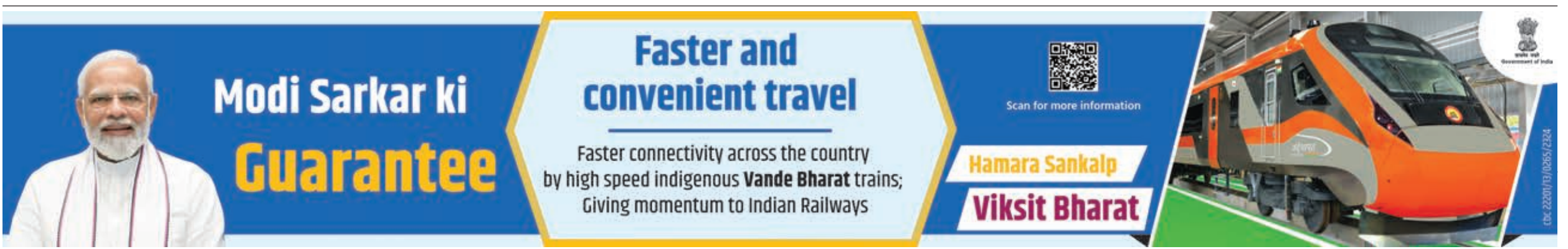


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NEW DELHI TUESDAY 13 FEBRUARY 2024




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WINDOWS



A model walks the ramp at the New York Fashion Week on Monday. — AFP

2 hostages freed in Israeli raid which kills 67 Palestinians

Rafah (Gaza Strip): Israeli forces rescued two hostages early Monday, storming a heavily guarded apartment in the Gaza Strip and extracting the captives under fire in a dramatic raid that was a small but symbolically significant success for Israel. Heavy airstrikes that provided cover for the operation killed at least 67 Palestinians, according to health officials in the beleaguered territory. The plight of the hostages has profoundly shaken Israelis, and the rescue in densely populated Rafah briefly lifted the spirits of a nation still reeling from Hamas' cross-border raid last year that started the war. — AP Full report on Page 6

Delhi court grants 3-day bail to Sisodia

New Delhi: A Delhi court on Monday granted three-day interim bail to senior Aam Aadmi Party leader Manish Sisodia, arrested in the alleged excise policy 'scam', to attend his niece's wedding. Special judge M.K. Nagpal granted the relief to Mr Sisodia from February 13-15.

Retail inflation eases to 5.10% in January

New Delhi: Retail inflation eased to a three-month low of 5.1 per cent in January mainly on account of lower food prices. Inflation based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI) was at 5.69 per cent in December 2023 and 6.52 per cent in January 2024. Full report on Page 7

COUNTERPOINT



Try for a Rajya Sabha seat... you never win a Lok Sabha seat!

WEATHER

Max: 21°C
Min: 11°C
RH: 61%
Rain: 0%

Forecast: Cloudy

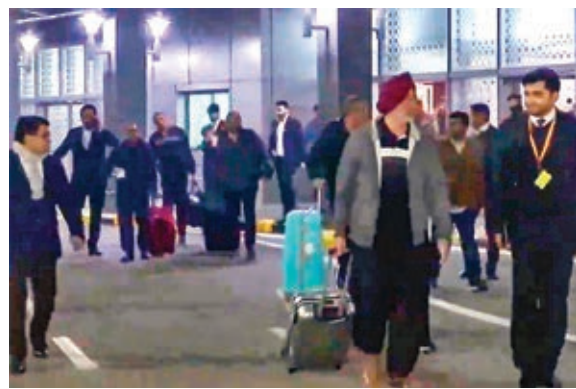
ASTROGUIDE

Shubhakarut: Uttarayana
Tithi: Pushya Bahula Saptami till 3.58 pm
Star: Swati till 5.56 am
Variyam: 9.06 am to 9.52 am;
Durmuhurtam: 10.37 am to 11.22 am; 3.08 pm to 3.53 pm
Rahukalam: 10.30 am to 12 pm
SUNSET TODAY 6.09 PM
SUNRISE TOMORROW 7.01 AM
MOONRISE TOMORROW 9.52 AM
MOONSET TODAY 10.03 PM

Freed Indians thank Modi for his intervention, also Qatar's Emir Qatar releases 8 ex-Navymen, in a big win for India, 7 back home

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI
NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

In a huge diplomatic win for India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, ordered the release of the eight Indian nationals and former naval personnel who were sentenced earlier to "varying prison terms" on alleged charges of spying for Israel. In the early hours of Monday morning, New Delhi put out a statement announcing and welcoming the release of the eight Indians, of whom seven have already returned to India. India also thanked the Qatar Emir for the release of the eight Indians, who had been earlier sentenced to death by a Qatari court in October 2023 but which was later commuted to varying prison terms in December by a higher court in the tiny oil-rich



Ex-Navymen, who were sentenced to death by the Qatari court on espionage charges, arrive in New Delhi following their release on Monday. — PTI

▶ **THE 8 Indians** were in the process of filing an appeal in Qatar's highest court for their acquittal when the country's ruler ordered their release and allowed them to return to India

Gulf nation. The eight Indians were in the process of filing an appeal in Qatar's highest court for their acquittal when

the country's ruler ordered their release and allowed them to return to India, in a huge relief for them and their families.

"The Government of India welcomes the release of eight Indian nationals working for the Dahra Global company who were detained in Qatar. Seven out of the eight of them have returned to India. We

▶ Turn to Page 4

Modi to visit Qatar, talk to Emir on Wed

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

In a surprise development, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Qatar on his way back home from the UAE.

This assumes significance given the release of the eight Indian nationals and former naval personnel by Qatar on Monday. At a special MEA briefing, foreign secretary Vinay Kwatra said Mr Modi had personally monitored all efforts for the release of the eight Indians and had "never shied away from any initiative" to secure their release. He added that the developments had provided "proof" of Mr Modi's leadership in this regard.

Jairam: Cong joins nation in joy and relief

New Delhi: The Congress on Monday welcomed the release of eight former Indian naval personnel and expressed relief and happiness. In a post on X, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said, "The Congress joins the entire nation in its relief and happiness that the eight former Indian Navy personnel earlier sentenced to death by a court in Qatar have been released and are back home."

▶ More on Page 3

Modi in UAE today, will open Abu Dhabi's 1st Hindu temple

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will begin an official two-day visit starting Tuesday to the United Arab Emirates, that will see him attending the World Government Summit 2024 in Dubai as the guest of honour and also later inaugurating the BAPS Mandir, which will be the first Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi, UAE's capital city. Thousands of Hindu devotees are expected to

▶ **THE PRIME Minister** will hold bilateral meetings with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. This will be Mr Modi's 7th visit to the UAE.

attend the event. Apart from also addressing the Indian community in the UAE at an event in Zayed Sports City in Abu Dhabi, Mr Modi will hold bilateral meetings with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, when

the "two leaders will discuss ways to further deepen, expand and strengthen the strategic partnership between the countries and exchange views on regional and international issues". Foreign secretary Vinay Kwatra said key agreements are expected to be signed between the two nations after the talks in Abu Dhabi. This is likely to include pacts in the energy sector.

This will be Mr Modi's seventh visit to the UAE

▶ Turn to Page 4

Ex-CM Chavan quits Cong, set to join BJP

PRASAD PATIL
MUMBAI, FEB. 12

Senior Congress leader and former Maharashtra chief minister Ashok Chavan on Monday quit the primary membership of the party as well as resigned from the state Legislative Assembly. He is likely to join the BJP on February 14. However, he said he has not taken any decision yet.

Mr Chavan, who was authorised by the Congress to hold seat-sharing negotiations with the alliance partners in the state, is the



third prominent exit in less than a month. Earlier, former Union minister Milind Deora joined the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and former Maharashtra minister Baba Siddique joined the Ajit Pawar-led NCP. Some more Congress leaders are also set to quit the party and join the ruling parties before the Lok Sabha

▶ Turn to Page 4

Nitish wins vote as Opp. walks out

▶ Jolt to Tejashwi as 3 RJD MLAs back govt ▶ Will probe graft: CM

NAYYAR AZAD
PATNA, FEB. 12

After weeks of speculation and a flurry of political activities, Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar on Monday won the floor test comfortably as the Opposition had walked out of the House.

In the 243-member Bihar Assembly, 129 MLAs voted for the motion of confidence. The deputy speaker declared zero votes against the motion after the Opposition walk-out ahead of the floor test. In the absence of the Opposition, Nitish Kumar first proved his majority



Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar at the Vidhan Bhavan in Patna on Monday. — PTI

by voice vote. He, however, then insisted on manual voting.

The 129 votes in favor of the Nitish Kumar-led NDA included three from

the RJD, who switched alliances at the last minute and supported the Nitish Kumar-led NDA. The RJD MLAs who sat on the ruling party benches were Chetan Anand, Neelam Devi and Prahlad Yadav. This came as a jolt to Tejashwi Yadav who earlier repeatedly claimed that the Mahagathbandhan would do "khela" (change the game).

Nitish Kumar, who dumped the RJD and joined hands with the BJP last month, accused Tejashwi Yadav's party of corruption. He said: "I

▶ Turn to Page 4

Rahul yatra to skip western UP as RLD set to ally with BJP

Lucknow, Feb. 12: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has decided to cut short his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Uttar Pradesh by skipping western part of the state and saving five days, a party leader said on Monday while citing board exams.

The decision follows indications that Samajwadi Party ally and Jayant Singh-led Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) may join hands with the BJP ahead of the Lok Sabha elections.

Uttar Pradesh Congress spokesperson Anshu Awasthi said the duration of the yatra in UP is being reduced in view of the state board examinations for Classes 10 and 12. The yatra was earlier scheduled to remain in Uttar Pradesh from February 16 to February 26 before entering Rajasthan. However, it will now end on February 21 and enter Madhya Pradesh by skipping western UP. "Setting an example of sensitivity, Rahul Gandhi ji has given public interest a priority on many occasions. Keeping in mind the UP Board examinations starting from February 22, the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra will remain in Uttar Pradesh from February 16 to February 21," Mr Awasthi said. — PTI

Sharif, Bilawal's parties discuss new power-sharing formula to form govt

Islamabad/Lahore, Feb. 12: The top leaders of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and the Pakistan People's Party have discussed a new power-sharing formula for dividing the five-year tenure between them, as efforts to form a coalition government gathered pace on Monday following a split verdict in the elections.

Despite Independent candidates backed by jailed former PM Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party winning the most seats in Parliament, questions loom over what the next government of

Imran's party to sit in Opposition

Islamabad: Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party will not join hands with rival PML-N or the PPP to form a coalition government and would sit in the Opposition despite having a majority in the newly-elected Parliament, party leader Barrister Gohar Ali Khan has said. PAGE 6

will look like. None of the three major parties, the PML-N, the PPP, or the

PTI have won the necessary seats to secure a majority and, therefore, will be unable to form government on their own, leaving it unclear who will be picked as the next Prime Minister.

The leaders of PML-N and the PPP discussed the idea of appointing a PM for half the term during their first meeting held on Sunday following the February 8 elections as part of their efforts to form a coalition government in the Centre and provinces, according to a source privy to the development. — PTI

▶ More on Page 6



Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and Punjab chief minister Bhagwant Mann during a visit to the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya along with their families on Monday. — PTI

▶ Report on Page 2

SHORT TAKES

Cong ready for all 7
Delhi seats: Lovely

New Delhi: The Delhi Congress chief Arvinder Singh Lovely on Monday said that the party is prepared for all seven Lok Sabha constituencies in the national capital, while talks are being held with the Aam Aadmi Party for an alliance. Mr Lovely said that meetings are being held between the Congress and AAP to chalk out a strategy for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, and the decision taken by senior Congress leaders about the alliance will be followed by the Delhi unit of the party. "We are having meetings with the Aam Aadmi Party. We are prepared for all the seven seats in Delhi. We respect all parties who are in alliance and whatever our high command will decide about the collaboration, we will abide by it," Mr Lovely said. He further said that the party will raise the issue of pollution in its election campaign.

DU PG aspirants to
get help from ABVP

New Delhi: Ahead of the upcoming Common University Entrance University (CUET) the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) has initiated a "Free Crash Course" for students interested in taking admissions in postgraduate programmes through CUET in Delhi University. ABVP will assist students in clearing CUET for postgraduate programmes in Commerce, Political Science, Geography, Hindi, History, Economics, Sanskrit, Philosophy, Journalism, Chemistry, operational research, English, and education subjects, via research scholars and subject experts through digital mediums, release by student organisation said. In this crash course, candidates will be prepared for the entrance through expert guidance, relevant study materials and regular online classes.

Min temp at 7.3°C, 3
slots below average

New Delhi: Delhiites woke up to a cold Monday morning with the minimum temperature settling at 7.3 degrees Celsius, three notches below the season's average, the weather office here said. According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), relative humidity was recorded at 97 per cent. It said a partly cloudy sky was likely during the day and the maximum temperature was expected to settle at 25 degrees Celsius. The Air Quality Index (AQI) reading was at 300 at 10 am, according to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) data.

L-G OK'S REVIVAL
OF 1,027 POSTS OF
VICE-PRINCIPALSAGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

Delhi lieutenant-governor V.K. Saxena has approved the revival of total 1,027 posts of vice-principals in the directorate of education, GNCTD for the vacancy year 2014-15 to 2019. A Raj Niwas official on Monday said that these posts would have been abolished due to the reason that they were not filled for more than the prescribed time limit, in which vacant posts are supposed to be filled, with the justification that they are not required. The revival of the posts of vice-principal was necessary since there was an acute shortage of the vice-principals — posts, which are essential for the smooth functioning of the Schools, he said. As per the earlier Recruitment Rules (RRs), total posts of vice-principals were supposed to be filled in through promotion. Meanwhile, the Aam Aadmi Party, in an official statement, said, "It is imperative to highlight that the responsibility for services lies squarely with the L-G. Why, then, has the L-G failed to exercise his power to fill these vacancies? In the paramount interest of the public, ensuring the uninterrupted education of children was absolutely crucial, and we spared no effort in making every conceivable arrangement." The L-G was informed that out of these 1,027 posts of vice-principals, 873 posts up to vacancy year Sep-2018, prior to amendment, were filled on adhoc basis vide promotion.

Prayed for happiness, peace and health of everyone, says Delhi CM
Kejriwal, Mann visit Ram MandirAGE CORRESPONDENT
AYODHYA, FEB. 12

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and his Punjab counterpart Bhagwant Mann along with their family members offered prayers at the Ram temple in Ayodhya on Monday. "Today I had the good fortune to have the darshan of Ram Lalla. I felt immense peace after offering prayers at the shrine that cannot be described in words," Mr Kejriwal later told reporters. The AAP leaders, their spouses and other family members spent around one hour and 15 minutes at the Ram temple. "It is a matter of good fortune for the entire world that a beautiful and grand temple has been



Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and Punjab chief minister Bhagwant Mann during a visit to the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on Monday.

constructed in Ayodhya and lakhs of Ram devotees are coming every day to offer worship," Mr Kejriwal said. Both the chief ministers

prarthana" (consecration ceremony) of the idol of Ram Lalla, he had said he wanted to visit it later with his family.

Mr Kejriwal along with his Punjab counterpart Mann were hosted over lunch by Champat Rai, general secretary of Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra, AAP UP president Sabhajeet Singh said.

Speaking to media persons at Ayodhya airport before returning to Delhi, Mr Kejriwal said, "We have prayed at the temple for happiness, peace and health of everyone."

Mr Mann said India is a country of multiple religious faiths where all festivals are celebrated together.

"At the Ram temple, we prayed for peace and

brotherhood in the country. India is a bouquet of flowers of different hues each with its own unique fragrance," the Punjab chief minister said.

In a post on X, Mr Kejriwal said, "Reaching Ayodhya today with my parents and my wife, I had the privilege of having the divine darshan of Ram Lalla ji in the Shri Ram temple. Bhagwant ji and his family were also present on this occasion."

"Everyone together had darshan of Maryada Purushottam Lord Shri Ram Ji and prayed for the progress of the country and the welfare of all humanity. May Lord Shri Ramchandra ji bless everyone. Jai Shri Ram." He also shared photographs of the visit to the temple.

AAP to decide LS
candidates, pact
with Cong today

'Need of quick decision on alliance'

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

The AAP's political affairs committee (PAC) will in its meeting on Tuesday discuss the party candidates for the Lok Sabha polls and prospects of alliance with the Congress, said Delhi unit convener Gopal Rai on Monday.

When asked whether the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) will enter into an alliance with the Congress in Delhi, Mr Rai told media, "The talks are on. There is a need of a quick decision on it."

A question mark has been put on the alliance with AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal addressing a gathering in Punjab's Taran on Sunday, claiming that the people of Delhi have decided to give all the seven Lok Sabha seats to his party.

Mr Rai said the PAC meeting will review all aspects of the Lok Sabha elections, including the alliance, candidates in different states and poll preparations.

When asked about Mr Kejriwal's claim that the party will win all the seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi, AAP national spokesperson Saurabh Bharadwaj said, "I understand that people are so harassed by the BJP that if elections are held right now, AAP has the capacity to defeat the BJP and

AAP slams BJP
over 'demolition
actions' in DelhiAGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

The AAP on Monday hit out at the BJP over "demolition actions" in the city allegedly by the Central agencies in the past few months.

Delhi urban development minister Saurabh Bharadwaj claimed that people were being "rendered homeless" as JJ clusters and other structures were being dismantled "without rehabilitating" the affected people.

One can see many people living beneath flyovers and on footpaths, and these are people who have been rendered homeless "due to such actions", the AAP leader said.

A number of "demolition actions" are being taken in the national capital by Central agencies, Mr Bharadwaj claimed, as he hit out at the BJP, the ruling party at the Centre.

win all the 7 seats in Delhi." He, however, said that talks for alliance with the Congress are still on. "I cannot reveal anything till there is an outcome of the discussions," he said.

19-yr-old man kills wife,
dumps body in field, heldAGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

Delhi police has arrested a 19-year-old man for allegedly killing and subsequently burying the body of his wife at a field near the railway tracks in Northwest Delhi, an official said on Monday.

The main accused was identified as Vicky, a resident of Ashok Vihar while his associates were identified as his mother, Tara Devi and one juvenile.

As per police, on January 25, complainant Savitri Shukla (55), a resident of Ashok Vihar, Delhi, stated

that her daughter, Sapna (25), was living with her husband, Vicky.

On February 8, Ashok Vihar police station received a call reporting the discovery of a dead body inside a pit at the Green Belt.

Upon reaching the scene, the police found a female corpse wrapped in a bed cover inside the pit.

"The body was later identified as Sapna by her mother, Savitri Devi, and other relatives, based on distinctive features including a tattoo of Sapna, Vicky on the left hand," said the official.



Multi-layered barricading in place at the Singhu border in New Delhi on Monday, ahead of the scheduled "Delhi Chalo" march by the protesting farmers.

Soon this will be extended to other AIIMS too: Mandaviya
AIIMS goes cashless with smart cardAVINASH PRABHAKAR
NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

The All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) has started the "AIIMS-SBI" smart payment card for cashless payments at cash counters.

Union health minister Mansukh Mandaviya launched the facility on Monday. The centre is also planning to extend the facilities to other AIIMS in the country too.

The card does away with cash payments at AIIMS Delhi for any patient services, including the canteen. A patient can deposit an amount in this card and recharge it at various points in different blocks of AIIMS.

The SBI-AIIMS smart

AIIMS Delhi, University of Liverpool
join hands for research on cancerAGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

The All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) has collaborated with the University of Liverpool for the "AIIMS Liverpool Collaborative Centre for Translational Research in Head and Neck Cancer — ALHNS."

The ALHNS will build upon the pre-existing collaboration and links card is being provided free of cost to all patients and has no service charges.

All patients upon admission will be issued a smart

between the Liverpool Head and Neck Centre (LNHC), the University of Liverpool, and the Head and Neck Cancer Unit at Delhi AIIMS.

The ALHNS will impact the care of patients with head and neck cancer by combining resources at both institutions in order to develop joint research programmes which will enhance the quality of research outputs.

The card will be linked to the patient's unique hospital identification (UHID) number and the Ayushman Bharat

Health Account (ABHA) ID issued under the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM).

Top-up and refunds from the card can be done only upon the provision of a one-time password (OTP) received on the mobile number linked to the patient's UHID.

Referring to the smart payment card as 'One AIIMS, One Card,' Mr Mandaviya said that funds can now be transferred easily and swiftly from across the country by anyone in case of any urgent payment-related requirement for the patient being attended at the hospital.

"Soon this will be extended to other AIIMS too," he said.

HC suspends life term of 4 in
scribe Soumya murder caseAGE CORRESPONDENT
WITH AGENCY INPUTS
NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

The Delhi high court on Monday suspended the life sentence awarded by the trial court last year to four men convicted for the murder of journalist Soumya Vishwanathan.

A bench of Justices Suresh Kumar Kait and Girish Kathpalia suspended the sentence of Ravi Kapoor, Amit Shukla, Baljeet Singh Malik and Ajay Kumar till the pendency of their appeals challenging their conviction and sentence. The bench noted that the convicts have been in custody for 14 years.

The high court had on

January 23 asked the Delhi police to respond to the appeals filed by the four convicts. Ms Vishwanathan, who worked with a leading English news channel, was shot dead in the early hours of September 30, 2008, on Nelson Mandela Marg in south Delhi while she was returning home from work.

A special court had on November 26, 2023, awarded two life terms to Ravi Kapoor, Amit Shukla,

Baljeet Malik and Ajay Kumar under Section 302 (murder) of the IPC and Section 3(1)(i) (committing organised crime resulting in the death of any person) of the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act. The court had made it clear that the sentences will run "consecutively."

The fifth convict, Ajay Sethi, was handed down three years of simple imprisonment under section 411 (dishonestly receiving stolen property) of the IPC. It, however, set off the three-year sentence against the time Sethi had already served, noting he remained in custody for more than 14 years.

Toddler drinks
paint thinner,
mistaking it
for water, dies

Gurgaon, Feb. 12: A child died here in Haryana after drinking paint thinner, mistaking it for water, police said on Monday.

Hakshan, one and a half years old, became unconscious from an excruciating pain in his stomach and died while he was being taken to a hospital in Gurgaon on Sunday, they said.

The incident was reported from Sohna's Kothada Raipur village where Hakshan's family was attending a marriage ceremony, police said.

The ceremony was taking place at a house, which was painted a few weeks ago, and the thinner was bought then, they said.

Hakshan, who was playing, drank the thinner, mistaking it for water, police said and added that he had come to Sohna along with his parents.

"The child drank the thinner by mistake. We have lodged a report and taken action under 174 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC). The body has been handed over to his family after post-mortem," investigating officer Dharmendra said.

The boy was a resident of Jalalpur village in Haryana's Palwal district. —PTI

'Kejriwal used govt funds to
book expensive hotel suites'

Around ₹1.5cr spent in 50 days for CM's stay in hotels: Ilmi

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

BJP spokesperson Shazia Ilmi on Monday alleged that chief minister Arvind Kejriwal used Delhi government's funds to book presidential suites in hotels in other states.

At a press conference, Ms Ilmi alleged that Mr Kejriwal stayed in the most expensive rooms in five-star hotels in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Punjab and Karnataka.

"Presidential, Maharaja, Imperial suites, which cost around ₹2-3 lakhs per night, were booked for



Shazia Ilmi

Delhi chief minister," she claimed.

"In Punjab, they have the AAP government, so they can stay in the state guest house but he (Mr Kejriwal) stayed in five-star hotels," she added.

Farmers' stir today as talks are inconclusive

Continued from Page 1

Mazdoor Sangharsh committee general secretary Sarwan Singh Pandher, among others, were part of the meeting, which began at around 6.30 pm.

Earlier while the meeting was going on, Ranjeet Singh Raju, a farmer leader who came out of the meeting briefly, said that no consensus was reached as yet. "There is nothing to say. The meeting is on. All major points, including MSP on all crops and debt waiver of farmers, were being discussed. But there was no final decision yet."

Besides a legal guarantee for minimum support price

(MSP), the farmers are also demanding the implementation of the Swaminathan Commission's recommendations, pensions for farmers and farm labourers, farm debt waiver, withdrawal of police cases and 'justice' for victims of the Lakhimpur Kheri violence, reinstate the Land Acquisition Act 2013, withdrawal from the World Trade Organisation, compensation for families of farmers died during the previous agitation, among others.

During the meeting, the delegation of the Centre is learnt to have agreed to withdraw the cases against the farmers regis-

tered during the 2020-21 agitation against the now-repealed farm laws. The Union ministers are also believed to have agreed to give compensation to any left out families of farmers who died during the previous agitation.

In view of the planned march, authorities in Haryana and Delhi fortified borders with the neighbouring states at many places. Barricades were installed, prohibitory orders imposed and thousands of police personnel have been deployed. Further, the Delhi police has imposed Section 144 for a month in

the view of intended widespread tension and "social unrest".

Social media platform X, meanwhile, suspended accounts of four farmer leaders — Surjit Phool, Tejveer, Raman Mann and Sarvan Pandher.

From putting up multiple security barricades to erecting nails on roads, police are leaving no stone unturned to block the protesters, they have also formed several teams to keep strict vigil on bus stands, Metro stations, railway stations to ensure that farmers do not enter the city using any other mode of conveyance.

Bomb threat to South Delhi
school turns out to be hoaxAGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

The Amity International School in Pushp Vihar here received a bomb threat email on Monday morning but nothing suspicious was found by the local police and bomb detection squad, officials said.

DCP (South) Ankit Chauhan said the email was received in the wee hours but the school administration spotted it a few hours later.

"As soon we received the call regarding the threat at about 8.30 am, local police along with bomb detection team (BDT) reached the spot," Mr Chauhan said, adding that nothing suspicious was found. Another

AMEETA MOHAN, principal of Amity International School, Pushp Vihar said classes have been called off for Tuesday as a precautionary safety measure

officer said that the sender of the email threatened that explosives were planted at several locations in the school.

In an official statement, Ameeta Mohan, principal of Amity International School, Pushp Vihar said classes have been called off for Tuesday.

"We received a bomb threat via email and we immediately took precautions and informed the police," the statement read.

2 arrested for
shooting dead
Class 12 boy in
Rajouri GardenAGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

Delhi Police on Monday claimed to have arrested two persons, who allegedly shot dead a Class 12 student in a park in west Delhi's Rajouri Garden area.

The police said that the accused had arranged a country made pistol on ₹5,000 to avenge an assault.

A bullet-ridden body of Alok Mathur (18) was recovered from a park in Rajouri Garden on Saturday morning, police said.

The police had earlier suspected that he was attacked by a sharp-edged weapon but the autopsy suggested that he was shot twice, they said. An officer said it has been found during the course of investigations that Alok, who studied in Class 12 in a government school, had a fight with the accused a week ago along with two of his friends.

"Alok and his friends had beaten up Saurav Chopra and Pratham on that fight. To avenge, the duo specially arranged the fire arm on ₹5,000 and attacked Alok on Friday night," an officer said.

Saurav and Pratham were arrested from their residences in Raghuraj Nagar on Sunday, police said and added further investigation is on.

SHORT TAKES

SC extends interim bail to Mishra's son

New Delhi: Supreme Court on Monday extended the interim bail of Union minister Ajay Kumar Mishra's son Ashish Mishra in the 2021 Lakhimpur Kheri violence case till the next date of hearing and directed the apex court registry to obtain a report from the trial court on the status of the proceedings. Directing the SC registry to obtain a report from the trial court on the progress of the case, the bench of Justices Surya Kant and K.V. Viswanathan adjourned the matter. On September 26 last year, the top court had relaxed the bail conditions of Mr Mishra to enable him to visit and stay in the National Capital Region to look after his ailing mother and for the treatment of his daughter. The case relates to an incident of violence on October 3, 2021, in which eight persons — including four farmers — were killed in Lakhimpur Kheri district of UP.

BJP fields 2 for RS elections from Raj

New Delhi: The BJP on Monday named two candidates for the Rajya Sabha polls from Rajasthan, excluding outgoing MP and Union minister Bhupendra Yadav, who is likely to fight the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. The BJP fielded Chunnilal Garasiya and Madan Rathore. While the BJP is likely to get its two candidates elected to the Rajya Sabha from the state, the Congress has the numbers to win one seat. The BJP has 115 and the Congress 70 members in the 200-member Assembly. A minimum of 41 votes will be needed to win one seat in case of a contest. The BJP is likely to not name several of its ministers, whose term in Rajya Sabha is ending, as it may field them in the upcoming LS polls. — PTI

4 boys trapped in Bengal trench die

Kolkata: Four boys died after they got trapped under a large chunk of mud while playing at an under-construction trench of the Border Security Force (BSF) in North Dinajpur of West Bengal on Monday. The tragedy took place at Chetanagachh under Daspara gram panchayat area of Chopra near the India-Bangladesh border. SP (Islampur police district) Joby Thomas said that the trench was around 10-15 feet deep. He added that the portion of the mud, which was dug out to make the trench, somehow fell on a group of five boys who were playing inside it. One of the boys escaped unhurt. Attacking the BSF and BJP over the deaths, the TMC alleged that it has come to light that the construction along the border was illegal.

SC SET TO HEAR FEB. 26 ANDHRA PLEA ON NAIDU

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 12
The Supreme Court on Monday fixed February 26 for the hearing of the Andhra Pradesh government's plea against a high court order granting regular bail to TDP chief N. Chandrababu Naidu in the skill development corporation scam case. A bench of Justices Bela M. Trivedi and Pankaj Mishra adjourned the hearing after senior advocate Siddharth Luthra, representing Mr Naidu, informed it that senior advocate Harish Salve will be arguing the matter but he is unavailable during the day. Mr Luthra sought deferment of the hearing for two weeks to enable Mr Salve to argue the matter. Senior advocate Ranjit Kumar and advocate Mahfooz Ahsan Nazki, appearing for the Andhra Pradesh government, urged the bench to fix an early date for hearing the appeal against the high court order. To this, the bench said it could hear the matter on February 26. On January 16, the Supreme Court had delivered a split verdict on the TDP supremo Mr Naidu's plea challenging the high court order refusing to quash the FIR against him in the "Skill Development Corporation scam" case.

Flies to Delhi to submit violence report ■ 6 BJP MLAs suspended from House
Gov rushes to troubled Bengal dist

RAJIB CHOWDHURI KOLKATA, FEB. 12

West Bengal governor C.V. Ananda Bose rushed to New Delhi on Monday evening to submit a strong report to the Union home ministry about the high voltage allegations of rape of women by absconding Trinamul Congress strongman Shahjahan Sheikh and his aides and the violence last week at Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas.

Cong leaders meet over seat-sharing in LS polls

New Delhi, Feb. 12: Top Congress leaders on Monday met at the residence of party chief Mallikarjun Kharge to discuss the finalisation of seat-sharing arrangements with various parties of the INDIA bloc. Sources said the Congress president is also learnt to have discussed the names of party candidates for the upcoming Rajya Sabha elections with parliamentary party chief Sonia Gandhi. Mrs Gandhi and party treasurer Ajay Maken are among the likely candidates, sources said.

Cong welcomes release of eight former Navymen from Qatar jail

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 12
The Congress on Monday welcomed the release of eight former Indian Navy personnel from Qatar. They were released nearly three and a half months after being handed down death sentences. The party welcomed the decision and greeted their families. The ministry of external affairs said 7 of them have returned to India. India appreciates the decision by the Qatar's Emir of release and home coming of its citizens, it added.

The Navy personnel were on October 26 last year given death sentences by Qatar's Court of First Instance in a case of suspected espionage. In a post on "X", Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said, "The Indian National Congress joins the entire nation in its relief and happiness that the eight former Indian Navy personnel, earlier sentenced to death by a court in Qatar, have been released and are back home." "It sends its greetings and good wishes to them and their families," he added. Senior Congress leader Shashi Tharoor said the release of the Indians was "a huge relief".

Eyes on LS, Assembly polls in Odisha, BJP rushes top brass for campaigning

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO BHUBANESWAR, FEB. 12

With various pre-poll surveys predicting "better performances" by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Odisha in the forthcoming Lok Sabha and state Assembly polls, the saffron party appears to be gradually activating its election machinery in the state. Until recently, it was being discussed in political circles that the BJP would focus only on Lok Sabha seats in Odisha and desist from causing inconvenience to the ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD), as the latter, despite not being officially in National Democratic Alliance (NDA), has proved to be a "trustworthy partner" for BJP in Parliament.

been underway following a two-day violence, after cutting short his tour in Kerala. He met the local women who narrated their horror to him and pleaded for safety. The governor later said, "What I saw there was ghastly, shocking and shattering to my senses. I saw something which I should never have seen. I heard many things which I should have never heard. If you have tears to cry, then now is the time to shed them." He added, "When I listened to my mothers and sisters there, I could not believe this could happen in Rabindranath Tagore's



C.V. Ananda Bose

place. I will fight it out within the laws of the land and will spare no efforts to see the guilty punished." In the evening, SP (Basirhat) Hossain Mehedi Rehman however said, "An SP-rank lady officer visited the areas and spoke to the women especially those, who

expressed their grievances in the media, and took them into confidence. We received four written complaints from women so far. But no of them have allegations of rape." Echoing him, DIG (Barasat Range) Sumeet Kumar said, "These complaints do not have any communal angle also. This is important. We are alert about the safety of women. A 10-member team led by a lady DIG has been set up by the government. It will start the probe from Tuesday." In the morning, chief minister Mamata Banerjee broke her silence on the unrest at

Sandeshkhali and said, "All of those, who unleashed the violence or have grievances against them, have been arrested." Welcoming the governor's visit there, she added, "Anyone can go to any place. I also sent there a team of state women's commission which has submitted a report." In the Assembly, six BJP MLAs including leader of the Opposition Suwendu Adhikari were suspended by Speaker Biman Banerjee from the House for the remaining days of the budget session after they burst in protest over the atrocities against women at Sandeshkhali. A



West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee during a government programme at Arambagh in Hooghly district on Monday. — PTI

Task to bring in synergy among stakeholders in managing frontiers' affairs
Govt to appoint consultant for border forces

AMRESH SRIVASTAVA NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

With an aim to make effective border management in the areas at northern and eastern borders, the government is to appoint a consultant for building competencies in the border guarding forces for effective management and also to develop synergy among the various stakeholders in managing border affairs. The consultant will be a

retired personnel of "Level-14" from the defence forces with adequate experience in handling the border areas management, besides the handling of security related matters and also the implementation of the policies envisaged for adequate development of the border areas in Ladakh, Kashmir, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, the officials said. Officials in the government said that the consultant would be assigned the task to create an effective mechanism to bring in synergy among the vari-

ous stakeholders in managing the affairs. He would also do coordination among various agencies involved in implementing the development works in border areas including the centrally sponsored "Vibrant Village Programme". They also said since the country's frontier areas face challenges like cross border terrorism, crime and illegal migration, etc. the consultant would be required to carry out

capacity needs analysis and mapping of the capacity building interventions specific to the threat perception. The consultant would also be mandated to conduct a comprehensive need assessment to understand the current and future challenges faced by border guarding forces such as BSF, ITBP and Assam Rifle, and to identify stakeholder requirements and expectations, they said.

Politics in MP over Sonia's nomination to Rajya Sabha
State prez requests leader to go for polls from state

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY BHOPAL, FEB. 12

Politics in Congress in Madhya Pradesh over nomination to the Rajya Sabha from the state in the February 27 biennial elections heats up with state party president Jitu Patwari making on Monday an appeal to Sonia Gandhi to go to the upper house from Madhya Pradesh in the polls. Mr Patwari's call for RS nomination of Ms Gandhi from MP comes in the wake of talks doing the rounds in the party circles here that Congress veteran and former chief minister Kamal Nath has been

lobbying hard with the high command to go to the RS in the ensuing biennial polls. "All the Congressmen in the state including senior leaders Digvijay Singh and Kamal Nath want Sonia ji to go to the Rajya Sabha from MP. It would be an honour for the state to send her to RS. Besides, she would give a voice to Madhya Pradesh (in the parliament) if she is elected to RS from the state", Mr Patwari said. Replying to a question by the media here as to if the call for RS nomination of Ms Gandhi from MP is a ploy to foil the reported move by Mr Nath to go to the upper house in the polls, Mr Patwari said,

"Mr Nath is a senior leader and respected by us. If he is keen to go to the Rajya Sabha, then we will back his candidature". Mr Patwari however hastened to add that there is no rumbling in the party over nomination for RS from MP. "It is only a rumour being spread by our rival party (BJP)", he said. Significantly, Mr Nath is going to host a dinner for all the Congress MLAs in the state here on Tuesday. Mr Nath's "dinner diplomacy" comes two days ahead of the beginning of filing of nomination for the biennial polls on February 15.

Poor were not invited to temple event, says Rahul

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY RAIPUR, FEB. 12



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Monday said celebrities and industrialists were invited to Ram temple consecration ceremony in Ayodhya on January 22, but the poor and farmers were not seen at the event.

Addressing a gathering in Korba in Chhattisgarh while undertaking his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, kicked off at Thoubal in Manipur on January 14, Mr Gandhi said, "Did you see a poor man at the inauguration of Ram Mandir? I saw all the big businessmen and film personalities. I did not see a single poor man, did not see a farmer, did not see a labourer, did not see an unemployed person."

The Congress leader said even though the BJP calls India a "Hindu nation", 74 per cent of the country's population and the poor in the general category in the country are not getting anything. Mr Gandhi raised the issue of caste census and alleged that Prime Minister Narendra Modi would never conduct the caste-based census. He reiterated that the caste census alone would usher in social justice in the country. Mr Gandhi also attacked

the Centre over the introduction of Goods and Services Tax (GST) and the demonetisation move. The Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra is set to reach Surajpur in north Chhattisgarh on Monday. Mr Gandhi is scheduled to make a night halt in Surajpur before resuming his yatra on Tuesday. Meanwhile, Mr Gandhi has decided to cut short yatra in Uttar Pradesh by skipping the western region of the state and saving five days, state party chief Ajay Rai said on Monday, citing board exams.

— Rahul Gandhi
Congress leader

SC notices to ministry, ICG over woman officer petition

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

The Supreme Court on Monday issued notices to the defence ministry and the Indian Coast Guard seeking response to a plea filed by a short-service appointment officer challenging the denial of opportunity for consideration of permanent commission. The petitioner, Priyanka Tyagi, contended that she was denied the opportunity to be considered for a permanent commission despite serving for 14 years with an impeccable record.

A three-judge bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud issued the notice on her plea moved through senior advocate Archana Pathak Dave. "The petitioner was part of the first-ever All Women Crew on the Dornier Aircraft deployed in the eastern region for undertaking maritime patrolling as captain of the aircraft near the ICGAS Chennai," the petition stated. "The petitioner was selected as GD officer after just two years of service and was given the chance to be an observer/navigator, for which the petitioner underwent a special aviation medical test and had cleared on merit," the petition added.



Women in bridal attire perform rituals as they celebrate ancient Nag festival "Kanchoth" in Baderwah of Jammu & Kashmir on Monday. — PTI

Indians travelling to both countries to benefit
UPI launched in Sri Lanka, Maritius; special day: Modi

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

India's Unified Payment Interface (UPI) services were rolled out in Sri Lanka and Mauritius on Monday, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi describing it as a "special day" for the three nations as it marked linking historic ties with modern digital technology. India's RuPay card services were also launched in Mauritius at a virtual ceremony attended by Prime Minister Modi, his Mauritius counterpart Pravin Jugnauth and Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe. "India's UPI or United Payments Interface comes in a new role today — Uniting

Partners with India," Mr Modi emphasised. Today is a special day for the three friendly countries of the Indian Ocean Region as "we are linking our historic ties with modern digital technology", he said. "I believe that Sri Lanka and Mauritius will benefit from the UPI system," Mr Modi said. The Prime Minister said

digital public infrastructure has brought about a revolutionary change in India. He also highlighted India's focus on its "neighbourhood first policy". "Be it natural disaster, health related, economic or supporting on the international stage, India has been the first responder, and will continue to be so," he said. The launch of the Indian services in Sri Lanka and Mauritius came amid New Delhi's increasing bilateral economic ties with the two countries. The launch enables availability of UPI settlement services for Indian nationals travelling to Sri Lanka and Mauritius as well as for Mauritius nationals travelling to India.



SHORT TAKES

5 dead in collision on Yamuna e-way

Mathura/Noida: Five people were charred to death on Monday as their car caught fire after a collision with a bus on the Yamuna Expressway in Mathura, police said. The incident took place near the 117th milestone on the Agra-Noida carriageway of the expressway under the Mahavan police station limits in the morning, a senior officer said, adding the car was going to Delhi. None of the passengers of the bus received injuries and all of them have been sent to their destination by different vehicles, police said. "There was a collision between the bus and the Swift car. So far it has come to light that a tyre of the bus burst, after which it went out of control and turned on the road," Mathura senior SP Shailesh Pandey said. — PTI

Ready for talks with Ufa: Assam minister

Guwahati: The Assam government is ready to hold peace talks with the hardliner ULFA (Independent) and doors for negotiations with its chief Paresh Barua are open, Parliamentary affairs minister Pijush Hazarika said in the state Assembly on Monday. The Barua-led faction has remained outside ambit of negotiations even as a peace pact has been signed with pro-talks group, Hazarika said. — PTI

Modi will open Abu Dhabi's 1st Hindu temple

Continued from Page 1 since 2015 and the third in the past eight months. Mr Modi will also meet Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who is the vice-president, Prime Minister and defence minister of the oil-rich Arab Gulf nation. In a statement last week, New Delhi had said: "India and the UAE enjoy warm, close and multi-faceted relations underpinned by strong political, cultural and economic linkages. Following the landmark visit of PM Modi to UAE in August 2015, bilateral relations between the two countries have been elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Both countries signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in February 2022 and a Local Currency Settlement (LCS) System in July 2023 to promote the use of Indian Rupee and AED for cross-border transactions." The MEA had added: "The two countries are among each other's top trading partners with a bilateral trade of about \$85 billion in 2022-23. The UAE is also among the top four investors in India in terms of foreign direct investments in 2022-23. About 3.5 million strong and vibrant Indian community forms the largest expatriate group in the UAE. Their positive and well-appreciated contribution in the development of their host country has been an important anchor of our excellent bilateral engagement with the UAE." — PTI

Present govt has made entire job process transparent: Modi 'BJP govt has given more jobs in 10 yrs than previous govts'

SHASHI BHUSHAN NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday said that his government has given 1.5 times more jobs in the last 10 years than the previous governments. The PM was speaking after virtually handing over appointment letters to one lakh newly-inducted recruits during a Rozgar Mela. Mr Modi also laid the foundation stone of Phase I of the Integrated Complex "Karmayogi Bhavan", which will promote collaboration and synergy among various pillars of mission Karmayogi, in the national capital. Pointing out that the long time spent between the job notification and handing out appointment letters led to an increase in bribery, the Prime Minister said

PM to inaugurate world's highest rail bridge Feb. 20

YUSUF JAMEEL SRINAGAR, FEB. 12

PM Narendra Modi is likely to visit Jammu and Kashmir on February 20 to inaugurate or lay the foundation stone of several projects, including the world's highest railway bridge coming up over the Chenab river. He is also scheduled to address a public meeting in the Union territory's winter capital Jammu. The government had

also planned to get the 272-km long rail track between the garrison town of Udhampur in the Jammu region and the border town of Baramulla in the Kashmir Valley inaugurated by the PM. But the concerned officials have informed the government that the track connecting the Kashmir Valley with the rest of the country by rail will now be ready for opening in May, sources said.

that the present government has made the entire process transparent while also completing the

recruitment process under the stipulated time. "It has led to equal opportunities for every youth in

showcasing their capabilities. Today, youth believes that they can cement their job position with hard work and skills," PM said, highlighting that the government strives to make the youth a partner in the growth of the nation.

He noted that the present government in the last 10 years has handed out jobs to the youth 1.5 times more than the previous governments. Talking about the opening of new sectors and creation of opportunities for employment and self-employment for the youth due to the efforts of the government, the PM mentioned the Budget announcement about one crore rooftop solar plants which will reduce the power bill of the families and they will be able to earn money by supplying power to the grid.



Protesters block rail tracks on the outskirts of Agartala on Monday during a protest organised by Tipra Indigenous Students' Federation demanding to instate Roman script for Kokborak language along with Bengali in Tripura board of secondary examination. — PTI

Govt working to make future better, says CM Manipur passing through troubled times, says Biren

Imphal, Feb. 12: Manipur chief minister N. Biren Singh described the current situation in the state as a battle for survival and identity, reflecting the gravity of the challenges being confronted.

Speaking at the launch of a skill development programme here on Monday, Mr Singh emphasised the need to address the crisis facing the state.

"We are passing through troubled times. The crisis we are facing today is one of struggle for existence, survival, and identity. The properties and identity, inherited over centuries, have now become insecure due to the lack of vision of certain politicians. Our generation is insecure today, so the government is working to make your future secure," he said. Mr Singh also highlighted Union home minister Amit Shah's post on social media regarding the cancellation of the India-Myanmar free movement regime (FMR), underscoring its importance in addressing internal security and demographic challenges. He stressed that the gov-



ernment's actions, including fencing and the cancellation of FMR, aim to ensure a safe and secure future, thereby putting an end to widespread illegal immigration and activities like drug smuggling and arms trafficking. "The insecurity we have today will not be faced by the generations to come. That is why we are bearing all the criticisms," Mr Singh added. Addressing the launch of Honda India Foundation's project "Buniyaad — Aatmanirbharta Ka Adhaar", Mr Singh expressed gratitude to the foundation for choosing Manipur. He praised the people of the state for their gentle nature, discipline, and cleanliness. — PTI

Gen. Pande set to meet US military brass on 4-day visit

Deepen military ties and strategic partnership key focus

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 12



Gen. Manoj Pande

Army Chief Gen. Manoj Pande embarked on a four-day visit to the United States from February 13 to deepen military cooperation and strategic partnership between the two countries. During his visit, Gen. Pande will engage in high-level discussions and interactions with Gen. Randy George, United States Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA), and other senior military leaders.

The Army Chief will visit the "Army Geospatial Centre" at Fort Belvoir, the "National Defence University" at Fort McNair and interact with leadership at Headquarters 1 Corps. He will also engage with units at the forefront of military innovation and strategy, including the

Stryker Unit, 1st Multi-Domain Task Force, the 1st Special Forces Group at Seattle and the Defence Innovation Unit in San Francisco. A visit to the California National Guard is also planned, highlighting the comprehensive nature of the visit aimed at exploring avenues for more significant training, co-development and co-production engagements. Highlights of Gen. Pande tour include a US

Army honour guard ceremony, a solemn laying of the wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery and a comprehensive tour of the Pentagon.

"This visit is another milestone in the Indo-US defence relationship, reflecting a mutual desire to enhance military collaboration, exchange strategic perspectives on global threat perceptions, and work together toward future force development and modernisation," the Indian Army said. The engagements between Gen. Pande and senior leadership of the United States Army are poised to yield substantive outcomes, fostering an environment conducive to shared security interests and defence cooperation, it added.

Assam govt tables ₹2.9 lakh-cr budget

MANOJ ANAND GUWAHATI, FEB. 12

Assam finance minister Ajanta Neog on Monday presented a budget of ₹2.9 lakh crores for the financial year 2024-2025. The budget has a deficit of ₹774.47 crores and does not propose any new taxes. Ms Neog announced that the government will support the education of 10 lakh girls up to the post-graduation level to combat child marriage in society.

The budget estimates for 2024-25 show a receipt of ₹1,43,605.56 crores under the consolidated fund of the state. With the addition of ₹1,44,550.08 crores under public account and ₹2,000 crores, the total receipts amount to ₹2,90,155.65 crores.

On the expenditure side, the total expenditure from the consolidated fund for

2024-25 is estimated at ₹1,43,890.62 crores. When considering the expenditure of ₹1,42,670.09 crores under the public account and ₹2,000 crores under the contingency fund, the total expenditure for the year is estimated at ₹2,88,560.71 crores.

Ms Neog stated that the gross state domestic product (GSDP) is expected to reach ₹6.43 lakh crores in the next financial year, compared to ₹5.7 lakh crores in 2023-24. She announced that ₹200 crores has been allocated to integrate wetlands with Brahmaputra, aiming for a flood-free Assam.

The budget also proposed funds for construction of the third Assam Bhavan in the Dwaraka area of New Delhi, with amenities like marriage hall and Namghar, etc., with an area of 4,000 sq m.

Police strn to come up on freed land in Haldwani: CM

Haridwar, Feb. 12: Uttarakhand CM Pushkar Singh Dhami on Monday said a police station would come up on the land freed from encroachment in Haldwani's Banbhoo

lpura, where violence erupted last week after authorities razed an illegally-built madrasa. Additional paramilitary forces were deployed on Monday in the Banbhoo pura area and the situation is "normal and under control", officials said, adding the curfew restrictions are now limited to the Banbhoolpura area of Haldwani. In the February 8 rioting, police personnel and municipal corporation workers were attacked and a police station was set on fire. Referring to the Haldwani violence, the chief minister, who came here to participate in the Nari Shakti Mahotsav, said the manner in which police personnel and journalists were "attacked by unruly elements cannot be condemned enough".

Six, including five alleged to be rioters, were killed while 60 people were injured in the violence during the demolition of the madrasa and an adjoining structure used for prayers. CM said several acres of land were freed from encroachment during the demolition drive in the "Malik ka Bagicha" area of Banbhoolpura. "Today, I announce from the holy banks of Mother Ganga that a police station will be built at that place." — PTI

SC rejects plea challenging appointment of deputy CMs

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 12

The Supreme Court on Monday junked a PIL challenging the practice of appointing deputy chief ministers, saying this does not breach the Constitution.

"This is just a label and even if you call someone a deputy chief minister, it does not change the status," a bench comprising CJI D.Y. Chandrachud and Justices J.B. Pardiwala and Manoj Misra said while trashing the PIL. "A deputy CM is first and foremost a minister in the government of the

state and this does not breach the Constitution," the bench said, adding that it does not create a class in itself. The bench said such appointments do not breach any constitutional provisions. The appointment of a deputy CM has no bearing in the constitutional sense as the label does not provide any additional perks.

The lawyer, representing the PIL petitioner Public Political Party, contended that states are setting a wrong example by appointing deputy CMs and this violates Article 14 (right to equality) under the Constitution.

Qatar releases ex-Navymen

Continued from Page 1

appreciate the decision by the Emir of the State of Qatar to enable the release and homecoming of these nationals," the MEA said in the early hours Monday. It may be noted a conversation had taken place at a meeting in early December last year between Prime Minister Modi and the Qatar Emir on the sidelines of the COP28 summit in Dubai. While New Delhi had declined to go into the specifics of that conversation between the two leaders, it is believed Mr Modi had sought the Qatar Emir's intervention.

The former naval personnel were shown on TV channels praising Mr Modi on their return for his personal intervention in securing their release. The eight Indian former naval personnel in Qatari custody were earlier identified in media reports as Navtej Singh Gill, Birendra Kumar Verma, Saurabh Vashisht, Amit Nagpal, Purnendu Tiwari, Sugunakar Pakala, Sanjeev Gupta and Ragesh. Most of them were officers of captain or commander rank. Of the eight Indians, seven had earlier served as officers in the Navy while one was a sailor.

Minister of state for external affairs Meenakshi Lekhi hailed the role of Mr Modi and the Qatar Emir in the release of the eight Indians. I&B minister Anurag Thakur also hailed Mr Modi's efforts and said it was proof of India's rising prestige on the global stage in the past decade. New Delhi had always reiterated it stands by the eight Indians and would continue to extend all consular and legal

assistance to them as well as continue to take up the matter with the Qatari authorities for their release, which has now been accomplished successfully.

The eight Indians were earlier sentenced to death by Qatar's Court of First Instance on October 26, 2023, reportedly on espionage charges. Two months later, on December 28 last year, the Qatari Court of Appeal had commuted the death sentences of all these eight Indian nationals to "varying prison terms", and had also given a time-period of 60 days to the eight Indians to file an appeal, should they choose to, in the Court of Cassation, the highest court in Qatar's judicial system. Some media reports suggested the eight Indians had been sentenced to jail terms ranging from three years to 25 years of imprisonment.

It may be recalled that going by media reports in the past several months, the eight Indians were accused by the Gulf nation of spying for Israel on a secret Qatari programme on stealth submarines. The eight Indians were reportedly employees of an Oman-based company, Dahra Global Technologies and Consulting Services, which was advising on a Qatari programme aimed at obtaining high-tech Italian-made submarines that could evade radar detection and providing training for Qatar's Navy. They were all reportedly picked up from their residences in Qatar in August 2021 for questioning and subsequently detained before being convicted. The charges were never spelt out in public by Qatar.

Nitish wins vote as Opp. walks out

Continued from Page 1

Mr Kumar reminded MLAs about the previous government during the Lalu-Rabri period. He said "they (Lalu and Rabri) got the chance to work in Bihar for fifteen years. What used to happen in Bihar then? People were scared to come out of their houses at night. What was the condition of roads then?" Nitish Kumar said his government will launch a probe on the corrupt RJD leaders who were making money during the 17 months of the Mahagathbandhan government.

Mr Kumar further said he has returned to his old place and will remain with them. While addressing the House ahead of the trust vote, Nitish Kumar also referred to the INDIA bloc, saying he tried to unite every party but nothing happened.

Nitish Kumar made these accusations after Tejashwi Yadav criticised him on the floor of the House for dumping the Mahagathbandhan. "Nitish Kumar has created history by taking oath as chief minister for nine consecutive times. It's not just nine times but he has also scripted history by taking the oath as CM thrice in a single term. This has never been seen before", Tejashwi said while taking part in the debate. He also warned the BJP, say-

ing: "Can the Prime Minister guarantee that Nitish Kumar won't flip again?"

During his speech before the trust vote, Tejashwi Yadav also took a sarcastic jibe at Nitish Kumar for his statement after resigning last month. "You mentioned after resigning that 'mann nahil lag raha tha (you were not enjoying). Are we there to entertain you? We wanted to support you in your work and not entertain you", Tejashwi Yadav said.

He said people will remember the Mahagathbandhan government for the corrupt RJD leaders who were making money during the 17 months of the Mahagathbandhan government.

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Former CM Chavan quits Congress

Continued from Page 1

Mr Chavan sent his resignation from the membership of the Assembly to Speaker Rahul Narvekar in the morning. Subsequently, he also sent a one-line resignation to Maharashtra Congress president Nana Patole.

Informing about his resignation, Mr Chavan posted on his social media account: "Today, on Monday, February 12, 2024, I have tendered my resignation as Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) from 85-Bhokar Constituency of the Assembly Speaker Rahulji Narvekar."

Later, the 65-year-old Congress leader denied that he had taken any decision regarding joining the BJP. "I have been in the Congress since my birth. I worked for the party honestly till yesterday. But now I feel it is time to explore other options," he said. When asked about the reports of him joining the BJP, Mr Chavan said: "I have not taken any decision yet. I need some time to think about my future course of action. I will announce my decision in a couple of days."

However, sources said Mr Chavan is likely to be formally inducted into the BJP on February 14 or 15. Mr Chavan has been unhappy in the Congress for more than a year now. Though he never openly admitted it, he was miffed with state Congress president Nana Patole. According to a

Congress insider, Mr Chavan and a few other senior Congress leaders felt that Mr Patole did not give them due respect and often kept them out while taking major party decisions. As per sources, Mr Chavan had even raised the issue with the Congress high command and demanded a change of leadership in the state Congress, but his pleas were ignored.

Another former chief minister, Prithviraj Chavan, and Congress legislative party leader Balasaheb Thorat expressed surprise over Ashok Chavan's decision. Prithviraj Chavan said: "He was there with us till 5 pm yesterday (Sunday). He attended the meeting called by the party's Maharashtra in-charge Ramesh Chennithala in Mumbai to discuss the party's election strategy. It did not appear that he was upset with anything. We have no clue about what happened overnight. Only he can tell what were his compulsions or whether he was under any pressure from anyone."

Mr Thorat said that Ashok Chavan wanted to continue the discussion on Monday. "After yesterday's meeting, he told me that we will meet again at 11 am today (Monday) to discuss our strategy for the Rajya Sabha elections. But today, when I tried to contact him, he was unavailable," Mr Thorat said. Last week, Mr Chennithala had authorised Ashok Chavan

along with Mr Patole and Mr Thorat, to negotiate seat-sharing for Lok Sabha elections with alliance partners on behalf of the Congress party. Accordingly, Mr Chavan attended all alliance meetings.

The Congress has denied that any more of its MLAs will join Mr Chavan. But the indications of Congress defections have been there for nearly two years now. In the Legislative Council elections held on June 20, 2022, several Congress legislators had crossed-voted. As a result, the Congress' first choice candidate Chandrakant Handore lost the election. He needed 72 votes to win. However, he received only 22 votes even though his party had 45 MLAs. About 10 Congress MLAs, including Ashok Chavan, were not present in the Assembly during the trust vote moved by the Eknath Shinde government on July 4, 2022. However, the Congress did not take any action in both cases.

BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis did not confirm or deny the reports about Mr Chavan's induction into the BJP. "I heard about Ashok Chavan from the media. But the only thing I can say now is that several good leaders from the Congress are in touch with the BJP. Those leaders who are connected with the masses are feeling suffocated in the Congress. I will only say Aage aage dekhiye hota hai kya, (wait and watch what happens next)," he said.

THE ASIAN AGE

13 FEBRUARY 2024

Dexterous Nitish Kumar wins trust vote in Bihar

The most dexterous trapeze artist among Indian politicians, nine-time Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar, has proved it yet again. The Socialist leader landed safely on the bar on Monday when he won the confidence vote by winning 129 votes in a House of 243 members, bagging seven more votes than required to keep his government going. The vote was necessitated after he quit INDIA, a platform of Opposition parties for which he took the initiative to form, and joined the National Democratic Alliance, the banner under which he fought the 2020 Assembly election.

Mr Kumar has defied most of the logical tools pundits employ to explain political phenomena. One of the early allies of the BJP and member in the Atal Behari Vajpayee Cabinet, he quit the NDA in 2013 when the saffron party decided that then Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi would be its prime ministerial candidate for the 2014 Lok Sabha poll. Mr Kumar formed the broad Mahagathbandhan with his *bête noire* Lalu Prasad Yadav and the Congress for the 2015 Assembly election, and romped home. Two years later, he embraced Mr Modi and returned to the NDA, faced the elections in 2020 and got the chief minister's job back thanks to the mercy of the BJP which had by then overtaken his party, the JD(U), in the count of members in the Assembly. Another two somersaults followed and he proved his mettle and majority again on the floor of the Bihar House.

Mr Kumar has been presiding over closely for two decades a state which comes at the bottom of every single parameter government think-tank NITI Aayog prepares annually, whether it is the Human Development Index or literacy rate or school enrollment ratio or debt burden. It also remains a state which is the recipient of Union government's financial bonanza owing to the backwardness of the state. Unfortunately, the state has not yet benefitted from the rule of Mr Kumar, a trained engineer and a passionate reformer who had his political baptism in the JP movement. Even the party to which he belongs has not: it has been steadily losing its ground and now comes after the RJD and the BJP in terms of the number of MLAs. After draining the last vestige of credibility as a politician, it only remains to be seen how long will Nitish Kumar remain relevant in the state politics, let alone at the national level. How people will react to changing colours of the government remains to be seen.

After draining the last vestige of credibility as a politician, it only remains to be seen how long will Nitish Kumar remain relevant in the state politics, let alone at the national level. How people will react to changing colours of the government remains to be seen.

The turf in Bihar is now open mainly for two players: the BJP, and the RJD which is one of the very few political parties in the country with no history of a truck with the former. The RJD and its leader Lalu Prasad Yadav had their calculations go completely wrong when they parted ways with then ruling United Progressive Alliance ahead of the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. It will be interesting to watch if Mr Kumar will face the same fate as that of his former comrade or will he have a punch above his weight.

Huge relief for Navy vets in Qatar

The eight India Navy veterans who were facing execution, later commuted to imprisonment of varying terms on espionage charges, have been let off. The fine gesture by the Emir of Qatar brings about the most empathetic possible ending to an excruciating drama involving the retired Navy men who were working for a security firm in Qatar.

Their release — seven men were whisked away to the Indian Embassy and then to the airport for a late-night flight to India while one remained behind to do some paperwork — is not just a sign of India's soft power in the world. It is a tribute to the warm vibes Prime Minister Narendra Modi shares with several world leaders, especially several rulers in the Gulf, including the State of Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani.

The Prime Minister's personal appeal to the Emir on the sidelines of the climate summit in Dubai in December 2023 must have swung the scales decisively considering the quick release of the eight condemned men. The PM's good ties with countries in a region where millions of Indians work as expatriates go beyond pragmatism to reflect a true warmth.

The system in the Gulf states is such that certain opaqueness is a given. It is not up to the Indian state or anyone else involved in this to try and ferret out what was the crime that these men committed as to bring upon themselves capital punishment from Qatar's Court of First Instance in August 2022.

The private Qatari firm Al Dahra, for which they worked, was involved in training naval personnel and handling other security matters and what happened to bring about such a harsh sentence on as many as eight personnel will remain a mystery.

It is time to rejoice over eight Indians escaping the noose in a foreign country. It is also time to compliment the diplomatic heavy lifting that the External Affairs Ministry did in the background, away from media glare and sustaining it diligently until the good news of the pardon and release came through as a genuine piece of good tidings for India.

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An unlikely spring in Pak: Will Army finally prevail?



Syed Ata Hasnain

Nations are known to throw up unclear verdicts in elections leading to hung legislatures and the cobbling of coalitions. However, Pakistan is one of those nations where such verdicts can bring threats to the nation's integrity and security because far too many extraneous factors play a role in bringing about such situations. In the recently-held general election in Pakistan the fractured mandate has created problems of national security, economic viability and the nation's existential status. It has led to four different parties taking pre-eminent positions in the provincial elections in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Balochistan and Sindh. The National Assembly's lower house, which decides the formation of the national government, is even worse. The pro-Army parties — PML(N) and PPP — which had earlier constituted the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), have scored 76 and 54 respectively in the 265-strong Parliament, which requires a grouping or a single party with 134 seats to form a government. Former PM and cricket icon Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which was barred from participating with a ban on its electoral symbol (a cricket bat), managed to have 97 Independent candidates elected — all supposedly backed by the PTI. Who then forms the government at the centre is a million-dollar question because we haven't as yet mentioned the elephant in the room — the Pakistan Army, which remains the final authority for putting together coalitions to govern with the acceptable personalities to lead them; it's not just a leader but one who has the credentials of acceptance by the Army.

To comprehend the complexity of the situation, one needs to be aware of the factors which impinge here and finally decide which way the nation will head. The PTI's legitimacy is suspect because of the legal factors and its ability to even retain the 97 Independents is questionable. However, its appeal is real and it's to the young who have apparently voted for the Independents who carry the PTI's backing. Under normal circumstances this vote would have gone further and created the right stability at the centre, but then PTI's leader Imran Khan isn't exactly the Army's favourite. At one time six years ago, he was. However, he ran afoul with the then Army chief Gen. Qamar Bajwa while attempting to follow a more independent defence and foreign policy that included the appointment of various generals in key appointments such as DG ISI. A surfeit of personal corruption charges was levelled against Imran Khan, with current Army Chief Gen. Asim Munir leading the investigations. Imran Khan was finally removed constitutionally and a coalition was cobbled which ruled Pakistan for almost 15 months. None in the coalition tried to exert the individuality of the constituent parties as long as the PTI was excluded and hounded by the Army. But now it's going to be different. The next government isn't an interim one, it's for five years, and so the factors which bring disunity, such as power play between the constituents, is something to contend with.

This election, or "selection", as it is often referred to, and its aftermath, had some important terms of reference unofficially laid

This election, or "selection", had some important terms of reference unofficially laid down by the Pakistan Army.

down by the Pakistan Army. First was the necessity to exclude Imran Khan and his PTI from any potential of coming to power. Second, a single party among the mainstream ones, such as PPP or PML(N), coming to power was avoidable as it would increase the possibility of confrontation with the Army if points of difference arose. Yet, to get any economic reprieve for Pakistan's nearly collapsed economy, a stable front had to be projected. In his long deliberations with American officials during his visit to Washington, Gen. Asim Munir probably took endorsement for his strategy and promised to also work on excluding the extremist elements so that they got no official handle to push the radical ideological agenda. For the US, which too is clandestinely helping the Taliban survive in Afghanistan, any furtherance of the Afghan Taliban agenda in Pakistan through the sponsored proxy Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) would be counter-productive. For Gen. Munir, his personal agenda was to achieve such an electoral status as to enable him to urge the following of a geo-economic rather than a geopolitical agenda. As part of the so-called Munir Doctrine, which is ascribed to his thinking, his intent was to transform Pakistan into a stabilising regional security actor following an agenda of strategic neutrality.

In many ways, the Pakistan Army has achieved at least some part of its overall agenda. However, its handling of the "selection" has been quite ham-handed, allowing itself to be targeted on legitimacy charges. It could have officially given warnings about Internet shut-downs and other control

measures instead of just executing that, and then ascribing it to terrorist threats. It's never easy to conduct a controlled election without running the risk of achieving illegitimate status; in this case the Pakistan Army has once again come out with egg on its face. However, much of it can be forgotten if a credible coalition can be formed. That might become a challenge because the PPP may demand more than its pound of flesh; in terms of the appointment of the Prime Minister, and that too for someone as young as Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari. In that case neither of the Sharif brothers can join the government, and it may be Maryam Nawaz who may be the one occupying the highest rank from the PML(N) — although this is a highly unlikely proposition. If such a formula is arrived at, the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the international community will also be further eroded. That isn't something Pakistani economists would be looking at with glee.

All talk of government formation will only come to fruition once it is certain that the PTI will not object to the verdict and its declaration. If it proposes to oppose it and take to the streets, a completely different scenario may emerge. On the face of it, this seems less plausible and we may see government formation in a fortnight or so. Even the MQM could have a role in it; strange bedfellows that they may all be. Whatever be the combination, one thing appears almost certain: that a new PDM 2.0 government will have even lesser legitimacy than its previous avatar. Gen. Asim Munir's grandiose thoughts of trying to prove that what Gen. Bajwa could only preach in the form of a doctrine, he (Gen. Munir) will actually execute, are more likely to come cropper, until another day, another election.

The writer, a retired lieutenant-general, is a former GOC of the Srinagar-based 15 ("Chinar") Corps

LETTERS
DIFFERENT VALUES

It was almost like a culture shock for Indian citizens to see Hungarian President Katalin Novak and justice minister Judit Varga resign for pardoning a man who was convicted of covering up sexual abuse. The pardon led to public uproar and demands for their resignation. In India, we not only give remission but also felicitate murderers and rapists. What happened to the cause of the medal-winning wrestlers who sacrificed their careers? Also, is not Haryana responsible for forwarding frequent parole requests of Ram Rahim? Most of our governments, regrettably, rule by a different set of values.

Bidyut K. Chatterjee
Faridabad, Haryana

PENSION 'REVDI'

WHEN ELECTIONS draw close, the ruling party in any state suddenly becomes liberal-handed with promises galore for all types of financial assistance to a class of people who play a pivotal role in influencing the results. But this attitude is seldom expected from the Odisha government, particularly when chief minister Naveen Patnaik is not that kind of leader. Yet, the old-age pension ought to have been increased long ago to alleviate the sufferings of senior citizens. Let us not undermine the wisdom of people, who never like poll-oriented promises.

Arun Gupta
Kolkata

GARLIC CRISIS

THE PRICE of garlic has skyrocketed to Rs 500 per kg in the retail markets of Bengaluru. The significant price rise, Rs 100-250 in wholesale markets and Rs 200-350 in retail markets, burdens both households and businesses. Supply shortages due to crop sowing delays worsen the situation. The climate also plays a significant role, as garlic requires cool temperatures to thrive. However, compared to last year, we are experiencing hotter days. Global warming exacerbates this issue, as increased temperatures lead to changes in the soil pH.

Vishal Mayur
Bengaluru

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



Aakar Patel

India in a state of perpetual violence? Some scary pointers

The demolitions in Uttarakhand last week, after which five people were killed in violence, follows a pattern that we see in BJP-ruled states. The pattern is of course that the government goes after citizens, especially Muslims. The demolitions are carried out as a form of extra-judicial punishment by the municipal authorities and the police, whether after episodes of communal violence or protests against discrimination.

The pattern has been documented in reports like "Routes of Wrath: Weaponising religious processions" by the Citizens and Lawyers Initiative. In his foreword, former Supreme Court Justice Rohinton F. Nariman says the report corroborates the findings (of decline in Indian democratic values), adding: "It finds that in nine states, during Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti celebrations in April 2022, there were widespread acts of hoodlumism and violence." After this, the JCBs came out.

A report by Amnesty International, of which I am India chair, has found similar patterns of people made homeless and deprived of livelihoods. These individuals were subjected to forced evictions, intimidation and unlawful force by the police and collective and arbitrary punishment, which undermined their rights to non-discrimination, adequate housing, and a fair trial.

Muslim-concentrated localities were either chosen or Muslim-owned properties selectively targeted in diverse areas for demolitions.

Adjacent or nearby Hindu-owned properties that also allegedly encroached on public land, particularly in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, were

left untouched. The Indian State's rationalisation of carrying out arbitrary demolitions to remove illegal encroachment sits in contrast to the reality of the country where the implementation of building laws lacks enforcement, that has led to a lot of construction without requisite permissions. In 2017, a report by a panel formed by the Delhi high court to document "illegal constructions" in the capital region found "90 per cent (of buildings) carry one kind of violation of the building bylaws or another".

The emblematic case here is that of Sainik Farms in Delhi, a tiny enclave that is totally illegal but hasn't seen any JCBs come and demolish the bungalows of our wealthy. The headline of a May 2023 news item illustrates this perfectly: "Expedite call on Delhi's Sainik Farms' bid for regularisation: High Court". Of course, the poor and especially Muslim poor are not given any such leeway. They're subjected to forced eviction, which is the permanent or temporary removal of people against their will from the homes or land they occupy, without legal protections and other safeguards. Forced evictions are a violation of human rights, including but not limited to the right to adequate housing.

Under international human rights law, states must ensure that evictions only occur in exceptional circumstances, require full justification and the provision of adequate legal safeguards. None of that here in New India, of course.

In fact, India's bulldozer demolitions are often instigated at the highest levels of government, with many state officials directly or indirectly calling for the use of bulldozers against Muslims.

There is credible evidence to believe these demolitions are discriminatory and targeted as part of a hate campaign against Muslims in India. Rather than prevent discrimination towards Muslims, senior political leaders and officials have actively encouraged it.

During the April 2022 demolitions in Delhi, BJP spokesman G.V.L. Narasimha defined JCB as "Jihadi Control Board", in a now-deleted tweet.

The discrimination shows elsewhere too. A year-and-a-half since the demolitions that Amnesty documented, despite the financial hardships created by the loss of their homes and businesses, victims continue to wait for justice with legal cases pending in courts. To date, the courts have failed to address punitive demolitions with the scale and urgency required by the prevailing situation, enabling the Indian authorities to continue tearing down people's homes and businesses in other areas with widespread impunity.

This must be seen in conjunction with the creation of quasi-judicial tribunals in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh which have provided prompt relief to Hindus who suffered losses due to the preceding violence while Muslim victims of the violence and following demolitions continue to struggle for justice.

The "Routes of Wrath" report concludes that while there have been earlier phases of communal violence in India, which entrenched cycles of violence, segregation and generated lasting barriers to socio-economic mobility for Indian Muslims in particular, they did not undermine State control over society or its authority over institutions in the manner that is being seen today.

Coordination between Hindutva outfits, and the police and district administration, means combining an extreme ideological entity with the civil service.

What can be observed is that the relationship between them has become institutionalised in many parts, sustaining a violently undemocratic model of governance that is anathema to the rule of law.

In a letter to the Prime Minister in April 2022, more than 100 retired senior civil servants stated that the administration of law has become the means by which the minorities, particularly Muslims, can be kept in a state of perpetual fear. They said facilitation and support for communal frenzy was being provided at all levels of the administration — from local police and administrative officials to the highest political levels in state and Central governments. "While the actual commission of violence may be outsourced to fringe groups, there is little doubt as to how the ground for their operations is made fertile, how each of them follows a master script and shares a common 'tool kit' and how the propaganda machinery of a party as well as the State is made available to them to defend their actions", the retired bureaucrats had written.

Finally, the Citizens and Lawyers Initiative report concludes: "The available evidence corroborates statements by civil society groups, lawyers, academics and activists, that India has now reached a stage of perpetual violence."

The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. Twitter: @aakar_patel

SHORT TAKES

GREEK SHIPPING CO. EX-EMPLOYEE GUNS DOWN 3

Athens, Feb. 12: A disgruntled former employee shot dead the head of a Greek shipping company and two others before killing himself at the firm's office in Athens on Monday. Police, fire engines and ambulances were stationed outside the offices of European Navigation in the capital. Earlier, anti-terrorism forces entered the building, Reuters reporters at the scene said. Among the dead was European Navigation's owner, said police spokeswoman Konstantina Dimoglidou, who didn't name the victim.

TWO, INCLUDING A 5-YEAR-OLD, HURT IN CHURCH FIRING

Houston, Feb. 12: A 5-year-old child and a man were injured and a woman was killed after she opened fire inside a church here in the US state of Texas, police said. The violence erupted at pastor Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston on Sunday where a 2 p.m. Spanish service was set to begin. Two off-duty law enforcement officers — a Houston police officer and an agent with the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission — engaged and struck the woman who had entered the massive church with the boy who was later hurt in the shootout.

PIO IN CANADA WANTED FOR FATHER'S MURDER

Toronto, Feb. 12: A 56-year-old Indian-origin man was allegedly murdered by his son at their home in the Canadian province of Ontario, police said. The Hamilton Police in a statement on Sunday said 22-year-old Sukhraj Singh Cheema was wanted for the first-degree murder of his father on Saturday night. The police said officers were called to a home at around 7:40 pm on Saturday and found Kuldip Singh with severe injuries. Singh was rushed to hospital but later died from his injuries, CTV News quoted the police as saying.

1ST LESBIANS IN NEPAL REGISTER THEIR MARRIAGE

Kathmandu, Feb. 12: Anju Devi Shrestha, nicknamed Dipti, and Suprita Gurung, both 33, have scripted history by becoming the first lesbian couple in Nepal to officially register their marriage. Dipti, a resident of Bardiya district in western Nepal, and Suprita, a resident of Syangja district, on Sunday, got their marriage registered at Jamuna Rural Municipality of Bardiya district. Ward secretary Dipak Nepal handed them the marriage certificate, said Sunil Babu Panta, a gay activist and a former member of Parliament.



Kelvin Kiptum

MARATHON WORLD RECORD HOLDER DIES IN CAR CRASH

Nairobi, Feb. 12: Tributes poured in on Monday for Kenyan running sensation Kelvin Kiptum after the marathon world record-holder was killed in a car crash at the age of 24. The favourite for the Paris 2024 Olympics was driving from Kaptagat to Eldoret in the Rift Valley of western Kenya around 11:00 pm (2000 GMT) on Sunday when his car came off the road and hit a tree. Father of two Kiptum and his Rwandan coach Gervais Hakizimana were killed while a woman passenger was seriously injured, police said. "The lost control and veered off-road entering into a ditch on his left side. He drove in the ditch for about 60 metres before hitting a big tree," said an official police report from Elgeyo Marakwet County. It said Kiptum and Hakizimana died on the spot while the passenger Sharon Chepkurui Kosgei was rushed to hospital with serious injuries.

2 hostages freed, Gaza airstrikes claim 67 lives

Doha, Jerusalem, Feb. 12: Israel freed two Israeli-Argentine hostages held by Hamas in Rafah on Monday in a rescue operation which killed 67 Palestinians in the southern Gaza city where about one million civilians have sought refuge. The mission by the Israeli military, the Shin Bet security service and a special police unit, freed Fernando Simon Marmán, 60, and Louis Hare, 70. They were among 250 people seized during the Oct. 7 raid by Hamas militants that triggered the war. More than four months on, much of the densely populated strip of land on the Mediterranean is in ruins, with 28,340 Palestinians dead and 67,984 wounded, according to Gaza health officials, with many others believed to be buried under rubble. The Israeli military says 31 hostages have died in that time, but PM Benjamin Netanyahu said Monday's rescue showed that military pressure should continue and he brushed aside international alarm at its plans for a ground assault on Rafah. "Fernando and Louis, welcome home," he said, saluting the Israeli forces who rescued them. "Only continued military pressure, until total victory, will bring about the release of all of our hostages." The Gaza health ministry said 67 Palestinians were killed overnight and the number could rise as rescue operations were under way. A Reuters journalist saw a vast area of rubble where buildings, including a mosque, had been destroyed. Israel says many of those killed are ultras; Gaza ministry says 70% are civilians. "I've been collecting my family's body parts since the morning," said Ibrahim Hassouna, as a woman knelt over the body of a young child nearby. "I only recognised their toes or fingers." An Israeli military spokesman said the hostages were being held on the second floor of a building that was breached with explosives during the raid amid exchanges of gunfire with surrounding buildings. — Reuters

HOUTHIS TARGET CARGO SHIP BOUND FOR IRAN

Dubai, London, Feb. 12: Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthis have targeted a Marshall Islands-flagged and Greek-owned cargo ship *Star Iris* in the Red Sea which shipping analysts said on Monday was carrying corn to Iran. It appeared to be the first time the Houthis have targeted an Iran-bound vessel since starting attacks on international shipping in solidarity with Palestinians over the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, shipping sources said. A US defence official said it was likely that the ship had not been targeted but not hit, but provided no further comment. Earlier reports by maritime specialists suggested it may have been damaged but that there were no casualties. — Reuters

UK SANCTIONS 4 ULTRA SETTLERS IN WEST BANK

London, Feb. 12: Britain imposed sanctions on four Israeli nationals on Monday, saying they were extremist settlers who had violently attacked Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. The measures impose strict financial and travel restrictions on the four individuals, who Britain said were involved in "egregious abuses of human rights". "Extremist Israeli settlers are threatening Palestinians, often at gunpoint, and forcing them off land that is rightfully theirs," British foreign secretary David Cameron said. "This behaviour is illegal and unacceptable. Israel must also take stronger action and put a stop to settler violence. Too often, we see commitments made and undertakings given, but not followed through," added Cameron. — Reuters

Former PM Stubb is Finnish Prez

Helsinki, Feb. 12: Finland has a new President after former PM Alexander Stubb narrowly won a runoff vote Sunday for the key post in this Nordic country. Stubb, who takes over in March, will steer Finland's foreign and security policy, including integrating the Nato newcomer into the alliance's core structures. The final tally shows Stubb, of the centre-right National Coalition Party, had 51.6 per cent of the votes, while independent candidate and former foreign minister Pekka Haavisto from the green left got 48.4 per cent of the votes. The two were the contenders in the second round of the election. Haavisto had served as Finland's top diplomat from 2019-2023. Stubb is taking over from the hugely popular President



Alexander Stubb

Sauli Niinistö, whose second six-year term expires next month and who was not eligible for reelection. A runoff was required after none of the original nine candidates got a majority of the votes in the first round on January 28. In tradition with consensus-driven Finnish politics and no below-the-belt attacks during the campaign, Stubb visited Haavisto's poll party. — AP

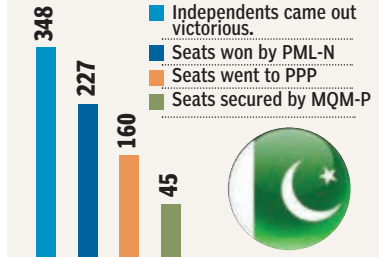
New power-sharing talks by Nawaz, Bilawal for next govt

Sharif's PML-N secures support of five more independent candidates

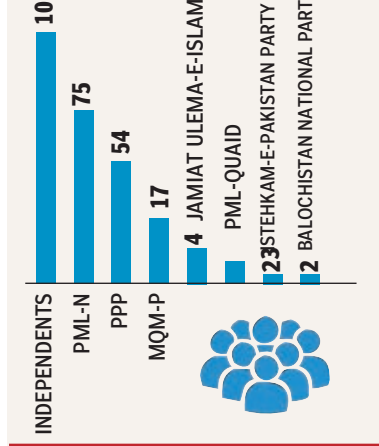
Islamabad, Lahore, Feb. 12: The top leaders of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and the Pakistan Peoples Party have discussed a new power-sharing formula for dividing the five-year tenure between them, as efforts to form a coalition government gathered pace on Monday following a split verdict in the elections. In a boost to the PML-N party, five newly elected independent members of Pakistan's National Assembly on Monday decided to join the party led by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif as he tries to form a coalition government after the general election resulted in a hung Parliament. This comes a day after one independent candidate backed by Imran Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party joined the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). In total, six independent candidates have joined PML-N. Despite independent candidates backed by jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party winning the most seats in Parliament, questions loom over what the next government of Pakistan will look like. None of the three major parties, the PML-N, the PPP or the PTI have won the necessary seats to secure a majority in the 266-member National Assembly and, therefore, will be unable to form government on their own, leaving it unclear who will be picked as the cash-strapped country's next prime minister. The leaders of PML-N and the PPP discussed the idea of appointing a prime minister for half the term during their first meeting held on Sunday following the February 8 elections as part of their efforts to form a coalition government in the Centre and provinces, according to a source privy to the development. "It has been proposed that a PML-N candidate will serve as prime minister for three years and PPP's leader for two years," the source said, adding that it was not yet decided who will get the first term. The meeting was attended by PPP-Parliamentarian president Asif Ali Zardari, PPP chairman Bilawal-Bhutto Zardari, and former prime minister Shehbaz Sharif from the PML-N. The same power-sharing formula was chalked out by PML-N and National Party (NP) in Balochistan in 2013 when two chief ministers from the two parties held office for half of the five-year term. Nawaz Sharif is still in the race for the prime ministerial slot. — PTI

ECP'S FINAL RESULTS

854 National and provincial Assembly constituencies where voting was held.



NATIONAL ASSEMBLY



Cops detain supporters of former PM Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party as they protest near the office of a Returning Officer in Lahore. — AFP

REJECTED BALLOTS exceeded victory margin in 24 National Assembly constituencies.

THE NUMBER OF REJECTED ballots was greater than the margin of victory in at least 24 National Assembly constituencies, according to an interesting statistical nugget from Pakistan's recent general elections. According to a report in the Dawn newspaper, 22 constituencies with a greater number of rejected votes than the margin of victory fell in Punjab, with one each in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh province.

A DELEGATION of the IMF may visit cash-strapped Pakistan once a new federal government is formed, negotiations for which are ongoing between major political parties after the general elections threw a hung Parliament, a media report said on Monday. The visit assumes significance as it is crucial for the completion of the \$3 billion Standby Arrangement, which is going to expire on April 12.

PTI to sit in Oppn

Islamabad, Feb. 12: Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party will not join hands with rival PML-N or the PPP to form a coalition government and would sit in the opposition despite having a majority in the newly elected Parliament, party leader Barrister Gohar Ali Khan said. Independent candidates, mostly affiliated with Khan's PTI, secured the most parliamentary seats in last week's general election. However, PTI does not have enough seats in the 266-member National Assembly to form a government on its own. "We don't feel comfortable with both (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and Pakistan Peoples Party) of them. There will be no talks with anyone to make a government. — PTI

Ukraine urges Poland to punish protesting farmers

Kyiv, Feb. 12: Ukraine called on Monday on Warsaw to "punish" Polish farmers who forcibly pried open Ukrainian trucks crossing into the EU, spilling mounds of grain onto roads near their border. The farmers began protesting at the border last week, blocking three crossing points in anger at what they see as cheap Ukrainian grain imports. The fresh protests mark another blow to relations between Ukraine and Poland, which had only weeks before managed to quell a similar two-month blockade by Polish truckers. Ukraine's agriculture ministry said it strongly condemned the "deliberate destruction of Ukrainian grain by Polish protesters." "We expect the culprits to be quickly identified and punished," the ministry said. Poland said it had opened a probe into "breaking customs security and destroying property" after the incident. The split grain will "probably not be suitable for further use," spokeswoman of the District Prosecutor's Office in Lublin, Agnieszka Kepka, told AFP. Ukraine, once dubbed "Europe's bread basket", has seen its agriculture sector turned upside down by Russia's invasion, with many of its Black Sea export hubs blocked and farmland rendered unusable by warfare. "For two years since the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian farmers have been working under constant enemy fire and suffering huge losses," Kyiv's agriculture ministry said. "They obtain this grain with great difficulty and sometimes at the cost of their lives," it said. The protests are another awkward blow to the new Polish government. — AFP

KYIV NEEDS ARMS TO TURN THE TIDE

MOSCOW OBTAINING MUSK'S STARLINK VIA 3RD NATIONS: KYIV

Russian forces are obtaining Starlink satellite terminals illicitly from third countries and increasing their use on the front line. Ukrainian military spy agency's spokesperson Andriy Yusov said work was underway to prevent Russians using the high-speed satellite internet terminals.

RUSSIA GAINING UPPER HAND: NORWAY INTEL

Russia is gaining the advantage in the war in Ukraine owing to a greater number of troops and materiel supplied by China, North Korea and other countries, Norway's intelligence service warned on Monday. Presenting its annual risk report along with other Norwegian security services, the head of the military intelligence unit Nils Andreas Stensones said Kyiv would need "extensive" Western military aid to turn the situation around.

U.S. SENATE FORGES AHEAD ON UKRAINE, ISRAEL AID AS 'PUTIN IS WATCHING'

The United States Senate on Monday will attempt to steer a \$95.34 billion package containing aid for Ukraine and Israel to passage this week following months of delays, even as it lacked any guarantee that the House of Representatives will support the measure.

As of Sunday evening, he remained hospitalised, said Pentagon press secretary Maj Gen Pat Ryder. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was also notified, as well as the White House and Congress. Ryder said Austin had travelled to the hospital with the unclassified and classified communications systems needed to perform his job. Austin was scheduled to depart on Tuesday for Brussels to hold a meeting of the Ukraine contact group, which he established in 2022 to coordinate military support for Kyiv. After that, Austin was scheduled to attend a regular meeting of NATO defence ministers. It was not immediately clear if this hospitalisation would change those plans. — AP

Austin in hospital with bladder issue

Washington, Feb. 12: US defence secretary Lloyd Austin, who was diagnosed with prostate cancer in December, was hospitalised again on Sunday following symptoms pointing to an "emergent bladder issue", the Pentagon said. In a statement, the Pentagon said Austin was transported by his security detail to Walter Reed National Military Medical Centre around 2.20 pm. While Austin initially was set to retain the "functions and duties of his office", at about 5 pm on Sunday he transferred those authorities to deputy secretary of defence Kathleen Hicks. As of Sunday evening, he remained hospitalised, said Pentagon press secretary Maj Gen Pat Ryder. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was also notified, as well as the White House and Congress. Ryder said Austin had travelled to the hospital with the unclassified and classified communications systems needed to perform his job. Austin was scheduled to depart on Tuesday for Brussels to hold a meeting of the Ukraine contact group, which he established in 2022 to coordinate military support for Kyiv. After that, Austin was scheduled to attend a regular meeting of NATO defence ministers. It was not immediately clear if this hospitalisation would change those plans. — AP

BIDEN FLAYS DON FOR COMMENTS ON HALEY HUBBY

Washington, Feb. 12: US President Joe Biden has slammed his predecessor Donald Trump for dragging Indian-American Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley's husband into the swirl of personal attacks. "The answer is that Major Haley is abroad, serving his country right now. We know he thinks our troops are 'suckers', but this guy wouldn't know about service to his country if it slapped him in the face," Biden said. — PTI

BORRELL: NATO TIE-UP CANNOT BE À LA CARTE

Brussels, Feb. 12: Nato "cannot be an alliance à la carte," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said on Monday after Donald Trump downplayed his commitment to Nato's security umbrella in Europe if he becomes US president. Trump ignited a political firestorm and sent a chill through the European allies when he said he would "encourage" Russia to attack any Nato country defaulting on payments. — AFP

DATING | APP In-person meeting is required to ensure the security of users

Swedes with disabilities find love

Stockholm, Feb. 12: For 24-year-old Sira Rehn, a dating app for people with mild intellectual disabilities and autism has opened up the world of online dating and a chance to find love in a safe space. "In here I know that people will not judge me, you just have to be yourself," says Rehn, who long felt excluded from other popular dating apps used by hundreds of millions of people worldwide. Launched in Sweden last November, the DigiVi app is reserved for people with autism or mild intellectual disabilities, specifically

those with an IQ of between 50 and 69. The app features a simplified user interface and requires an in-person meeting to create an account in order to ensure the security of users, who are often victims of abuse on social media. Seated at a cafe in Uppsala, north of Stockholm, Rehn sips a lemonade while tapping energetically on a cell phone. Rehn identifies as non-binary and uses the gender neutral Swedish pronoun "hen", equivalent to "they" in English. "I've just started to chat with someone!", Rehn says. "We share the same interests, she seems nice. I can't wait to see what will happen... I dream of finding love," they gush. Rehn's profile features a photo and a list of interests and hobbies: Singing, dogs and watching movies. "On other platforms I used to hide my disability but it's a big part of who I am. People didn't want to talk to me when they found out about it," they recall. DigiVi — a contraction of the words "Digital" and "Vi" — was developed by an organisation that helps people with intellectual, cognitive disabilities. — AFP

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Launched in Sweden last November, the DigiVi app is reserved for people with autism or mild intellectual disabilities. — AFP

Half of migratory species in peril: UN

Washington, Feb. 12: Nearly half of the world's migratory species are in decline, according to a new United Nations report released on Monday. Many songbirds, sea turtles, whales, sharks and other migratory animals move to different environments with changing seasons and are imperiled by habitat loss, illegal hunting and fishing, pollution and climate change. About 44% of migratory species worldwide are declining in population, the report found. More than a fifth of the nearly 1,200 species monitored by the United Nations are threatened with extinction. "These are species that move around the globe. They move to feed and breed and also need stopover sites along the way," said Kelly Malsch, lead author of the report released at a UN wildlife conference in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. — AP

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	71,072.49	-0.73
Nifty 50	21,616.00	-0.76
S&P 500*	5,027.57	0.02
Dollar (₹)	83.0	0.04
Pound Sterling (₹)	104.77	-0.05
Euro (₹)	89.43	-0.02
Gold (10gm) (₹)	62,189.105	-0.17
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	81.90	-0.35
IN 10-Yr bond yield	7.094	-0.019
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.154	-0.033

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Signature Global plans housing project in 20 acre

Signature Global has entered into a joint development agreement (JDA) for 20.3 acre land in Gurugram. The total development potential on this land is 28.4 lakh square feet of residential space. Signature Global chairman Pradeep Aggarwal said the potential sales realisation would be around ₹4,500 cr in this upcoming project. Earlier this month, it signed three JDAs to develop housing projects.



Bridgestone appoints Hiroshi as India MD

Bridgestone, the Japanese tyre maker, on Monday appointed Hiroshi Yoshizane as its new managing director for India. He succeeds Stefano Sanchini, who will be moving into the role of VP of Consumer Replacement for Europe, Bridgestone India said. Earlier, Yoshizane served as executive vice president of solution business, retail, and service business in Bridgestone Tire Solution Japan Co, the company said.

Gensol, Matrix plan hydrogen electrolyser

Gensol Engineering said its consortium with Matrix Gas has won a project for manufacturing of hydrogen electrolyser under a PFI scheme. The project has been awarded under sustainable hydrogen innovation and green hydrogen technologies PFI scheme's tranche-1. "We are set to catalyse the adoption of green hydrogen globally," Ali Imran Naqvi, CEO (EPC Business), Gensol Engineering said.

Trust Fintech files draft papers with NSE Emerge

Trust Fintech, a SaaS product-focused fintech software solutions provider, has filed draft papers with NSE Emerge to raise funds through an initial public offering (IPO). Also, the Nagpur-headquartered company announced plans to increase its workforce from existing 263 employees to 1,000 within the next three years. The company's IPO is entirely a fresh issuance of 62.8 lakh equity shares with a face value of ₹10 each.

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Oils, fats, pulses, spices, fruits, and vegetables saw lower rise Jan. retail inflation falls to 3-month low of 5.1%

New Delhi, Feb. 12: Retail inflation declined to a three-month low of 5.1 per cent in January, mainly due to subdued prices of vegetables, fruits and other food items, according to government data released on Monday.

The fall indicates that retail inflation is inching towards RBI's comfort level of 4 per cent.

The consumer price index (CPI) based inflation was on the rise for two straight months after touching a trough of 4.9 per cent in October 2023. In December, it stood at 5.69 per cent.

In January, inflation in the food basket eased to 8.3 per cent from 9.53 per cent in the preceding month. It was at 6 per cent in January 2023, data from National Statistical Office (NSO) said.

Food inflation was lower



● **MANUFACTURING** output growth accelerated to 3.9% in Dec. as against 3.6% a year ago. Power generation growth slowed to 1.2% in Dec. from the 10.4% growth in the year-ago period.

in rural areas at 7.91 per cent compared to 9.02 per cent in the urban centres.

The data showed that inflation in oils and fats, pulses and products, spices, fruits, and vegetables segments was lower in January compared to Dec. 2023.

However, inflation was marginally higher in the 'fuel and light', 'clothing and footwear', 'cereals and products', 'meat and fish', and eggs segments on a month-on-month basis.

While rabi sowing has

caught up with last year's level, reservoir storage remains below the year-ago levels in most regions, said Aditi Nayar, chief economist, Icra.

"We project the CPI inflation to ease below 5 per cent in February-March 2024, and average at 5.3 per cent in FY2024. Thereafter, we estimate the CPI inflation at 4.6 per cent in FY2025," she said.

Meanwhile, India's industrial production growth slowed to 3.8 per cent in December 2023, mainly

due to poor performance of mining and power generation segments, according to official data released on Monday.

The factory output growth measured in terms of the index of industrial production (IIP) was at 5.1 per cent in December 2022 and 2.4 per cent in November.

During the April-December period of this fiscal, IIP growth touched 6.1 per cent, up from 5.5 per cent in the corresponding period a year ago.

Manufacturing output growth accelerated to 3.9 per cent in December as against 3.6 per cent a year ago. Power generation growth slowed to 1.2 per cent in December from the 10.4 per cent growth in the year-ago period.

Mining saw a 5.1 per cent decline in Dec. from 10.1 per cent a year ago. — PTI

Apple rules tablet segment with 25% share

New Delhi, Feb. 12: Apple led the India tablet PC market in 2023 as well as in the December quarter with a 25 per cent share notwithstanding a decline in its shipments, according to a report.

Samsung was at the second spot with a 23 per cent market share in 2023, yberMedia Research (CMR) India Quarterly Tablet PC Market Review report said on Monday.

Apple tablet PC shipments declined by 17 per cent on a year-over-year

(YoY) basis.

Lenovo occupied the second slot in the December quarter with a 24 per cent market share even as its shipments declined by 3 per cent. Samsung tablet PC shipments grew by 36 per cent on YoY basis, the report stated.

"There is a rising consumer demand for diverse tablet options in India, including premium, 5G and value-for-money tablet offerings. This growth is particularly noticeable in the B2B sec-



tor and online purchases," CMR, analyst Industry Intelligence Group (IIG), Menka Kumari said.

The market witnessed a robust 21 per cent quarter-on-quarter (QoQ) growth

in Q4 2023, driven by strong demand for 5G tablets.

"5G tablet shipments soared by 43 per cent YoY, accounting for a significant share of the market. Wi-Fi tablets also performed well, recording a 13 per cent YoY increase and claiming 52 per cent of overall shipments," the report said.

The premium tablet segment, priced between ₹20,000-30,000 apiece experienced a 95 per cent QoQ jump, it said. — PTI

216 central projects worth ₹2 lakh crore completed

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, FEB. 12

As many as 216 central infrastructure projects were completed till Dec., amounting to ₹2 lakh cr.

However, government's capital expenditure has to rise 11 per cent in the March quarter to revise the budgetary estimate of FY24. The general elections may hold back completions of infrastructural projects and new investment proposals in Q4 FY24.

In order to meet the revised estimate of ₹9.5 lakh crore for FY24, the government's capex has to rise 11 per cent in the March quarter. In each of the three months in the quarter, the capex has to be at least ₹92,200 crore against ₹74,800 crore per month in nine-month period of FY24, as per ICRA.

Completion of central infra sector projects moderated in the nine-month period. Based on the data released by the government, 216 central infrastructure projects were completed till Dec., amounting to ₹2 lakh crore. It was lower than 229 proj-



ects and ₹2.3 lakh crore worth completions in 9M FY2023.

Based on the tardy pace of completions seen in 9M FY2024, the Central infra project completions in FY2024 are unlikely to surpass the ₹3.1 lakh crore seen in FY23. The projects commissioned in 9M FY24 were largely concentrated in sectors like roads, railways, petroleum, and health and family welfare.

New investment proposals in Q3 FY2024 saw a muted increase. The value of new project announcements rose modestly to ₹2.4 lakh crore in Q3 from the 11-quarter low of ₹2.1 lakh crore in Q2 FY2024. The number of new investment proposals slid to the lowest level since Q2 FY2005. — PTI

RBI GOV RULES OUT REVIEW OF ACTION ON PAYTM

New Delhi, Feb. 12: RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das on Monday ruled out any review of the central bank's action against Paytm Payments Bank (PPBL), saying the decision was taken after a comprehensive assessment of the functioning of the lender.

In a major action against PPBL, RBI, on Jan. 31, directed it to stop accepting deposits or top-ups in any customer accounts, FASTags, wallets, and other instruments after Feb. 29.

"At the moment let me say very clearly there is no review of this (PPBL) decision. If you are expecting a review of the decision, let me very clearly say there is no review of the decision," Das said at a press conference after the 606th meeting of the central board of directors of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

While emphasising that RBI is supportive of the fintech sector, Shaktikanta Das said it is also committed to protect the interest of customers as well as ensure financial stability. — PTI

Markets lose steam on profit taking

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, FEB. 12

Market declined for a second consecutive session on profit taking after the Budget and Reserve Bank of India (RBI) policy meeting completion with the benchmark Sensex and Nifty-50 down by around 0.75 per cent.

Financials took a big hit amid reports of RBI's regulatory measures on

Bandhan Bank, casting a shadow on other bank stocks. PSU banks saw profit taking after the post Budget rally.

Broader market underperformed with much bigger fall in BSE midcap and small-cap index by 2 to 4 per cent leading to 3,015 stocks on declining side and only 980 stocks advancing on BSE.

"Domestic equities opened positive but soon

witnessed selling pressure amid muted global cues. Broader market plunged sharply with Nifty midcap 100 down 2.5 per cent and the Nifty smallcap 100 down by 4 per cent. PSUs saw a heavy profit booking after witnessing a sharp rally over the last few months and weak Q3 results. There was also caution ahead of domestic CPI and IIP data that was due for release later on

Monday," said Siddhartha Khemka, head - Retail Research, Motilal Oswal Financial Services.

"Despite a robust economic forecast, corporate earnings are expected to slow due to moderated operating margins. It is going to be a challenge for the broad market to sustain the premium valuation," said Vinod Nair, head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

Top 500 cos valued at ₹231L-cr

FALAKNAAZ SYED MUMBAI, FEB. 12

With a value of ₹15.6 lakh crore, Reliance Industries has retained its tag of India's most valuable company for the third time in a row as well as the 2023 Burgundy Private Hurun India 500 list released on Monday.

The second place in the list was occupied by Tata Consultancy Services with ₹12.4 lakh crore.

The report is a list of 500 most valuable companies in India, ranked according to their value (market capitalisation) for listed com-



GDP of Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, and Singapore said the report.

"Zomato, which gained ₹40,000 crore, is amongst the biggest gainers by value, underscoring the role that Indian startups would play in future value creation. The performance of Indian unicorn IPOs, marked by a collective valuation increase of ₹62,837 crore, reflects investor enthusiasm in the technology and e-commerce sectors."

Suzlon Energy, with a 436 per cent y-o-y growth dominated the list of fastest growing firms.



SEBI INCREASING SCRUTINY OF ISSUE DOCUMENTS

Mumbai, Feb. 12: The market regulator is increasing scrutiny of issue documents filed by companies going public, four sources said on Monday, amid a rise in initial public offerings in the Indian market.

The country's surging stock market has prompted nearly 50 companies to launch public issues in 2023; eight issues have been completed so far this year and another 40 are waiting for clearance from the securities and exchange board of India (Sebi).

"The regulator has returned at least six public offer documents, as Sebi observed companies are misleading in their reasons for fundraising," said a source.

The regulator is particularly scrutinising what companies say they intend to use funds raised from the IPO for; the source, directly familiar with the matter, said.

Earlier this month, India's market regulator said it was investigating three IPOs for allegedly inflating the number of subscriptions received.

Sebi is working on measures to curtail such malpractices, chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch said. — Reuters

BIG MARKET No end to rise in AI spending anytime soon: Nvidia CEO

Faster computers to pare AI costs

Dubai, Feb. 12: Nvidia chief executive officer Jensen Huang anticipates advances in computing over the next few years will keep the cost of developing artificial intelligence well below the \$7 trillion that Sam Altman said to be fundraising.

"You can't just assume that you will buy more computers. You have to also assume that computers are going to become faster and therefore the total amount that you need is not as much," Huang told the World Government Summit in Dubai on Monday.

The company makes the most sought-after artificial intelligence (AI) accelerators and he's confident the chip industry will drive down the cost of



● **ALTMAN AND** other AI developers are seeking ways to diversify their hardware options, including by exploring chip-making ventures of their own.

AI, as those parts are made "faster and faster."

Huang was responding to a report that OpenAI chief executive officer Sam Altman is seeking to raise \$7 trillion from investors in the Middle East for a semiconductor initiative to power AI projects that would rival Nvidia.

Because of its uncontested leadership in AI-train-

ing chips, Nvidia's market value has ballooned to more than \$1.7 trillion and increased Huang's personal wealth several times over.

Altman and other AI developers are seeking ways to diversify their hardware options, including by exploring chip-making ventures of their own.

The contract chipmakers, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing, and

Samsung Electronics, commit in excess of \$30 billion in capital expenditures each year to stay ahead of rivals.

For Altman to have a realistic chance of making a dent in their lead, he would need to spend more on research, development, facilities and expert personnel, but Huang's view would suggest, more cost-efficient chips will make that unnecessary.

Still, the Nvidia CEO doesn't see an end to the increase in AI spending anytime soon. "We're at the beginning of this new era. Over the course of the next four or five years, we'll have \$2 trillion worth of data centres that will be powering software around the world," he said. — Bloomberg

Microfinance biz holds big potential to grow

Kolkata, Feb. 12: Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) have sought more penetration in terms of household coverage to increase their portfolio of disbursements, an official said on Monday.

Chief executive officer and director of Microfinance Institutions Network (MFIN) Alok Misra said there are 7.3 crore low-income borrowers in the country at present with an outstanding portfolio of ₹4 lakh crore.

Misra told reporters here that the potential for the MFI sector is to have an outstanding of ₹13 lakh cr. adding that there is a huge scope for growth. Managing director of Arohan Financial Services Manoj Nambiar said

that there is under-penetration of MFI coverage in the country at present.

This penetration needs to grow, he said.

Kuldip Maity, managing director of VFS Capital, said that historically the average levels of NPAs in the MFI sector is less than one per cent.

Maity said MFIs will play an important role in the sustainable growth of the economy.

Misra said the MFI sector is seeking a guarantee scheme for the loans for which the individual entities will pay a small premium.

The sector is also looking for a financial institution to be dedicated only for refinancing small MFIs. — PTI

SHORT TAKES

Nagal jumps 23 spots, in top-100

New Delhi: India's leading singles player Sumit Nagal on Monday jumped 23 spots to break into the top-100 of the ATP singles rankings for the first time in his career. The win at the Chennai Open challenger event on Sunday pushed Nagal to 98th in the latest singles rankings led by Serbian Novak Djokovic. Last month, Nagal had become the first Indian to beat a seeded player at a Grand Slam in 35 years when he upset then world No. 27 Alexander Zverev of Kazakhstan in the first round. He eventually lost to China's Junheng Shang in the second round. Nagal is the first Indian to feature in the top-100 since left-handed Prakash Padukone made the cut in 2019. — PTI

Argentina knock Brazil out of Oly

Caracas, Venezuela: Brazil were denied the chance of winning a third straight men's Olympic football title after a 1-0 defeat to Argentina on Sunday knocked them out of qualifying for the Paris Games. Champions in Rio 2016 and the Covid-delayed 2020 Tokyo Games, Brazil only needed a draw against their arch continental rivals on the final day of the South American pre-Olympic tournament in Venezuela. But Argentina it is who now go to France, seeking a third title after 2004 and 2008, courtesy of Luciano Gondou's second-half goal in Caracas. Paraguay claimed the other ticket to Paris 2024 from South America with a 2-0 victory over Venezuela. Midfielder Diego Gomez with a penalty in the 48th minute and forward Marcelo Perez in the 75th minute scored the goals for Carlos Jara Saguier's Paraguay, who topped the standings in the qualifying tournament ahead of Argentina. The qualifying tournament was restricted to under-23 players, unlike at the Olympics, where teams are allowed to call on the services of three overage reinforcements. And Argentina will now be on the phone to try to persuade one very special 36-year-old player, Lionel Messi who starred in the 2008 run to Olympic gold, to join them in Paris. — AFP

Ivory Coast are African champs

Abidjan, Ivory Coast: Sebastien Haller scored a dramatic late winner as hosts Ivory Coast fought back to beat Victor Osimhen's Nigeria 2-1 in Sunday's Africa Cup of Nations final and complete the most remarkable of major tournament turnarounds by claiming their third continental title. Nigeria looked set to repeat their 1-0 victory over the Ivorians here during the group stage when captain William Troost-Ekong — who had netted a penalty to decide that first meeting — rose to head in the opener late in the first half. However, Franck Kessie equalised just after the hour mark and Haller turned in Simon Adingra's cross in the 81st minute to spark wild celebrations among the sea of orange in the Abidjan stands. Ivory Coast's success sees them add this year's title to those claimed in 1992 and 2015, while this win also allows them to join Nigeria on three Cup of Nations triumphs overall. "It is greater than a fairytale," said coach Emere Fae, who took over a stricken team mid-tournament. — AFP

Chiefs bag third Super Bowl title

Las Vegas, United States: Patrick Mahomes pulled off another Super Bowl comeback on Sunday as the Kansas City Chiefs snatched a thrilling 25-22 overtime victory over the San Francisco 49ers to win their third NFL championship in five seasons. In a perfectly scripted finale before a celebrity-studded Las Vegas crowd including pop icon Taylor Swift, Mahomes hit Mecole Hardman in the end zone with just three seconds of overtime remaining to seal a dramatic win in what was the longest Super Bowl in history. The win makes Kansas City the first team to win back-to-back Lombardi Trophies in two decades, cementing the franchise's right to be regarded as the NFL's latest dynasty. "It means a ton," Mahomes said. "With the adversity we dealt with this year and to come through, the guys never faltered." For long periods, however, it looked as if Kansas City would be denied by San Francisco's ferocious defense. — AFP

KLEAN BOWLED

Rahul fails to recover, ruled out of third Test in Rajkot

Rajkot, Feb. 12: Senior India batter K. L. Rahul was on Monday ruled out of the third Test against England after failing to fully recover from his quadriceps strain that forced him to miss the second match in Visakhapatnam.

Devdutt Padikkal, the talented Karnataka left-hander who is enjoying a great first class season, replaced Rahul in the squad. "KL Rahul, whose availability for the remaining three Tests was subject to fitness, has been ruled out of the third Test against England in Rajkot. Mr. Rahul has reached 90 per cent of match fitness and is progressing well under the supervision of the BCCI Medical Team," the BCCI said. Rahul will continue his recovery at the National Cricket Academy (NCA) in Bengaluru as he looks to return for the fourth and fifth Test. The series is currently locked 1-1.

The selectors had earlier named both Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja in the squad subject to clearance from the BCCI's medical team. "KL Rahul hasn't yet reported in Rajkot. Ravindra Jadeja, the local boy has linked up with the team. It was always a case of subject to fitness and BCCI medical team is still not confident that he is match fit," a senior BCCI source said on the condition of anonymity.

In his most recent Ranji Trophy match, the 23-year-old Padikkal scored 151 with the chairman of selectors Ajit Agarkar watching his knock from the stands.

Padikkal has been in excellent form this season. Having started with a 193 against Punjab in the opening game, he struck 103 against Goa.

Besides his exploits in Ranji, Padikkal also scored 105, 65 and 21 in his three innings for India A in the two unofficial Tests against England Lions.

Coming back to Rahul, the 31-year-old batter's extended break raises a serious question about whether the senior India players and the BCCI's medical team are giving proper picture about the injury status of certain players. "If the BCCI's medical team knew in first place that Rahul's quad injury is as serious as it looks, why in the first place was he kept in provisional squad. And why is the player sending wrong signals by posting videos of his batting on Instagram stories," a senior BCCI official asked. — PTI

Jadeja sizzles with 7-for in Saurashtra win

Jaipur, Feb. 12: Left-arm spinner Dharmendrasinh Jadeja once again did the star turn with career-best figures of 7 for 32 and played a leading role in Saurashtra's 218-run drubbing of Rajasthan in their Ranji Trophy Group 'A' match here on Monday. Having picked up five wickets in the first innings, Jadeja ended with career-best match figures of 12 for 131, as the defending champions logged six points from the contest on the fourth and final day.

Resuming on overnight 174 for 4 and 245 runs ahead, Saurashtra stretched the overall lead before declaring their second innings on 234 for 6 with Arpit Vasavada remaining not out on 74. Walking into the middle after Saurashtra had lost their fourth wicket for 74, Vasavada added 102 runs with Player of the Match Sheldon Jackson (49).

Jackson had scored 116 in Saurashtra's first innings after Cheteshwar Pujara's 110. Set a target of 305, thanks to the efforts of Jackson and Vasavada, Rajasthan, who rode on a collective batting display to total 257 in their first innings, simply fell apart



The marquee five-match Test series is locked at 1-1 after India and England pulled off thrilling victories in Visakhapatnam and Hyderabad respectively. The third Test will start from Thursday in Rajkot.

— AP

England team lands in Rajkot

Rajkot, Feb. 12: Fresh from a one-week break in their pre-series base Abu Dhabi, the England cricket team on Monday returned to India for the remainder of the five-match rubber against the hosts, which is locked at 1-1 after two games. The England landed in the city — venue for the third Test — on Monday evening.

After their 106-run loss in Visakhapatnam, the England players opted to utilise the 10-day break between the second and third Test by relaxing and playing golf in Abu Dhabi. The third Test is scheduled to be held here from February 15.

The visiting team will begin training at SCA Stadium from Tuesday morning, while the India players will practice in the afternoon.

A day before their return to India, England were dealt a blow with their frontline spinner Jack Leach ruled out of the remaining three Tests with a knee injury.

However, no replacement will be called up for Leach, an indication that England will continue

CHAPPEL FEELS ENGLAND WILL GIVE TOUGH COMPETITION IN THIRD TEST

Melbourne, Feb. 13: Former Australia skipper Ian Chappell feels England under Ben Stokes will give India tough competition in the remainder of the Test series but backed the hosts to win it. "As the home side India should eventually win a tough series, but it has a real battle on their hands," Chappell wrote in his column for 'ESPNcricinfo'.

"England under the aggressive leadership of Stokes are a far cry from the poorly captained Joe Root team that capitulated against spin on their last tour of the country,"

he added. In their previous tour of India in 2021, England, playing under Joe Root, had surrendered the Test series after winning the opener.

While star batter Virat Kohli will not be part of the series, the India team will be bolstered by the return of Ravindra Jadeja, who has been included in the squad for the remaining three Tests.

— PTI

Virat Kohli will not return for the rest of the series is a blow." Shreyas Iyer has been dropped for the remainder of the series. The 29-year-old made 35, 13, 27, 29 in the opening two Tests and was guilty of not building on the starts. "Hopefully the selectors will now stop overestimating Shreyas Iyer's batting ability and learn to value Kuldeep Yadav's wicket-taking capability more. "This India versus England contest is shaping up as it should: a tough five-match encounter between two talented sides," Chappell added.

"India is a strong side and they also have a good leader in Rohit Sharma. They will be greatly strengthened by Ravindra Jadeja's recovery from injury, but that

for practice matches. During the Abu Dhabi camp prior to the series, the England team spent a lot of time working on ways to tackle the Indian spinners. — PTI

PREMIER LEAGUE

Utd sink Villa to boost top 4 bid

Birmingham (United Kingdom), Feb. 12: Scott McTominay kept alive Manchester United's hopes of finishing in the Premier League's top four as the midfielder's late goal clinched a vital 2-1 win against Aston Villa on Sunday.

Erik ten Hag's side desperately needed a victory at Villa Park to close the gap in the race to qualify for next season's Champions League. United took an early lead through in-form Rasmus Hojlund before Douglas Luiz levelled in the second half.

That set the stage for United's second late winner against Villa this term as McTominay came off the bench to head home with just four minutes left.

United remain in sixth place after their fourth successive victory in all competitions, but they are now just five points behind fifth-placed Villa and six adrift of fourth-placed Tottenham.

"It is a massive win for us. We've got closer and that was the aim for today. The way we did it, I liked it," Ten Hag said.

"At 1-1 we had to fight back and we are really happy about that. It was so open, like a tennis match. It could go two ways, but we found the mentality and character to win.

"Scott is great. He is an example for many players these days. He is always ready to come on and

● United remain in sixth place after their fourth successive victory in all competitions, but they are now just five points behind fifth-placed Villa and six adrift of fourth-placed Tottenham.

make a difference." Villa boss Unai Emery added: "We were playing well against the mighty Manchester United, but we couldn't score some clear chances. The result is tough for us and difficult to accept but that's football. We played like we planned and deserved more."

While a top four place is still a tough ask for United, they have at least given themselves a chance with their gritty success in the West Midlands.

Significantly, they are finally flourishing in attack after misfiring for much of the campaign.

Hojlund's winner against Villa on Boxing Day has kick-started a run of six goals in seven games for the Denmark striker.

After failing to score in any of his first 14 games in the Premier League, the 21-year-old has become the second youngest player to net in five successive appearances in the competition, behind Nicolas Anelka for Arsenal in 1998. — AFP



Manchester United's Rasmus Hojlund (left) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Aston Villa during the English Premier League match at the Villa Park Stadium in Birmingham, England, on Sunday. — AP

BADMINTON TEAM | ASIA C'SHIP

India chase glory as Sindhu returns

Shah Alam (Malaysia), Feb. 12: Thomas Cup champions India will look to recreate magic when they chase the elusive crown at the Badminton Asia Team Championships, which will mark the return of double Olympic medalist P. V. Sindhu from injury.

The Indian men's team, which lifted the Thomas Cup in 2022 and secured a first-ever silver medal at last year's Asian Games, will look to go all the way in the continental event this week after finishing with bronze medals in the 2016 and 2018 editions.

It won't be a walk in the park for the Indian men's team, who will face formidable China and Hong Kong in its Group 'A' league matches.

However, India, led by H. S. Prannoy, Lakshya Sen and inform doubles pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty, will back themselves to finish in the top two and make it to the knockout stage.

The women's team, led by Sindhu, got the rub of green as China is the only

other team in Group 'W' and India are thus already assured of a knockout berth.

It will be an uphill task for the women's team, which will depend on Sindhu and the two doubles pairs — Commonwealth Games bronze medalists Treesa Jolly-Gayatri Gopichand and Guwahati Masters 2023 champions Ashwini Ponnappa-Tanisha Crasto to provide them the push.

For Sindhu, the event assumes extra significance as she will look to test her match fitness and regain confidence after being missing action since October last year.

The 28-year-old had suffered a knee injury at the French Open and took some time to regain her fitness and then shifted her base to Bengaluru to train under mentor Prakash Padukone at PPBA.

The continental competition will also be important for the players as it offers valuable qualification points in the race to the 2024 Paris Olympics. — PTI

BRIEF SCORES

- In **Surat:** Railways 297 & 208 beat Goa 200 & 242 in 65.2 overs (Suyash Prabhudessai 67; Akash Pandey 9/71) by 63 runs.
- In **Chennai:** Karnataka 366 & 139 drew with Tamil Nadu 151 & 338 for 8 in 105 overs (Baba Indrajith 98, Pradosh Ranjan Paul 74, Vijay Shankar 60; Vijaykumar Vyshak 3/71).
- In **Mohali:** Gujarat 339 & 290 for 8 decl. beat Punjab 219 & 111 in 39.4 overs (Mandeep Singh 18; Priyajitsingh Jadeja 5/39).
- In **Chandigarh:** Chandigarh 356 & 359 for 3 decl. in 74 overs (Arslan Khan 147, Shivam Bhambrani 98, Manan Vohra 74; Sridam Paul 1/39) drew with Tripura 438 & 121 for 3 in 34.4 overs (Bikramkumar Das 58; Arpit Pannu 1/15).
- In **Jaipur:** Saurashtra 328 and 234/6 decl. in 62 overs (Arpit Vasavada 74, Sheldon Jackson 49) beat Rajasthan 257 and 87 in 28.4 overs (Dharmendrasinh Jadeja 7/32, Yuvraj Singh Dodiya 3/25).
- In **Pune:** Maharashtra 208 and 371 in 121.5 overs (Murtaza Trunkwala 86, Ankit Bawne 84; Aditya Thakare 5/54) lost to Vidarbha 552 and 28/0 in 6 overs.
- In **Dharamsala:** Delhi 264 and 381/6 decl. beat HP 319 and 250 in 76.4 overs (Rishi Dhawan 65, Himanshu Chauhan 5/63).
- In **Indore:** Madhya Pradesh 454 beat Baroda 132 and 270 in 98.3 overs (Shashwat Rawat 105; Kulwant Khejroliya 5/34, Kumar Kartikeya 3/77).
- In **Cuttack:** Uttarakhand 342 and 203/8 decl. beat Odisha 169 and 214 in 91.4 overs (Subhranshu Senapati 61; Deepak Dhapola 5/74).

sational four wickets in the fourth ball en route to a sizzling five-wicket haul, which powered Madhya Pradesh to an innings and 52-run win over Baroda in Indore.

Khejroliya became only the third bowler to take four wickets in 4 balls in Ranji Trophy history as Madhya Pradesh dismissed Baroda for 270 in 98.3 overs to complete the massive win and grab the top position in the points table.

The win lifted Delhi (16) to the fourth place behind Madhya Pradesh (26), Baroda (23) and Jammu and Kashmir (18).

In Surat, Railways left-arm spinner Akash Pandey achieved a rare feat as he took nine wickets for 71 runs in Goa's second innings in a stunning bowling show to single-handedly power his side to a 63-run win in their Ranji Trophy Group 'C' match here on Monday. — PTI



Tamil Nadu's Baba Indrajith plays a shot against Karnataka on the fourth day of the Ranji Trophy match at the M.A. Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai on Monday. — PTI

in their second essay and were bowled out for 87 in 28.4 overs, bringing the match to an early end.

DELHI BEAT HP

In Dharamsala, Rookie pacer Himanshu Chauhan snared five wickets as Delhi bowled out

Himachal Pradesh for 250 in their second innings to register an emphatic 76-run win, only their second victory of the ongoing Ranji Trophy season. However, the highlight of the day in Group 'D' was left-arm medium pacer Kulwant Khejroliya's sen-