as the country's President and vice president called for an end to escalating inter-communal violence. More than 150 people have been killed since last week in separate conflicts that have pitted armed youths from Warrap State against rivals from the neighbouring Lakes and Western Bar El Ghazal states, and Abyeil, an administrative area that is jointly run by South Sudan and Sudan.

Houthi drones strike 2 ships; 1 bound for India

Blinken pursues Gaza truce quest amid Israeli onslaught

Dubai, Feb. 6: Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthis said on Tuesday they had fired missiles at two vessels in the Red Sea, causing damage to the ships. One of the ships was headed for India. The group's military spokesman said it had fired naval missiles at the *Star Nasia* and *Morning Tide*, identifying the Marshall Islands and Barbados-flagged ships, respectively, as American and British.

US secretary of state Antony Blinken met Egypt's President on Tuesday as part of a 48-hour, four-nation flurry of shuttle diplomacy in search of a ceasefire in Gaza's war, while Israel pressed its onslaught in the south of the enclave.

The Greek-owned *Star Nasia*, managed by Star Bulk Carrier, was damaged by an explosion at 11:55 GMT, a Greek shipping ministry official said, adding that its crew were not injured.

It is unclear whether the explosion was caused by a sea mine or a rocket, the official added.

Separately, the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) agency and British maritime security firm Ambrey reported an explosion near a



Palestinians look at a house destroyed in an Israeli strike in Rafah, Gaza Strip. — AP

merchant vessel off Yemen's Aden port on Tuesday. Ambrey said the south-bound Greek-owned bulk carrier had been targeted while heading through the Maritime Security Transit Corridor about 53 nautical miles southwest of Aden, en route from the US to India.

Maritime monitoring service TankerTrackers.com said the vessel was carrying US coal to India. Ambrey said the second vessel, a Barbados-flagged

general cargo ship owned by a British company, had suffered damage from an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) while sailing south through the Red Sea.

No injuries were reported. The ship performed evasive manoeuvres and continued its journey, Ambrey said.

The owner of the *Morning Tide*, British firm Furadino Shipping, told Reuters the ship was currently sailing without problems, but gave no fur-

ther information. LSEG ship-tracking data showed the *Morning Tide* was heading south through the Red Sea after navigating the Suez Canal on Friday. Its most recent signal shows it sailing out of the Red Sea through the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) agency had reported just after midnight GMT on Tuesday that a projectile had been fired at the port side of a ship located 57 nautical miles west of Hodeidah and that a small craft was seen nearby. The projectile passed over the deck and caused slight damage to the bridge windows, but the vessel and crew were safe and proceeded on the planned passage, UKMTO added.

The Red Sea attacks have disrupted global shipping and forced firms to re-route to longer and more expensive journeys around southern Africa and stoked fears that the Israel-Hamas war could spread to destabilise the wider Middle East.

The United States and Britain began striking Houthi targets in Yemen last month in retaliation for the attacks on Red Sea shipping. — Reuters

Pak app faces allegations of poll result manipulation

Islamabad, Feb. 6: Pakistan's election commission's new app to swiftly transmit and tabulate election results is in the crosshairs due to concerns raised by some officials about the possibility of manipulation of the software to impact the outcome of the polls on Thursday.

The caretaker government in Pakistan will consider shutting down the internet connections on the polling day on Thursday only if there is a request from a district or a province, interim interior minister Gohar Ejaz said on Tuesday.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) prepared the Election Management System (EMS) app for transmission of results from each polling station to a centralised system where tabulation of all results would be completed by the Returning Officers (RO), who are in charge of preparing and releasing the result of each constituency.

The ECP is set to use the system on February 8 after claiming that the

PTI-BACKED CANDIDATE HIT BY TERROR CASE

Lahore, Feb. 6: A Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf-backed woman candidate contesting against PML-N supreme Nawaz Sharif was indicted in a terrorism case, as authorities in Punjab province intensified crackdown on jailed ex-PM Imran Khan's party leaders. The PTI candidates are contesting the Feb. 8 polls independently after the Supreme Court upheld the ECP's decision to deprive Khan's party of its iconic poll symbol 'bat'. — PTI

2 TERRORISTS KILLED IN KPK PROVINCE

Peshawar, Feb. 6: Two terrorists were gunned down during a search operation by security forces in the restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province while two policemen were injured when a remote-controlled bomb exploded. An intense fire exchange took place between the troops and terrorists. Weapons, ammunition, and explosives were recovered from the dead terrorists. — PTI

MQ9-B drones to provide India maritime security: US

Washington, Feb. 6: The US has said the sale of 31 armed drones to India at an estimated cost of nearly \$4 billion would provide it with an enhanced maritime security and domain awareness capability and give the country outright ownership of the aircraft.

Last week, the US approved the sale of 31 MQ-9B armed drones to India at an estimated cost of \$3.99 billion, an acquisition

that will bolster India's capability to meet current and future threats by enabling unmanned surveillance and reconnaissance patrols in sea lanes of operation.

"This sale, we believe, will provide India with an enhanced maritime security and maritime domain awareness capability," state department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said.

"It offers India outright ownership of these aircraft, and this is something that we'll continue to deepen our cooperation with our Indian partners on," Patel said.

The mega deal to acquire the drones from US defence major General Atomics (GA) was announced during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's historic state visit to the US in June 2023. — PTI

WORKS BY SCHIELE The art collection would now be worth \$540 million

Austria rebuts heirs' Nazi loot claims

Vienna, Feb. 6: Orders to hand back artworks by Austrian painter Egon Schiele to the American heirs of their former Jewish owner have forced some of Austria's top museums to deny claims that some of their holdings were Nazi loot.

The latest in a series of legal bids targets works from the vast art collection of Fritz Gruenbaum, an Austrian Jewish cabaret performer and outspoken critic of the Nazis, who perished in the Holocaust.

His collection comprised more than 400 pieces, including 81 by the Expressio-

nist master Schiele. Overall it would now be worth an estimated 500 million euros (around \$540 million), according to Austrian newspaper *Der Standard*.

Twelve Schiele pieces from the collection are housed in two Viennese museums — the Leopold Museum has 10 paintings and drawings, including *Dead City III* (1911), while the Albertina has the remaining two.

Gruenbaum's descendants have been demanding their return for more than two decades, saying they were looted by the Nazis. The Austrian governme-

nt insists the state obtained them in good faith. "Despite meticulous research over years, no evidence was found that Fritz Gruenbaum's collection was confiscated" by the Nazi authorities, Austria's culture ministry said in an email sent to AFP.

"On the contrary, the evidence suggests that the collection was still in the family's possession after the end of the Nazi regime," it added. In 2010, a special commission recommended that it should not return the artworks. The government said Gruenbaum's sister-in-law Mathilde Lukacs sold dozens of works to a Swiss art dealer in the 1950s. The dust settled — until several lawsuits in the United States came to a different conclusion. America's Holocaust Expropriated Art Recovery (HEAR) Act from 2016 extended the statute of limitations for recovering Nazi-looted artworks, allow-

ORDER OF SUCCESSION TO THE BRITISH THRONE



PRINCE WILLIAM (Prince of Wales — the eldest son of Charles and the late Princess Diana). He is married to Kate, Princess of Wales.



PRINCE HARRY (younger son of Charles and Diana), who has relinquished his royal duties but retains his place in line.



PRINCESS BEATRICE (elder daughter of Andrew and his former wife, Sarah Ferguson).

SIENNA ELIZABETH (daughter of Beatrice and Edoardo Mapelli Mozzi, born in September 2021).



PRINCESS EUGENIE (Andrew and Ferguson's younger daughter).

AUGUST BROOKSBANK (born to Eugenie and James Brooksbank in Feb. 2021).

ERNEST BROOKSBANK (born to Eugenie and James Brooksbank in May 2023).

PRINCE EDWARD (the queen and Philip's youngest child).

JAMES, VISCOUNT SEVERN (son of Edward and his wife Sophie, Countess of Wessex).

THEIR THREE CHILDREN FOLLOW HIM IN THE LINE OF SUCCESSION.

1 PRINCE GEORGE of Cambridge (born in July 2013).

2 PRINCESS CHARLOTTE of Cambridge (born in May 2015).

3 PRINCE LOUIS of Cambridge (born in April 2018).

1 ARCHIE MOUNTBATTEN Windsor (born to Harry and Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, in May 2019).

2 LILIBET MOUNTBATTEN Windsor (born to Harry and Meghan in June 2021).



King Charles has put off his engagements to undergo treatment.

Charles' cancer 'caught early' as Harry flies in

MODI WISHES A SPEEDY RECOVERY

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

London, Feb. 6: King Charles III's estranged son Prince Harry reportedly arrived in London on Tuesday after his father's diagnosis of cancer, which doctors "caught early". Harry, who now lives in California with his actress wife Meghan and their children, has been at war with his family since quitting royal life and launching a barrage of score-settling criticism in his bestselling autobiography "Spare".

The *Telegraph* and *The Sun* newspapers reported that Harry arrived at Heathrow airport following an overnight flight from Los Angeles.

His car was reportedly seen being driven from

the airport accompanied by two police cars, less than 24 hours since Buckingham Palace made Charles's cancer diagnosis public. Royal watchers say that while Charles's ill health may be a catalyst for a rapprochement between father and son, healing the rift with his broth-

er Prince William, heir to the throne, would be more difficult. However, Buckingham Palace has not specified the type of cancer afflicting the 75-year-old monarch who will now step back from public-facing royal duties to complete his treatment. — AFP

recovery and good health". The MEA said in a brief statement, "Prime Minister Narendra Modi today conveyed his and people of India's wishes for the speedy recovery and good health to His Majesty King Charles III."

Snow, ice disrupt trips for Chinese

Beijing, Feb. 6: Freezing rain, snow and ice have snarled traffic in central, eastern and southern China as millions of people travel home ahead of the Spring Festival holiday in the blistering cold that has swept through parts of the country over the past week.

Southern Hunan and Hubei provinces bore the brunt of the severe weather, which deteriorated over the weekend, slowing highway traffic to a

crawl while cancelling hundreds of trains and delaying flights.

The disruptions coincide with the biggest mass travel migration in the world as people flock home to see their families for the Chinese New Year holiday, which officially begins on Saturday. Over the past few days, Chinese social media videos showed images of people stranded on trains and trapped in cars on snowy highways. — Reuters



Vehicles are stuck on a highway due to heavy snow in Wuhan, in China's Hubei province on Tuesday. — AFP

2 'TERRORISTS' KILLED OUTSIDE ISTANBUL COURT

Istanbul, Feb. 6: A civilian was killed and six others were wounded when leftist militants shot at a police checkpoint in front of a courthouse in Istanbul on Tuesday, in what Turkey called an attempted terrorist attack.

Interior minister Ali Yerlikaya said police had killed the two shooters, whom he said were believed to belong to the DHKP-C group.

Justice minister Yilmaz Tunc told reporters 34 people had been detained, without giving further details. He said the three police officers wounded were in a good condition. One of the four civilians wounded died in hospital, he added.

The DHKP-C, the Revolutionary People's Liberation Army-Front, is an outlawed Marxist organisation considered a terrorist organisation by the United States, European Union, and Turkey. It has been blamed for a string of attacks and suicide bombings in Turkey since 1990. — Reuters

SWORD-WIELDING MAN ARRESTED IN WALMART STORE

Vancouver, Feb. 6: A man wielding a samurai sword and threatening to hurt people was arrested after he entered a Walmart store in southwest Washington state, police said.

Multiple people called 911 around 5:30 pm on Sunday about a man walking in Vancouver traffic with the sword while screaming and making threats to injure people, Vancouver police said Monday in a news release. — AP

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	72,186.09	0.63
Nifty 50	21,929.40	0.72
S&P 500*	4,942.81	0.00
Dollar (₹)	83.05	0.02
Pound Sterling (₹)	104.26	0.38
Euro (₹)	89.33	0.004
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	62,321.45	0.01
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	78.32	0.42
IN 10-Yr bond yield	7.092	0.01
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.154	-0.01

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Entero Healthcare to raise ₹1,600 cr through IPO

Healthcare product distributor Entero Healthcare Solutions announced ₹1,600 crore initial public offering (IPO) opens on Feb. 9 and closes on Feb. 13. The price band for the public issue has been fixed at ₹1,195 to ₹1,258 per equity share of ₹10 face value. The IPO comprises a fresh issue of equity shares worth ₹1,000 crore and an offer for sale of over 47.69 lakh equity shares by promoters and selling shareholders.



Kia Seltos SUV surpasses one lakh bookings

Kia Seltos SUV facelift has surpassed over one lakh bookings within six months since its launch in July 2023. On average, Kia has been receiving approximately 13,500 bookings for this updated popular model every month. The new Seltos is priced at ₹10.99 lakh at the Delhi showroom. To date, Kia has produced over six lakh Seltos units in India, with nearly 75 per cent being sold domestically.

L&T to construct bridge in Assam worth ₹5K crore

Larsen & Toubro (L&T) on Tuesday said it has bagged a large project to construct a bridge across the Brahmaputra in Assam. As per L&T classification, contracts worth ₹2,500-₹5,000 crore fall in the category of large orders. "The transportation infrastructure business of L&T Construction has won a project to construct the Palashbari to Sualkuchi stayed bridge across the Brahmaputra in Assam," the company said.

HSBC MF offers NFO for open ended scheme

HSBC Mutual Fund has launched of new fund offering (NFO) for an open-ended scheme focussed on multi asset allocation. The fund aims to invest the corpus in equity and equity-related instruments, debt and money market securities and gold/silver ETFs. It aims to generate long-term capital growth, help reduce volatility and offer diversification as well as invest across market caps.

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Companies ramping up capex and announcing new projects

CEA: Animal spirit back in Indian private sector

New Delhi, Feb. 6: Chief Economic Adviser (CEA) V Anantha Nageswaran has said the animal spirit is back in the Indian economy and has reflected in the visible pick-up in private sector investment.

"It has come back. Otherwise, how the Indian economy grows at 7 per cent. You look at Purchasing Managers' Index, manufacturing and services indices, the line between expansion and contraction, the stock market performance," Nageswaran said.

It has come back, and that is reflected in the GDP numbers, he added.

The expression 'animal spirits' was coined by celebrated economist John Maynard Keynes to refer to investors' confidence in



● **THE PRIVATE** investments are happening at scale, the lower borrowings by the central government will facilitate larger availability of credit for the private sector.

taking action in terms of investment.

Listed companies in the private sector were beginning to ramp up their capital spending and new project announcements, Nageswaran said, citing data from the Reserve Bank of India.

Even finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman in

her interim Budget said that private investment is happening.

"Now that the private investments are happening at scale, the lower borrowings by the central government will facilitate larger availability of credit for private sector," she said while presenting the interim Budget of FY25.

With the growth in the economy, there has been a pick-up in private investment in recent times in sectors like steel, cement and petroleum.

Both, corporate and banking sector balance sheets, have room to take more risk, assuming India's real GDP grows at 7 per cent in FY25, he said.

India Inc. deleveraged its balance sheet before and during the Covid-19 period so they have the capacity to borrow for expansion. At the same time, banks' financial strength improved with an average capital adequacy ratio (CAR) of around 15 per cent for the public sector banks (PSBs). CAR, Bank of Maharashtra, with 16.85 per cent, is the highest amongst PSBs. —PTI

MSME loan ticket size rises after pandemic

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, FEB. 6

Post-Covid, the ticket size of loans by lenders to MSMEs has increased while approval rates have fallen. This indicates cautiousness among lenders after the removal of pandemic relief measures.

Post-Covid, ticket size of loans is slowly rising across public sector banks (PSBs) and non-banking financial corporations (NBFCs) while it has dipped for private banks. The average ticket size of loans offered by PSBs has risen from ₹12.6 lakh to

₹15.1 lakh between Q2, 2022 to Q4, 2023.

In the case of NBFCs, it has gone up from ₹19.7 lakh to ₹23.4 lakh. However, it has come down from ₹34.3 lakh to ₹30.3 lakh for private banks, according to a report by Dun and Bradstreet and U Grow.

Segment-wise, the ticket size of loans to micro and small has increased while it has dipped for medium firms during this period. For micro firms, it went up from ₹6.4 lakh to ₹8.1 lakh, and for small firms from ₹43 lakh to ₹44.2 lakh. For medium firms, it came down from ₹98.6 lakh to ₹98.4 lakh.

● **FOR MICRO FIRMS,** it went up from ₹6.4 lakh to ₹8.1 lakh, and for small firms from ₹43 lakh to ₹44.2 lakh. For medium firms, it came down from ₹98.6 lakh to ₹98.4 lakh.

The drop in the approval rate is greater in PSUs for both medium-risk and high-risk firms. NBFCs remain most cautious for high-risk firms. This also indicates that low-risk firms can access more credit while high-risk



BSE'S M-CAP TOUCH ALL TIME HIGH ON TECH STOCKS RALLY

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, FEB. 6

Domestic IT stocks have rallied riding on good earnings performance of the global peers after the US tech giants have posted stellar fourth quarter performance led by Meta, Amazon, Google, Microsoft among others.

Nifty IT index gained 2.92 per cent on Tuesday. Several IT stocks hit 52 week highs led by TCS, Infosys, HCL Tech among others.

TCS market cap crossed ₹15 lakh crore mark for the first time. The stock hit a 52 week high of ₹4,149.90 per share intraday and closed at ₹4,136 up 4 per cent.

Rally in IT stocks helped Sensex and Nifty-50 reached near all time highs with Sensex up 454.67 points or 0.63 per cent at 72,186 and Nifty-50 at 21,929.40 up 157.70 points or 0.72 per cent.

IT stocks rally helped BSE's m-cap touch a new all time high of over ₹386.83 lakh crore.

Steps taken to control price rise in commodities: Nirmala

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Tuesday said that headline retail inflation would be kept in check as the steps were taken by the government to contain price rise, especially in perishable commodities.

"The prices of perishable goods have started coming down and 'they are within the tolerance band'. Besides, she also highlighted the fuel prices and import of pulses in the country and the steps being taken by the Centre to reduce the burden on the public.

"The prices have started coming down and they are within the tolerance band.

Over 85 lakh MNREGA job cards deleted

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, FEB. 6

In the current fiscal, over 85 lakh job cards under the rural employment guarantee scheme have been deleted.

As of February 1, 2024, a total number of 85.6 lakh job cards for MNREGA have been deleted in the current fiscal. The total number of job cards deleted



Lots of steps have been taken by the government, particularly for meeting the shortage in supply of perishable goods. Since we don't grow enough pulses in the country and due to a shortfall in supply, prices of pulses normally keep fluctuating, for which, by analysing the crop estimates, we start tying up for imports," Sitharaman said.

India's retail inflation has declined from an average

of 6.8 per cent in April-December 2022 to 5.5 per cent in the corresponding period of 2023. The retail inflation is now stable and within the notified tolerance band of 2 per cent to 6 per cent. "The government is seized by the difficulties, which arise due to shortage of perishable goods, which are not grown in India. The committee sits and reviews periodically, and the efforts have shown on the ground that inflation is now within the tolerable band," she said.

The minister further said that in order to check the volatility in prices of onion, the government has progressively increased its buffer size to 7 LMT in 2023-24.

Rationalise tax for auto sector to grow: Audi chief

Munio, Feb. 6: German automaker Audi is bullish on India but believes that till the time high taxes rationalise to a lower level, penetration of luxury cars in the country will continue to remain low compared to South East Asian countries, according to a senior company official.

Audi expects growth of the luxury car market in India to moderate to low double digits in 2024 compared to around 25 per cent in 2023. "The overall car indus-

try is growing, as well as the luxury segment is growing. Last year was one of the biggest numbers that the industry could achieve, which is also in line with the overall growth of the country," Audi India Head Balbir Singh Dhillion said.

He further said, "India's GDP is growing, all the parameters that you see for the growth of the automotive industry are showing an upward direction. So we believe we are in the right space at a good time." —PTI

NEW | TEAM

Nvidia, Cisco to build AI infra for cos

California, Feb. 6: Nvidia Corp. and Cisco Systems Inc. are teaming up to make it easier for corporations to build their own artificial intelligence (AI) computing infrastructure, an attempt to push the technology beyond the big data-centre providers.

Under an arrangement announced Tuesday, Cisco will offer Nvidia-based equipment, popular for developing artificial intelligence models, along with its networking gear.

For Nvidia, the partnership opens up another channel for its technology.

Cisco, meanwhile, gets to capitalise on an AI spending boom that's helped turn Nvidia into the world's most valuable chipmaker.

"Working closely with Cisco, we're making it easier than ever for enterprises to obtain the infrastructure they need to benefit from AI, the most powerful technology force of our lifetime," Nvidia chief executive officer Jensen Huang said.

Cisco will offer M7 server computers that use Nvidia's latest processors, as well as the chipmaker's

Google removes 2,200 fraud loan apps in India

FC CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

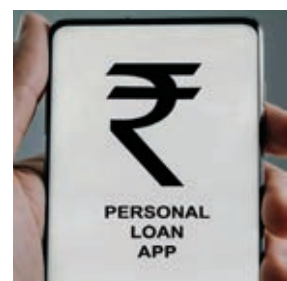
The government on Tuesday informed Parliament that Google has suspended or removed more than 2,200 fraudulent loan apps from its Play Store between September 2022 and August 2023.

"The government is constantly engaged with the RBI and other regulators and stakeholders concerned to control fraudulent loan apps," minister of state for finance Bhagwat K Karad said in a written reply to Rajya Sabha.

"As per the information received from ministry of electronics and information technology (MeitY), during April 2021-July 2022, Google had reviewed approximately 3,500 to 4,000 loan apps and suspended/removed over 2,500 loan apps from its Play Store," he said, adding that similarly, during September 2022-August 2023, over 2,200 loan apps were removed from the Google Play Store.

"Further, Google has updated its policy regarding enforcement of loan apps on the Play Store and only those apps are allowed on Play Store which are published by regulated entities (REs) or those working in partnership with REs. It has also deployed additional policy requirements with strict enforcement actions for loan apps," he said.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the minister said, has issued regulatory guidelines on digital lending, which aims at firming up the regulatory



● **AS PER** the information received from ministry of electronics and information technology (MeitY), during April 2021-July 2022, Google had reviewed approximately 3,500 to 4,000 loan apps.

framework for digital lending, while enhancing customer protection and making the digital lending ecosystem safe and sound. "The Indian cyber crime coordination centre (I4C), ministry of home affairs (MHA) has been proactively analysing the digital lending apps on a continuous basis," he added.

Karad said, JanSamarth Portal was launched to provide a common platform for availing loans under credit-linked government schemes.

"A total of 1.83 lakh beneficiaries have availed loans under the said schemes linked to JanSamarth portal since its launch till Dec. 2023. About 7.25 cases of fraud related to UPI were reported during 2022-23. The amount involved in these fraud cases was ₹573 crore," he added.

OIL STORAGE SPACE TO BE LEASED: ISPRL

Betul (Goa), Feb. 6: After dropping a ₹5,000 crore plan to fill parts of strategic oil storages, the government will lease out space in the underground rock caverns to domestic and international firms to store oil, a top executive said on Tuesday.

India Strategic Petroleum Reserve Ltd (ISPRL) has built underground storages at Visakhapatnam and Mangalore and Padur in Karnataka to store 5.33 mn tonnes of oil that can be used in any emergency situation like supply disruption or war.

UAE's Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (Adnoc) has already hired for storage capacity at Padur and Mangalore, ISPRL CEO and MD L.R. Jain said.

—PTI

Give new deadline, Paytm boss urges RBI

FALAKNAAZ SYED MUMBAI, FEB. 6

Paytm's chief executive officer Vijay Shekhar Sharma met RBI officials to discuss regulatory concerns and to understand if the company could transfer its wallet business and electronic toll collection system FASTag. The fintech giant is also said to have sought an extension of RBI's deadline that ends on February 29.

These talks come after the RBI on Jan. 31 barred Paytm Payments Bank from taking further deposits or making credit transactions or top-ups in customer accounts, prepaid instruments, wallets, FASTags, and National Common Mobility Card cards from March 1 citing supervisory concerns and non-compliance with rules.

"The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) heard Paytm out without making any commitments," Reuters said. The meeting took place on Monday.

According to the company website, Paytm Payments has more than 30 crore wallets and three crore bank accounts. It claims to have issued over 80 lakh FASTag units to date. The platform has processed over 5.791 crore FASTags transactions in



RBI'S MPC PANEL STARTS FEBRUARY LENDING RATE DELIBERATIONS

New Delhi, Feb. 6: RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das-headed rate-setting panel on Tuesday started its three-day deliberations amid expectations of continued status quo on short-term lending rates as the retail inflation remains near the higher end of the central bank's comfort zone.

For almost a year, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has kept the short-term lending rate or repo rate stable at 6.5 per cent. The benchmark inter-rent rate was last raised in Feb. 2023 to 6.5 per cent from 6.25 per cent to contain inflation driven mainly by global developments.

The retail inflation in FY2023-24 has declined after touching a peak of 7.44 per cent in July 2023, it is still high and was 5.69 per cent in Dec. 2023, though within the RBI's range of 4-6 per cent.

Governor Das will announce the decision of the monetary policy committee on Feb. 8.

On expectations from the policy, Raoul Kapoor, co chief executive officer of Andromeda Loans, said the RBI is anticipated to maintain the current interest rates. "This decision is primarily influenced by the persistent challenge of high retail inflation. The current inflationary pressures necessitate a cautious approach," he said. —PTI



terms of volume in December 2023, data from National Payments Corporation of India shows.

Earlier, One97 Communications denied reports that Jio Financial Services was in talks with it to acquire Paytm Payments Bank's wallet business. In an exchange filing on Monday, Jio Financial Services too denied talks with Paytm.

On Monday, media reports claimed that Jio Financial Services and HDFC Bank were frontrunners to buy Paytm's wallet business.

Shares of One97 Communications, the company's parent, ended with gains after a three-day rout. Its stock ended at ₹452.8, up 3.3 per cent over its previous day's close. Shares worth ₹2,775 crore were traded on NSE.

Paytm founder Vijay Shekhar Sharma has reportedly assured employees that there would be no layoffs in the company.



● **CISCO** WILL offer M7 server computers that use Nvidia's latest processors, as well as the chipmaker's software, AI models and development tools.

software, AI models and development tools. It's also offering its own cloud-based software and services for monitoring and managing such systems.

great partnership with Nvidia is going to arm enterprises with the technology and the expertise they need to build, deploy, manage and secure AI solutions at scale," Cisco chief executive officer

Chuck Robbins said.

The two companies made the announcement at the Cisco Live event in Amsterdam. It's part of an effort to spread the deployment of AI hardware beyond its current concentration in data centres owned by Microsoft, Amazon.com, Alphabet's Google and Meta.

Cisco's largest sales team will sell Nvidia-based servers combined with its Ethernet networking gear. Nvidia offers an alternative called InfiniBand in its own products. —Bloomberg

SHORT TAKES

Mayank returns to lead Karnataka

Bengaluru: Karnataka captain Mayank Agarwal, who was recently hospitalised after drinking a suspicious liquid on board a flight, has recovered and will return to lead his team against Tamil Nadu in their next Ranji Trophy Group 'C' match in Chennai from Friday. The 32-year-old batter had consumed the liquid on board his team's flight to Surat after the match against Tripura last month. He had to be admitted to a hospital to treat the burning sensation in his mouth and throat. Agarwal went on to file an FIR alleging foul play. He consequently missed Karnataka's last engagement against Railways. However, he was cleared of any major health issue by the doctors here, paving the way for his comeback to the team. Currently, Tamil Nadu lead Group C with 21 points, same as Karnataka. But TN are leading the chart because of their better net run rate 2.06. Agarwal's return will boost their batting as the Karnataka opener so far has scored 310 runs from four matches. — PTI

2nd string Indian team to tour Zim

Harare: A second string Indian team will tour Zimbabwe for a five-match T20I series starting July 6, the country's cricket board announced on Tuesday. The series that will be held immediately after the conclusion of the marquee T20 World Cup in the USA and the West Indies on June 29, is unlikely to feature any top Indian players as it has been the case during previous tours of the African nation over the years. The five matches will be held at the Harare Sports Club on, July 6, 7, 10, 13 and 14. "Zimbabwe Cricket (ZC) and the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) on Tuesday announced that Zimbabwe will host India for a five-match Twenty20 International (T20I) series in July. The series is scheduled to take place from 6 to 14 July 2024 in Harare," Zimbabwe Cricket stated in a release. The confirmation of this tour comes after productive discussions between ZC and the BCCI, with the primary objective of fortifying bilateral ties and fostering a spirit of collaboration between the two cricketing boards. A tour by the Indian team takes care of Zimbabwe's entire year's TV revenue. — PTI

ISL's 11th season from Sept. 14

New Delhi: The top-tier Indian Super League, which will run into its 11th edition, will kick off on September 14 and will run till April 30, 2025, the All India Football Federation (AIFF) announced on Tuesday. As usual the senior competition calendar for the next season (2024-25) will kick off with the Asia's oldest tournament Durand Cup slated from July 26-31. I-League on the other hand will be held from October 19-April 30, while the Super Cup will run concurrently with the league season from October 1-May 15. I-League 3, which will act as a qualifying tournament for I-League 2, will be held from August 1-September 30. I-League 2 is slated from January 15-April 30. The Indian Women's League will be held from October 25-April 30. — PTI

De Rossi's dream start continues

Rome: Lorenzo Pellegrini scored in the second minute and Paolo Dybala got a brace as Roma beat Cagliari 4-0 in Serie 'A' to extend coach Daniele De Rossi's dream start. Pellegrini's goal, a close-range stab from a corner kick, was his third in three league games and helped to lift Roma two points above Bologna into fifth place. The midfielder also set up Dybala 21 minutes later for him to hammer home a second. Dybala scored the third from the penalty spot six minutes into the second half. Dean Huijsen, the 19-year-old Dutch defender on loan from Juventus, got his first goal for the club when he headed the fourth from a corner kick just five minutes after coming on as a substitute. Pellegrini's opportunist early strike marked the first time in his career he has scored in three consecutive games but the happiest man in the stadium might have been De Rossi. The win was the fourth in a row for De Rossi, who replaced Jose Mourinho in January and it further endeared him to a home crowd which loved him during his 17 years there as a player. — AP

AUSTANDING!

Aggressive Aussies blow Windies away in third one-dayer

Canberra (Australia), Feb. 6: Australia needed just 6.5 overs to thrash a woeful West Indies by eight wickets in an embarrassing end to their one-day international series in Canberra on Tuesday, with Jake Fraser-McGurk slamming 41 off 18 balls.

The hosts won the first game in Melbourne by eight wickets and the second in Sydney by 83 runs to clinch the series, with the West Indies playing for pride.

But after Australia skipper Steve Smith won the toss and sent them in on a humid day, they crumbled to 86 all out in the 25th over against an attack missing Josh Hazlewood, Pat Cummins and Mitchell Starc.

In reply, Australia recorded their shortest successful run chase in the format with 259 balls remaining to cap a stunning capitulation by the Caribbean side.

"It was a good performance, the bowlers put it in the right areas and everything seemed to work out. One of those days where everything came off," said Smith.

"It's been good opportunity to expose a few players to international cricket and they've shown that they can play at this level."

Explosive 21-year-old opener Fraser-McGurk showed his immense talent in only his second match with five fours and three sixes in an electric 41 before he was caught going for another big hit off Alzarri Joseph.

Aaron Hardie was the only other wicket to fall, caught behind for two off Oshane Thomas.

Josh Inglis blasted an unbeaten 35 while Smith was not out six.

Earlier, paceman Xavier Bartlett took 4/21 to go with the 4/17 he bagged on his debut in Melbourne. Fellow fast bowler Lance Morris grabbed 2/13 before leaving the field with a side strain.

"Our batting let us down. It did for the entire series," said West Indies captain Shai Hope.

"We need to do some real soul searching to understand what's needed in certain conditions. Can't really put your finger on one thing, it comes down to mindset."

Bartlett struck early with Kjorn Ottley trapped lbw for eight and, while Alick Athanaze and Keacy Carty steadied the ship, they were in survival mode, with just 36 runs coming from the opening 10 overs. — AFP

BRIEF SCORES
West Indies 86 in 24.1 overs (Alick Athanaze 32, Xavier Bartlett 4/21) lost to Australia 87/2 in 6.5 overs (Jake Fraser-McGurk 41, Josh Inglis 35 not out).



Matthew Forde of the West Indies (left) falls as he is run out during the third One-day International against Australia at the Manuka Oval in Canberra, Australia, on Tuesday. — AP

India U-19 pip SA, make WC final for ninth time

Benoni (South Africa), Feb. 6: Fuelled by splendid feats by Sachin Dhas and captain Uday Saharan, defending champions India battled past South Africa by two wickets to storm into the final, their fifth consecutive, of the ICC Under-19 World Cup here on Tuesday.

Dhas (96, 95 balls, 11x4, 1x6) and Saharan (81, 124, 6x4), who were India's guiding forces in the last match against Nepal with a hundred each, garnered 171 runs for the fifth wicket as India hunted down the target of 245 with just 7 balls to spare.

India will face either Australia or Pakistan in the summit clash to be played at this venue on Sunday, searching for their sixth trophy in the marquee event.

But the beginning of India's chase resembled a debris yard, losing four wickets for just 32 runs in the 12th over.

The South African new-ball bowler Kwena Maphaka jolted India in the first ball of their innings, dismissing Adarsh Singh with a nasty climbing delivery that the batter had no choice other than snicking to wicket-keeper Lhuan-dre Pretorius.

His partner Tristan Luus soon joined the fun with the wickets of Musheer Khan, Arshin



India's Raj Limbani (left) celebrates after taking a South African wicket during the U-19 World Cup semifinal in Benoni, South Africa, on Tuesday. — BCCI

Kulkarni and Priyanshu Moliya as all three India batters were indecisive outside the off-stump while hanging their bats to dry.

But the Indians found their saviours in Dhas and Saharan, who dished out innings of vastly contrasting nature and tempo.

Dhas' knock was a treatise on playing cross-batted shots as he cracked a six, pulled four besides those well-placed nudges through the vacant spots on the on-side.

Saharan, on the other hand, was more traditional but was not entirely hesitant to bring out an exquisite drive or rasping

flight titles. Brentford goalkeeper Mark Flekken started the night as statistically the worst goalkeeper in the Premier League for percentage of shots saved.

However, the Dutchman was in inspired form to frustrate the champions in the opening 45 minutes as he made nine saves before the break.

Brentford had barely posed any threat before they went in front on 21 minutes as City's run of just one Premier League clean sheet since October goes on.

Flekken got the assist on top of his heroics at the back as his goal-kick, Ivan Toney blocked off Nathan Ake, allowing Maupay to run clear and score for the fifth consecutive game.

Haaland had a huge chance to mark his first start for two months with a goal moments later, but could not beat Flekken when sent clean through on goal. — AFP



Manchester City's Phil Foden (left) celebrates after scoring against Brentford during the English Premier League match at the Gtech Community Stadium in London on Monday. Manchester City won 3-1. — AP

of goal," said Guardiola after Foden took his tally for the season to 14.

"I think he is playing his best season since we are together. The incidence of

goals and assists, of playing in this central position, are unbelievable."

City's rivals for the title may rue not opening up an advantage while De

Bryne and Haaland were sidelined by injury in recent months as they look primed to become the first side to ever win four consecutive English top-

Hockey player accused of rape

Bengaluru/New Delhi, Feb. 6: Arjuna award-winning Indian hockey player Varun Kumar has been booked under the stringent POCSO act by the Bengaluru Police after a woman accused the defender of sexually abusing her multiple times when she was a minor.

The 22-year-old, in her complaint filed on Monday, said that she came in contact with Varun in 2018 through Instagram, and the player raped her on multiple occasions promising her of marriage when she was 17.

She said Varun was training at the Sports Authority of India (SAI) centre in Bengaluru when she met him. Varun, who was awarded the Arjuna in 2021, was recently promoted as a DSP in Punjab Police.

"Based on the complaint received from the woman, we have registered a case on Monday against the Hockey player under appropriate section of Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act and sections 376 (rape) and 420 (cheating and dishonestly inducing delivery of property) of the Indian Penal Code," a senior Bengaluru Police officer said on Tuesday.

Varun, who was in the Indian standby list for the Tokyo Olympics, is currently training with the national squad in Bhubaneswar for the upcoming FIH Pro League. India are scheduled to face Spain in their opening encounter on February 10.

● A 22-year-old woman filed a complaint saying Varun Kumar sexually abused her on multiple occasions promising her of marriage when she was 17. Varun, a 2021 Arjuna Awardee, was recently promoted as a DSP in Punjab Police.

There was speculation that Varun, a 2022 Commonwealth Games silver-medallist, is on the run, but Hockey India rubbished the rumour.

"He is not absconding. He is in Bhubaneswar with the team," a Hockey India source said. Varun, who hails from Himachal Pradesh, made his debut for India in 2017.

In the FIR, the woman has alleged that Varun insisted on meeting her after they got in touch on Instagram and she relented after some of his friends convinced her.

The two eventually became friends and got into a relationship.

According to the woman, he took her to a hotel in Bengaluru's Jayanagar in July 2019 and made physical relations with her despite being aware that she was a minor. She said she had resisted but he promised to take their relationship a step further and marry her later.

"She accused him of getting physical with her on several occasions over the five-year long relationship she shared with him on the pretext of marriage," the FIR stated. — PTI

INDIAN BATTERS NEED TO WORK HARD: ZAEHEER

Visakhapatnam, Feb. 6: Former India pacer Zaheer Khan has highlighted the hosts' batting frailties in the ongoing series against England, saying it was only because of the individual brilliance of Yashasvi Jaiswal and Shubman Gill that India won the second Test.

"There are a few concerns when you look at the team — batting is something that they will be talking about because under these conditions, on this sort of a surface, we have seen India do better," Zaheer said on JioCinema.

India set England a 399-run target and despite Zak Crawley being the only one breaching the half-century mark.

"You look at England's second innings, there is only one half-century and they still managed to get close to 300. That is what collective effort can do. We have seen two brilliant innings — Yashasvi Jaiswal and Shubman Gill, but with the bat, there is a lot of work to be done," Zaheer added.

"If you are one down in the series, you need that aggression, fight and belief to make sure that it is 1-1 after the end of the game. And I think Rohit was able to bring out those individual performances from the players." — PTI

BRIEF SCORES
South Africa 244/7 in 50 overs (Lhuan-dre Pretorius 76, Richard Seletswane 64; Raj Limbani 3/60) lost to India 248/8 in 48.5 overs (Sachin Dhas 96, Uday Saharan 81; Kwena Maphaka 3/32, Tristan Luus 3/37).



India's Rutuja Bhosale returns to Peangtarn Plipuech of Thailand in the Mumbai Open first round match on Tuesday. Rutuja won 6-4, 7-5. — DEBASISH DEY

SHRIVALLI STUNS SECOND SEED; RUTUJA TOO WINS

AGE CORRESPONDENT MUMBAI, FEB. 6

A day after wild carder Sahaja Yamalappalli sent the top seed Kayla Day of USA crashing out of the tournament, Indian qualifier Shrivalli Bhamidipaty pulled off another stunning upset, defeating second seed Nao Hibino of Japan in the first round of the L&T Mumbai Open WTA 125K Series Tennis Championships on Tuesday.

Ranked No. 520 in the world and playing against a top 100 player for the first time, the 22-year-old Bhamidipaty, who won two matches in qualifying to reach the main draw, recovered from the loss of the first set to oust the three-time WTA titlist Hibino 2-6, 6-1, 7-6 (5) in two hours and 17 minutes.

The Indian will take on 16-year-old Russian Alina Korneeva for a spot in the pre-quarter-finals.

Earlier in the day, Asian Games mixed doubles gold medallist Rutuja Bhosale scored a straight sets win over Thailand's Peangtarn Plipuech 6-4, 7-5 to make it three Indians advancing to the second round of the tournament.

However, Indian No. 1 Anika Raina went down tamerly to American 8th seed Katie Volynets in straight sets 6-4, 6-2.

There was also good news for local fans in the doubles draw with India No. 1 Prarthana Thombare and Dutch partner Arianne Hartono reaching the quarter-finals with a 6-4, 2-6, 10-6 upset win over the fourth-seeded Thai duo Luksika Kumkhum/ Peangtarn Plipuech.

TOP NAMES TO FEATURE IN WOMEN'S HANDBALL LEAGUE

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 6

South Asia's first-ever professional Women's Handball League, which will be featuring prominent players from the Middle East, South East, Europe and Africa, was launched in the National Capital on Tuesday.

With six teams set to compete in the inaugural edition, the league promises to be a game-changer for women's handball in India by not only providing a transformative platform for players to showcase their skills but also creating a platform for the upcoming players.

The league is promoted by Panna Sports Venture which is the official licensee holder, under the auspices of the South Asian Handball Federation, the Asian Handball Federation, and supported by the Handball Association of India. India's girls handball team won the prestigious Asian President's Cup for the first time in Jordan last year.