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NEW DELHI TUESDAY 20 FEBRUARY 2024




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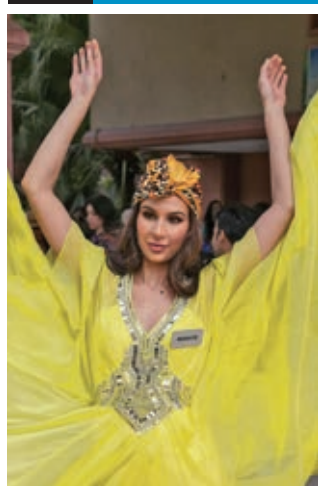
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WINDOWS



Miss World 2023 participant Sonia Ait Mansour of Morocco poses for a picture in New Delhi on Monday.

— PRITAM BANDYOPADHYAY

SC stays notices by LS privileges panel to Bengal's CS, DGP

New Delhi: The Supreme Court on Monday stayed the notices issued by the privileges committee of the Lok Sabha to the West Bengal chief secretary, director general of police and others over a complaint of "misconduct" filed against them by BJP MP Sukanta Majumdar. Mr Majumdar was hospitalised last week after BJP workers clashed with police personnel when they were stopped from going to violence-hit Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas.

Full report on Page 3

Mahua Moitra gets fresh ED summons

New Delhi: The Enforcement Directorate has issued fresh summons to TMC leader and expelled Lok Sabha MP Mahua Moitra for questioning in a Fema contravention case after she did not depose on Monday, sources said.

Full report on Page 3

4-time Cong MLA joins BJP in Raj

Jalpur: In a significant political development, Mahendrajeet Singh Malviya — a four-time Congress MLA and senior leader from Rajasthan's tribal belt — on Monday joined the BJP, saying he sought development for his region.

Full report on Page 3

COUNTERPOINT



It's high time to repair roads to ensure a smooth campaigning!

WEATHER

Max: 26°C
Min: 12°C
RH: 62%
Rain: 0%

Forecast: Clear

ASTROGUIDE

Shubhkrut: Uttarayana
Tithi: Magha Shukla Ekadasi till 9.57 am
Star: Ardra till 12.14 pm
Varjyam: 1.16 am to 3.01 am
Durmuhurtam: 9.02 am to 9.49 am; 11.15 pm to 12.05 am
Rahukalam: 3 pm to 4.30 pm
SUNSET TODAY 6.14 PM
SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.55 AM
MOONRISE TOMORROW 3.23 PM
MOONSET TODAY 4.16 AM

14K projects in UP 'Cong feels 1 family has right to Bharat Ratna' 'Red tape' has been replaced by 'red carpet' in today's UP: Modi

SHASHI BHUSHAN with agency inputs NEW DELHI/LUCKNOW, FEB. 19

Launching 14,000 projects across Uttar Pradesh worth more than ₹10 lakh crores, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday said that the culture of "red tape" has been replaced with the "red carpet" for investors in the seven years of the "double-engine" government in the state. Addressing a ground-breaking ceremony in Lucknow for projects worth over ₹10 lakh crores in the fourth ground-breaking ceremony of the UP Global Investors Summit held in February 2023, Mr Modi said an environment of trade, development and trust had emerged in the state.

Noting the seven years of the "double-engine" government in Uttar Pradesh, the Prime Minister said that in this period "red carpet culture" has replaced "red



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath during the 4th ground-breaking ceremony of UP Global Investors Summit in Lucknow on Monday.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that in the last seven years an atmosphere of business, development and trust has developed in Uttar Pradesh. The double-engine government has proven the inevitability of change if there is a genuine desire for it, he said.

Noting the doubling of exports from the state in this period, he also praised the state's strides in electricity generation and transmission. "Today, UP is a state with

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Modi will launch ₹30K-cr projects for J&K today; hold Jammu rally

YUSUF JAMEEL SRINAGAR, FEB. 19

A warm welcome awaits Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he visits Jammu on Tuesday to address a public rally in the city's fortified Maulana Azad Stadium that the BJP hopes will set the tone for its campaign for the Lok Sabha as well as Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir.

More important, the visit is likely to be a harbinger of a new era of development and growth as the Prime Minister will, during the day-long visit to J&K's winter capital, launch multiple projects, including for education, railway, aviation and road sectors, worth ₹30,500 crores virtually from one place, official sources said.

The sources said he will also distribute appointment letters to about 1,500 newly-recruited government employees of J&K and interact with the beneficiaries of various schemes as part of the "Viksit Bharat, Viksit Jammu" programme.

Union minister Jitendra Singh, speaking to reporters in Jammu Monday, said there was huge excitement on the eve of the PM's visit. "The people of J&K have a natural connection with PM Modi. They are eagerly waiting for his arrival here. In fact, every citizen of J&K wants to be a part of the programme", he said.

More on Page 4



Snow-covered Auli area after fresh snowfall in Uttarakhand's Chamoli district on Monday. Parts of Lahaul and Spiti, Kinnaur and higher reaches of Kullu and Chamba districts in Himachal Pradesh also received moderate to heavy snowfall.

— PTI

Farmers to review govt offer of 5-yr MSP 'deal'

'Delhi Chalo' agitation on hold for 2 days

BHASKAR HARI SHARMA with agency inputs NEW DELHI/CHANDIGARH, FEB. 19

After the marathon meeting between the Centre and the farmers' unions in Chandigarh till late on Sunday night, a panel of three Union ministers has proposed the buying of pulses, maize and cotton crops by government agencies at minimum support prices for five years after entering into an agreement with the farmers.

The farmer leaders, however, said after the talks that they will discuss the government's proposal in their forums on Monday and Tuesday, and then decide their next course of action. Till then, the "Delhi Chalo" agitation will remain on standby.

On the Centre's proposal, farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher said on Monday: "We will discuss in our forums on February 19-20 and take the opinion of experts regarding it and accord-



Farmers listen to a leader at the Punjab-Haryana Shambhu border during their "Delhi Chalo" protest near Patiala district on Monday.

UNION AGRICULTURE minister Arjun Munda, commerce and industry minister Piyush Goyal and minister of state for home affairs Nityanand Rai represented the Centre at the meeting

ingly take a decision. "A discussion on loan waivers and other demands is pending and hope that these will be resolved by Tuesday", Mr Pandher said, adding that

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Wheel has turned for India, it sets an example for world: PM

'God has given me duty of building temple that is India'

AGE CORRESPONDENT with agency inputs NEW DELHI/SAMBHAL (UP), FEB. 19

Asserting that the wheel of time has turned for the country as it records many firsts and sets an example for the world, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday said that God has given him the duty to rebuild the temple that is India.

Addressing a gathering after laying the founda-

tion stone of Shri Kalki Dham temple in Uttar Pradesh, he said that on the day of the Ram Mandir's consecration ceremony in Ayodhya, he had said a new cycle had started from January 22.

Shri Kalki Dham is being built by Shri Kalki Dham Nirman Trust whose chairman is Acharya Pramod Krishnam.

Recalling the consecration ceremony of the Shri

Ram Janmabhoomi Temple in Ayodhya, the Prime Minister reiterated the beginning of a new "kaal chakra" (circle of time) since January 22, 2024 and highlighted the impact of Shri Ram's rule that lasted for thousands of years. Similarly, with Ram Lalla being seated now, India was beginning its new journey where he resolve for a "Viksit Bharat" in the "Azaadi ka Amrit Kaal" was not

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ED's 7th summons to Kejriwal soon

AAP says agency should wait for court's decision before summons

AMRESH SRIVASTAVA and BHASKAR HARI SHARMA NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

The Enforcement Directorate is likely to issue yet another summons — its seventh — to Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal for questioning over the alleged Delhi excise policy scam under the provisions of the money-laundering law as he skipped the sixth summons on Monday, saying the probe agency should wait till the decision of the local court comes.



Sources in the ED on Monday claimed that a local court had prima facie held Mr Kejriwal guilty of "disobeying" earlier notices issued to him, warranting the seventh summons. The Central financial probe agency has filed a complaint

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Kejriwal: Serious constitutional crisis has arisen in Delhi

under Section 174 IPC against Delhi CM for allegedly intentionally disobeying the first three summons issued to him. Talking to the media outside the Delhi Assembly, Mr Kejriwal said that replies to the ED's summons have been given as per the law. "We are replying as per the law. Now, the ED has filed a case in the court and

they should wait for the decision of the court before issuing any fresh summons," he said.

Mr Kejriwal refused to depose before the ED for the sixth time on Monday with the Aam Aadmi Party saying the ED should wait for the court's decision instead of repeatedly sending summonses to the Delhi CM.

A Delhi court on February 17 had granted exemption to the Delhi CM from personal appearance for the day over the complaint filed by the

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SC to check ballots of mayor poll today

RAKESH K. SINGH NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

The Supreme Court on Monday rapped the returning officer for the Chandigarh mayoral polls, Anil Masih, for defacing ballot papers with tick and cross marks during counting, observing "horse trading is taking place".

The court said it would peruse the ballot papers and the entire video-recording on Tuesday, and directed the high court

registrar-general to depute a judicial officer to bring the records safely to New Delhi. "We ourselves will look at the records at 2 pm", said a bench headed by CJI D.Y. Chandrachud.

Chandigarh mayor Manoj Sonkar of the BJP, meanwhile, resigned ahead of Monday's hearing. Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal said this only proved the BJP had won by "unfair means".

More on Page 3

Navalny's widow vows she'll continue his fight with Kremlin, 'punish' Putin

Moscow, Feb. 19: The widow of Russian Opposition leader Alexei Navalny vowed on Monday to continue his fight against the Kremlin while the authorities denied his mother access to a morgue where his body is believed to be held after his death last week at an Arctic penal colony. Fighting back tears, Yulia Navalnaya accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of killing her husband in the remote prison and vowed to punish him and other

FIGHTING BACK tears, Yulia Navalnaya accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of killing her husband in the remote prison and vowed to punish him and other alleged perpetrators.

She also slammed the authorities, saying they were refusing to hand over the body to Navalny's mother to cover-up his alleged killing, and referred to his alleged earlier poison-

ing with a Soviet-era Novichok nerve agent. Russian authorities said that the cause for Navalny's death Friday at age 47 is still unknown. He had been jailed since January 2021, when he returned to Moscow after recuperating in Germany from poisoning with a Novichok-type nerve agent that he blamed on the Kremlin. He received three prison terms since his arrest, on a number of charges he has rejected as politically motivated.

— AP



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi with supporters during the "Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra" in Amethi on Monday.

— PTI

SHORT TAKES

Fire breaks out in slum in outer Delhi

New Delhi: Nearly 130 shanties were gutted after a major fire broke out in a slum area near Shahbad Dairy in outer Delhi, an official of the Delhi fire service said on Monday. No casualty was reported in the blaze that broke out on Sunday night. The officials said they received a call regarding the fire at 10.17 pm on Sunday. "A total of 15 fire tenders were pressed into service and the fire was doused completely. No one was injured in the incident. Nearly 130 shanties were gutted," the official said. The visuals showed a thick smoke at the spot. Several people became homeless following the incident. At least 11 people — the factory owner and 10 workers — died and four others were injured in a fire that broke out in a paint factory in outer Delhi's Alipur area on Thursday evening.

4 armed men attempt to rob jewellery shop

New Delhi: Four armed assailants attempted to rob a jewellery shop owner of his bag containing cash and some ornaments at gunpoint in Delhi's Sonia Vihar area, the police said on Monday. A purported video of the incident also made rounds on social media where the four robbers, wearing helmets, can be seen trying to snatch a bag from two people and firing gunshots in the air before fleeing on two motorcycles. "On Sunday at 9.30 pm, a PCR call was received in Sonia Vihar police station regarding firing at a jewellery shop," a senior police officer said. The police said Mohit Pandey along with his father Rajesh Pandey had just closed their jewellery shop and were about to leave when four people tried to snatch Mohit's bag containing ₹3,000, some silver jewellery and keys.

2 toll plaza staff die after being hit by car

Gurgaon Two toll plaza employees died after being hit by a car at Kundli-Manesar-Palwal (KMP) expressway, the police said on Monday. On Saturday night, Jaikishan Sahni (21) and Sonbir alias Monu were standing near Farrukhnagar KMP toll waiting for someone when at around 11 pm a speeding car hit them, said Deepak, a member of the patrolling team of KMP expressway, in his complaint. The car driver once stopped at the spot and after noticing that the two people were injured, he fled away, he said. "I noted the vehicle number and then reached the spot where I found that both the men died on the spot," Deepak said in his complaint. — PTI

MAYOR ORDERS TO INSTALL CCTVs IN ALL WOMEN PARKS

New Delhi: Delhi mayor Shelly Oberoi has directed officials to install CCTV cameras in women-only 'pink parks' operational across zones of the MDC to ensure the safety and security of women visiting these parks, an official said on Monday. The civic body's horticulture department may soon start the work on installing the CCTV camera in its women-only parks that are being built across its 250 wards, an official said. "The mayor has given instruction to install the CCTV cameras in the women-only parks to provide a safe and secure environment to the women and children who visit these parks," the official said. It will also help in controlling illegal activities and crime against women that often get reported in public parks, the official added. According to a report by the National Crime Records Bureau, Delhi recorded the highest cases of crime against women among the 19 metropolitan cities in 2022. The capital witnessed a 1.25 per cent year-on-year increase in crime against women to 14,158 cases from 13,982 in 2021, the data showed. Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal had in July last year urged L-G V.K. Saxena to take stock of the rising crime against women in the city and engage the police after a young woman was murdered in a park in south Delhi. — PTI

'Officers are threatened to block one-time settlement scheme' Serious constitutional crisis has arisen in Delhi, says CM

AVINASH PRABHAKAR
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal on Monday said a "serious constitutional crisis" has arisen in the national capital as officers are saying they will not work because of alleged "threats and pressure" from the BJP.

The CM was speaking on the resolution moved for discussion on the 'one-time settlement' (OTS) scheme of the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) during the Budget Session in the Assembly.

This problem stems from Delhi not enjoying full statehood and the real power lies with the Central government, which is led by a different party, and "that other party does not want that the elected government (of Delhi) does its work," he said during the discussion.

During the Budget Session, AAP members presented a resolution paper to discuss the OTS scheme in the House.

Supporting the resolution, the CM said, "Despite our government in Delhi,



Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal speaks in the Assembly during the budget session in New Delhi on Monday. — PTI

a policy is not being implemented and a discussion is underway in the Assembly to implement the policy. Incorrect bills are being received by people in Delhi and this policy is being introduced to correct those bills."

He further alleged that the scheme to rectify water bills is being "obstructed" by some officers.

"After the implementation of the scheme, around 90 per cent of water consumers' bills

will be waived off. Along with this, the DJB will also receive crores of revenue from the subsidy reimbursed by the Delhi government. Yet, officers are being threatened to stop the scheme; if the scheme is passed, they (officials) will not be spared. Therefore, I respectfully request the lieutenant-governor (L-G) sir to ask the officers to pass the scheme; if they still do not, then suspend them," said Mr Kejriwal in the House.

'BJP won by unfair means in mayoral polls of Chandigarh'

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Monday said that Bharatiya Janata Party leader Manoj Sonkar's resignation as Chandigarh mayor shows that they won the elections by using "unfair means."

Addressing the media outside the Delhi Assembly, Kejriwal said, "If the mayor has resigned then it is very obvious that something is suspicious there. It clearly shows that they won the elections by unfair means."

"This is how they win other elections too; if they don't, they buy leaders from the winning party. How will a democratic country function if elections are won unfairly? They (BJP) should let the party that won the elections run the government," AAP supremo alleged.

L-G writes to Kejriwal for action against tax evasions

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

Delhi lieutenant-governor (L-G) V.K. Saxena on Monday wrote a letter to chief minister Arvind Kejriwal asking him to direct the city finance minister to hold a detailed enquiry in alleged GST evasions and tighten tax administration.

Mr Saxena, in the letter addressed to the chief minister, said that Delhi has achieved the 'inglorious distinction' of recording the highest tax evasion in the country.

In all, 483 'bogus firms' were detected, which



V.K. Saxena

accounted for ₹3,028 crore of tax evasion, he said in the letter.

"It is indeed dubious that the capital of the country tops the list of tax evasion amongst all states and Union Territories, with the one in the second place behind Delhi by as much as ₹827 crore. This is a seri-

ous matter in which the possibility of collusion of officials in the GST department cannot be ruled out," Mr Saxena said.

The Delhi L-G 'advised' the chief minister to direct the finance minister to hold a detailed inquiry into the matter and assess the root cause of such tax evasions.

"This not only reflects poorly on the state of tax governance in the national capital but also results in a huge loss to the public exchequer. This resource could have been meaningfully utilised for investments in public interest," the L-G said.

Court seeks ED response on AAP's Amanatullah bail plea

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

A local court on Monday issued a notice to the Enforcement Directorate on an application moved by AAP MLA Amanatullah Khan, seeking anticipatory bail in a money laundering case related to alleged irregularities by the Delhi Waqf Board in hiring staff and leasing assets during his chairmanship. Special judge Rakesh Syal sought the Central probe agency's response by Tuesday, when the court will hear

arguments on the application that has claimed Mr Khan anticipates being arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in the case.

Mr Khan, the AAP's Okhla MLA, was not named as an accused in the charge sheet that the ED recently filed.

The ED has named five entities in its prosecution complaint (the ED's equivalent of a charge sheet) that included three suspected associates of Khan — Zeeshan Haider, Daud Nasir and Jawed Imam Siddiqui.

UP police recruitment exam: Candidate, dummy arrested

Noida, Feb. 19: A candidate for the Uttar Pradesh police recruitment examination and his dummy were arrested for alleged cheating, forgery and using unfair means during the test, officials said on Monday.

The deal under which the dummy candidate appeared for the examination instead of the actual aspirant was fixed at ₹5 lakh, of which ₹1 lakh was paid in advance.

The examination organised by the UP police recruitment and promotion board was held across



Women in traditional attire take part in Shivaji Jayanti celebrations at the Maharashtra Sadan in New Delhi on Monday. — PTI

7 BJP MLAs move HC over suspension from Assembly

Legislators were suspended Feb. 16 for disrupting L-G's speech

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

Seven Delhi BJP MLAs approached the Delhi high court on Monday challenging their indefinite suspension from the Assembly for interrupting the lieutenant-governor's address.

Justice Subramonium Prasad listed the matter for hearing on February 20 on whether to grant any interim relief to suspended legislators.

Mohan Singh Bisht, Ajay Mahawar, O.P. Sharma, Abhay Verma, Anil Bajpai, Jitender Mahajan, and Vijender Gupta.

Senior advocate Jayant Mehta, appearing for the petitioners, said their indefinite suspension till the conclusion of the proceedings before the privileges committee was in violation of the applicable rules.

He said the MLAs were consequently unable to attend the ongoing budget session.

He urged the court to facilitate their participation in the session.

The petitions came up for hearing before justice Prasad after they were mentioned for urgent list-

SENIOR ADVOCATE Jayant Mehta, appearing for the petitioners, said their indefinite suspension till the conclusion of the proceedings before the privileges committee was in violation of the applicable rules.

ing before a bench of acting chief justice Manmohan and justice Manmeet P.S. Arora in the morning.

The Bharatiya Janata Party MLAs had allegedly interrupted lieutenant-governor (L-G) V.K. Saxena multiple times during his address on February 15 highlighting the achievements of the Aam Aadmi Party government while they attacked the Arvind Kejriwal dispensation on a range of issues.

Mr Mehta said seven out of eight Bharatiya Janata Party MLAs were suspended by the Speaker on February 16 when they had already been "marshalled out" the day before, which should have been considered as punishment for their alleged wrongdoing.

Even if it is assumed that the conduct of the

petitioners was disruptive, the suspension cannot exceed three days, he added.

Senior advocates Kirti Uppal and Malvika Trivedi also appeared for the petitioners.

Mr Mahawar, Mr Gupta, and Mr Bajpai have contended that the entire Opposition has been suspended from the House, silencing any voice for accountability.

Their suspension was in violation of the Constitution and Rules of Business of the House, the lawmakers have said.

"Surprisingly and shockingly, on 16.02.2024, an unconstitutional motion was moved by Aam Aadmi Party MLA Dilip Pandey for suspending the petitioners for an indefinite period till disposal of the adjudication in the cases pending before the committee of privilege. This was maliciously engineered to disable the Opposition members from participating in the discussions on crucial businesses that were to be discussed and to also exclude them, albeit unconstitutionally, from participating in the budget session of the House," the plea stated.

23 commercial shops get nod from govt to open for 24 hrs

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

Delhi chief minister and Aam Aadmi Party supremo Arvind Kejriwal on Monday granted permission for 23 more shops and commercial establishments to operate 24 hours. The labour department of the Delhi govt had proposed the plan for the operation of these establishments for 24 hours.

The proposal has now been sent to the lieutenant-governor (L-G) V.K. Saxena for the final approval. The commercial establishments which has been given permission belong to the categories of commercial, retail trade, and business. The initiative is expected to create employment opportunities for the youth, along with enhancing economic activities within Delhi, said chief minister office in a statement.

It said that all these establishments must strictly adhere to the provisions and rules of the Delhi Shops Establishment Act of 1954. The government will keep strict surveillance over them to ensure strict action can be taken in case of any violation of the rules. — PTI

2 held for hacking delivery app, placing order of ₹97K

New Delhi, Feb. 19: Two men were arrested for allegedly making grocery purchases almost worth a lakh by hacking into a south Delhi woman's online delivery app account, the police said on Monday. The accused were identified as 25-year-old Aniket Kalra and 23-year-old Himanshu Kumar, both residents of Gurgaon, the police said. An associate of theirs is still at large.

DCP (south) Ankit Chauhan said the victim late on February 14 night got an IVR (interactive

voice response), call with an automatic recording warning her of a potential hacking attempt into her account and asked her to click certain numbers in her phone. As soon as she clicked the numbers, she received a message that online orders of ₹97,197 were made from her bank account linked with the delivery firm app.

"Simultaneously, other details from the delivery partner were obtained and the location of the caller was found in to be in Gurugram, the police said. — PTI

Form panel to check bags of students, DoE directs schools

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

Delhi schools have been directed to constitute a committee for surprise checking of school bags to ensure that no student brings any object that may be used to harm fellow students, a circular by the Delhi government's Directorate of Education said.

Schools have been directed to ensure that guards at the gates regularly check students' bags and ensure that CCTVs are functional all the time.

According to the Directorate of Education (DoE), some incidents have come to their notice where students had indulged in quarrels and fights in and outside the premises during school hours.

"All the heads of government and private schools of Delhi are hereby directed to put all possible efforts for ensuring safety and security of students in the school premises," a DoE circular said.

Govt clears signing of MoU on 1st 3 Metro corridors under Phase-4

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal has approved the signing of MoU for the first three corridors between Delhi government, DMRC and Centre under phase four expansion of the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation. A total of 6 corridors will be developed under Phase-4 of the DMRC expansion.

After this MoU, the constitution works will be accelerated up on Janakpuri West to Ramakrishna Ashram cor-

ridor, Delhi Aerocity to Tughlakabad station corridor, Majlis Park to Matujpur corridor.

There will be 45 stations on all these corridors. An official said that the Delhi government is also trying to get approval for three other corridors pending with the Centre under phase four as soon as possible. It includes Rithala, Bawana, Narela and Kundli Corridor, Indralok, Indraprastha Corridor and Lajpat Nagar and Saket Ji Block Corridor. It has 47 kilometers and will have 39 stations.

Greek PM to headline Raisina Dialogue

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

India on Monday formally announced the launch of the ninth edition of the Raisina Dialogue conference 2024 starting Wednesday in the national capital that will see Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis as the chief guest and the keynote speaker. The theme of the conference this time is "Chaturanga --- Conflict, Contest, Cooperate, Create". Chaturanga is an ancient Indian board game regarded as the precursor to the present-day

Chess game. The Raisina dialogue is India's premier conference on geopolitics and geo-economics that is organised by the ministry of external affairs in association with the think tank Observer Research

Foundation (ORF). The "thematic pillars" of the edition this year are: tech frontiers, peace with the planet, war and peace, decolonising multilateralism, post-2030 agenda, and defending democracy".

The MEA said the conference this year would see the participation from more than 100 nations, including that of ministers, NSAs, diplomats and senior officials and representatives from industry, trade and finance.

Meanwhile, the Greek Prime Minister, who will be accompanied by senior officials and a high-powered business delegation, will be on a two-day official visit to India, starting Wednesday that will also see him holding talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on bilateral ties before his visit to Mumbai Thursday.

India is a close strategic partner of Greece, which has had long-standing dis-

putes and tensions with Pakistan's close ally Türkiye. India-Greece relations were elevated to a "strategic partnership" during PM Modi's visit to Greece August last year.

"They are based on shared cultural values; commitment to foster economic growth; collaboration in the fields of security and defence, shipping, and maritime, and are marked by convergence on regional and global issues. The two countries have also been cooperating closely in various multilateral forums," New Delhi had said in a recent statement.

ED's 7th summons to Kejriwal in excise case soon

Continued from Page 1 Central agency for "disobeying" its summons in the excise policy-linked money laundering case.

The court posted the matter for March 16 and Mr Kejriwal's counsel assured the court of his physical appearance that day.

The court had said from the contents of the complaint and the material put on record (by the ED), a prima facie offence under Section 174 IPC had been

made out and there were sufficient grounds for proceeding against him.

"The question in front of the court is not about the validity of the summons, rather the illegal act on the part of Mr Kejriwal of intentionally disobeying the said three summons," the sources said. Hence, the ED is not wrong in issuing him summons despite the court matter listed for March 16, they said.

The AAP supremo's name has been mentioned multiple times in chargesheets filed by the ED in the case. The agency has said that the accused were in touch with him regarding the preparation of the now-scrapped Delhi Excise Policy 2021-22.

AAP leaders Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh, apart from communications in-charge of the party Vijay Nair, have been arrested in this case by the

ED till now.

The ED had claimed in its chargesheet that the AAP used the "proceeds of crime" to the tune of about Rs 45 crores in its Goa election campaign.

The agency is also expected to file a fresh supplementary chargesheet in the case and may name the AAP as a "beneficiary" of the alleged kickbacks that were generated through the excise policy. Reacting to the develop-

ment, Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva claimed that even the court has admitted that the ED summonses to Mr Kejriwal were legal and he should cooperate in the probe.

"It's contempt of court if Kejriwal is terming the ED summonses illegal despite the court's observation. The Delhi chief minister is not ready to accept that scam has been done in the excise policy. The probe

agencies are doing their job and he will also be behind the bars like Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh," the BJP leader said.

It is alleged that the Delhi government's excise policy for 2021-22 to grant licences to liquor traders allowed cartelisation and favoured certain dealers who had allegedly paid bribes for it, a charge repeatedly refuted by the AAP.

SHORT TAKES

Banners threaten to kill Odisha Cong MLA

Bhubaneswar: A number of posters and banners threatening to kill Odisha's senior Congress leader and Kantabanji MLA Santosh Singh Saluja surfaced in Odisha's Bolangir district on Monday morning. While the banners have a picture of a man, his identity is yet to be ascertained. The unknown person has written, "I will kill Santosh Singh Saluja within 15 days." Speaking about the threat, Mr Saluja said, "I came to know about the banners through electronic media. It is strange that at a time when I am roaming the Kantabanji Assembly segment for its development, somebody has threatened to kill me. Kantabanji's development cannot be held back even after killing me. I do not fear death. If one Saluja dies, many more Salujas will take birth to carry out my mission for its development. The police seized the banners and launched a probe to nab the accused.

Odisha polls: Cong to list 70 on March 1

Bhubaneswar: Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee president Sarat Pattanayak on Monday said his party would announce names of at least 70 candidates for the first phase of the upcoming Assembly elections in the state on March 1. In an attempt to maintain transparency in candidates' selection and ticket distribution, the Congress has launched a new initiative called "Project Pragman" for the upcoming twin polls in Odisha. This online portal launched in this regard remained open from February 4 to 11, 2024. "From now onwards, only honest and dedicated Congress workers will get the chance to secure a ticket without any reference and family lineage," Congress in-charge Ajay Kumar said.

NCW chief seeks Prez rule in Bengal

Kolkata: National Commission for Women (NCW) chairperson Rekha Sharma on Monday echoed the call of central caste panel chief Arun Haldar for President's Rule in West Bengal, after she met women of Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas over their allegations of rape by Trinamul Congress strongman Shahjahan Sheikh and his aides. Ms Sharma also sought the resignation of chief minister Mamata Banerjee for failing to protect women. She claimed, "I do not think anything good will happen without the President's Rule in Bengal because the women are scared of the police. Without me, they were not ready to come to the police station." Ms Sharma alleged, "Their situation is so bad that they were not letting me go."

ALL RUMOURS, NOT LEAVING 'INDIA' CAMP: PDP

AGE CORRESPONDENT SRINAGAR, FEB. 19

Jammu and Kashmir People's Democratic Party (PDP) on Monday denied reports appearing in a section of media about it leaving the INDIA bloc and said that it remains committed to the unity of the bloc. "Disregard the fabricated news about PDP breaking ties with the INDIA alliance. We stand firm in our commitment to unity and our alliance," the party said in a post on X. Terming the media reports about it having quit the Congress-led Opposition alliance, it asked the people not to be misled by this "malicious misinformation". A section of the media had earlier reported that the PDP had left the INDIA bloc and decided to contest all the six Lok Sabha seats of J&K and Ladakh on its own. Last week, similar reports about the National Conference had appeared in a section of the media and this gained credence when its president and former chief minister Farooq Abdullah told reporters that his party will contest all the J&K and Ladakh Lok Sabha seats on its own. However, NC vice-president Omar Abdullah said, "Our party was, is and will remain a part of the INDIA bloc."

■ BJP: Ranchi UIDAI office responsible, will be reversed in 24 hrs

Didi writes to PM over 'sudden deactivation' of Aadhaar cards

RAJIB CHOWDHURI KOLKATA, FEB. 18

Taken back by the Aadhaar Card deactivation by the Centre in West Bengal ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, chief minister Mamata Banerjee sought to know, in a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday, the motive behind the sudden step. The TMC supremo later announced that her government would provide alternative cards to those affected by the action, after launching an online portal to record their grievances on Tuesday. Swinging into a damage control mode, BJP blamed

"I would like to know from you about the causes for such sudden action of deactivation without assigning reasons. Is it just for the sake of depriving the eligible beneficiaries of the benefits or to create a panic situation among the people just before the Lok Sabha polls?"

— Mamata Banerjee, West Bengal CM

UIDAI Ranchi office for the deactivation and assured a reversal in 24 hours.

In the letter to PM, Ms Banerjee complained that the Aadhaar Card deactivation was "indiscriminate" that affected "the people, especially belonging to the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe

and Other Backward Class communities."

She wrote, "I would like to know from you about the causes for such sudden action of deactivation...without assigning reasons. Is it just for the sake of depriving the eligible beneficiaries of the benefits or to create a panic situation among the

people at large just before the ensuing Lok Sabha elections?"

The CM mentioned, "I am shocked to see the deactivation of Aadhaar Cards in the state against the interest of SCs, STs, OBCs and the poor section of the society."

Ms Banerjee alleged that the UIDAI head office in New Delhi, without any field enquiry or hearing the people and taking the state government into confidence, has been directly issuing letters to inform them about the cards' deactivation under provisions of the Regulation of 28A of Aadhaar (Enrolment and Update) Regulations, 2016.



People from the Maratha community take part in celebrations of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's birth anniversary in Hyderabad on Monday. — PTI

■ Warns of prosecution if found guilty ■ Orders HC to send officer with records

Chandigarh mayor polls: SC pulls up officer

RAKESH K. SINGH AND BHASKAR HARI SHARMA NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

The Supreme Court on Monday rapped the "returning officer" (RO) for the Chandigarh mayoral polls Anil Masih for allegedly defacing the ballot papers with tick and cross marks during the counting, observing that "horse trading is taking place".

The SC said it would peruse on Tuesday the ballot papers of the Chandigarh mayoral polls and the entire video-recording of the counting day, and directed the registrar general of the Punjab and Haryana HC to depute a judicial officer to bring the records safely to national capital. After watching the video of the electoral exercise for the mayoral polls on February 5, the apex court had lambasted the RO, observing that he had defaced the ballot papers, and that he should be prosecuted. The court had also said that Mr Masih's action amounted to "mur-

der" and a "mockery" of democracy. During the proceedings on Monday, a bench comprising Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud and Justices J.B. Pardiwala and Manoj Misra, directed the Chandigarh administration to provide security to

the judicial officer, to be appointed by the high court, to ensure the safety of him and the records. "We ourselves will look at the records at 2 pm," the SC bench said. "Horse-trading taking place," the CJ remarked, while declining a plea that the case on the mayoral polls be heard on some other day instead of Tuesday.

In pursuance of the SC direction on February 5, Mr Masih appeared before the bench and was quizzed by the judges over the alleged tampering of certain ballot papers. Responding to the queries of the bench, Mr Masih said he did put the X mark on the eight — already defaced — ballot papers, and accused Aam Aadmi Party councillors of creating a ruckus and trying to snatch away the ballot papers. He said that due to this, he was looking at the CCTV camera at the counting centre. The bench also warned that the RO could be prosecuted if he took recourse to lies before the Court.

Shah to address several BJP meetings in Rajasthan today

To take stock of Jaipur, Udaipur & Bikaner LS seats 'Modi govt developed early disaster warning systems'

AGE CORRESPONDENT, NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

Union home minister Amit Shah will address several BJP meetings in Rajasthan on Tuesday, as the ruling party looks to win all 25 seats in the western state in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. The BJP had won 24 seats in the 2019 polls, while its then ally Rashtriya Loktantrik Party had one. The RLP is no longer with the BJP. Sources said Mr Shah will focus on three "clusters", which include three Lok Sabha seats: of Jaipur, Udaipur and Bikaner during the visit. He will address the election management committee meeting in Bikaner, followed by a meeting of party workers in Udaipur and a get-together in Jaipur.

The Bikaner cluster comprises Bikaner, Ganganagar and Churu constituencies, the Udaipur cluster includes

Udaipur, Dungarpur and Chhittorgarh seats while Jaipur, Jaipur Rural and Dausa figure in the Jaipur cluster. The BJP has divided Lok Sabha seats across the country into clusters for the upcoming general election. — PTI

Tejashwi to kickstart Jan Vishwas Yatra

NAYYAR AZAD PATNA, FEB. 19

Ahead of RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav's Jan Vishwas Yatra, the BJP on Monday blamed him for "misleading people of Bihar" and suggested that he should "highlight corruption" that occurred during the Mahagathbandhan regime. In a statement, BJP leader and deputy chief minister of Bihar Samrat Choudhary said instead of calling it the "Jan Vishwas Yatra", Mr Tejashwi should name it

corruption yatra". Mr Yadav is set to begin the "Jan Vishwas Yatra" on February 20, marking the state-wide tour after being ousted from power. The deputy CM also expressed confidence that the NDA would win all the 40 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar. "He should first address the corruption committed by him and his family. People are aware of all their deeds and we are fully confident that the NDA will secure victory in all Bihar seats during the Lok Sabha elections," Mr Choudhary said.



Tejashwi Yadav

The yatra is scheduled to commence on Tuesday (February 20) and continue till February 29. According to RJD insiders, the objective is to raise awareness among the people about the

SC stays LS panel notices to WB's chief secy & DGP

Takes officials plea as 'matter of urgent mentioning'

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

The Supreme Court on Monday stayed the notices issued by the privileges committee of the Lok Sabha to the West Bengal chief secretary, director general of police and others over a complaint of "misconduct" filed against them by BJP MP Sukanta Majumdar.

Mr Majumdar was hospitalized last week, after he fell on a car bonnet during a clash between BJP workers and police when they were stopped from going to violence-hit Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas in West Bengal. The privileges committee of the lower house had summoned chief secretary Bhagwati Prasad Gopalika, DGP Rajeev Kumar and others, including the district magistrate and the superintendent of police of North 24 Parganas district, for appearance before it at 10.30 am on Monday.

A bench comprising Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud and Justices J.B. Pardiwala and Manoj Misra took note of the submissions of senior advocates Kapil Sibal and Abhishek Singhvi representing the state officials, and stayed the notices issued against them and fixed the plea for hearing after four weeks. The bench took the pleas of West Bengal officials as

Top court not to entertain plea over Bengal violence

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

The Supreme Court on Friday refused to entertain a public interest litigation (PIL) seeking a court-monitored CBI or SIT probe into the violence in Sandeshkhali village of North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, saying the Calcutta high court is already seized of the matter.

Stating that the incidents in Sandeshkhali cannot be compared to the savagery in Manipur, a bench of Justices B.V. Nagarathna and Augustine George Masih said, "The high court will be the best to assess the

situation. Let there be no dual forums."

The petitioner-lawyer Alakh Alok Srivastava said disturbing incidents have come to light where a number of women have claimed of having been raped.

The SC said one of the judges of the HC had also taken cognisance of the alleged incidents. If, the HC, can consider transferring the case to the CBI, the bench said.

Senior advocate Jaideep Gupta, representing the West Bengal government, submitted that the high court had taken cognisance of the alleged incidents and some arrests have also been made.

the first matter on urgent mentioning. The bench said there shall be a stay of further proceedings initiated in pursuance of the office memorandum of the Lok Sabha secretariat on February 15.

When the bench asked whether the notices were issued because the MP got injured, one of the lawyers said, "Video shows that he (the MP) jumps on the bonnet of a police car. His colleagues in the BJP pulled him. He is taken to the hospital by

the police." During the hearing, Mr Sibal said parliamentary privileges are not available to an MP for political activities and can be invoked only when a legislator is obstructed in discharge of duties as an MP while attending the House. The prohibitory orders under section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure were imposed in the Sandeshkhali area and the BJP MP and his supporters violated them, he said.



Mahua Moitra

New summons by ED to TMC's Mahua Moitra over Fema case

AMRESH SRIVASTAVA, NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

The Enforcement Directorate on Monday issued a fresh summons to TMC leader and the expelled Lok Sabha MP Mahua Moitra for questioning her in an alleged Fema case as she did not appear before the agency to dispose in this case on February 19.

According to the sources, the 49-year-old politician has been given one-week time to appear at the probe agency office here, after a communication sent by her expressing her inability to appear. On February 15, the Central financial probe agency had issued the first notice to Ms Moitra, asking her to appear for questioning in a Foreign Exchange Management Act contravention case and to record her statement under the said act on February 19.

Transactions linked to a non-resident external (NRE) account are under the scanner of ED in the case, apart from a few other foreign remittances and transfer of funds, the sources said.

Recently, she also submitted her reply to a questionnaire by the CBI on allegations of corruption in raising questions in the Lok Sabha.

■ Akhilesh will join Nyay Yatra only if proposal accepted: Party

SP offers 17 seats to Congress in UP

Lucknow, Feb. 19: The Congress has been offered 17 Lok Sabha seats in Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party said on Monday and asserted that its chief Akhilesh Yadav will join the Rahul Gandhi-led Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Raebareli only if the proposal is accepted.

The Samajwadi Party also declared 11 candidates from Uttar Pradesh for the upcoming general election with the list also including the name of Lok Sabha MP Afzal Ansari.

Mr Ansari, who is the sitting BSP MP from Ghazipur parliamentary constituency, has been fielded from the same seat by the SP.

"We have given a final offer of 17 Lok Sabha seats to the Congress. Akhilesh Yadav's partici-

ation in the Nyay Yatra in Raebareli on Tuesday will depend on their acceptance," Rajendra Chaudhary, the Samajwadi Party's chief spokesperson, told PTI. He, however, refused to identify the seats offered to the Grand Old Party.

The Gandhi-led yatra will pass through Amethi on Monday. It will then enter Raebareli, where the Samajwadi Party chief had earlier said he would join.

The Samajwadi Party had earlier offered 11 seats to the grand old party, while the Congress' state unit demanded a higher allocation.

The Congress' Uttar Pradesh unit chief Ajay Rai, had earlier said that the party should get around two dozen seats it had won in the 2009 general election. — PTI

Centre & Ladakh delegation hold talks on key demands

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

A high-powered committee of the Union home ministry, headed by minister of state (MoS) for home Nityanand Rai on Monday met a delegation from Ladakh and deliberated over their demands, including statehood for the UT, two LS seats and bringing the area under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

According to sources, the delegation demanded

one each Lok Sabha seat for Leh and Kargil, job opportunities for the residents and bring the high-altitude region under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution to accord special status likewise in the north eastern states.

"The 14-member delegation from Ladakh consisted of representatives of the Apex Body Leh (ABL) and Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA), who placed their demands before the Rai-led panel," a source said.

SHORT TAKES

Girl abducted in WB: CBI takes over case

New Delhi: The CBI has taken over the probe into alleged kidnapping of a teenaged girl from Bengal's Bardhaman district in which the role of functionaries of the "ruling dispensation" is under scanner, officials on Monday said. The agency's action comes on the Calcutta high court's directions where the 14-year old girl's parents, had in a petition, alleged that their daughter had left home at 6 PM on August 9, 2023, for her studies but did not return. They said that the local police was reluctant to take the probe but after much insistence they registered a case in which not much progress was made. They had filed an FIR at the Anti-human Trafficking Unit of the state CID on August 17 that year. The Calcutta HC had handed over the probe to the CBI on February 8 this year, they said. "Although two persons were held, the probe was not concluded within the statutory period, citing allegations made by the girl's parents. Parents have alleged that a group of miscreants came to their home where they pressurised them to settle the matter after taking some money," the HC had noted. — PTI

Muraleedharan in Rio Feb. 21 for G-20

New Delhi: Minister of state (MoS) for external affairs V. Muraleedharan will represent India at the two-day G-20 foreign ministers' meeting (FMM) in Brazil's Rio de Janeiro city that begins Wednesday, New Delhi announced on Monday. It may be noted that EAM S. Jaishankar is expected to be busy with several engagements during the three-day Raisina Dialogue conference in New Delhi that also starts on Wednesday. Brazil assumed the G-20 presidency from India in December last year. In a statement, New Delhi said, "India is currently a member of the G-20 Troika together with Brazil and South Africa, and has conveyed its support to Brazil's G-20 priorities." During his visit, he will participate in both FMM sessions, first on G-20's role in dealing with ongoing international tensions and second on global governance reform.

2 killed, 12 hurt in UP tractor accident

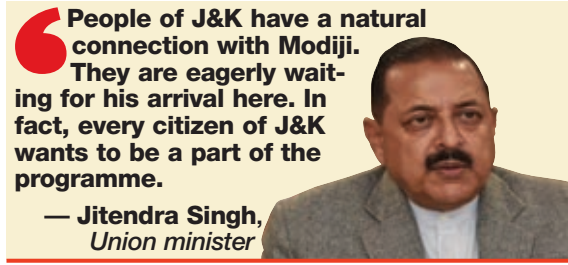
Shahjahanpur (UP): Two people were killed and 12 others on their way for a holy dip in river Ganga were seriously injured when the tractor trolley in which they were travelling overturned in Mirzapur police station area here, officials said on Monday. "One Aruna (40) and Shivani (3) were killed in the mishap that occurred in Mirzapur Police Station area in the morning," SP Ashok Kumar Meena said. "It appears that the accident occurred when the driver of the tractor trolley tried to make a sharp turn," he added. The 12 people injured in the accident have been admitted to the hospital, police said. The bodies of the deceased have been for post-mortem examination, they said. — PTI

Modi to also address public rally in Maulana Azad Stadium PM to launch ₹30K-cr projects in J&K today, distribute job letters

YUSUF JAMEEL SRINAGAR, FEB. 19

A warm welcome awaits Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he visits Jammu on Tuesday to address a public rally in the city's fortified Maulana Azad Stadium, which the BJP expects will set the tone for its campaign for the upcoming Lok Sabha as well as Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir.

More importantly, the visit is likely to be a harbinger of a new era of development and growth as the Prime Minister will, during the day-long visit to J&K's winter capital, launch multiple projects, including for education, railway, aviation and road sectors, worth ₹30,500 crores virtually from one place, sources said. Sources said that he will



People of J&K have a natural connection with Modiji. They are eagerly waiting for his arrival here. In fact, every citizen of J&K wants to be a part of the programme. — Jitendra Singh, Union minister

also distribute appointment letters to about 1,500 newly-recruited government employees of J&K and interact with beneficiaries of various schemes as part of the "Viksit Bharat, Viksit Jammu" programme. Union minister Jitendra Singh, while speaking to reporters in Jammu on Monday, said that there is a huge amount of excitement on the eve of the Prime Minister's visit.

"The people of J&K have a natural connection with Modiji. They are eagerly waiting for his arrival here. In fact, every citizen of J&K wants to be a part of the programme," he asserted. Earlier in a statement, the PMO had said that the multiple developmental projects the Prime Minister is scheduled to inaugurate include the railway line between Banihal-Khari-Sumber-

Sangaldan (48 km) and the newly-electrified Baramulla-Srinagar-Banihal-Sangaldan section (185.66 km). "He will flag off the first electric train in the Valley and the train service between Sangaldan and Baramulla stations," the statement said, adding that the commissioning of the Banihal-Khari-Sumber-Sangaldan section is significant as it features the usage of ballast less track (BLT) all along the route providing a better ride experience to passengers. The statement added that India's longest transportation tunnel T-50 (12.77 km) lies in the portion between Khari and Sumber and that the railway projects will improve connectivity, ensure environmental sustainability and boost the overall economic development of the region.

3 coal miners kidnapped by militants in Arunachal

MANOJ ANAND GUWAHATI, FEB. 19

Security forces on Monday launched a massive combing operation on Assam-Arunachal Pradesh inter-state border areas after suspected NSCN (K-YA) and Uifa (Independent) militants abducted at least three coal miners from a coal mine in the Chhanglang, near the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh interstate border, an area that serves as a transit route for insurgent groups with its proximity to Myanmar.

Security sources said that a group of seven armed rebels abducted the workers at gunpoint and transported them in a dumper to the remote jungle area of old Longtoi in Changlang district. The police suspects the miners were kidnapped as the outfits had not been paid "extortion money". Three of the abducted workers have been identified as Gyan Thapa from Lekhapani Hawaipathar village, Lekhak Bora and Chandan Narzary from Ledo, all residents of Assam's Tinsukia district.



Children perform the "Kuthiyottam" ritual at the Attukal Bhagavathy temple in Thiruvananthapuram on Monday, ahead of the "Attukal Pongala" festival. — PTI

Athletes from 20 states to compete in games Gulmarg set to host 4th edition of Khelo India; 800 to take part

YUSUF JAMEEL SRINAGAR, FEB. 19

Gulmarg with many other parts of the Kashmir Valley on Monday received heavy snowfalls, bringing cheer among locals and tourists alike. Meanwhile, Gulmarg rated as Asia's one of the best ski resorts and located 2,650 meters above sea level, is all set to host the 4th edition of Khelo India winter games, beginning on Wednesday. The officials said on Monday that around 800 athletes and officials from 20 states and Union territories, including Jammu and Kashmir, will participate in various skiing, snowboarding and other games during the 5-day-long event.

"The winter sporting events that will take place at Gulmarg include snowboarding, Alpine ski, of the mascot while the anthem and the customised apparels of the 4th edition of Khelo India Winter Games will be on the similar lines of the Khelo India Games held in the other parts of the country," an official statement reads.

"All logistic arrangements like accommodation, transport, etc. for the athletes and officials have been worked out by the organisers and final touches are being given on the spot," it adds. Youth services and sports secretary Sarmad Hafeez held a series of meetings in this regard in the past few days with representatives of line departments while Secretary, J&K Sports Council, Nuzhat Gull, has been overseeing the finalisation of arrangements at the spot.

Lt. Gen. Dwivedi takes over as Vice-Chief of Army Staff

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

Lt. Gen. Upendra Dwivedi on Monday took over as the new Vice-Chief of the Army Staff. Lt. Gen. Dwivedi is the front-runner to become the Army Chief when incumbent Gen. Manoj Pande retires on May 31.

He has had a unique distinction of balanced exposure of both northern and western theatres.

Lt. Gen. Dwivedi was Northern Commander from 2022-2024, which looks at the LAC with China in Ladakh and LoC with Pakistan. During his command, he provided strategic guidance and operational oversight for planning and execution of sustained operations along the northern and western borders, besides orchestrating the dynamic counter-terrorism operations in J&K. During this period, he was actively

Lt. Gen. Kumar takes charge as Northern Command chief

AGE CORRESPONDENT SRINAGAR, FEB. 19

Lt. Gen. M.V. Suchindra Kumar on Monday assumed the charge of the Army's Northern Command. He replaced Lt. Gen. Upendra Dwivedi who took over as the Vice-Chief of the Army Staff from him earlier during the day.

In a post on "X", the Army's additional directorate general of public

engaged in the ongoing negotiations with China in resolving the vexed border issue.

He was also involved in modernisation and equipping of the largest Army command of the Indian Army, where he steered

information (ADGPI) said that Lt. Gen. Kumar after taking over as the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of Udhampur-based Northern Command paid homage to Bravehearts at Dhruva War Memorial in the garrison town. "On assuming command, the Army commander exhorted all ranks to remain focused on operational preparedness and continue working with utmost zeal and enthusiasm," it said.

the induction of indigenous equipment as part of Atmanirbhar Bharat. He synergised with people of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh for convergent nation-building outcomes and infrastructure development.

SC seeks Ajit faction reply on Sharad plea

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

The Supreme Court on Monday sought response of the Ajit Pawar faction on a plea by Nationalist Congress Party founder Sharad Pawar against the Election Commission order recognising the group led by his nephew as the real NCP.

The top court also directed that the February 7 order of the poll panel granting the name of "Nationalist Congress Party-Sharadchandra Pawar" for the group led by Sharad Pawar will continue till further orders.

A bench of Justices Surya Kant and K.V. Viswanathan granted liberty to Sharad Pawar to move the Election Commission for allocation of the party symbol

and directed the poll panel to allot it in one week of the application.

Senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, representing the NCP founder, said that the order passed by the EC on February 7 is an interim arrangement made by the poll panel for the Rajya Sabha elections till February 27.

"The Maharashtra Assembly session is scheduled to start from February 26 and our group will be without any name or symbol," Mr Singhvi contended.

Sharad Pawar had sought an urgent hearing of his plea in the top court in view of the February 15 order of Maharashtra Assembly Speaker Rahul Narwekar holding that the NCP faction led by Ajit Pawar was the real NCP.

Proceedings against Sidda in 2022 case stayed by SC

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

The Supreme Court on Monday stayed criminal proceedings against Karnataka chief minister Siddaramaiah and others in connection with an FIR registered against a protest march held in the state in 2022.

Issuing notice to the Karnataka government, a bench of Justices Hrishikesh Roy and P.K. Mishra also stayed the proceedings against Congress general secretary and Karnataka in-charge Randeep Singh Surjewala, state ministers M.B. Patil and Ramalinga Reddy.

It also stayed the Karnataka high court order, which had imposed a fine of ₹10,000 on them and directed them to appear before a special court on March 6.

"Issue notice. Returnable in six weeks. In the meantime, further proceedings against the petitioners are stayed," the bench said.

Senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, representing Mr Siddaramaiah, submitted that it was a "political" protest and the criminal case was a violation of the right to protest under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution.

In a democracy the right of freedom of speech and protest is paramount and is guaranteed under the Constitution and the only restriction envisaged is when public order is impacted, he said.

Religious conversion bill to be tabled in C'garh House

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY RAIPUR, FEB. 19

A new bill providing a minimum of two years and maximum of 10 years in jail to those who illegally convert minors, SC and ST will be tabled in the current budget session of the Chhattisgarh Assembly.

The draft legislation, christened Chhattisgarh Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Bill, also provides that for mass conversion, the punishment will be a minimum of three and maximum of 10 years.

A compensation of up to ₹5 lakhs may be awarded to the victim of illegal religious conversion by the court, the draft bill says. "The anti-religious conversion bill will be tabled in the House on February 27 or February 28," parliamentary affairs minister Brij Mohan Agrawal told on Monday.

The bill states those who opt to change religion have to inform the district magistrate in advance and the permission will be granted for this only after a police probe to ascertain if the conversion is not being under allurement or duress.

'Red tape' has been replaced by 'red carpet' in today's UP: Modi

Continued from Page 1

the maximum number of expressways, and international airports in the country. It is the state where the country's first rapid rail is running," said the PM, noting the presence of a big chunk of Eastern and Western Peripheral Expressways in the state.

Acknowledging the use of river waterways in the state, Mr Modi praised the connectivity and ease of travel in the state.

He also took a swipe at the Congress, saying people in that party believed that only members of one family had a right to the Bharat Ratna, and that is why their governments did not confer it on Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the father of India's Constitution, was finally conferred the Bharat Ratna in 1990, when a non-Congress government was in power.

Mr Modi said he had the honour to confer the award on former Prime Minister Chaudhary Charan Singh, an iconic farmers' leader hailing from Uttar Pradesh.

The PM reiterated the government's commitment to supporting farmers in exploring new avenues in agriculture, stating, "We are assisting and encouraging farmers to take our country's agriculture on a new path." He emphasising that the focus was on natural farming and millets, citing the emergence of large-scale natural farming along the banks of the Ganga

in Uttar Pradesh, which not only benefits farmers but also helps preserve the purity of India's sacred rivers. The Prime Minister said his government will not rest until all "labharthi" get the benefits of various schemes.

Highlighting the government's equal emphasis on the ease of living and ease of doing business, Mr Modi said the "double-engine" government strives to make every benefit available for every beneficiary. Talking about the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra, which has benefited lakhs of people from Uttar Pradesh by taking the benefits to the doorsteps of beneficiaries, he said: "Modi ki guarantee vehicle has reached almost all villages and cities."

The PM stressed that the saturation of government schemes constitutes the truest form of social justice. "This is true secularism," he said, pointing out the prevalence of corrupt practices and disparity during previous governments which had led to tedious processes for the beneficiaries.

"Modi's guarantee that the government will not rest till every beneficiary gets what they deserve, be it pucca homes, electricity supply, gas connection or tapped water," he said.

The PM added: "Modi is looking after those who were ignored by all earlier governments."

The Prime Minister underlined that today's development projects

were not assessed in terms of investment alone, but presented a holistic vision for a better future and a ray of hope for investors.

Recalling his recent visit to the UAE and Qatar, Mr Modi noted the unprecedented positivity towards India all around the globe and said that every nation feels assurance and trust in India's growth story.

"Even though 'Modi ki guarantee' is being widely discussed around the country today, the world is seeing India as a guarantee for better returns," the Prime Minister said.

Reaffirming the belief of investors, the PM said India has broken the trend of governments drifting away from investments when elections were close. "Investors around the globe trust the government's policies and stability," the Prime Minister remarked, noting the emergence of a similar trend in UP.

Mr Modi launched 14,000 projects across UP, including those relating to key sectors like manufacturing, renewable energy, food processing, housing and real estate, hospitality and entertainment, and education.

Uttar Pradesh governor Anandiben Patel, defence minister Rajnath Singh and UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath also attended the event. Several industrialists, representatives of top global and Indian companies.

Wheel has turned for India, it sets an example for world: PM

Continued from Page 1

merely a desire. "When Lord Shri Ram ruled, his influence lasted for thousands of years. Similarly, with the enthronement of Ram Lalla, a new journey began for India for the next thousand years," he said.

The Prime Minister noted that India's culture and tradition had lived through this resolve in every time period. Talking of the 18-year wait for the inauguration of the Dham, the Prime Minister said it seems that there are many good works that have been left for him to accomplish and with the blessings of the people and the saints he will continue to clear all unfinished tasks.

Noting that Monday's event was another unique moment for India's cultural renaissance, he referred to the consecration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya and the recent inauguration of the temple in Abu Dhabi, and said: "What was beyond imagination has now become a reality."

The Prime Minister underlined the value of such events coming in quick succession and continued talking about the spiritual regeneration and mentioned Vishwanath Dham in Kashi, the transformation of Kashi, Mahakaal Mahalok, Somnath and Kedarnath Dham.

"We are moving with the mantra of 'Vikas bhi Virasat Bhi' (Heritage with Development)," he said.

Seeking the blessings of seers and religious leaders present at the programme, Mr Modi also said: "God has given me the duty to

rebuild a 'rashtriyaya rupi mandir' (the temple that is India)."

"While on one hand places of pilgrimage are being developed, on the other, cities are getting hi-tech infrastructure," he said, saying that today, if temples are being built, new medical colleges are also coming up across the country.

"Today, our ancient scriptures are also being brought back from abroad and a record number of foreign investments are also coming. This change is proof that the wheel of time has turned and a new era is knocking at our doors. It is time that we welcome this with an open heart," the PM said.

The Prime Minister noted that for the first time India was in a position where it was not following others but setting an example. "For the first time, in the field of technology and digital technology, India is being looked at as a centre of possibilities," he said, adding the country was recognised as an innovation hub.

Mr Modi further pointed out that India has become the fifth largest economy in the world for the first time and it has also reached the South Pole of the Moon.

"India is a nation that can pull out a victory even from defeat. We were attacked so many times for hundreds of years. Had it been any other country, any other society, it would have been completely destroyed due to so many continuous attacks. Yet, we not only endured, but came out even stronger," the Prime Minister said.

Farmers to review govt offer of 5-yr MSP 'deal'

Continued from Page 1

represented the Centre at the meeting, which started at around 8 pm on Sunday and culminated at around 1 am Monday. Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann too joined the meeting in Chandigarh. This was the fourth round of talks between the two sides. The three previous rounds of dialogue on February 8, 12 and 15 had remained inconclusive.

Talking to the media after the meeting, commerce minister Piyush Goyal said: "Cooperative societies like the NCCF (National Cooperative Consumers Federation) and NAFED (National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India) will enter into a contract with those farmers who grow 'tur dal', 'urad dal', 'masoor dal' or maize for buying their crop at MSP for next five years."

The commerce minister said there will be no limit on the quantity (purchased) and a portal will be developed for this. It will save Punjab's farming, improve the groundwater table, and save the land from getting barren which is already under stress.

The Centre has also proposed that the Cotton Corporation of India will buy cotton from farmers at MSP for five years after entering into a legal agreement with them. However, Mr Goyal had underlined that the other demands of the farmers were "deep and policy-driven" and it was not possible to find a resolution without an in-depth discussion.

The Punjab CM too battled for a legal guarantee for MSP for crops to safeguard the interests of farmers and also said that "peace, and law and order must be maintained by all means during the protest".

The protesting farmers have stayed put at the Shambhu and Khanauri borders of Punjab and Haryana for the seventh day though no fresh confrontations took place between them and the security forces. The farmers' leaders have asked the protesters to maintain calm at the borders.

In Delhi, the situation remained calm even though the police are on high alert and security remains tight. Two border points between Delhi and Haryana remained shut for traffic with deployment of security personnel. Traffic movement was allowed at the Ghazipur border.

THE ASIAN AGE

20 FEBRUARY 2024

PM exhorts poll-ready BJP to perform, win trust of all

It appears that the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has entered the final and intensive leg of the campaign for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections with Prime Minister Narendra Modi calling upon the party cadre to work on a mission mode in the next 100 days and to ensure that the party gets the trust of all sections of people. The Prime Minister is confident that the 10 years of governance under him will get the party 370 seats and the alliance, 400.

Mr Modi's speech and the resolutions passed at party's national council meeting have laid out its plan for the elections: NDA will bank heavily on the beneficiaries of the Union government's welfare schemes; India's position as the world's fifth largest economy and its cruise towards the third position; the construction and the consecration of the Ram temple, the Amrit Kaal of India's goal of becoming a developed nation by 2047 and corruption and dynastic politics of the Opposition.

The BJP's social engineering has been by and large successful and the party has expanded its base, coopting the most marginalised people, including those belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Knowing fully well that it is next to impossible to obliterate the reality of the caste system and to cover up for its unwillingness to declare a war on it, Mr Modi has now come up with a new narrative of four castes — the farmer, the women, the youth and the poor, and has declared his aim will be their uplift.

A communicator par excellence, Mr Modi can be successful in driving home any point that he would wish Indians to hear. However, as Prime Minister of two terms, he will be required to place his report card before the very same people whom he has vowed to serve. A section of the farmers is on the road with a list of demands which included a legal guarantee for the minimum support price. Mr Modi had in 2016 promised that the farmers' income will be doubled by 2022; it will be better if he can tell the nation how far the government has been successful in achieving the goal.

There were a series of programmes aimed at women, including the Ujjwala scheme and the Swachh Bharat sanitation mission, which had an impact on them, especially those in the rural areas. A status report of these schemes also will be in order. As for the youth, the BJP's promise in 2014 was to create two crore jobs a year but all available data points to the high level of unemployment in the country.

The Prime Minister, citing NITI Aayog data, has insisted that the government has lifted 25 crore people from poverty in the last nine years, which is a commendable feat indeed. The government's recent decision to extend the free ration scheme for about 80 crore people for another five years is a measure of government's concern for the poor on the one hand; on the other, it puts the government's claims over poverty alleviation under a cloud of suspicion.

However, it's not the hard facts or data that deliver electoral dividends. It's the ability to convince the electorate about the narrative of a better future for them. The BJP has identified the narratives, and the effort now will be to sell it among the people. Mr Modi's exhortation of the BJP cadre for 100 days of hard work is not for no reason.

TN budget tries to please all

Ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, the Tamil Nadu government has come out with a dream budget that aims to please all sections of society, particularly the marginalised and the poor. It is not surprising that on social media platforms common people are going gung ho over the budget proposals for 2024-25, read out in the State Assembly by finance minister, Thangam Thennarsu, on Monday. For, it has not just something for everyone to rejoice but has been framed with lofty ideas like social justice, gender equality, poverty eradication, environmental protection, modernization, industrial development and public education in mind.

A futuristic document with proposals for new skill labs in colleges and the setting up of an Artificial Intelligence (AI) Mission, it also takes pride in the past by allocating Rs 17 crore to set up an open-air museum at Keezhadi, the excavation site that gave indisputable evidence to the antiquity of the Tamil race, and launching more archeological explorations.

Besides laying emphasis on spending more on roads and bridges (Rs 17,890 crore), transport (Rs 2,966 crore, urban development (Rs 3,767 crore), water supply (Rs 9,535 crore), water bodies (Rs 4,747 crore) and education and health services (Rs 2,810 crore), it also makes available funds to the tune of Rs 1,000 crore for providing basic amenities in tribal habitations and improving the living conditions of the people there and proposes to rescue five lakh families from the clutches of poverty, besides disbursing Rs 35,000 crore credit to women self-help groups.

In a bold step, the State government that has hitherto been complaining about the Union Government not providing the promised funds for the second phase of the Metro Rail project has now decided to allot Rs 12,000 for completing the work that it had started without waiting for money from Delhi and extend the line up to Kilambakkam to provide connectivity to the new bus terminus that has been constructed for south-bound buses. In short, it's a people oriented budget, drawn up by the DMK government with the coming Lok Sabha elections in mind.

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Aakar Patel

SC bonds ruling a reminder how weak India's key institutions are

India's electoral bonds scheme has been declared illegal, a rare win in court for those resisting authoritarianism. But many elections, including the last general election, have been fought on these unlawful funds.

It would have been appropriate to have heard and adjudicated on the issue earlier but the court chose not to do so. Former Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi, rewarded with a Rajya Sabha seat, when asked why he had delayed adjudicating on the issue, said he did not remember the issue coming up before his court. Many will not know how diabolical the electoral bonds enterprise was, and it is for their benefit that this is being written.

The scheme was announced by the Narendra Modi government through the 2017 Union Budget. The bonds would be a way for political parties to receive money through anonymous donors. The donor would have to reveal their identity to the bank while making the bond purchase, but the identity would not be revealed on the bond itself. Political parties could accept the money without being required to reveal who gave it. Voters would therefore not know who was funding and influencing political parties. The change would allow foreign companies and even shell companies to donate to India's parties without having to inform anyone of the contribution or having their names revealed. It also undid that part of the Companies Act, under which corporates had to disclose

details of their political donations in their annual statement of accounts. Now they were no longer required to do so. The corporates had earlier also been limited to donating a maximum of 7.5 per cent of their average three-year net profits to political parties. No longer, because they could now just go through the electoral bond route as that cap had been lifted legally. The process to fund a party anonymously was made easy. Bonds would be available in multiples of up to Rs 1 crore at State Bank of India branches in 29 cities. A donor could purchase them through their bank account and hand them over to the party or individual of their choice, who could then encash them. They would be valid for 15 days.

Four days before the 2017 Budget, a bureaucrat spotted it in finance minister Arun Jaitley's speech, and noted that the RBI's assent was required for such a large shift. This was because the introduction of bonds required changes to the RBI Act, something that apparently the government did not know. The officer drafted a proposed amendment to align the RBI Act with the change and sent the file up the ranks for the finance minister to see. The same day, January 28, 2017, a Saturday, the RBI was sent a five-line email seeking its comments. The reply came the next working day, Monday, January 30. The RBI said it was a bad idea because it went against the RBI's authority as the sole issuer of bearer instruments,

meaning cash. These bonds, because they were anonymous, could become currency and undermine the faith in India's cash. On this point, the RBI was unambiguous: amending the law to facilitate this "would seriously undermine a core principle of central banking legislation and doing so would set a bad precedent". The RBI's second objection was that "even the intended purpose of the transparency might not be achievable as the original buyer of the instrument (the bond) need not be the actual contributor to the party". If person A purchased the bond and then sold it, at face value or more, to any entity, including a foreign government, that entity could gift it to a party. The nameless bond was as good as cash. "The bonds are bearer bonds and transferable by delivery," the RBI said, "hence, who finally and actually contributes the bond to the political party will not be known". This would affect the money laundering law as well, the RBI said. The last point it made was that what was being proposed through the electoral bond scheme — the transfer of money from bank accounts of entities to political parties — could be done through a cheque, bank transfer or demand draft. "There is no special need for, or advantage by, the creation of an Electoral Bearer Bond, that too by disturbing an established international practice." The next body to say that the electoral bonds scheme was dangerous was the Election Commission. In an affidavit to the

Supreme Court, it said that to exclude the reporting of donations received by political parties through electoral bonds would have "serious repercussions on the transparency aspect of political funding of political parties".

The EC remained opposed to the law even after it was enacted and continued to resist though the Supreme Court gave the government a pass.

The two most important institutions related to the bonds tried to do their work and resisted the scheme. They were unable to.

Though the RBI had responded immediately, one reason the government gave to dismiss its concern was that "this advice has come quite late at a time when the Finance Bill is already printed". The electoral bonds episode reveals the limits of institutional checks in our democracy. When a strong executive decides it wants something, even something that is dangerous and unconstitutional, there is little resistance from within to stop it.

The Supreme Court has now held that the scheme unconstitutional, something that was obvious to anyone familiar with the most basic details of what the bonds were for. But this should also alert us to how weak our institutions are and how, when they mean well for the country, they can just be ignored.

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



Time for the Tiger: India must be on UN high table



Debotri Dhar

Animal instincts

During his recent visit to India, the UN General Assembly president affirmed what many global affairs analysts know to be true: that the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) does not reflect contemporary geopolitical realities. Last year, a top Cabinet minister had, using a tongue-in-cheek analogy from industry, compared the UN to a company whose shareholders had changed, with the new shareholders wanting better management but the "old guys" refusing to let go. Once a hallowed institution, the UN is seen by many as losing its relevance in a world reeling from the human and economic costs of war. There is an urgent need for democratisation and expansion of the UNSC, with India being included as a permanent member.

The UN Security Council is one of the six organs of the UN system with a mandate to protect international peace and security. Among examples of its peacekeeping and peace-building operations are missions in Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, and Bosnia, approving military interventions, and, in theory, issuing binding resolutions on member states. The Council was preceded by the League of Nations, founded in 1920 by the Paris Peace Conference at the end of the First World War, for maintaining inter-state harmony, financial stabilisation, rules related to treatment of prisoners of war and against human trafficking of women and children, etc.

However, the League was criticised for its failures to prevent mass atrocities like Nazi crimes under Adolf Hitler, or to represent the colonised people and creating a diverse, representative international relations arena.

That its successor, the UNSC, has still lagged behind at giving voice to

the erstwhile colonised people is apparent in its composition. Despite its mandate of "global" governance, its 15-member body has five permanent members: the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China, who enjoy a veto power relating to UNSC resolutions. There is no permanent member country from Africa, Latin America or South Asia. Thus, the case for increasing general membership to more than 15, and to include India as a permanent member in the UNSC is very strong.

India has been an important part of UN initiatives through the decades, playing a key role in international diplomacy and mediation. An old civilisation as well as a modern state, India's Constitution demonstrates remarkable syncretism from its very inception, combining a global outlook with distinctly local features. India's parliamentary system of governance was modelled after the British system, part three of the Constitution on the fundamental rights of individuals was inspired by the American Constitution, part four on the Directive Principles of State Policy by the Irish Constitution, the concurrent list by the Australian Constitution, etc. With a history of being invaded, colonised and racially exploited for centuries, it has much in common with other countries from the Global South with similar painful histories. It shares some cultural commonalities with its South Asian neighbours; forms of dress and address, celebration and blessing, languages facing the global domination of English, if not extinction. This links up with the concerns of a large global Indian diaspora, which has some shared experiences with other diasporic Asian communities and engagements with inclusivity and representation. At the same time, as

the world's largest democracy whose Army has never usurped power from democratically-elected governments, India aligns more with many Western democracies than with some of its subcontinental neighbours. India is the world's fifth largest economy aiming to become the third largest in the coming years, with a growing private sector alongside the public sector, and consistent GDP growth of 7-8 per cent. While the developed East Asian economies of Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan are referred to as the "Asian Tigers" for their industrialisation and export-driven high economic growth, the time has come for India's national animal, the tiger. India has been recognised as the third largest ecosystem for start-ups globally, with not just a unicorn boom but deacorn transitions already under way.

These historical, geopolitical, and economic factors place India in the distinctive position of understanding and mediating between countries and blocs with diverse needs and agendas while fostering dependable friendships. This was also apparent from the G20 summit hosted by New Delhi, which I covered in a previous article and one of whose major successes was the long overdue inclusion of the African Union, alongside the European Union, under India's leadership. Termed "multi-alignment", this is India's strength, not weakness, despite external pressures to opt for a more simplistic position. In published interactions with journalists, the external affairs minister S u b r a h m a n y a m Jaishankar reiterates that India is non-Western and not anti-Western, an independent country that does not perceive itself primarily in alliance terms. In this sense, multi-alignment and strategic autonomy is not all that different from the

India has been an important part of UN initiatives, playing a key role in international diplomacy and mediation.

"active non-alignment" model espoused by several nations in the Global South and veteran analysts of colour. As a tenet of diplomacy, it certainly draws upon India's historical strengths.

One challenge, on a practical level, is the aforementioned veto. France, the US, the UK and Russia may support India's candidature, but this is not the case with China, unless Sino-Indian disputes can be resolved. Hence, India must also provide leadership to calls for democratising UN processes, replacing the current veto system by a simple majority votes in certain instances and a two-thirds majority vote for UNSC permanent membership deliberations.

Of course, India is not yet a developed country. As a leading voice for the Global South, domestic social, educational, financial, and health policies to upskill youth, uplift the poorest sections of society, and provide opportunities for socio-economic mobility must continue, ensuring inclusive growth and sustainable development. *White Tiger*, Arvind Adiga's Booker Prize-winning novel, traced India's ascent through the rise of its protagonist Balram Halwai, whose entrepreneurial vision breaks caste boundaries. As important is the continuing inclusion of women in polity, society and organisations across sectors, with particular attention to women's safety and security, reducing gender-based violence and the facilitation of legal justice. With a resurgence of great power competition and hostilities, international pressure on India can be expected to mount. Yet a continuing commitment to its founding principle of democracy, and clearly stated points of agreement and disagreement in foreign policy, can strengthen India's role as a force of good for promoting global peace and security. It is what the UNSC needs.

Dr Debotri Dhar is an author, educator, academic, consultant, and founder of the Hummingbird Global Leaders Forum. She is a women's studies and global studies expert, with a focus on South Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

LETTERS SNOW LEOPARDS

The elusive snow leopards of the Himalayas finally have a headcount: 718!

This landmark survey paints a hopeful picture, with Ladakh boasting the most and J&K harbouring the least. But challenges loom: shrinking habitat, dwindling prey and the icy climate change. A dedicated cell, holistic ecosystem monitoring and unwavering protection of their sky-high havens may help protect them. Let the national plan be our guiding light, for these phantoms of the peaks deserve a future. Let's count on their survival, not their extinction.

Ibne Farooq Mumbai

TAX VENDETTA

THE INCOME-TAX department's demand on the Congress, crippling its finances just before general election, reeks of political vendetta. Does a 45-day delay in tax filing warrant a Rs 210 crore penalty? This unprecedented action, coupled with the SC verdict on electoral bonds, paints a chilling picture. Money in politics warps polls, and targeting the Opposition with dubious charges undermines the foundation of democracy. Can we afford to let accountability become a tool to silence dissent? Every stakeholder, but especially the ruling party, must uphold fair play. Stifling the Opposition is a recipe for democratic disaster. Let's raise our voices and demand a level playing field, not a rigged one.

Md Taukir Bettiah, Bihar

CLOUD ON BOND DATA

IT FEELS strange when constitutional bodies like the Election Commission say they will go by the verdict of the Supreme Court in matters like using ballot papers or electoral bonds. Is there any choice for them? Politicians, too, have this habit of grandly declaring they would follow the apex court's orders when the judgment is against them. Nobody is doing anyone any favours by obeying the orders of the nation's highest court. Anybody not following the court's orders is likely to be in more trouble. One hopes the records of the electoral bonds are available and don't go missing. Otherwise, there may be huge consequences for SBI.

Anthony Henriques Mumbai

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

SHORT TAKES

INDIANAPOLIS SHOOTING LEAVES 1 DEAD, 5 HURT

Indianapolis, Feb. 19: A shooting at a Waffle House restaurant in Indianapolis early on Monday morning killed one person and wounded five others, according to news reports.

The Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department said officers responded to a report of a shooting at the restaurant on Lynhurst Drive around 12:30 am, reports said. Police found six victims with gunshot wounds. One woman died at an area hospital, while another woman was in critical condition. Three men and a woman were in stable condition.

LIGHTNING BOLT SCORCHES 4 NEAR SYDNEY OPERA

Sydney, Feb. 19: A lightning bolt scorched and knocked out four people near the Sydney Opera House on Monday as they sheltered under a tree during a violent electrical storm, rescue officials said.

The four were struck beneath the tree in the Botanic Gardens, ambulance workers said, just a stone's throw from the harbourside architectural masterpiece. "They all had a brief loss of consciousness," said New South Wales ambulance service's Dominic Wong.

They also suffered burns and presented cardiac symptoms, he told reporters.

RWANDA REJECTS U.S. 'WITHDRAW TROOPS' CALL

Kampala, Feb. 19: Authorities in Rwanda on Monday rejected US calls for the withdrawal of troops and missile systems from eastern Congo, saying they are defending Rwandan territory as Congo carries out a "dramatic military build-up" near the border.

Rwanda's foreign ministry spoke of threats to Rwandan national security stemming from the presence in Congo of an armed group whose members include alleged perpetrators of the 1994 genocide. The rebel group, known by its initials FDLR, "is fully integrated into" the Congolese Army.

MEXICAN ARMY KILLS 12 GUNMEN NEAR BORDER

Mexico City, Feb. 19: Mexican soldiers killed 12 gunmen in a shootout near the Texas border, authorities said.

The security department of the northern border state of Tamaulipas said late on Sunday the confrontation took place in the township of Miguel Aleman, across the border from Roma, Texas. The department wrote on its social media accounts that soldiers came under attack and that 12 suspects were "reduced" in the shootout. The word is an old-style reference to killing suspects. Twelve rifles were seized at the scene.

SURRENDERING TOWN: MYANMAR GIVES DEATH TO 3

Yangon, Feb. 19: Myanmar's junta has sentenced to death three high-ranking officers who oversaw the surrender of a strategic town on the Chinese border to ethnic minority fighters last month.

Hundreds of troops put down their weapons and handed over the town of Laukkai in Shan state to the so-called Three Brotherhood Alliance after months of fighting that saw the military lose swathes of territory.

It was one of the biggest single losses for the military in decades, and sparked further criticism of the junta leadership by its supporters.

TRAINEE DOCTORS QUIT EN MASSE IN SOUTH KOREA

Seoul, Feb. 19: Trainee doctors in South Korea began submitting their resignations en masse Monday in protest of a government medical policy, causing reported delays in surgeries and other treatments at hospitals.

Doctors' groups and the government have been squabbling over a government plan to increase the number of medical school admissions by 2,000, starting from next year.

Health authorities say it's urgent to have more doctors considering South Korea's fast-growing population.

Ship at risk of sinking in Gulf of Aden after Houthis' attack

Another US-owned ship calls for military help following 2 missile strikes

Cairo, London, Feb. 19: Yemen's Houthi militants said on Monday they had attacked another cargo vessel in the Gulf of Aden which was at risk of sinking, raising the stakes in their campaign to disrupt global shipping in solidarity with Palestinians in the Gaza war.

A Greece-flagged, US-owned cargo ship reported two missile attacks on Monday in the Gulf of Aden and called for military assistance, Greek shipping ministry sources and British maritime security firm Ambrey said.

Separately, UK's maritime agency (UKMTO) said it had received a report from a vessel located 100 miles east of Yemen's port of Aden indicating an explosion close to it.

The *Sea Champion*, with 23 crew members, was sailing from Argentina to Aden carrying grain when it was attacked, Greek shipping ministry sources told Reuters.

The Iran-aligned Houthis have made repeated drone and missile strikes since November in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait, drawing United States and British bombing against them.

Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea said in a statement that the *Rubyymar*'s crew was safe but that the ship was badly damaged and at risk of sinking. The Belize-flagged,



British-registered and Lebanese-managed vessel was attacked on Sunday. The Houthis had also shot down a US drone over the Yemeni port Hodeidah, Sarea added.

Security firm LSS-SAPU, in charge of safety on the *Rubyymar*, said the crew evacuated after two missiles hit. They were picked up by another commercial ship which took them to Djibouti. "We know she was taking in water," LSS-SAPU told Reuters in comments by phone. "There is nobody on board now ... The owners and managers are considering options for towage."

— Reuters

END OCCUPATION BY ISRAEL, PALESTINIANS DEMAND AT UN COURT

Palestinians are suffering "colonialism and apartheid" under the Israelis, foreign minister Riyad Al-Maliki told the United Nations' top court Monday, urging judges to order an immediate and unconditional end to Israel's occupation. The International Court of Justice is holding hearings on the legal implications of Israel's occupation since 1967, with 52 countries expected to give evidence.

FOURTEEN PATIENTS EVACUATED FROM BESIEGED HOSPITAL

14 patients were evacuated from a Gaza hospital that has been raided by Israeli troops, the Gaza health ministry said on Monday, as Israel denied its military operations had stopped the hospital from functioning.

UNSC TO VOTE TODAY ON GAZA CEASEFIRE AS U.S. VOWS TO USE ITS VETO

The United Nations Security Council is expected to vote on Tuesday on an Arab-backed resolution demanding an immediate humanitarian truce in Gaza, which the US announced it will veto. Algeria, the Arab representative on the council, put the draft resolution in a final form.

FREE HOSTAGES OR FIGHT IN RAMZAN: ISRAEL

Deadly fighting raged on in Gaza on Monday after Israel warned that, unless Hamas frees all its remaining hostages, it will push on with its offensive during the Muslim holy month of Ramzan, including in the far-southern Rafah area.

FREE HOSTAGES OR FIGHT IN RAMZAN: ISRAEL

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— AP

26 KILLED IN PNG TRIBAL VIOLENCE

Melbourne, Feb. 19: At least 26 combatants and an unconfirmed number of bystanders were killed in a gunbattle between warring tribes in Papua New Guinea, police said on Monday.

A tribe, their allies and mercenaries were on their way to attack a neighboring tribe when they were ambushed on Sunday in Enga province in the South Pacific nation's remote highlands, Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary acting superintendent George Kakas said.

Police commissioner David Manning later described the clash as a "gunbattle between warring tribes". An unconfirmed number of villagers also were killed. Police reinforcements were sent to the scene of the battle, Manning said.

"At this point, it's not clear exactly how far we have moved into the conflict there," Manning told *Australian Broadcasting Corp.* "But the intent is to regain control or have a significant presence in that conflict area and then work...our way through our procedures in dealing with this type of incident."

Kakas initially said 53 combatants had died. But security forces later revised the death toll down to 26.

Bodies were collected from the battlefield, roads and the riverside, then loaded onto police trucks and taken to the hospital.

Authorities were still counting "those who were shot, injured and ran off into the bushes," Kakas said.

— AP

Consensus eludes Pak govt

Islamabad, Karachi, Feb. 19: Pakistan's two major parties are set to meet on Monday to try and bridge differences over forming a minority coalition government after an inconclusive election, a top party official said, underscoring political and economic instability.

Meanwhile, a Pakistan high court on Monday suspended the result of three constituencies in the federal capital after the success of the three candidates was challenged.

The three losing candidates, including Amir Mughal, Shoaib Shaheen and Mohammad Ali Bukhari, who were backed by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and former prime minister Imran Khan, had petitioned in the Islamabad High Court, alleging manipulation of the results.

The IHC after hearing the case suspended poll result notifications issued by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) from NA-46, NA-47 and NA-48, putting on hold the success of Anjum Aqeel Khan, Tariq Fazal Chaudhry and Raja Khurram Nawaz who had won respectively on the three seats.

Earlier, they challenged the election results before the ECP on February 10 and the commission issued a status quo order. But, the ECP on February 11, also issued the notification that declared Khan, Chaudhry and Nawaz as returned candidates.

Pakistan Peoples Party Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has revealed that he said "No" to a power-sharing formula in which the prime minister's post would be shared between his and former premier Nawaz Sharif's parties, as he did not want to take up

KAKAR SLAMMED FOR NON-APPEARANCE IN COURT



Trucks wait as supporters of Balochistan National Party, Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party and Hazara Democratic Party block the Quetta-Karachi highway to protest against the alleged skewing in Pakistan's national election results, on Monday.

PTI SAYS VICTORIOUS INDEPENDENTS WILL JOIN SUNNI ITTEHAD COUNCIL

Islamabad, Feb. 19: Reversing its earlier decision, jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) on Monday said that the party-backed independent candidates, who won the February 8 elections, will join the rightwing Sunni Ittehad Council. PTI earlier decided that its members elected to the National Assembly and the Punjab

provincial assembly would join Majlis Wahdat-i-Muslimeen (MWM), a Shia party, while those elected in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) would be part of Jamaati-e-Islami (JI), a hardline Sunni religious party. The Sunni Ittehad Council is an alliance of Islamic political and religious parties in the Muslim-majority country.

He added, "I said I do not want to be a prime minister like this. If I become the prime minister, it would be after the people of Pakistan elect me." Monday's talks will be the fifth such round after former Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif was named by his Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party to lead the country again.

CHANTING ISLAMIC slogans, activists of a radical student organisation Islami Jamiat Tuleba pelted stones at the participants of a live music event at the prestigious Punjab University's School of Communication Studies in Lahore. They warned the participants against playing music or performing, saying it was "un-Islamic".



Trucks wait as supporters of Balochistan National Party, Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party and Hazara Democratic Party block the Quetta-Karachi highway to protest against the alleged skewing in Pakistan's national election results, on Monday.

PTI SAYS VICTORIOUS INDEPENDENTS WILL JOIN SUNNI ITTEHAD COUNCIL

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Qatari mediation helps Ukrainian kids, kin reunite

Moscow, Feb. 19: Eleven Ukrainian children were setting off from Russia to Ukraine on Monday to be reunited with their families in the latest transfer between the warring sides under a Qatari-mediated scheme.

The children, aged between two and 16, were hosted at the Qatari embassy in Moscow on Monday ahead of a long journey via Belarus which should see them cross into northwestern Ukraine on Tuesday.

This latest operation includes several children with special medical needs, including two aged five and six who have chronic conditions.

Groups of children began to be transferred from Ukraine to Russia under the scheme in October.

Russia says a total of 59 children have been repatriated to Ukraine through the mechanism.

Kyiv has accused Moscow of dividing families and moving children from Russian-held parts of Ukraine to Russia to brainwash them, while Moscow has said it is doing this only for their safety.

The Hague-based International Criminal Court last year issued an arrest warrant for President Vladimir Putin and his children's commissioner on the accusation of unlawfully deporting Ukrainian children.

"Qatar has been working closely with its Russian and Ukrainian counterparts, making progress on the reunification initiative, but also looking for ways to build trust in other areas," Lolwah Al-Khatir, Qatar's minister of State for international cooperation, said in a statement.

"We will continue to mediate between the two sides as long as it is requested, with the hope that it can eventually lead to a de-escalation in the conflict," she said.

Qatari diplomats will accompany the children. Among them is a 16-year-old boy whose family members died while evacuating from the Lugansk region in Ukraine and who is being reunited with an aunt who has acquired guardianship over him.

A five-year-old boy who had been living with his grandparents in Russian-held territory is going to be reunited with his mother.

A 14-year-old boy whose mother, a member of the armed forces, was held by Russia as a prisoner of war for several months in 2022, will also be able to see her again.

RUSSIA LOST SIX WARPLANES IN 3 DAYS: UKRAINE

Kyiv, Feb. 19: Ukraine's military on Monday shot down two more Russian warplanes used to drop highly destructive guided aerial bombs on Kyiv's troops, Army chief Oleksandr Syrskiy said.

The destroyed planes were an Su-34 fighter-bomber and an Su-35 fighter, Syrskiy said on Telegram, not disclosing the area where they were downed. At the weekend, Ukraine said it shot down three Russian Su-34s and one Su-35.

"In just three days, the enemy lost six aircraft," Oleksandr Pavliuk, Ukraine's new ground forces chief, said on Telegram on Monday.

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Snowfall causes landslide in Af, kills 25 people

Kabul, Feb. 19: A landslide caused by heavy snowfall has killed 25 people and injured eight others in the eastern Afghan province of Nuristan, a disaster management ministry spokesman said on Monday.

Earth, snow and rubble swept through the village of Nakre in the Tatin valley of Nuristan overnight on Sunday.

"As a result of the landslide, some 25 people have been killed and eight injured," spokesman Janan Sayeg said in a video clip shared with media.

Sayeg also told AFP the death toll could rise.

Nuristan province, which borders Pakistan, is mostly covered by mountainous forests and hugs the southern end of the Hindu Kush mountain range. Provincial officials said snow has also hampered rescue efforts. "Due to clouds and rain, the helicopter cannot land in Nuristan," said Mohammad Nabi Adel, province's head of public works.

Adel said snow had blocked one of the main roads into the province, making "the rescue operation difficult".

Around 20 houses were destroyed or heavily damaged, the provincial head of information and culture Jamiullah Hashimi said. "It is still snowing. Rescue efforts are underway and the number of dead may rise," he said.

The arrival of snow this year was delayed across much of Afghanistan, which is accustomed to harsh winters. Already in its third year of drought, Afghanistan is one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change, according to the United Nations.

Officials said there has been less snowfall in Nuristan compared to previous years. "This year we had little snow and it doesn't last for long," said Adel. The exceptionally low level of rain in a country that relies heavily on agriculture has forced many farmers to delay planting. Afghanistan is one of the world's poorest countries, racked by decades of war, prone to natural disasters and vulnerable to extreme weather events.

Min.: Male will scuttle bid to impeach Prez

Male, Feb. 19: Accusing the Opposition of trying to illegally overthrow Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu's government in less than 100 days in power, a minister has said the administration would not allow them to do so unless they cut "every vein in our throats".

The comments by minister of Islamic affairs Mohamed Shaheem Ali Saeed came on Sunday as he was accompanying Muizzu on his first trip to Addu, the second-largest urban area in the Maldives in terms of population.

Pro-China Muizzu, 45, defeated India-friendly

incumbent Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in the presidential runoff held in September last year.

Saeed alleged that the government is facing challenges from inside and out, and were being bombarded with the relentless spread of misinformation and baseless rumours.

He said that it is the responsibility of the Opposition to hold the government accountable.

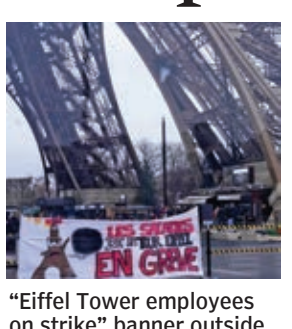
"However," he said, "it is not part of holding a government accountable to attempt to create obstacles for and overthrow a government elected by the people."

Landmark | BARRED Tourists warned in many languages on monument site

Strike disrupts visits to Eiffel Tower

Paris, Feb. 19: Visits to the Eiffel Tower were disrupted on Monday because of a strike over poor financial management of the monument, which is one of the world's most-visited sites.

The hugely popular 300-metre (984-foot) landmark in central Paris has seen soaring visitor numbers in the lead up to the Summer Olympics in the French capital.



"Eiffel Tower employees on strike" banner outside the Eiffel Tower, on Monday.

year, but it is occasionally affected by strikes.

In December, the monument was closed to visitors for an entire day during Christmas and New Year's holidays because of a strike over contract negotiations. Stephane Dieu of the CGT union, which represents a large number of the Eiffel Tower's employees, said Monday's strike is aimed at a salary increase in proportion to the income from ticket sales and improved maintenance of the monument, which is owned by the Paris municipality.

GROUND CREW STRIKE AT LUFTHANSA SET TO AFFECT 1,00,000 PASSENGERS

Berlin, Feb. 19: A strike by Deutsche Lufthansa AG ground staff is set to disrupt more than 1,00,000 passengers in a blow to the flagship German airline that is facing its third bout of industrial action in almost three weeks.

Labour union Verdi has called on German ground staff to walk out from Tuesday morning for 35 hours following failed negotiations over wages for about 25,000 employees. Seven

major airports in the country will be affected. The so-called "warning strike" marks another hurdle for Lufthansa which already had to cancel flights on Feb. 1 and Feb. 7 after security staff and ground crews went on strike. Workers in Germany's transport sector have taken repeated industrial action over pay and working conditions amid rising inflation and staffing shortages.

quick BITES

| INDICATORS | % |
|------------------------|-----------------|
| Sensex | 72,708.16 0.39 |
| Nifty 50 | 22,122.30 0.37 |
| S&P 500* | 5,005.57 -0.48 |
| Dollar (₹) | 83.01 0.04 |
| Pound Sterling (₹) | 104.48 0.21 |
| Euro (₹) | 89.37 0.27 |
| Gold (10gm)* (₹) | 62,019*141 0.23 |
| Brent crude (\$/bbl)* | 83.40 -0.08 |
| IN 10-Yr bond yield | 7.099 0.014 |
| US 10-Yr T-bill yield* | 4.312 0.30 |

*As of 8:30 PM IST

Yokohama brings new tyres for off-road driving

Japanese tyre maker Yokohama on Monday introduced two new additions to its Geolandar series called the Geolandar X-AT and Geolandar M/T G003. According to the company the Geolandar X-AT positioned in between all terrain and mud terrain offers performance across a variety of terrains. The Geolandar M/T G003 is specifically crafted for loose (mud/slush) terrain, offering traction.



GPT Healthcare IPO to open on February 22

GPT Healthcare, operates and manages ILS Hospitals brand, announced ₹525 crore initial public offering (IPO) in the price band of ₹177 to ₹186 per equity share ₹10 face value. The IPO will open on Feb. 22, and close on Feb. 26. The public offer comprises a fresh issue of ₹40 crore and an offer for sale of ₹485 crore. The fresh issue to be used for payment of debt and other purposes.

Realty co Arvind sells 220 units in Bengaluru

Realty firm Arvind SmartSpaces on Monday said it has sold over 220 units in a residential plotted development project in Bengaluru for more than ₹160 crore. In a regulatory filing, the company informed that "it has sold out the entire inventory released for sale in the 1st phase of its residential plotted development project, Arvind Orchards in Devanahalli, Bengaluru, within 7 hours of launch."

D2C label Rangita opens 2 retail outlets in AP

Rangita, a direct-to-consumer Indian fashion brand from AceVector Group's Stellaro, has expanded into offline retail space with the launch of two outlets in Andhra Pradesh, and is eyeing 10 more stores in the coming six months in AP and Telangana. Further, Stellaro Brands will expand on larger scale once a dozen stores take off, Himanshu Chakrawarti, chief executive officer of Stellaro Brands said.

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Global cues push Nifty to 22,189 pts, Sensex to 72,708 pts

BSE m-cap hits new high of ₹391 lakh cr

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, FEB. 19

Market gained for the fifth consecutive session on positive global cues taking Nifty-50 to new high of 22,189.50 intra-day, later NSE's benchmark index closed at a new all time high of 22,122 up 81.55 points or 0.37 per cent.

The Sensex also gained 281.52 points or 0.39 per cent to close at 72,708 points after touching an intra-day high of 72,881.

Market capitalisation of all BSE listed companies made a new all time high of over ₹391.69 lakh crore at market close or \$4.71 trillion at USD/INR rate of ₹83.02 per US dollar.

"The BSE market cap touching a record high of around \$4.7 trillion reflects the strength of the ongoing bull run and the momentum in the market.



● **THE MARKET** is following global positive cues and has continued with its upward bias, although indices pared gains towards fag-end due to select profit-taking.

The fact that the crucial buffet ratio (market cap to GDP) is signalling very high valuation at above 120 per cent is a matter of concern. But this is unlikely to halt the bull run in the near-term since flows into the market from domestic individual investors and Domestic institutional investors continue to be strong," said V. K. Vijayakumar, chief investment strategist, Geojit Financial Services.

"The market is following global positive cues and has continued with its upward bias, although indices pared gains towards fag-end due to select profit-taking. It has been moving in a range-bound trend with a positive bias as investors are cautiously optimistic given the global macroeconomic challenges and geopolitical tensions," said Prashanth Tapse, senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities.

Sectoral indices mostly closed in the green led by BSE consumer durable (1.76 per cent), BSE FMCG (0.84 per cent), power (0.89 per cent), healthcare (0.49 per cent), telecom (1.52 per cent) while losers included BSE IT (-0.26 per cent), capital goods (-0.62 per cent), metal (-0.87 per cent).

Power sector stocks rallied on expectation of higher revenue generation. Shares of Life Insurance Corporation of India gained 1.23 per cent to ₹1,052.15 after hefty refund from IT Department reported last week.

"The near-term trend of Nifty remains positive. But the market is displaying lack of strength to witness a decisive upside breakout of the resistance around 22,150-22,200 levels," said Nagaraj Shetti, senior technical analyst, HDFC Securities.

The company plans to strengthen its offices in Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata with an aim to develop these as regional hubs for businesses.

"We want not to only expand but whatever we have now to take it a notch further ahead, take it much higher and look at new business opportunities also for ITDC as a company," Synrem said on the sidelines of the launch of the company's new mascot 'Adyant' and a fresh tagline.

On the new business opportunities, he said, "We have won a bid for a new duty free shop at Visakhapatnam airport. We participated in the competitive bid and we have won it. It is a new thing which is coming up very soon."

Sharing plans to strengthen ITDC regional offices to expand its business, Synrem said at present the staffing at the company's offices in Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata is not reasonably strong with only one officer stationed in these regional offices.

Indian states have also received investment pledges from companies and conglomerates, including Maruti Suzuki and the Adani Group in January, at the business events such as the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit and the World Economic Forum in Davos. — Reuters

Air India, TASL to spend ₹2,300 cr on projects

Bengaluru, Feb. 19: Tata Group-owned carrier Air India and plane parts-maker Tata Advanced Systems Ltd (TASL) will invest ₹2,300 crore (\$277.2 million) in the Karnataka, the state government said on Monday.

Air India will conduct maintenance, repairs, and overhaul of planes at the Bengaluru airport, while Tata Advanced Systems will set up manufacturing and research and development facilities in the state, the government said.

The investments will generate around 1,600 jobs directly and more than 25,000 jobs indirectly in the state, it added.

Tata Advanced Systems makes cargo and bulk cargo doors for European planemaker Airbus' A320neo family of aircraft, while Air India has the second-biggest market share among domestic Indian airlines as of January 31.

The investment comes a month after Tata Technologies pledged an

investment of ₹15,000 crore in Telangana as part of the conglomerate's commitment to expand in the state.

The Tata Group is also close to announcing plans to build a semiconductor fabrication plant in Gujarat, Tata Sons chairman Natarajan Chandrasekaran said last month.

RBI may cut rates on steady inflation: Goyal

FC CORRESPONDENT
WITH AGENCY INPUTS
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal on Monday exuded confidence that the Reserve Bank will cut interest rates as inflation is under control.

The RBI has been maintaining the benchmark interest rate at an elevated level of 6.5 per cent since February 2023.

Goyal said that the economic fundamentals of the country are strong and inflation is under check. He said that the average inflation of 10 years in India is about 5 to 5.5 per cent.

It was the best-performing decade and because of that, the interest rate came down "dramatically" and the central bank was strengthened and had the ability to bring down the interest rate.

"Of-course in the last year and a half, post Ukraine-crisis, interest rates have again gone up by 250 basis points. But now that inflation is pretty much in control, I suspect we will soon see the



reversal of the rate hikes starting in India, whether it happens in the next or the second monetary policy from now. I think it's only a matter of time," Goyal said addressing journalists from 19 Latin American and Caribbean countries here.

In case the Reserve Bank goes for a reduction in the key short-term lending rate (repo), the cost of borrowings both for corporate as well as individuals, will go down, and hence EMIs.

The RBI on February 8, for the sixth time in a row, left the key policy rate unchanged at 6.5 per cent, which may keep the cost of borrowings for both individuals as well as corporates largely stable, and lowered the retail inflation projection to 4.5 per cent for next fiscal.

FINOLEX PLANS TO SPEND ₹580 CRORE ON OPTICAL FIBRE

Mumbai, Feb. 19: Finolex Cables signed an agreement with the Maharashtra industries department to invest ₹580 crore to more than double its optic fibre cables capacity to 10 million fibre km per year as 5G rollout is leading to higher demand for last mile connectivity.

Finolex Cables has an existing capacity of 4 mn fibre km per year which will touch 10 mn fibre km per year after the commissioning of the new plant. The new plant will be solely catering to fibre optic cables, the company said in a statement.

This expansion initiative encompasses installation of fibre draw towers and the implementation of backward integration for producing glass preforms. With this, Finolex Cables will be the second company in the country to manufacture glass preforms.

This expansion will generate over 400 direct and indirect employment opportunities, Finolex Cables deputy chief executive officer Mahesh Viswanathan said. — PTI

Silver economy needs push: Niti

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, FEB. 19

Appropriate interventions are required on the part of the government to provide a thrust to the "silver economy," or economy driven by goods and services demanded by the elderly. Further, elderly need work opportunities that can provide a platform to use and utilise their experience and expertise in

● **THE DEPENDENCY** ratio to rise from 15.7 per cent to 20.1 per cent over the next decade (2021-31), indicating a growing economic responsibility on working Indians.

various sectors, finds Niti Aayog.

The elderly population is financially vulnerable due to loss of work. Only a lit-

tle more than one-third (34 per cent) of elderly are currently working.

Formal work serves as a crucial physical, social, and financial safety net. Loss of work due to retirement from employment is a critical point in the life of a working individual, which causes various socio-psychological and economic changes, and makes them economically vulnerable and prone to

financial shocks. Almost 78 per cent of the elderly do not have pension cover. The dependency ratio to rise from 15.7 per cent to 20.1 per cent over the next decade (2021-31), indicating a growing economic responsibility on working Indians.

With private cover at 8 per cent, India's aged population is at risk of financial vulnerability post-retirement.

TVS arm, Mitsubishi form JV

New Delhi, Feb. 19: TVS Mobility on Monday said it has formed a joint venture (JV) with the Japanese conglomerate Mitsubishi Corporation to establish a comprehensive vehicle mobility ecosystem in India.

As part of the collaboration, Mitsubishi Corporation will initially invest ₹300 crore with both parties committed to support the growth of JV.

This investment is intended to propel both the parties' vision in relation to vehicle ownership in passenger cars, commercial vehicles and



material handling equipment (MHE), TVS Mobility said.

The business model will have the potential to achieve \$2 billion revenue in the next 3-5 years' time, it added.

With this, the dealership business of TVS Mobility will transform into TVS

Vehicle Mobility Solution (TVS VMS) offering a complete portfolio of services to its customers.

"This collaboration with Mitsubishi Corporation will enable TVS to provide a range of solutions to the entire vehicle mobility ecosystem," TVS Mobility director R Dinesh said.

After providing integrated and digital platforms for the independent aftermarket, the vehicle mobility business will provide digitally-enabled solutions to customers, be it enterprises, corporates or fleet owners, Dinesh added. — PTI



MANY INDIAN COS GET INTO TOP 100 LUXURY BRANDS

Mumbai, Feb. 19: Malabar Gold and Diamonds and four other jewellery firms along with fashion accessory maker Titan have joined the global rank of top-100 luxury brands.

Malabar Gold led the domestic contingent, claiming 19th rank as the top Indian international jewellery brand, followed by Tata group entity Titan Company which secured the 24th position. Jewellery players Kalyan Jewellers and Joy Alukkas listed at 46th and 47th spots, respectively, on the Deloitte global luxury goods list 2023.

The other two jewellery makers, Senco Gold & Diamonds and Thangamayil Jewellery, ranked 78 and 98, respectively.

Diversified French luxury major LVMH topped the list.

The rise of domestic luxury brands underscores the evolving dynamics of the luxury goods market. As the domestic economy continues to grow and consumer preferences evolve, the country's luxury market is witnessing significant growth, contributing to the global recognition of these brands, Deloitte said in the report released on Monday. — PTI

TECH | TOOL MCA, fact-checkers to address viral misinformation

Helpline soon to fight deepfakes

New Delhi, Feb. 19: The misinformation combat alliance (MCA) and Meta have announced that a dedicated fact-checking helpline on WhatsApp - aimed at combating deepfakes and deceptive AI-generated content - will be available for the public in March 2024.

"The MCA and Meta are working on launching a dedicated fact-checking helpline on WhatsApp in an effort to combat media generated using artificial intelligence (AI) which may deceive people on matters of public importance, commonly known as deepfakes, and help people connect with verified and credible information," according to a release. The MCA-Meta collabo-



● **PEOPLE WILL** be able to flag deepfakes by sending it to the WhatsApp chatbot which will offer multilingual support in English and three regional languages (Hindi, Tamil, Telugu).

ration will allow MCA and its associated network of independent fact-checkers and research organisations to the address viral misinformation particularly deepfakes.

People will be able to flag deepfakes by sending it to the WhatsApp chatbot which will offer multilingual support in English and three regional languages (Hindi, Tamil,

Telugu). The MCA will set up a central deepfake analysis unit to manage all inbound messages they receive on the WhatsApp helpline.

According to the release, the program is based on a four-pillar approach detection, prevention, reporting and driving awareness around the escalating spread of deepfakes along

with building a critical instrument that allows citizens to access reliable information to fight the spread of misinformation.

Shivnath Thukral, director, Public Policy India, Meta, said, "we recognise the concerns around artificial intelligence-generated misinformation and believe combating this requires concrete and cooperative measures across the industry."

The collaboration with misinformation combat alliance to launch a WhatsApp helpline dedicated to debunking deepfakes that can materially deceive people, is consistent with Meta's pledge under the tech accord to combat deceptive use of AI in upcoming 2024 elections. — PTI

Govt to support rubber plantation with ₹708 cr

New Delhi, Feb. 19: The government has allocated ₹708.69 crore under the revised sustainable development of the natural rubber sector scheme for the next two financial years (2024-26) to promote growth of the segment, an official said on Monday.

Under the scheme, the Rubber Board provides subsidies for new planting and replanting (of senile plantations) to growers.

Additional secretary in the commerce ministry Amardeep Singh Bhatia said that the funds will be used for supporting the plantation of rubber, generation of planting material, productivity enhancement, formation of rubber producers societies, and rubber research and

training.

"The outlay (has) increased by 23 per cent from ₹576.4 cr to ₹708.69 cr for the next two financial years," Bhatia said. In traditional areas, including Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, plantation of rubber will be undertaken on 12,000 hectares.

The rate of assistance has been increased to ₹40,000 per hectare from the previous ₹25,000 per hectare, he said, adding that it will help to cover the increased cost of production.

In non-traditional areas like Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and north-east states, 3,752 hectares will be brought under rubber cultivation during 2024-26. — PTI

Hotel revenues to rise 11% on strong demand

FC BANKING BUREAU
MUMBAI, FEB. 19

The hotel industry in India is slated for a healthy revenue growth of 11-13 per cent in the next fiscal after a strong 15-17 per cent growth in the current fiscal, backed by steady domestic demand and ramp up in foreign traveller demand according to a report from Crisil Ratings.

The strong demand dynamics along with modest new supply will keep the operating performance of the industry healthy over the near term. The healthy operating performance will augur well for the industry profitability where the earnings before interest, taxes and depreciation (Ebitda) will continue the strong momentum over the current and the next fiscal. This, along with limited capital expenditure, will keep the credit profiles strong.

An analysis of branded hotel companies with approximately 70,000 rooms across categories, indicates as much.

Anand Kulkarni, director, Crisil Ratings, said, "While the demand (domestic travel) will remain strong, the growth rate is expected to taper off next fiscal due to high base. Consequently, the average room rates are expected to grow 5-7 per cent next fiscal against 10-12 per cent this fiscal and the occupancy is expected to remain healthy at current levels of 73-74 per cent."

On the other hand, the foreign tourist arrivals in



● **THE AVERAGE** room rates are expected to grow 5-7 per cent next fiscal against 10-12 per cent this fiscal and the occupancy is expected to remain healthy at current levels of 73-74 per cent.

India, despite a growth this fiscal, are estimated to remain at 10 per cent below pre-pandemic level and pick-up in the same will provide fillip to the hotel demand next fiscal.

Apart from the aforementioned factors, demand in meetings, incentives, conventions and events, (MICE) segment is also expected to remain healthy as corporates have resumed their activities post the pandemic.

Nitin Kansal, director, Crisil Ratings, "greenfield capex is expected to remain muted with new room addition remaining at 4-5 per cent per fiscal over the next couple of years. While the demand rebound has boosted the industry sentiments, the cost dynamics still remain a constraining factor for new capex. High land costs, increase in construction costs, long gestation period coupled with cyclicity in the sector is resulting in cautious new capex in the sector."

SHORT TAKES

Women paddlers blank Uzbekistan

Busan: Indian women's team eased past Uzbekistan while the men endured successive defeats with the loss to South Korea in the World Table Tennis Team Championships here on Monday. Ayhika Mukherjee and Sreeja Akula were rested from the rubber, providing an opportunity to Archana Kamath and Diya Chitale. They both won their respective singles while Manika Batra also had it easy against her opponent to make it a 3-0 win for India. Archana defeated Rimma Gufranov 11-7, 11-3, 11-6, while Manika stormed past Markhabo Magdieva 11-7, 11-4, 11-1. Diya on the other hand faced tough resistance before prevailing over Rozalina Khadjieva 11-6, 10-12, 11-4, 11-6. Having started off their campaign with a 2-3 loss to China, Indian women's team now have secured two wins on the trot to occupy second spot in the Group 1 standings. The men's team of Sharath Kamal, reigning national champion Harmeet Desai and G. Sathiyam lost their respective singles to go down meekly in their third group stage tie against third seeds Korea. — PTI

Diya, Swastika to train abroad

New Delhi: The Sports Ministry's Mission Olympic Cell has given its go-ahead to paddlers Diya Chitale and Swastika Ghosh to travel to South Korea and Japan for advanced-level training. While Diya will head for Paju-si in South Korea to train under Shin Min Sung, Swastika will be coached by Qiu Jian Xin in Osaka, Japan. The MOC also approved proposals for competition for shuttlers Kiran George and Anupama Upadhya, doubles women's team of Treasa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand and shooter Rudranksh Patil. While Kiran and Anupama will participate in the BWF Orleans Masters, the pair of Treasa and Gayatri along with their coach and physio will head to Germany to compete in the BWF German Open. The MOC also approved proposals of table tennis players Sathiyam Gnanasekaran and Manika Batra for financial assistance for participation in WTT Feeder events. — PTI

Chameera to replace Atkinson

New Delhi: Kolkata Knight Riders on Monday named Sri Lankan Dushmantha Chameera as a replacement for England pacer Gus Atkinson for the 2024 Indian Premier League. Chameera will join KKR at a reserve price of ₹50 lakh, the IPL organisers said. The Sri Lankan speedster was a part of Rajasthan Royals and Royal Challengers Bangalore in the 2018 and 2021 seasons respectively.

GIANTS AND RCB NAME REPLACEMENTS FOR WPL

Rising star Kashvee Gautam, the most expensive uncapped Indian player in Women's Premier League (WPL), has been ruled out of the second edition owing to an injury. Gujarat Giants, who had secured the services of Kashvee for ₹2 crore, have named Mumbai's Sayali Sathgare as a replacement at a reserve price of ₹10 lakh. India all-rounder Kanika Ahuja, too, has been ruled out of WPL 2024 owing to an injury. Royal Challengers Bangalore have named Shraddha Pokharkar, Maharashtra's left-arm fast bowler as her replacement. — PTI

IOC won't change boxing age limit

Lausanne: The International Olympic Committee will not change its rules on age limits to let boxing great Manny Pacquiao compete at the Paris Games. Pacquiao, who retired in 2021, wanted to box at age 45 in the Olympic tournament in Paris. The IOC said Sunday it wrote to Olympic officials in Philippines explaining the age limit for boxers of 40 will be upheld. The IOC now oversees Olympic boxing after de-recognizing the International Boxing Association governing body. The age limit for Olympic boxing was raised to 40 from 34 in 2013 — a move that would have let Pacquiao try to compete at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics. He chose not to at the time when he was also elected to be a senator in his home country. It is unclear if Pacquiao would have tried to earn a place at the Paris Olympics in one of two qualification tournaments that open later this month in Italy and in May in Thailand. — AP

RESHUFFLE

Bumrah likely to be rested, Rahul set to be back for Ranchi Test

Rajkot, Feb. 19: Lead India pacer Jasprit Bumrah is likely to be rested, while batter K. L. Rahul is expected to come back after recovering from a quadriceps injury, in the fourth Test against England beginning February 23 in Ranchi.

Bumrah is the leading wicket-taker in the five-match series with 17 scalps and singlehandedly bowled India to victory in the second Test. The hosts lead 2-1 in the five-match rubber.

"The team will travel to Ranchi tomorrow and Bumrah is likely to be given rest," said a BCCI source while also informing that Rahul is nearing full fitness and should be a part of the squad in Ranchi.

The decision to rest Bumrah doesn't come as a surprise considering he bowled 80.5 overs in the first three Tests.

As part of workload management, India had also rested Mohammed Siraj from the second Test in Visakhapatnam before he returned to play a part in India's record 434 run win over the visitors in Rajkot on Sunday.

India are well-placed to seal the series in Ranchi but if they are not able to, the home team will desperately need the services of Bumrah for the fifth and final Test in Dharamsala beginning March 7.

Rahul, who missed the second and third Test after complaining of pain in his right quadriceps, had reached 90 percent fitness last week, according to an insider. "He is reaching his match fitness and should be available for Ranchi Test," the source added.

Rahul was among India's best batters in the opening Test in Hyderabad before going down with the same injury that he suffered during the Indian Premier League last year. Since his comeback after four months on the sidelines, the batter has delivered for India across formats. He was the only centurion for India in the drawn two-Test series in South Africa in December. — PTI

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Jasprit Bumrah reacts after taking the wicket of England's Zak Crawley on the fourth day of the third Test in Rajkot in this file photo. — AP

FORMER ENGLISH CAPTAINS SLAM 'BAZBALL' GAME

London, Feb. 19: Former England captains Nasser Hussain and Michael Vaughan have criticised the team's 'Bazball' approach in the ongoing Test series against India, saying the visitors need to apply themselves based on match situation instead of being guided by a one-dimensional philosophy of aggression.

"This (third Test) was the worst defeat under (Ben) Stokes and Brendon McCullum, and one that exposed their method. They cannot take the aggressive at every opportunity, they have to pick their moments," Vaughan wrote in his column for Telegraph.co.uk.

Hussain echoed the sentiment. "Bazball is about being attacking but it is also about soaking pressure," Hussain he said on Sky Sports.

"They need to look at the way Jaiswal and Shubman Gill played on day three. They soaked up the pressure for 30 or 40 balls, and then they started to get boundaries. That is what Test batting is about. India have scored 875 runs in 228.5 overs. No one can tell me it's been boring watching India bat here," Vaughan said.

Things have gone downhill for England since winning the series-opener in Hyderabad. "...surely a defeat this heavy has to be a wake-up call for Ben Stokes and his players." — PTI

Jaiswal and Co. are the future

New Delhi, Feb. 19: Inexperience of India's batting line-up was flagged as a major concern following the shocking loss in the first Test but three games into the five-match series against England, the same fearless bunch has grabbed its chances to give the hosts a comforting 2-1 advantage.

Irrespective of what happens in the remaining two games, the series will be remembered for the coming of age of 22-year-old Yashasvi Jaiswal, who has bossed the English bowlers with back to back double hundreds at the top of the order.

The way he constructed his innings in Rajkot not only belied his age, it was also a master-class in Test match batting. He was



Sarfraz Khan (right) throws a ball during a practice session as Yashasvi Jaiswal looks on. — AP

extremely watchful at the start of the innings before deciding to hit sixes at will including three off the great James Anderson in three different directions. From the team's perspective, another big takeaway from the Rajkot Test was

the performance of debutants Sarfraz Khan and wicketkeeper-batter Dhruv Jurel. "Ye aaj kal ke bacche (these kids of today)," quipped skipper Rohit Sharma, sharing a picture of the trio on his social

media account, a day after the record win in Rajkot. In the absence of Virat Kohli and K. L. Rahul, the middle-order looked extremely vulnerable but after finally getting his big break, Sarfraz showed he belonged at the biggest stage from ball one and piled on the runs like he did for years in domestic cricket.

Indian batters are not known for their sweep shots but in a welcome change, that is how Sarfraz got most of his runs in the game. He did not play the reverse that often but his conventional sweep and slog sweep off the spinners did fetch him a lot of runs and at the same time, put pressure on the opposition. — PTI

5 DOMESTIC DOYENS BID ADIEU TO RANJJI CAREERS

New Delhi, Feb. 19: The ongoing Ranji Trophy season marks the end of an era in domestic cricket with five heavyweights bidding adieu to the game, leaving a huge void to fill. Bengal legend Manoj Tiwary, Jharkhand duo of big-hitting Saurabh Tiwary and express pacer Varun Aaron, Mumbai stalwart Dhawal Kulkarni and Vidrabha's Ranji Trophy-winning captain Faiz Fazal have decided to bring curtains to their illustrious domestic careers.

The reasons for their retirement are varied, ranging from not having anything to play for (IPL contract or national call-up), to embarking on new adventures or focussing on politics.

For Aaron, Manoj and Faiz life came a full circle as they said goodbye at the same venue they began their domestic journeys.

But needless to say, domestic cricket will be poorer without the quintet turning out.

One of the doyens of domestic

Bengal's Manoj Tiwary said goodbye to his "beloved 22 yards" after leading his state to a comprehensive win over Bihar on Monday.

Tiwary served his state for over 19 years, the 38-year-old had taken Bengal to the finals of the Ranji Trophy last season.

An aggressive batter, he has over 10,000 first class runs in his kitty. As a captain, he always led from the front, helping Bengal become a force to reckon with.

The absence of the supremely experienced duo Aaron and swash-buckling Saurabh Tiwary will be a big void Jharkhand will have to fill.

Tiwary, a left handed middle order batter, made his first-class debut while he was still a teenager in the 2006-07 Ranji Trophy season. Over the last 17 years, the Jharkhand captain became a prolific run-getter in domestic cricket, playing 115 first-class matches amassing 8030 runs in 189 innings at an average of 47.51 including 22 hundreds and 34 fifties. — PTI

Tamil Nadu, Karnataka qualify for quarterfinals

Salem (Tamil Nadu), Feb. 19: Tamil Nadu needed just seven overs to chase down an easy target and beat Punjab by nine wickets on the final day to top Group 'C' and qualify for the Ranji Trophy quarterfinals here on Monday. With six points from the easy win, TN topped the group with 28 points from seven matches.

Karnataka, who drew with Chandigarh in Hubballi on Monday, also qualified for the quarterfinals as they finished second in the group with 27 points.

Tamil Nadu left-arm spinner Sai Kishore (4/80) shone with the ball on Monday as he took four wickets to help his side bowl Punjab out for 231 in 64.2 overs.

Punjab were following-on after they made 274 in their first innings in reply to Tamil Nadu's 435.

Ajith Ram (3/52) and Pradosh Ranjan Paul (3/23) added one wicket each to their two on Sunday as Punjab added just 51 runs from 24.2

RANJI TROPHY BRIEF SCORES

- **At Lucknow:** Chhattisgarh 414 & 199/8 decl in 53 overs (Ajay Mandal 51; Shivam Sharma 3/34) drew with Uttar Pradesh 238 & 201 for 3 in 42 overs (Priyam Garg 114 not out; Vishvas Malik 2/26).
- **At Vizianagaram:** Andhra 272 & 189 for 9 in 97 overs (Ashwin Hebbar 72; Basil Thampi 3/36 and Nedumankuzhy Basil 3/43) drew with Kerala 514 for 7 decl in 161.4 overs.
- **At New Delhi:** Odisha 440 & 205 (Asirwad Swain 29; Sumit Mathur 5/26) lost to Delhi 451 & 123/3 in 20.3 overs (Ayush Badoni 40 not out; J B Mohapatra 2/45).
- **At Nagpur:** Vidarbha 423 and 205 (Dhruv Shorey 43, Atharva Taide 49) beat Haryana 333 & 180.
- **At Jamshedpur:** Jharkhand 188 and 269 beat Rajasthan 210 and 158 all out in 68.1 overs (Mahipal Lomror 48; Anukul Roy 5/36) by 89 runs.
- **At Delhi:** Maharashtra 225 and 157/6 (Arshin Kulkarni 58; Kaushal Tambe 44; Pulkit Narang 2/33, Nitin Tanwar 2/29) drew with Services 432 all out in 190 overs (Shubham Rohilla 72, Rajat Paliwal 51, Nakul Sharma 87; Taranjitsingh Dhilon 5/131).
- **At Salem:** Tamil Nadu 435 and 71 for 1 in 7 overs beat Punjab 274 and 231 all out in 64.2 overs (Nehal Wadhwa 109; Sai Kishore 4/80) by nine wickets.
- **At Agartala:** Tripura 149 and 333 lost to Railways 105 and 378 for 5 in 103 overs (Pratham Singh 169 not out, Mohammad Saif 106; Manisankar Murasingh 3/81).
- **At Hubballi:** Chandigarh 267 and 236 for 5 in 80 overs (Arslan Khan 63, Mayank Sidhu 56 not out; Vasuki Koushik 2/26) drew with Karnataka 563 for 5 declared.

overs for the loss of six wickets in their second innings.

Needing just 71 runs for an outright win, Tamil Nadu reached the target in just seven overs for the loss of one wicket.

Narayan Jagadeesan and Pradosh Ranjan Paul remained unbeaten on 26 and 22 respectively while Suresh Lokeshwar made 19 as Tamil Nadu reached 71 for 1 to win the match. — PTI

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

Hojlund makes history for Utd

Luton (United Kingdom), Feb. 19: Rasmus Hojlund made Premier League history as the Manchester United striker's double ensured his side survived a scare from lowly Luton in their 2-1 win on Sunday. Hojlund became the youngest player to score in six consecutive Premier League games after netting twice in the first seven minutes at Kenilworth Road.

At 21 years 14 days old, Hojlund surpassed Newcastle midfielder Joe Willock's previous record set when he was 21 years 272 days old.

Ruud van Nistelrooy scored in 10 successive United top-flight outings in 2003 before Leicester's Jamie Vardy beat his Premier league record with 11 in a row in 2015.

After failing to score in his first 14 Premier League appearances following his August move from Atalanta, Hojlund has scored eight times in his last eight games in all competitions.

His brace should have put United in complete control, but Luton fought back impressively as

Rasmus Hojlund became the youngest player to score in six consecutive Premier League games after netting twice in the first seven minutes at Kenilworth Road.

Carlton Morris quickly reduced the deficit.

Erik ten Hag's side were under siege for spells and wasted several chances to kill off fourth-bottom Luton in a tense finale. Praising Hojlund's mentality, Ten Hag said: "I recruited him on his character, I knew it was strong. He can really perform under stress and that is something you need from a Man United striker. He doesn't get nervous or lose confidence. He has a lot of confidence and I'm sure he will score even more."

Sixth placed United's fourth consecutive league victory moved them within five points of fourth placed Aston Villa in the race to qualify for next season's Champions League. — AFP



Manchester United's Rasmus Hojlund (right) vies for the ball with Luton Town's Gabriel Osho during the English Premier League match at Kenilworth Road in Luton, England, on Sunday. — AP

Rayo hold subdued Spain leaders Real

Madrid (Spain), Feb. 19: La Liga leaders Real Madrid stumbled to a frustrating 1-1 draw at neighbours Rayo Vallecano on Sunday but stretched their lead at the top to six points.

Joselu fired the visitors in front early on but former Madrid youth player Raul de Tomas levelled for Rayo from the penalty spot in coach Inigo Perez's first match at the helm.

Carlo Ancelotti's side extended their lead over surprise challengers Girona before the Catalan minnows face Athletic Bilbao on Monday.

After Los Blancos thrashed Girona last weekend to take a five-point lead in the title race, the draw allows their closest pursuers a chance to cut the gap.

Dani Carvajal was sent off at the death for Madrid after appearing to elbow Kike Perez.

"We have to win all our games, but to win a league, the games you can't win, you can't lose them (either)," Madrid coach Ancelotti said. "Sometimes draws can hurt a bit but it could be a positive step to take us closer to winning the league."

Real Madrid have suffered just one defeat in the top flight and are unbeaten in 19 league matches.

Rayo, 14th, sacked Francisco Rodriguez earlier this week and appointed Perez, with Madrid's visit a baptism of fire. It took only three minutes for Madrid to take the lead, with Fede Valverde racing down the right on a sharp counter-attack.

The Uruguayan crossed for Joselu to bundle home and despite initially being called offside, VAR showed the goal should stand. — AFP



Real Madrid's Joselu (left) in action against Rayo's Aridane Hernandez during the La Liga match at the Vallecas Stadium in Madrid, Spain, on Sunday. — AP