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PUNJAB CM BHAGWANT SINGH MANN HAS BECOME A 'RUBBER DOLL': NAVJOT SINGH SIDHU

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JULIA ROBERTS SAYS SHE TURNED DOWN ROMANTIC COMEDIES FOR 20 YEARS AS GOOD SCRIPTS DIDN'T EXIST

FinMin Reaffirms India's commitment to fighting money laundering, terror financing, lauds the role of FATF

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has reaffirmed India's political commitment to fighting money laundering and terrorist financing as she appreciated the role of FATF global network in safeguarding the global financial system. Sitharaman said this as she attended the FATF Ministerial Meeting conducted here alongside the 2022 Spring Meetings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to endorse the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force's strategic priorities for the years 2022-24.

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is an inter-governmental body established in 1989 to combat money laundering, terrorist financing and other related threats to the integrity of the international financial system. The finance minister on Thursday extended support to the strategic priorities and reiterated India's commitment



to provide necessary resources and support to the FATF in its endeavor as a global alliance against money laundering, terrorist financing and financing of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the Ministry of Finance said.

The Paris-based FATF has placed Pakistan on its grey

list since June 2018 for failing to check money laundering, leading to terror financing, and was given a plan of action to complete it by October 2019. Since then, Pakistan continues to be on the FATF's list due to its failure to comply with the FATF mandates.

Sitharaman congratulated

FATF President Marcus Pleyer for the able guidance and leadership provided through the challenging times of pandemic, it said. The Strategic Priorities for the FATF for 2022-24 are: Strengthen the FATF Global Network, FATF systems of Mutual Evaluations, Enhance International Beneficial Own-

ership Transparency, Increase Capabilities to more effectively recover Criminal assets, Leverage Digital Transformation, Ensure Sustainable Funding for FATF Strategic priorities, the finance ministry said on Twitter.

FM reaffirmed India's political commitment to fighting Money Laundering, Terrorist Financing and Proliferation Financing. Also appreciated the work of FATF on Beneficial Ownership Transparency, the role of FATF global network in safeguarding global financial system, it said in a series of tweets.

Sitharaman arrived in Washington on Monday for the IMF-World Bank Spring Meetings 2022. The FATF currently has 39 members including two regional organisations -- the European Commission and Gulf Cooperation Council. India is a member of the FATF consultations and its Asia Pacific Group.

Punjab CM orders probe into whopping debt of ₹3 lakh cr

CHANDIGARH: Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Monday ordered an inquiry into how the state has a whopping public debt of Rs 3 lakh crore and where was the money spent.

"We will inquire as to where the money was spent and will order recovery into where this money was spent. This was the public money," Mann said in a tweet.

As per official figures, the total outstanding debt of Punjab as on March 31 was projected at Rs 2, 52, 880 crore, which is 42 per cent of the GSDP for 2020-21 and the outstanding debt is likely to be Rs 2, 73, 703 crore in 2021-22, which is 45 per cent of the GSDP.

Twenty per cent of the annual budget is being spent only to pay the interest on the loans.

As per the latest findings of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, the state's financial crisis is set to worsen with the debt likely to reach Rs 3.73 lakh crore by 2024-25. Government officials that the state's debt has increased by Rs 1 lakh crore in the past five years under the previous Congress government, largely owing to populism.

Responding to the Chief Minister's decision, the Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal) welcomed the decision to order a probe into the Rs 3 lakh crore debt acquisition but said the inquiry should not be used to divert attention from fulfilling the promises made to the people of the state. It also demanded a probe into all advertisements released by the AAP government in the last one month in office.

"We are all for a free and fair probe into the Rs 3 lakh crore debt accumulated by the state but this probe should not be used as an excuse to delay fulfilling the promises made to the people," senior leader Daljit Singh Cheema said in a statement here. He said the previous Congress government had used the excuse of empty treasury to renege on all promises made to the people. "Despite knowing the reality of the financial position of the state before taking over the reins of the state, the Chief Minister has now come up with an excuse to probe the reasons behind this position. The SAD feels the probe should not come in the way of fulfilling the government promise to distribute Rs 1, 000 to all women in the state, besides ensuring 300 units of free power per month to all domestic consumers immediately."

AGENCIES

Rajnath asks Army to prepare for every possible security challenge



NEW DELHI: In the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Thursday asked the top commanders of the Army to prepare for every possible security challenge that India may face in the future including that of unconventional and asymmetric warfare.

Singh made the remarks at the biannual Army Commanders' Conference that began on Monday. The defence minister also complimented the Army for its operational readiness to deal with any possible eventualities.

The commanders carried out an extensive review of India's national security challenges along the borders with China and Pakistan as well as assessed possible geopolitical implications of the Russia-Ukraine war for the region.

"Addressed the Army Commanders Conference today. Complimented the Indian Army for their operational preparedness and capabilities. Exhorted the Military leadership to prepare for every possible challenge in future, including the challenge of unconventional & asymmetric warfare," Singh tweeted. The Army said the defence minister appreciated the force for "selfless and unflinching" service to the nation and its relentless efforts towards modernisation through indigenisation. **AGENCIES**

Punjab Govt announces 300 units of free electricity from 1st July



CHANDIGARH: Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann announced 300 units of free electricity per month to households from July 1.

The announcement was made in advertisements published by the state's information and public relations department in various newspapers on.

It was related to a 30-day report card of the AAP government in Punjab. A formal announcement is expected to be made on last Saturday.

Giving 300 units of free electricity was one of the major poll promises of the Aam Aadmi Party in the Punjab assembly election.

Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann had on Thursday said in Jalandhar that "good news" would be announced on April 16.

Punjab was already providing free electricity to the farming sector. It also provides 200 units of free power to all Scheduled Castes, backward castes and the below poverty line households. **AGENCIES**

BJP accuses Rahul of 'sowing seeds of hatred'

NEW DELHI: The BJP on Wednesday accused Rahul Gandhi of maligning the country's image and sowing the seeds of hatred after the Congress leader attacked the ruling party over the use of bulldozers in riot-hit areas of Delhi and states like Madhya Pradesh.

Replying to a question on Gandhi's comments, Union minister Anurag Thakur said in an apparent reference to the opposition party, "This is all you



can expect from someone whose history is linked to corruption and riots."

"He is doing no good to the country by sowing the seeds of hatred. He is maligning the country's image," Thakur told a press conference where he highlighted the government's work during 'Azadi ka amrit mahotsav', an exercise aimed at celebrating India's 75th anniversary of Independence.

Gandhi had attacked the government over the use of bulldozers in violence-hit areas of Delhi and Madhya Pradesh, and

urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to switch off "bulldozers of hate" and switch on power plants.

The BJP leader also hit back at the Aam Aadmi Party for accusing the ruling party of instigating riots and saying that its headquarters should be bulldozed.

It is a party which goes to the extent of compromising with terrorists for power, Thakur alleged. **AGENCIES**

LAKHIMPUR CASE

SC sets aside Allahabad HC order granting bail to Ashish Mishra



NEW DELHI: Supreme Court of India on Monday cancelled the bail granted by the Allahabad High Court to Ashish Mishra, son of Union minister Ajay Mishra, in the Lakhimpur Kheri violence case. A special bench of Chief Justice N V Ramana and Justices Surya Kant and Hima Kohli also asked the accused to surrender in a week's time.

The top court on April 4 had reserved its order on a plea of

farmers seeking cancellation of bail to Mishra. Earlier, the high court had granted bail to him. On October 3 last year, eight people were killed in Lakhimpur Kheri during violence that erupted when farmers were protesting against Uttar Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya's visit to the area.

Four farmers were mowed down by an SUV, in which Ashish Mishra was seated, according to the Uttar Pradesh Police FIR. Following the incident, the driver and two BJP workers were allegedly lynched by angry farmers.

A journalist also died in the violence that triggered outrage among opposition parties and farmer groups agitating over the Centre's now-repealed agricultural reform laws. **AGENCIES**

Economic fugitives not welcome in Britain: UK PM Johnson



NEW DELHI: India and the UK on Friday decided to set up a task force on countering extremist elements such as pro-Khalistan groups operating in Britain, with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson asserting that his country does not tolerate such elements.

After holding wide-ranging talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Johnson also said that economic fugitives seeking to use the British legal system to evade the law in India are

not welcome in Britain.

At a press conference, Johnson said the UK government has ordered the extradition of economic offenders wanted in India but legal technicalities are making the process difficult.

Asked about concerns over reports of human rights violations and the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, Johnson said the UK raises these issues in a "friendly way" but added that India is a great democracy and it has constitutional protec-

India, UK decide to deepen defence, trade ties

NEW DELHI: In the backdrop of the rapid geopolitical turmoil, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his British counterpart Boris Johnson on Friday agreed on a new and expanded India-UK defence partnership and vowed to seal an ambitious free trade agreement by the end of the year.

After his wide-ranging talks with Modi on the second and final day of his India visit, Johnson said the UK is creating an Open General Export Licence (OGEL) for India to "reduce bureaucracy and slashing delivery times" for defence procurement.

The British prime minister said both sides agreed to work together to meet new threats across land, sea, air space and cyber domains and that the UK will partner with India on new fighter jet technology as well as in the maritime sphere to detect and respond to threats in the oceans.

"Today, we have agreed on a new and expanded defence and security partnership, and decades-long commitment to not only forge tighter bonds between us but to support your goal Narendra of Make in India (in defence)," Johnson said, describing Modi as his "khas dost" (special friend).

Johnson said, "We have these conversations but the advantage of our friendship is that we can have them, and we can have them in a friendly and private way," he said. **AGENCIES**

Russia bars Kamala Harris, Mark Zuckerberg

MOSCOW: Russia's foreign ministry has announced that it has barred US Vice President Kamala Harris, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg and 27 other prominent Americans from entering the country.

In a statement on its website Thursday, the ministry said that the move came as a response to ever-widening anti-Russian sanctions brought on by the Biden administration. It claimed to be targeting top executives, public intellectuals and journalists shaping what it referred to as the Russophobic narrative prevailing in US public debate. Alongside Harris and Zuckerberg, the ban includes top defense and justice officials; the CEOs of LinkedIn and Bank of America; high-profile foreign affairs commentators; as well as the editor of the Russia-focused Meduza news website. **AGENCIES**

India extends duration of USD 400 mn currency swap facility with Sri Lanka

COLOMBO: In an unstinted and multi-faceted support to Sri Lanka which is grappling with its worst-ever economic crisis, India has extended the duration of the USD 400 million currency swap facility which had been concluded with the island nation in January.

This was the first extension of an international debt instrument to Sri Lanka after the government led by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on April 12 temporarily suspended debt servicing. The embattled government had announced an orderly default until the country came to an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a possible bailout package. India's unstinted and multi-faceted support to Sri Lanka continued. As ongoing currency support, @RBI extended the duration of the US\$ 400 million currency swap for @CBSL which was concluded in #January this year, the High Commission of India said on Twitter. However, the debt service suspension was not applicable to currency swap arrangements with other central banks. The debt default came as the island nation was grappling with its worst-ever economic crisis compounded by forex shortages and a balance of payments crisis. Sri Lanka had also drawn on Indian credit lines worth USD 1 billion for essential imports and separate ones for the importation of fuel.

The island nation's central bank started borrowing from other central banks and the market through swaps as reserves were lost due to money printed to keep rates down, the Economy Next news service said in a report. Sri Lanka's economists have printed money under various pretexts, delayed market rate rises through various monetary instruments and triggered currency crises for 72 years and blamed them on budget deficits and imports, the report said. **AGENCIES**

Adopt 'nation-first' approach to decision making: PM Modi to civil servants

NEW DELHI: Emphasising a "nation-first" approach to decision-making, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said there cannot be any compromise on the unity and integrity of the country and even decisions at the local level should be made on this touchstone.

Addressing civil servants on the 15th Civil Services Day at Vigyan Bhawan here, he said every decision should be evaluated on the basis of its capacity to strengthen the country's unity and integrity. PM Modi said in the country's democratic set-up, "we should be committed to three goals".

"The first goal is that there should be a change in the life of the common people in the country, their life should be easy and they should also be able to feel this ease. The common people should not have to struggle in their dealings with the government, benefits and services should be available to them without hassle," he said.

Secondly, given the growing stat-



ure and changing profile of India, it is imperative that things should be done in the global context, he said. "If we do not follow the activities at the global level, it will be very difficult to ascertain our priorities and focus area. "We need to develop our schemes and governance models keeping this perspective in mind," he added.

Thirdly, Modi said, "Wherever we are in the system, our prime responsibility is the unity and integrity of the country, there cannot be any compromise. Even local

decisions should be measured on this touchstone".

Every decision should be evaluated on the basis of its capacity to strengthen the country's unity and integrity, Modi said, adding "nation-first" (approach) should always inform our decisions". The prime minister also underlined the need to update systems and governance models regularly, saying "we cannot deal with the challenges of today with systems of the last century".

Referring to 'Amrit Kaal', the 25-year lead-up to the centenary year of independence in 2047, Modi said it cannot just be a "routine" or simply for celebration or praising the journey from the 75th year to the 100th year of independence. "India @100 cannot be routine. This 25-year period should be seen as one unit and we should have a vision from now onwards itself. This celebration should be a watershed," he said. Every district of the country should move with this spirit, he said. **AGENCIES**

India tops milk production in world, turnover higher than wheat & rice output: PM Modi



BANASKANTHA: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday said India produces milk worth Rs 8.5 lakh crore annually, more than the turnover of wheat and rice, with small farmers being the biggest beneficiaries of the dairy sector.

Now, India is the world's largest producer of milk. When the livelihood of crores

of farmers depend on milk, India produces milk worth Rs 8.5 lakh crore annually, something that many people, including big economists, do not pay attention to," the prime minister said while addressing a gathering at Diyodar in the Banaskantha district after inaugurating a new dairy complex and a potato processing plant of the Banas Dairy.

"Decentralised economy system of villages is an example of this. As against this, even the turnover of wheat and rice is not equal to Rs 8.5 lakh crore. And small farmers are the biggest beneficiaries of the dairy sector," he said.

The new dairy complex and the potato processing plant of Banas Dairy are aimed at empowering local farmers and giving a boost to the rural economy in the region.

The Prime Minister also dedicated to the nation the Banas Community Radio Station and the expanded facilities for the production of cheese products and whey powder at Palanpur, and organic manure and biogas plant established at Dama. **AGENCIES**

Punjab CM has become a 'rubber doll': Navjot Sidhu

CHANDIGARH: Congress leader Navjot Singh Sidhu on Thursday dubbed Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann as a "rubber doll", alluding to the Opposition charge that the state government is being run by the AAP leadership from Delhi.

He claimed that the law and order situation in Punjab has «deteriorated drastically» under the Mann government, with 40 people killed in a month.

Sidhu, along with former MLAs Navtej Singh Cheema and Ashwani Sekhri, met Punjab Governor Banwarilal Purohit here and raised several issues, including the law and order situation in the state.

After the meeting, the Congress leader said, «Does he (Bhagwant Mann) care about Punjab?»

«The chief minister has become a 'rubber da gudda»



(rubber doll),» Sidhu told reporters.

«Punjab's CM should be «ankhila» (a self-respecting man) who could not be pulled by strings,» Sidhu added.

«Someone is playing the game but someone else is dancing and speaking. The person who is playing the game while sitting in Delhi is the masquerader and he is getting unmasked,» said Sidhu in

an apparent dig at AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal.

The former Punjab Congress chief said the law and order situation in the state has «deteriorated drastically» under the Mann government.

He claimed 40 people have been killed in the state in the last month.

Sidhu alleged the Punjab government is using the police force to target those who raise

their voice against Kejriwal. «You are politicising the police force to use it for your own interests,» he said attacking the AAP government.

«Whether it is «badlav» (change) or «badla» (vendetta)... vendetta politics has started,» he said.

Sidhu's remarks came a day after the Punjab Police visited the homes of former AAP leader Kumar Vishwas and Congress Alka Lamba in connection with a case registered over «inflammatory statements» against Kejriwal. Both leaders have been summoned for questioning on April 26.

Targeting the Aam Aadmi Party, Sidhu accused it of «selling lies» to people in order to grab power in Punjab.

«You sold lies and dreams but you do not have resources to fulfil them, < said Sidhu. «What was the need for

making tall promises,» he asked while pointing out that Punjab's financial position was the «worst» in the country.

He said 85 per cent of the state's revenue is being spent on salaries, pension and repaying debt.

On the electricity front, the former Punjab Congress chief asked the Mann-led government how it will meet the rising demand.

«Today, the demand for power has reached 8,000 MW and the government is unable to meet it,» said Sidhu claiming that thermal power plants are getting shut because of coal shortage.

«When the demand for power reaches 15,000 MW, then how will they meet it,» he asked. Sidhu demanded that wheat growers be given Rs 500 per quintal for the drop in crop yield because of early onset of heat wave. **AGENCIES**

Punjab Govt to give Rs 1 cr as ex-gratia amount of family of police personnel in case of death in line-of-duty

CHANDIGARH: In a landmark decision, Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Wednesday announced to give Rs 1 crore as an ex-gratia amount to the family of Punjab Police Personnel in case of death in line-of-duty.

The Chief Minister was virtually addressing officers and personnel of the Punjab Police using the Punjab Police Technology platform here. Chief Secretary Anirudh Tiwari, Additional Chief Secretary to Chief Minister A. Venu Prasad, Principal Secretary Home Anurag Verma and Director General of Police (DGP) Punjab VK Bhawra were also present in the meeting.

While addressing over 23000 Police Personnel of all ranks, the Chief Minister directed them to adopt zero against Gangsters, Drugs, Terrorism, Illegal Mining and Corruption.

Notably, Police Personnel of all ranks joined this meeting from as many as 933 Video Conferencing (VC) locations established by Punjab Police at State Police Headquarter, all District Police Offices, Police Stations, Training Centres, Special Task Force (STF) Office, Intelligence offices, SAANJH Kendras, various Armed Bat-



talions and Railway Police. This is for the first time in Punjab that the Chief Minister addressed such a large number of police personnel. While assuring all the Police Officers that there will be no interference in functioning of the Police in the state, CM Bhagwant Mann exhorted Police Personnel to perform their duties with absolute professionalism, dedication and integrity.

He also asked the Police force to ensure safety and security of people in the state and take action against lawbreakers without any bias.

Taking another remarkable decision for the welfare of the Punjab Police, the Chief Minister also announced to increase the Police Welfare Fund from

Rs 10 crores to Rs 15 crores from this financial year.

He encouraged the Police officers and personnel to put in their best efforts to make the Punjab Police as one of the best Police Forces in the Country. He also asked the Police Force to treat their citizens with dignity.

Acknowledging the fact that the Police job is challenging and it is open to criticism despite putting best efforts, the Chief Minister lauded the role of the Punjab Police.

Meanwhile, since the Chief Minister had launched an initiative to felicitate Police Personnel on their Birthdays, as many as 3650 Birthday Greetings have been handed over to the Police Personnel on their Birthdays till date. **AGENCIES**

Ambala MLA gets threat to blast

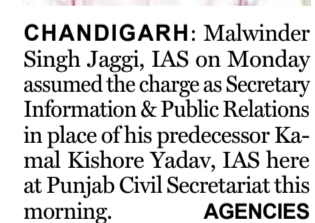
AMBALA (SATISH HANDA): Ambala SP Jashandeep Singh Randhawa increased security measures after registering a complaint with Baldev Nagar police station Ambala City on the complaint of receipt of a hand written letter received by post by Aseem Goel BJP MLA Ambala City threatening to

blast him by Yaseen Malik and Abdul Hameed Daar alias Bitta Karate on the direction of Lashkar-E-Toiba on April 26, 2022 since he along with his party has played an important role to harm 'Islam' religion in the country which cannot be tolerated by Muslim community.

Information reveals, after release of film 'The Kashmir Files' both Yaseen and Bitta have come to light once again in terrorist activities as well as killings in Kashmir valley including attack on pilgrims during Amarnath Yatra in 2008 and was arrested. Bitta also arrested by police was released on bail by TADA court on October 23, 2006 presently behind bars allegedly involved in Hawala case. Yaseen Malik working for Kashmir Liberation Front was alleged accuse in a case of attack on Indian Air Force employees on January 25, 1990 in which four persons including Sqdn Leader Ravi Khanna were killed. **AGENCIES**

Malwinder Singh Jaggi assumes charge as Secretary Information & Public Relations

CHANDIGARH: Malwinder Singh Jaggi, IAS on Monday assumed the charge as Secretary Information & Public Relations in place of his predecessor Kamal Kishore Yadav, IAS here at Punjab Civil Secretariat this morning. **AGENCIES**



CEO Chandigarh Smart City receives ISAC award 2020 in Best UT award category

CHANDIGARH: Anindita Mitra, IAS, CEO Chandigarh Smart City Ltd. received India Smart Cities Award Contest (ISAC) 2020 in the Best UT from Sh. Hardeep Singh Puri, Union Minister for Housing & Urban Affairs (MoHUA), Govt. of India a function Smart City Award Ceremony today at Surat.

The India Smart Cities Award Contest (ISAC) 2020 was organized under the Smart Cities Mission, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India for the period from 25th August 2020 till 24th Feb 2021. This was one of the important activities initiated under the Mission, where pioneering city strategies, projects and ideas have been recognized



based on innovation, impact and replicability/scalability. The ISAC 2020 recognizes and have rewarded the cities, projects and innovative ideas that are promoting sustainable development in urban areas in India, as well as stimulating inclusive, equitable, safe, healthy and collaborative cities, thus enhancing quality of life for all. The following were the

awards categories:
1. Project Awards
2. City Leadership Award
3. Best State/UT Award
4. Innovation Award
5. COVID Innovation Award
6. City Award
Timeline of the Awards
Chandigarh has participated in the competition and has won the award for Culture category for its Capitol Complex project which is a heritage site

declared by UNESCO.

Capitol Complex is the first large scale Restoration Project for Modern Heritage (spread over 100 acres) and as part of the solution to the many issues one of the innovative techniques were used to increase the life of buildings different State Governments were involved, coordination was done at highest level. Apart from this, detailed Heritage restoration plan was prepared and integrated with tourism promotion plan.

The Best UT Award was given to Chandigarh on basis of its performance in India Cycles4Change Challenge, ClimateSmart Cities Challenge, Streets4People Challenge, TULIP and DataSmart Cities. **AGENCIES**

Rajoana should be released as he is in prison for 26 yrs: Manish Tewari

In a surprise move, Congress MP Manish Tewari has advocated for the release of Balwant Singh Rajoana, a convict in the murder of then Punjab Chief Minister Beant Singh.

«Being a Terror Victim I understand anguish of my colleague Ravneet Bittu but as a Lawyer & MP from Punjab it is my considered view-S. Balwant Singh Rajoana having served 26 years in Prison his death sentence be commuted to life and he be released by passing orders under Sec 432 CrPC».

Tewari on Wednesday said that Rajoana should be released



from prison by invoking section 432 of CrPc. «Criminal jurisprudence of incarceration needs to be grounded in reformation & not retribution,» he said.

Ravneet Singh Bittu, the grandson of Beant Singh, had

opposed the release and had written a letter to the Prime Minister to order investigation in SAD demand for the release.

The matter came to fore after Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) President Sukhbir Singh Badal on Monday urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to intervene and ensure the expeditious release of Bhai Balwant Singh Rajoana to fulfill the promise made to the Sikh community to release eight Sikh prisoners, who have served more than the effective equivalent of a life sentence, on the eve of the 550th Parkash Purb

celebrations of Guru Nanak Dev in 2019.

While calling for the release of all such Sikh prisoners, the SAD president urged the Prime Minister to intervene and expedite the matter of clemency of Bhai Rajoana with the competent authority to commute the death penalty awarded to him and ensure his release at the earliest.

The Union government had approved the commutation of Bhai Rajoana's death sentence to life imprisonment as a humanitarian gesture in 2019. **AGENCIES**

Wear face mask at crowded places: Punjab govt

CHANDIGARH: The Punjab government on Thursday advised people to wear face masks at crowded places amid a surge in coronavirus cases in some of the states.

Punjab on Wednesday had reported 30 fresh cases, taking its coronavirus tally to 7,59,334.

According to the advisory issued by the Department of Home Affairs and Justice, wearing of masks should be ensured in closed environments such as in buses, trains, aircrafts, cinema halls, shopping malls,



departmental stores, offices and classrooms.

Earlier, the Haryana government had made the wearing of a face mask mandatory in four districts falling in the National

Capital region.

In Chandigarh, the joint capital of Punjab and Haryana, the administration had advised people to wear face masks at crowded places. **AGENCIES**

550 officers to be included in SVB network to root out corruption in Haryana

SATISH HANDA

Talking to media persons Director General State Vigilance Bureau Shatrughit Kapoor said, Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khatter has given green signal to include another 550 officers along with few retired senior CBI officers in State Vigilance Bureau (SVB) network immediately to root out corruption in government offices in Haryana state completely. He disclosed SVB Haryana presently have strength of only 533 officers to control more than seven lakh employees working in government offices in the state. He said, five retired senior CBI officers have already been included in SVB network.

Kapoor said, Chief Minister has expressed unhappiness over fast increasing corruption cases in government offices in the



state and situation have become bad to worst during past couple of years when state government was facing epidemic outbreak and senior government officers in government departments were alleged involved in corruption for amount worth crores of rupees in this period, however SVB was successful to arrest large number of government employees including senior officers while accepting bribe in

past sometime and it was observed such corrupt employees as well as officers were found sheltered by senior bureaucrats of departments.

Haryana Chief Minister Khatter has appreciated the role of SVB officers arrested large number of corrupt employees, officers red handed while accepting bribe and many of them are lodged behind the bars. Kapoor disclosed, there is a proposal to avail services of efficient officers from engineering sector, retired or a working judge, CID and police officers to bring them on deputation in State Vigilance Department enabling to have a strong infrastructure to wipe out crime in the state. Kapoor told that SVB presently have nearly 300 corruption cases under investigation with police and nearly 170 cases are under trial awaiting decision in courts.

Sukhbir Badal asks PM to ensure expeditious release of Bhai Rajoana

CHANDIGARH: Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal) President Sukhbir Singh Badal on Monday urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to intervene and ensure the expeditious release of Bhai Balwant Singh Rajoana to fulfill the promise made to the Sikh community to release eight Sikh prisoners who have served more than the effective equivalent of a life sentence on the eve of the 550th Parkash Purb celebrations of Guru Nanak Dev in 2019.

While calling for the release of all such Sikh prisoners, the SAD president urged the Prime Minister to intervene and expedite the matter of clemency of Bhai Rajoana with the competent authority to commute the death penalty awarded to him and ensure his release at the earliest.



The Union government had approved the commutation of Bhai Rajoana's death sentence to life imprisonment as a humanitarian gesture in 2019.

Badal said the issue warranted the urgent attention of the Prime Minister since a

clemency petition under Article 72 of the Constitution which was filed by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) in March 25, 2012 is still pending with the President.

He said the Supreme Court

had also issued a notice to the Union government to take a call on his mercy petition by April 30.

Badal asserted in his communication that he was hopeful that the Prime Minister would appreciate that there was no rationale to keep Bhai Rajoana behind bars when the Union government had commuted his death sentence.

He said the Sikh prisoner had already been incarcerated in prison for 26 years which was much longer than the effective duration of a life term.

The SAD President also apprised the Prime Minister that SAD had submitted a resolution to the Centre to request for commuting Bhai Rajoana's death sentence to life term and later for his release. **AGENCIES**

Kurukshetra in Haryana to have first Bmx cycling track in India

SATISH HANDA

Haryana state is going to be blessed with another gift in the field of sports with the approval of project for construction of Bmx cycling track at religious town Kurukshetra and the work is likely to start shortly. Sports Minister Sandeep Singh said it will be the first Bmx cycling track in the country for which four acre

area at village Lohar Majra on Pehowa Road has already been arranged and amount worth Rs 2.5 to 3 crore will be spent on this project by the government. Information reveals, presently there are six Bmx cycling tracks in the world at Thailand, Malesia, China, Japan and Korea.

Chairman of Indian Cycling Association Onkar Singh told that proposed cycling track to



be constructed at Kurukshetra will prepare country's cyclists

to participate in Olympics and bag medals for the country. He said, more than 10 players from Kurukshetra have won medals by participating in international cycling competitions in past years which include four National level cycling, 30 state level track cycling, 16 state level road cycling and 16 Mountain Bike Competitions brought name and fame for the country.

Ashwini Vaishnav reviews developmental projects in Khajuraho

Indian Railways is committed to provide world class facilities to its passengers at Railway stations said Ashwini Vaishnav, Hon'ble Minister of Railways, Communications, Electronics and Information Technology during his visit to Khajuraho Jhansi National Highway / Expressway.

During his visit, Hon'ble Minister of Railways reviewed the works done in the Pradhan Mantri Gram Yojana in Bundelkhand region. Hon'ble Minister took stock of the developmental projects of Maharaja Chhatrasal Convention Center area. Hon'ble Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, Virendra Kumar and other public representatives were also present during the inspection.

During his interaction, Hon'ble Minister of Railways announced the operation of Vande Bharat Express from Khajuraho. He said that two rake points have been approved at Chhatrapur and Khajuraho. Along with this, he also said that rail tickets can now be obtained from 45,000 post offices. Soon ROB/RUB will be constructed at important places, he added. He also mentioned about the operation of Bharat Gaurav trains like Ramayana



Express, Electrification which is to be completed by August. By that time, Vande Bharat will also start rolling out. He said that the vision of Hon'ble Prime Minister 'The Government is to serve the people' has to be followed in spirit while doing development of the region.

Hon'ble Minister of Railways also informed about the redevelopment of Khajuraho station to make it a world class station. Hon'ble Minister, along with the local administration and Railways, encouraged the farmers to set up solar plants on their land so that their income could increase. Pilot project is to be started with Bundelkhand. The land is to be identified soon. Kisan Morcha, Railway and District Administration to jointly

identify the location. He also informed that One Station One Product Scheme is also being expanded so that local level products will be made available in the market through stations. 1000 stations will be included under this scheme, in which Chhatrapur station will also be included. He said that limestone industries near Panna are important. Panna is to be linked with Railways.

On this occasion, General Manager of North Central Railway, Pramod Kumar, General Manager of West Central Railway, Sudhir Kumar Gupta, Divisional Railway Manager, Ashutosh along with District Collector, Superintendent of Police and officers of Railway Administration and District Administration were also present.

Shah meets Power, Coal, Rly ministers on power situation

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Tuesday chaired a meeting with Power Minister R.K. Singh, Coal Minister Pralhad Joshi and Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnav to access the supply of coals to the thermal powers situation following reports of coal shortage reported by many states.

The meeting was held in the Home Ministry in the North Block to review the power situation and supply of low ash coal to various thermal power plants in the country, the officials said.

In an hour-long meeting, the Ministers reportedly dis-

cussed the availability of coal to power plants and the current power demands because the temperature has gone up early this year in April itself.

This move came after in the wake of many states have reported about the low stocks of coal with the thermal powers, the officials, aware of this development said.

As many as 12 states such as Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab, Jharkhand and Haryana which are facing nominal power cuts now a days because of less coal supply.

The thermal power com-



panies are facing shortage of low ash coal because of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war as they were unable to get coal

loads from Russia.

It was learnt that the Railways Minister has been directed to rush coal loads to the

thermal power plants whose coal stocks are on minimum level.

Meanwhile, it was also learnt that the government is mulling to explore the possibility of cheap coal from other countries to meet the shortage that arose after the Russia Ukraine war. Earlier in October last year, a similar meeting was also held to meet out the coal shortage in the country.

During the meeting, Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba, CMD of Naveli Lignite Corporation, and higher officials of the Coal Ministry were also present.

Anurag Thakur inaugurates 40th 'Hunar Haat' in Mumbai



Union Minister for Information & Broadcasting and Youth Affairs & Sports, Anurag Thakur inaugurated the 40th edition of the 'Hunar Haat' in the presence of Union Minority Affairs Minister Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, in Mumbai today.

The 40th edition of Hunar Haat, a credible platform to promote 'Swadeshi' products, is being held at MMRDA Ground, Bandra-Kurla Complex in Mumbai from 16th to 27th April, 2022.

Speaking on the occasion, Thakur said "Aatmanirbhar Bharat is being strengthened by initiatives like Hunar Haat. In this 40th edition of Hunar Haat, more than a thousand craftsmen and artisans coming from 31 states have put up

400 stalls."

"There is no lack of talent in India," he said recalling how India responded to PM's clarion call for building an Aatma Nirbhar Bharat during the hours of crisis. "We started producing PPE Kits, masks and even ventilators."

The Minister also spoke about 'One District One Product', where each district is recognised for one product. He said this initiative not only allowed people to generate their own income, but also created job opportunities for a few others in the vicinity when economies across the world were affected by the Pandemic.

Thakur highlighted the steps taken by the PM in promoting Skill India. "Skill training is

provided so that you do not become job-seekers, instead become job-givers." He mentioned that our culture and educational structure had not focused much on the pride of labour. "PM Modi has stressed a lot on 'Dignity of Labour'," he said.

Thakur also informed about 'Tejas' a skilling programme which has been launched by Govt. of India. Under this initiative India will send skilled manpower to UAE. "Within a year, 30,000 skilled job-seekers will be sent to UAE," he informed.

The Minister suggested that Ministry of Minority Affairs can tie up with the universities, colleges and schools so that students can be brought to the Expo and given demonstration about how 'Best from Waste' can be created. He also urged the Minority Affairs Ministry to examine feasibility of conducting short term Skill training courses concurrently in the future edition of Hunar Haats planned across the country.

Thakur urged mediapersons to focus on various stalls put up at the 40th Hunar Haat, so that their information reaches the public and their products receive the right recognition.

Assam Govt to approach SC for Aadhaar to NRC applicants

Assam Government will file an Interlocutory Application in Supreme Court for providing Aadhaar cards to National Register of Citizens (NRC) applicants whose biometrics have been locked in the updating process of the citizenship document.

The decision was taken at a Cabinet meeting, chaired by Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, here on Wednesday evening.

Later Sarma tweeted: Approval to filing of an IA (Interlocutory Application) in the Supreme Court for relaxation of Para 9 of the SOP and for providing Aadhaar cards to NRC applicants whose Aadhaar cards are kept on hold because of existing SOP.

This, he said, will benefit a large section of people below poverty line, students, pensioners, job seekers who do not have Aadhaar cards.

Over 27 lakh NRC applicants in the state had submitted their biometrics during the claims and objections phase for updating the state's NRC. Of these 19 lakh names were not included in the final draft of the NRC published on August 31, 2019, and these people are now facing problems in generating Aadhaar as their biometrics

have been locked due to a Supreme Court directive.

The apex court is overseeing the NRC updating process.

The state government had said in the Assembly last month that it has written at least twice to the Centre in the last two years requesting them to allow the Aadhaar card issuing authority to access the biometrics of at least those people whose names had figured in the NRC final draft.

During the meeting a cabinet sub-committee was formed to discuss the way forward with different organisations by the state government and the meeting approved was given to the proposed Assam State Bridge Infrastructure Project (ASBIP) at an estimated cost of Rs 4,360 crore.

ASBIP will encompass 1,085 minor and major maintenance of bridges, capacity expansion of bridges, conversion of timber bridges to RCC bridges among others.

Approval was also given to Chief Minister's Scheme for Public Emergency under which monetary assistance to individuals or organisations can be given where budget allocation is not adequate or available.

Petrol price touches Rs 123/litre in Rajasthan's Sri Ganganagar

JAIPUR: Petrol prices in Rajasthan's Sri Ganganagar district rose to Rs 123 per litre on Monday morning, making it the costliest in the country.

The unprecedented hike has impacted over 80 per cent of petrol pumps bringing them on the verge of closure, confirmed petrol pump owners. In fact, the price of diesel here is Rs 105.31 per litre, which yet remains one of the highest prices in India. However, in the neighbouring state of Punjab, petrol and diesel are cheaper by Rs 17 and Rs 11 per litre respectively. Petrol consumers from Rajasthan can be seen making beeline at filling stations of Punjab, while those in Sri Ganganagar have very limited consumers.

In fact, 80 per cent of petrol pumps are on the verge of closure as an impact of this huge difference in fuel costs, said Sri Ganganagar District Petrol Pump Dealers Association District President Ashutosh Gupta. "Our district is selling the country's costliest petrol. The reason being the depot from this district is over 500 km away and hence one needs to be commute for around 1, 100 km which adds extra cost and hence comes this highest price," he added.

AGENCIES

Double engine UP govt should give full protection and justice to Lakhimpur witnesses: Bibi Rajwinder Kaur Raju

JALANDHAR: Mahila Kisan Union President Bibi Rajwinder Kaur Raju strongly welcomed the Supreme Court's decision for cancelling bail of main accused Ashish Mishra in the Lakhimpur Kheri (UP) case and said the ruling right-wing party, who allegedly exerted political influence to save its Union Minister Ajay Mishra Teni vis-a-vis to secure the bail of his accused son, has failed miserably keeping in view the SC verdict due to which the victim families and witnesses could have faith for justice.

In a statement issued here on Monday, the Mahila Kisan Union President Bibi Rajwinder Kaur Raju alleged the "double engine" Yogi government in UP had deliberately not argued well on the bail plea of Ashish Mishra in a Lucknow court two months back. Due to such behavior the martyr and injured farmers of the Lakhimpur Kheri case could not get justice timely.

Despite the protection given by the court, witnesses were being threatened and eyewitness Hardeep Singh has also been attacked on the alleged



provocation by BJP leaders.

In the light of the recent Supreme Court verdict the women farmer leader has demanded personal intervention of saffron-clad Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath to ensure fair justice to the sufferer farmers who were brutally killed and injured under the SUV car of accused Ashish Mishra and punish all the culprits of this heinous crime.

She demanded from Prime Minister Narendra Modi that the Union Minister Ajay Mishra Tenni (father of the main accused Ashish Mishra), who is alleged to have conspired in this heinous murder case, should be immediately removed from the Union Cabinet. AGENCIES

GST : GoM yet to take a view on rate rationalization

NEW DELHI: A group comprising ministers from states is yet to finalise a report on rationalisation of GST rates and a decision will be taken in due course, sources said.

The Group of Ministers (GoM) will deliberate and finalise recommendations which will be sent to the GST Council, headed by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and comprising state finance ministers. No view on rate rationalisation has yet been taken by the GoM, the sources said.

There was a thought in some quarters that the slab of 5 per cent may be broken into 3 per cent and 8 per cent, and the remaining slabs of 12, 18 and 28 per cent will continue. But no view on rate rationalisation has yet been taken by the GoM, let alone the GST Council. AGENCIES

Goa BJP leader: Take back Padma awards from stars promoting tobacco products

Goa BJP's medical cell convenor, Shekhar Salkar, on Wednesday urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to strip Bollywood actors Amitabh Bachchan, Ajay Devgn and Akshay Kumar and Shah Rukh Khan off their Padma awards for featuring in surrogate advertisements promoting tobacco products.

"I have no words to condemn the way Akshay Kumar has joined the gang of Amitabh Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan and Akshay Devgn to promote cancer through a surrogate advt of tobacco product. Ironically, all these people are Padma award winners," Salkar Tweeted.

"While @PMOIndia is working overtime to make India healthy through Fit India movement, the entire mission is humiliated by these so-called influencers with their surrogate advt trapping the younger generation into tobacco consump-



I have no words to condemn the way Akshay Kumar has joined the gang of Amitabh Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan and Akshay Devgn to promote cancer through a surrogate advt of tobacco product. Ironically, all these people are Padma award winners"

who is also an office-bearer of the National Organisation for Tobacco Eradication.

"People have put their faith in these disgraced, dishonourable actors who have sold their soul and ethics to make money at the cost of minds of innocent youth who emulate them and get adversely influenced and initiated to tobacco consumption," he added.

Bachchan is the recipient of the Padma Vibhushan award, while Khan, Devgn and Akshay Kumar have been awarded the Padma Shri award, the country's fourth highest civilian honour.

NEWS BRIEF

MCA registers highest ever 1.67 lakh companies in FY 2021-22

During the Financial Year 2021-22, Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) registered more than 1.67 Lakh company incorporations as compared to 1.55 Lakh companies during FY 2020-21.

The increase is significant considering that number of companies incorporated during Financial Year 2020-21 were the highest in any of the previous years. The incorporations during FY 2021-22 are 8% more than the incorporations during FY 2020-21. While MCA had registered 1.24 lakh companies during FY 2018-19 and 1.22 lakh companies in 2019-20 respectively, it had registered 1.55 Lakh companies during FY 2020-21.

As part of Government of India's drive for Ease of Doing Business (EoDB), the MCA has taken many initiatives thereby saving as many procedures, time and cost for starting a business in India.

Jakhar fails to reply to Cong disciplinary panel notice, faces action

NEW DELHI: The Congress Disciplinary Committee will meet in a couple of days to decide on action against former Punjab Congress chief Sunil Jakhar and Kerala Congress leader K V Thomas, after it served them notices on April 11.

Jakhar on his part said he has not replied to the panel notice and was ready to face action.

AICC general secretary Tariq



Anwar, who is a member of the party's disciplinary panel chaired by A K Antony, said they have received the reply of Thomas but not Jakhar, who now faces action

including suspension or expulsion for violating party discipline.

"We had given both the leaders notices to reply within a week, but we have not received Jakhar's reply to the notice. The disciplinary committee will hold its meeting in the next day or two and will take appropriate action, which includes suspension or expulsion," Anwar told reporters. AGENCIES

Government appoints Lt Gen Manoj C Pande as next Chief of Army Staff

Government has appointed Lt Gen Manoj C Pande, presently Vice Chief of the Army Staff, as the next Chief of the Army Staff with effect from the afternoon of April 30, 2022. Born on May 06, 1962, Lt Gen Manoj C Pande was commissioned on December 24, 1982 in the Corps of Engineers (The Bombay Sappers) of the Indian Army. During his long and distinguished service spanning over 39 years, he has served in a variety of Command, Staff and Instructional appointments. The Command appointments of Lt Gen Manoj C Pande include Command of an Engineer Brigade in the Western Theatre, as part of Strike Corps and an Infantry Brigade along with Line-of-Control in Jammu & Kashmir. Other important Command appointments include a Mountain Division in the high-altitude area of the Western Ladakh and Command of a Corps, deployed along the LAC and in Counter Insurgency Operations area of Eastern Command.



In the rank of Lt General, the officer has held important appointments including that of Commander-in-Chief of the Andaman & Nicobar Command and as the GOC-in-C of the Eastern Command at Kolkata before getting appointed as the Vice Chief of the Army Staff.

Lt Gen Manoj C Pande is an alumnus of National Defence Academy and has undergone courses at Staff College, Camberley (UK), Army War College, Mhow and National Defence College, New Delhi.

Niti Aayog releases draft battery swapping policy

NEW DELHI: Government think tank Niti Aayog on Thursday released a draft battery swapping policy under which all metropolitan cities with a population above 40 lakh will be prioritised for development of battery swapping network under the first phase.

The Aayog in its draft policy further said all major cities such as state capitals, UT headquarters and cities with population above 5 lakh will be covered under the second phase, given the importance of the two-wheeler and three-wheeler vehicle segments in growing cities.

According to the draft policy, vehicles with swappable batteries will be sold without a battery, providing the benefit of lower purchase costs to potential EV owners. It said any individual or entity is free to set up a battery swapping station at any location, provided that the specified technical, safety and performance



standards are adhered to.

Considering the constraint of space in urban areas for setting up charging stations at scale, Finance Minister in her Budget speech 2022-23 had announced that the Centre would be introducing a battery swapping policy and interoperability standards in the EV ecosystem.

According to an official statement, in this regard, Niti Aayog held an inter-ministerial discus-

sion to formulate a robust and comprehensive battery swapping policy framework in February 2022. It also held an extensive pre-draft stakeholder discussion with a wide spectrum of stakeholders representing battery swapping operators, battery manufacturers, vehicle OEMs, financial institutions, think tanks and other experts. The draft is up for consultation, and Niti Aayog has invited comments on it until June 5. AGENCIES

Inaugural NIF translation fellowships for 3 books

BENGALURU: The New India Foundation (NIF) on Thursday announced three awardees of its inaugural translation fellowships, chosen from across 10 Indian languages for research and translation of three historically significant non-fiction texts originally published in Bengali, Kannada and Marathi to English.

Awarded for a period of six months with a stipend of Rs 6 lakh to each recipient or team, the NIF translation fellowships offer an opportunity for direct mentorship under a language expert committee and NIF trustees, apart from providing financial, editorial, legal, and publishing support.

The three awardees are Venkateswar Ramaswamy (literary translator) and Amal Biswas (statistician) to translate Nirmal Kumar's "Diaries 1946-47" from Bengali; N S Gundur (academi-



cian and literary historian) to translate D R Nagaraj's "Allamprabhu Mattu Shaiva Pratibhe" from Kannada; and Rahul Sarwate (academician and historian) to translate Sharad Patil's "Marxvad: Phule-Ambedkarvaad" from Marathi.

Instituted to promote non-fiction translations from various Indian languages to English, the fellowships are envisioned to create an expansive cultural reach for works which have thus far been confined to those who understand the original language of their composition. AGENCIES

Two farmers killed, one injured in wild bear attack

Two farmers were killed and one sustained grievous injuries when a wild bear attacked them in Jharkhand's Gumla district on Thursday, a police officer said.

The three farmers belonging to the same family were engaged in ploughing their paddy field in the morning when an adult wild bear attacked them at Ambera Nagesiatoli village under the jurisdiction of Karanj police station, the officer said. While 56-year-old Lalit Kishan died on the spot, Subhash Kishan (25) and Mangleshwar Kishan (35) sustained grievous injuries after the wild animal pounced on them suddenly. The injured were rushed to Sisai Referral Hospital for primary treatment before they were referred to Rajendra Institute of Medical Science (RIMS), Ranchi.

Congress in its existential crisis is not good for democracy

Congress has been consistently decimated after every election. When the BJP under Narendra Modi and Amit Shah swept power at the Centre in 2014, the Congress ruled in nine states. Now with the loss of Punjab, the number of States where it is in power of its own is down to just two. In the last eight years since 2014, the Congress has won just five of the 45 elections held in the country.

The most ironic is its fading in Punjab where it looked all set to win, less than a year ago. Call it infighting or mishandling by party high command, it lost badly and its Chief Ministerial candidate Charanjit Singh Channi who contested from two seats, lost from both.

The PCC President Navjot Singh Sidhu too lost. Similarly in Uttarakhand, it was hopeful for a victory but the party lost with its former Chief Minister, Harish Rawat losing elections from Lalkuan. From Uttar Pradesh where party leader, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra contested on the slogan of "ladki hun, lad sakti hun" and crisscrossed the entire state and from Goa and Manipur there was no consolation for the party. It is becoming increasingly clear that Nehrus and Gandhis seem to have entirely lost to charisma to pull in votes but just targets for dynastic whipping.

The rout of the Congress does not bode good for the party and for a healthy democracy which needs a strong opposition because the recent elections were fought on the premise of a "semi-final" for the 2024 parliamentary election. The results of the latest round of assembly elections show that the BJP is well placed to win again in 2024. There now remains no doubt that come 2024 and it would pit the BJP not against the Congress but a coalition of regional parties, may be sans Congress. The Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh elections, later this year, the Karnataka election in mid-2023, and polls in in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Mizoram in November and Rajasthan in December the same year, could well decide the party's future. Its hope of wresting back Himachal Pradesh from the BJP later this year in the absence of six time chief minister, Virbhadra Singh, who died last year, stands little slim chance. In the two states it still rules, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh which go to the polls next year, there is huge infighting. It is a grim reminder for the grand old party to reform or else by the 2024 General Election, it may be in power in no state at all. Democracy needs a strong Opposition to hold the government to account. Indeed regional parties are gearing up and so is Aam Aadmi Party but a motley collection of parties each eyeing the Prime Ministership, does not suit the best interests of a vibrant democracy. Less than a decade old AAP is the only political party other than the BJP and the Congress that is in power in two States and it has to be an important constituent of the political grouping that comes together to take on the BJP in 2024.

It is time for the Congress to act fast to check the existential crisis and set its house in order by ending adhocism. For instance, after Rahul Gandhi's resignation as president in 2019, Sonia Gandhi has been interim president and she still continues as such. Notwithstanding the complete rout in five states, the Congress still has around over 692 MLAs in the country, compared to BJP's 1,373 which confirms that everything is still not lost but Congress has to resurrect in the best interests of democracy.

LETTERBOX

Readers' feedback adds value to the newspaper. Please email comments on reports, features and columns to fwletters@gmail.com. We will publish them on this page.



West Bengal best under MGNREGA but awaits Rs 2786 crore

West Bengal has become the best performing State both in terms of allotting jobs and utilising funds under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). However, when it comes to receipt of funds, it has yet not received Rs 2786 crore amount due from the Centre.

"Under @MamataOfficial's exemplary leadership, Bengal ranked first among all States in 'Total Persons Worked' (Employed) in MGNREGA (2021-22). Bengal Govt. gave work to nearly 1.1 Cr people through MGNREGA! This is the #BengalModel that @narendramodi ji could only dream of!" it tweeted.

"Bengal ranked 2nd among all States in Person-Days-Generated (2021-22), having generated 36.4 Cr of person days. Rs 2,876 Cr is PENDING from the Central Govt upto March 31st, 2022. We're still awaiting payment and wondering if the Govt spends more time sleeping or spewing venom!" the party said in another Twitter post.

According to statistics recently provided in Rajya Sabha by the Minister of State for Rural Development Ram Kripal Yadav, West Bengal generated more than 28.21 crore work days under the scheme so far and spent more than Rs 7,335.31 crore for it.

The Minister was replying to a question from Trinamool Congress MP Manas Ranjan Bhunia. He also said that Tamil Nadu occupied the second spot with 22.17 crore work days and spent Rs 5,981.75 crore. Andhra Pradesh was third with 18.16 crore work days, and funds worth Rs 5054.17 crore.

BJP ruled states slacken

Bhunias pointed out that the performance of BJP-ruled States such as Goa, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh was "not impressive." Goa is ranked at the bottom of the list with 94,000 work



BENGAL RANKED 2ND AMONG ALL STATES IN PERSON-DAYS-GENERATED (2021-22), HAVING GENERATED 36.4 CR OF PERSON DAYS. RS 2,876 CR IS PENDING FROM THE CENTRAL GOVT UPTO MARCH 31ST, 2022. WE'RE STILL AWAITING PAYMENT AND WONDERING IF THE GOVT SPENDS MORE TIME SLEEPING OR SPEWING VENOM!

days and spent funds worth Rs 2.47 crore. Gujarat generated 2.93 crore work days and spent funds worth Rs 793.50 crore, while Uttar Pradesh generated 15.6 crore work days and utilised funds worth Rs 3701.54 crore.

TMC in protest mode

West Bengal's ruling party Trinamool Congress will start a massive agitation against the Union government on the issues of MGNREGA and GST dues and BSF excesses in the border areas of the state. Soon after

the upcoming by polls for one Lok Sabha and one Assembly constituency, the party would launch these protests. The by polls in West Bengal will be conducted on April 12, and the results will be announced on April 16.

Besides, the Trinamool Congress leadership will also contact the chief ministers of non-BJP ruled states and urge them to be a part of a joint nationwide movement on the issues.

Political observers feel that this initiative is prompted by Banerjee's long-term plan to ensure that her party

plays a key role in forging a unity of the anti-BJP forces in the country.

Wondering whether the Centre spends more time "sleeping or spewing venom", Trinamool Congress has claimed that West Bengal was yet to receive MGNREGA dues amounting to Rs 2,786 crore from the BJP-led Union government.

The party, quoting a list recently issued by the Centre, said that the eastern state has topped the chart in providing employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), giving work to 1.1 crore people in 2021-22, and has come second in generating mandays under the scheme.

By Bharat Hiteshi-Senior Journalist & Columnist...views are personal



If you love reading books you're the best

I have been very fond of books and magazines since my childhood days. Be it in my city or in any other city, even today the most favourite places of mine are bookstores, magazine stalls and libraries. Magazines are gradually disappearing from the stalls, but books are everywhere, from book shops to airports and your mobile phones. Reading e-books has its own benefits. They are easy to carry and do not require any space. From the very beginning, there was an inclination to buy books, so a small library has been developed in the house. The places of living kept on changing when I was working for the newspaper houses, but the stock of books kept traveling together. As soon as I get free time from the busy work schedule, I feel like picking up a book and start reading. Books transport you to another world. Last year, I had to stay in the hospital for a long duration, where my favorite books stayed with me. With this, positive, creative and happy thoughts kept coming in my mind. When doctors and nurses saw me reading a book, they used to leave with a smile and give good compliments.

Vani, a well-known journalist and author, whose second novel - 'Seconds Letter' is in news these days,



says that «She cannot even imagine a home without books. Reading books gives motivation to write, and books introduce her to the experiences of other writers. During the last two years, when everyone was forced to stay indoors, it didn't make much difference to the book lovers. They were happy to get a lot of free time to sit comfortably and finish their favourite books, which was not

possible earlier." These days Vani is busy writing a self-help book for women. As food lovers feel good in a sweets shop, the book lovers get satisfaction in a bookstore. One day I said to the owner of the English Book Shop that you are fortunate to be surrounded by so many books; you can read any new book you want.» Can you imagine what his answer was, he said, «I have studied

only till 10th standard. That's why I cannot read all the books but I can smell and tell which book will sell more.» There are people like him also.

If someone asks what are the benefits of reading books, people will tell you different benefits. I believe that the biggest advantage of reading books is that you can live many lives in one life. Different authors must have poured many years of experience in their books, the benefit of which you can get within a few hours only. For those who want to improve their language, learn new words, then reading is a good way out. Reading has great benefits for your mental health. Reading is like an exercise to the brain. While reading a story, your mind can indulge in imaginations. Reading is fun. That's why many movies and TV shows are based on books. Reading increases concentration and introduces new words. The more words one knows, the more intelligent that person is. If you make a habit of reading a book before going to bed, you will definitely get a good sleep.

Narvijay Yadav, Writer is a senior journalist & columnist...views are personal, Formerly with Free Press Journal, Dainik Bhaskar, Rashtriya Sahara...views are personal



BOOKS: REVIEW

Essays plucked out of real life Situations & Experiences

HUMRA QURAISHI

What strikes almost immediately about the New Delhi based German writer Roswitha Joshi is her spontaneity and that grit to be frank and outspoken and straightforward. Perhaps, a rarity in the times we are destined to be living in. And that's why these qualities do leave a definite impression.

Needless for me to focus on the fact that her writings do carry those imprints to her personality. Writ large it gets, as one reads her

novels, short stories, verse and those long and short essays.

In fact, I'm just back from the launch of her latest book of essays and verse, titled, Spaced Out - A Cross-Cultural Cocktail. Before I focus on the book, I must say that it was one of those best launches I have attended in these recent months. Hosted by the Austrian ambassador to India, Katharina Wieser, at the Austrian Embassy, there were none of the formal speeches but a lovely informal launch followed by lots to eat and talk about! Getting back to

I have been particularly impressed with her essays which seem to be plucked out of real life situations and experiences. Not to be overlooked the fact that Roswitha has been a witness to a whole range of situations, with definite backgrounders to them

Roswitha's latest book, it



Title of the book - Spaced Out - A Cross-Cultural Cocktail
Author - Roswitha Joshi
Publisher - Hemlunt Publishing
Price - Rs. 400
Pages - 191

carries an entire range. Much in keeping with the very title, it carries tragedies as well as comedies, intense grief-stricken situations as well as those along the lighter-brighter side to everyday life.

I have been particularly impressed with her essays which seem to be plucked out of real life situations and experiences. Not to be overlooked the fact that Roswitha has been a witness to a whole

range of situations, with definite backgrounders to them. She was born and brought up in Hamburg. And its during her studies of Political Science and History at the Hamburg University, she met and tied the knot with a doctoral candidate from India. And with that she moved to India, settling down here with her husband, raising their two children. She'd earlier worked at the German Embassy here in New Delhi, but then took to full-time writing.

What's kept her going strong amidst the various situations and challenges is her determination to carry on. Living her "own adventure story" with "humour, wit, and grit as survival tools."

वह हाथ सदा पवित्र होते
है; जो प्रार्थना
से ज्यादा.. सेवा के लिए
उठते हैं..

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NEWSBRIEFS

Kia to drive in EV6 electric crossover in India, bookings open next month



NEW DELHI: South Korean automaker major Kia is planning to foray into the electric vehicle segment in India with the launch of its high-end premium electric crossover EV6 later this year. The company, which currently sells models like Seltos and Sonet in the country, will open the bookings for the electric model on May 26. Only 100 units of the EV6 would be on sale in the country. "We are embarking on the next level Kia experience in India. We are launching our most celebrated EV globally, the EV6 a true game-changer, designed from the ground up to make electric mobility fun, convenient, and accessible by combining a highly impressive real-world driving range, ultra-fast charging capabilities, a spacious high-tech interior," Kia India MD and CEO Tae-Jin Park said at an event on Wednesday evening. **AGENCIES**

Passenger vehicle exports from India rise 43% in FY22, Maruti Suzuki leads segment



Passenger vehicle exports from India increased 43 per cent in FY22, with Maruti Suzuki India leading the segment with dispatches of over 2.3 lakh units, as per the latest data by industry body SIAM. The total passenger vehicle (PV) exports stood at 5,77,875 units in 2021-22 fiscal, as compared to 4,04,397 units in 2020-21. Passenger car shipments saw 42 per cent growth at 3,74,986 units, while utility vehicle exports rose 46 per cent at 2,01,036 units during the last fiscal, the data by the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) showed. Exports of vans rose to 1,853 units in 2021-22 fiscal, from 1,648 units in the 2020-21 fiscal year. Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) led the vertical last fiscal, followed by Hyundai Motor India and Kia India at second and third positions, respectively. MSI, the country's largest car-maker, exported 2,35,670 PVs last fiscal, an over two-fold increase, as compared to 94,938 units in the 2020-21 fiscal year. **AGENCIES**

British PM Johnson meets industrialist Gautam Adani

AHMEDABAD: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who is on a two-day India visit, on Thursday held a meeting with industrialist Gautam Adani here.

The meeting took place at the Adani Group's global headquarters at Shantigram on the outskirts of Ahmedabad city. "Honoured to host @BorisJohnson, the first UK PM to visit Gujarat, at Adani HQ. Delighted to support climate & sustainability agenda with focus on renewables, green H2 & new energy. Will also work with UK companies to co-create defence & aerospace technologies. #AtmanirbharBharat," Adani tweeted afterwards.

Sources said the two discussed, among other things, key sectors such as energy transition, climate action, aerospace and defence collaboration.

With India set to invest USD 300 billion by 2030 to



modernize its armed forces, sources said collaboration in the defence sector was one of the key focus areas of the meeting between Adani and Johnson.

Discussions revolved around how Adani Group and British companies can collaborate to co-design and develop aerospace and defence technologies as part of the Atmanirbhar

Bharat initiative, sources said.

Adani also announced an academic facilitation program for young Indians through Chevening Scholarship, one of the most prestigious international scholarships offered by the UK government. He also invited the British Prime Minister to the India-UK Climate Science and Technology Summit, to be held in London

“ Honoured to host @BorisJohnson, the first UK PM to visit Gujarat, at Adani HQ. Delighted to support climate & sustainability agenda with focus on renewables, green H2 & new energy”

on June 28.

The Adani Group Chairman had met Johnson in October last year at the Global Investment Summit in London where the two leaders had reiterated their commitment to ongoing transition to clean energy. After the meeting on Thursday, Johnson left for Halol industrial area near Vadodara where he will visit a factory of British equipment manufacturer JCB. **AGENCIES**

Grasim's caustic soda unit inaugurated in AP

AMARAVATI: Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy, along with Aditya Birla Group Chairman Kumaramangalam Birla, on Thursday inaugurated Grasim Industries Limited's caustic soda manufacturing unit at Balabhadrapuram in East Godavari district.

The Chief Minister, in the company of Birla, went round the plant and inspected various aspects of its design and safety features.

The unit would reach a production capacity of 1,600 tonnes per day in three phases, entailing a total investment of Rs 2,700 crore. The project would provide direct employment to 1,300 people and indirect employment to another 1,150, Birla said on the occasion. He said 75 per cent of the jobs would be given to the locals in accordance with the state law.

Grasim Industries acquired an ailing caustic soda manufacturing unit from KPR Industries in 2019 as part of its



plans to expand its Chlor-Alkali business. Grasim currently has a 29 per cent capacity share in caustic soda manufacturing in the country.

The Aditya Birla Group Chairman said Grasim completely revised the design of the Balabhadrapuram plant, incorporating a combined water treatment-cum-effluent treatment and recycling plant with Zero Liquid Discharge facility.

This would ensure no liquid went out of the site, leaving no possibility of contamination of ground water. Also, modern Electrostatic Precipitators for

dust absorption and elaborate scrubbing system for exhaust gases have been put in place and connected to the Central Pollution Control Board's on-line monitoring system.

A three-layer safety design has also been put in place, along with a state-of-the-art command and control centre to manage emergencies.

On the occasion, the Chief Minister announced that cases filed against people who protested against the setting up of the plant would be withdrawn and Government Order to the effect issued. **AGENCIES**

Wipro appoints Satya Easwaran as India head



NEW DELHI: IT major Wipro Limited has appointed Satya Easwaran, a former senior executive at consultancy KPMG, as its India head.

Easwaran will be in charge of strengthening Wipro's business in India across key industry sectors through strategic consulting, transformation and modernisation engagements, it said in a statement on Monday.

"India is a strategic market for Wipro and I am excited to welcome Satya to champion



our bold ambition for growth and leadership here. Satya's rich international experience in delivering high value consulting services, and his track record of building successful sales and leadership teams will help strengthen Wipro's positioning as a trusted partner for Indian clients," Anis Chenchah, CEO of APMEA (Asia Pacific, India, Middle East and Africa) and member of the Wipro Executive Board, said.

Easwaran will help clients leverage Wipro's capabilities and investments in cloud, digital, engineering R&D, data, analytics and cybersecurity for their business and digital transformation initiatives. Prior to joining Wipro, he was the head of business consulting and the telecom, media and technology sector leader at KPMG India.

During his tenure at KPMG, in India and the US, and at Accenture India, Easwaran held multiple leadership positions in management consulting with a focus on Software-as-a-Service (SaaS), cloud, digital, strategy and transformation, the statement said. "India is experiencing significant technology-led shifts and a growing demand for specialised skills and innovation — all of which present us with exciting opportunities to strengthen our partnerships with clients and deliver value to our ecosystem. I look forward to contributing towards Wipro's leadership in the India market," Easwaran said. **AGENCIES**

After Ford, Nissan pulls the plug on Datsun brand in India



Nissan announced that the Datsun brand will be phased out of India, nine years after the company launched the brand's worldwide relaunch in the nation. After failing in its ambitious global relaunch of Datsun, Nissan decided to phase out the brand in 2020 in Russia and Indonesia, as well as South Africa and India, which were identified as crucial markets for the entry-level car sector. Earlier, brands like Ford and Chevrolet also pulled out of the Indian market.

Confirming the move to discontinue the Datsun brand,

Nissan India, in a statement, said, "Production of Datsun Redi-GO has ceased at the Chennai plant (Renault Nissan Automotive India Private Ltd). Sales of the model still continue (till the stock lasts)."

The company further said, "We can reassure all existing and future Datsun owners that customer satisfaction remains our priority, and we will continue to provide the highest levels of after-sales service, parts availability, and warranty support from our national dealership network." **AGENCIES**

JSPL's steel production rises in March quarter



NEW DELHI: Jindal Steel and Power Limited (JSPL) on Monday posted a 2% rise in steel production at 2.11 million tonnes in the quarter ended March 2022.

Its sales also registered a growth of 8 per cent at 2.07 Million Tonnes (MT) in the January-March period, according to a statement. In financial year 2021-22, the company produced a record 8.1 MT of steel while sales were at a record 7.63 MT.

Despite several challenges throughout FY22, JSPL managed to meet its production guidance breaching the 8 MT mark for the first time. For the

fifth consecutive year, JSPL has also posted spectacular growth in annual steel sales on a year-on-year basis, the statement said.

JSPL Managing Director V R Sharma said, "we aim to produce more than 9 MT in FY23. Our Angul plant expansion is on track and we expect to reach more than 15 MT capacity by FY25. The company has significantly enhanced its raw material supply after winning four new coal blocks recently". As part of its expansion, the company has plans to set up a coal gasification plant to manufacture steel through gasification technology. **AGENCIES**

Adani Ports to acquire marine services firm Ocean Sparkle

Adani Ports and Special Economic Zones (APSEZ) on Friday said its subsidiary Adani Harbour Services has entered into a definitive agreement to acquire leading third-party marine services provider Ocean Sparkle Ltd (OSL).

Commenting on the development, APSEZ CEO and Wholtime Director Karan Adani said given the synergies of OSL and the Adani Harbour Services Ltd (TAHSL), the consolidated business is likely to double in five years with improved mar-



gins, thereby creating significant value for APSEZ's shareholders.

He further said this acquisition not only provides APSEZ

a significant share of India's marine services market but also provides us with a platform for building a presence in other countries. According to a statement, key activities carried out by the company include towage, pilotage, and dredging.

"With an asset base of 94 owned vessels and 13 third-party-owned vessels, OSL is a market leader," it added.

OSL is valued at an enterprise value of Rs 1,700 crore with Rs 300 crore of free cash in the company, as per the statement.

The company was established in 1995 by a group of marine technocrats with P Jairaj Kumar as the Chairman and MD, who will continue as the Chairman of the OSL.

It has a presence in all the major ports, 15 minor ports and all the 3 LNG terminals in India, the statement said.

Adani Ports and Special Economic Zones, the flagship transportation arm of the diversified Adani group, is India's largest private ports and logistics company. **AGENCIES**

Nestle Q1 net profit slips 1.25 pc to Rs 594.71 cr

NEW DELHI: FMCG major Nestle India Ltd on Thursday reported a 1.25 per cent decline in its net profit to Rs 594.71 crore for the first quarter ended March 2022.

The company, which follows January-December financial year, had posted a profit of Rs 602.25 crore in the same period a year ago, Nestle said in a BSE filing.

However, Nestle India's net sales increased 9.74 per cent to Rs 3,950.90 crore during the quarter against Rs 3,600.20 crore in the corresponding period last fiscal, the company added.

Its total expenses in the January-March quarter rose 12.98 per cent to Rs 3,195.90 crore compared to Rs 2,828.61 crore a year ago.

Nestle India's domestic sales surged 10.23 per cent to Rs 3,794.26 crore from Rs 3,442.03 crore in the January-March quarter of 2021. **AGENCIES**

Fluid Ventures announces close of its debut fund at Rs 50 cr

NEW DELHI: Direct-to-Consumer (D2C) focused VC fund, Fluid Ventures floated by Amit Singal and Dhianu Das announced the final close of its debut fund at INR 50 crores.

The fund announced its first close in June 2021 and has seen participation from 35+ limited partners (LPs) that are high net-worth CXOs and successful founders/entrepreneurs from India and internationally, with 80% being the first-time investors in a SEBI-registered AIF. The fund, with an initial target of 45-crores, received investor commitments of INR 50 crores and utilized the green shoe option. The fund has already invested in six companies in the last three quarters, which include Fabriclore (e-retailer for fabric), Shumee Toys (sustainable wooden toys brand), Wall Mantra (home décor brand), Eske (luxury lifestyle brand), Raskik (coconut infused beverages) and Mashterchow (Chinese condiment and sauce brand).

Fluid Ventures, a D2C-focused fund investing in emerg-



introducing D2C 2.0 'accessible to all', where the products are available to Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities as well. Our model is not to spray and pray, but to be focused in approach, invest in emerging D2C business and build Indian global brands." Akshay Grover, Investment Lead, adds, "Our focus is to partner with founders that are analytical and can think out-of-the-box when it comes to marketing endeavours in building world-class brands." Among its six portfolio companies, two have already raised the follow-up investments and, three portfolio companies have been shortlisted for Amazon's Global Selling Propel Accelerator Season 2.

He adds, "We are looking for products made for Bharat by

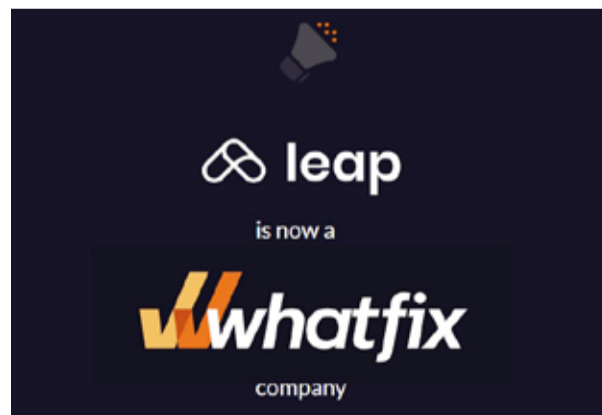
Whatfix Acquires Leap.is to Expand Mobile Capabilities

Whatfix, the global leader in the digital adoption platforms (DAP) space, today announced the acquisition of Leap.is (previously Jiny.io), a mobile-first onboarding and assistance platform that brings the value of digital adoption platforms to mobile applications. The deal marks Whatfix's first mobile DAP product focused acquisition, as well as its largest M&A deal so far.

Mobile Expansion Details

The acquisition will augment the company's platform by extending Whatfix's mobile capabilities. Leap's toolset will seamlessly integrate with Whatfix's existing applications by adding guidance to mobile apps to improve activations and adoption, reduce time-to-ship for onboarding experiences, and increase the customization of user experiences overall.

The shift to mobile is one of the most important business dynamics of recent years, especially amid the expansion of remote work, said Khadim Bhatti, CEO and Co-founder of Whatfix. We're eager to bring on the Leap team to augment our mobile capabilities and to sharpen our focus on this



absolutely essential segment. This acquisition follows an extremely successful year for Whatfix, during which the company achieved 76% YoY revenue growth, 85% increase in new business revenue, and 250% increase in revenue from existing business. Other milestones include closing new partnerships and enterprise customers, earning recognition from top analyst firms, and winning several industry awards including the Deloitte Technology Fast 500.

Whatfix is the industry leading Digital Adoption platform (DAP) and we are thrilled to join forces with Whatfix to help extend its DAP leader-

ship to mobile, said Kushagra Sinha, CEO & Co-founder, Leap. Our common goal has always been to accelerate user adoption of software products and Leap's mobile offering fits perfectly with Whatfix's browser and desktop offerings. Joining Whatfix feels like a natural progression in our journey.

Desktop and Web Expansions

As a part of the company's continued product innovation, Whatfix also launched Whatfix Studio, a more intuitive and powerful iteration of the current content editor. Studio is built on a low-code platform, enabling content creators to

fully leverage its capabilities with little to no technical skills. The easy-to-use UI enables creators to seamlessly design customized end-to-end journeys for end users. Whatfix Studio reduces content creation time, improves quality of content and experiences, and helps improve user engagement on applications on which it is deployed.

Whatfix is also introducing a significant revamp to its Desktop offering. This is aimed at making the application more scalable and stable, while also providing the foundation for robust new capabilities and bringing Whatfix's desktop capabilities at par with the Web experience. With this revamp, Whatfix extends its DAP offering to all applications running on Windows 10, and offers out-of-the-box support for popular ERP such as SAP ERP and collaboration applications such as Microsoft Teams.

Additionally, Whatfix is launching the Whatfix Hub - a centralized platform for user support and engagement. With Whatfix Hub, enterprises can offer their users guidance on all web and desktop applications on which Whatfix is

enabled, right from the user's desktop. Customers can also use Hub for enhancing their employees' onboarding experience and driving continuous engagement through targeted communication right on the employee's desktop.

About Whatfix

Whatfix empowers anyone, anywhere to have scalable success with technology they use everyday, achieving greater knowledge, expanding capability, and unlocking productivity for themselves and their organizations. Whatfix's Digital Adoption Platform (DAP) integrates seamlessly with applications to enable users, providing in-context information and guidance to immediately increase individual capability and collectively amplify productivity. The organization has six offices globally in the US, India, UK, Germany, and Australia, and works with Fortune 500 companies around the world. Whatfix has raised USD 140 million to date, and is backed by marquee investors including Softbank Vision Fund 2, Sequoia Capital India, and Cisco Investments.

Government to take call on LIC IPO timing this week

NEW DELHI: Union government is likely to take a call on the timing of LIC initial public offering within this week, a senior official said.

The sale of 5% stake or 31.6 crore shares in the country's largest insurer was originally planned for in March, but was postponed in view of the geopolitical tension.

The government has time till May 12 to launch the IPO without filing fresh papers with markets regulator SEBI.

The official said it would be a tough call to decide whether to go ahead with the retail and domestic investor demand or to wait for geopolitical tension to ease and FIIs to return to



market. A decision on timing the IPO would be taken this week, LIC's embedded value, which is a measure of the consolidated shareholders' value in an insurance company, was pegged at

about Rs 5.4 lakh crore as of September 30, 2021, by international actuarial firm Milliman Advisors. There were estimates made in certain quarters that LIC's market valuation would

be about 2-3 times its embedded value. The official said that for a company of the magnitude of LIC, such high multiplier to embedded value may not be correct. The official further said the IPO price would have to be fixed in a way that on the listing day there is an upside to the stock and investors get rewarded.

LIC is already a matured company and has seen business growth since its inception. The market valuation would have to be done keeping in mind its growth potential here-on, the official added. If the IPO is not launched now then it would have to be deferred till August or September since fresh papers

with updated quarterly results and valuations would have to be filed with SEBI.

If the government decides to go ahead with the initial public offering by May 12 then the life insurer will have to file the red herring prospectus with SEBI by next week.

The official also said that under the present market condition the government is unlikely to offload more than 5 per cent stake in the life insurance behemoth. When we are already facing headwinds, we cannot test waters with higher IPO size. The finance ministry did not respond to the e-mail seeking comments for the story. **AGENCIES**

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman for regulating crypto at global level to check money laundering, terror funding



Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Tuesday made a strong case for regulating cryptocurrencies at a global level to mitigate the risk of money laundering and terror funding.

Participating at a high-level panel discussion organised by the IMF, the Finance Minister said that as long as the non-governmental activity of the crypto assets was through unhosted wallets, the regulation was going to be very difficult.

However, she said, cross border payments between countries will become very effective through Central Bank-driven digital currencies.

"The risk which worries me more on the non-governmental domain is essentially you're looking at unhosted wallets across the borders, across the globe... So, regulation cannot be done by a single country within its terrain through some effective method and for doing it across the borders, technology doesn't have a solution which will be acceptable to various

mark such as RBI's repo rate or Treasury Bill yield. As a result, monetary policy transmission by banks has gained traction. The impact of the introduction of external benchmark-based pricing of loans on monetary transmission has been felt across various sectors, encompassing even those sectors that are not directly linked to external benchmark-based loan pricing.

"Looking ahead, the proportion of loans linked to external benchmarks is expected to increase further along with a commensurate fall in the internal benchmark linked loans. Coupled with shorter reset periods, monetary transmission to banks' interest rates can, thus, be expected to strengthen further, a recently released article by RBI said. **AGENCIES**

sovereigns at the same time applicable within each of the territory," she said.

The risks involved will have to be differentially approached, because for each user case, the risks can also be different, depending on the economy, she said during a panel discussion on the topic 'Money at a Crossroad: Public or Private Digital Money?'

Citing an example, Sitharaman said application of regulation and risk involved from Nigeria would be different from a tourism or investment rich Bahamas.

Stressing that regulation using technology will have to be so adept and nimble that it should not be behind the curve. It has to be ahead and this is not possible if any one country thinks that it can handle it, she said.

Pointing out that unless there's going to be a global approach at regulating and understanding of the technology on cryptocurrencies there is a risk of money laundering.

"I harp on that very much because I think the biggest risk for all countries across the board will be on the money laundering aspect, and also on the aspect of currency being used for financing terror," she said.

With regard to taxing income generated from transactions in crypto assets, Sitharaman said it is a means to check the source and trail but not to legitimise them.

"We haven't said that this is currency. We haven't said that this has intrinsic value, but certain operations are taxable for the sovereign and that is why we have taxed," she said.

Budget 2022-23 proposed a 30 per cent tax on income from transactions in crypto assets and also imposed a 1 per cent TDS (tax deducted at source) on transactions in such asset classes above a certain threshold.

"We did announce that on the income that was generated out of the transactions of these crypto assets will be taxed at 30 per cent and over and above that, there is a 1 per cent tax deduction at source which is also imposed on every transaction. So through that we will be able to know who's buying and who's selling it," she said.

On the Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC), she said, it is going to happen sometime this year. RBI is planning to come out with a central bank-backed digital currency using blockchain technology in 2022-23. **AGENCIES**

HDFC Bank shares decline nearly 4 pc

NEW DELHI: Shares of HDFC Bank on Monday fell nearly 4 per cent even after the leading private sector lender reported a 23 per cent jump in standalone net profit for the March quarter. The stock declined 3.63 per cent to Rs 1,411.65 on the BSE. On the NSE, it went lower by 3.66 per cent to Rs 1,411.30.

"Despite sector-leading credit growth (-21 per cent y-o-y), HDFC Bank reported a slight miss on PAT at Rs 100 billion due to continued weak core profitability (up 10 per cent y-o-y), which was dragged by weak margins/fees and additional contingent provisions of Rs 10 billion," Anand Dama, Senior Research Analyst at Emkay Global Financial Services, said. On Saturday, HDFC Bank on posted a 23 per cent jump in standalone net profit to Rs 10,055.20 crore for the March quarter, led by growth in loan demand across categories and lower provisioning as bad loans were trimmed. The bank's net profit during the corresponding period of the previous fiscal stood at Rs 8,186.51 crore. **AGENCIES**

SEBI signs pact with Canada's Manitoba Securities Commission

NEW DELHI: Indian capital markets regulator Sebi and Canada's Manitoba Securities Commission (MSC) have entered into a pact for mutual cooperation, exchange of information and technical assistance. The move comes after the Union Cabinet last week approved the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) and Manitoba Securities Commission. The MoU, which took effect on Wednesday, will strengthen cross border cooperation in the area of securities regulation. SEBI said in a statement. This will facilitate mutual assistance, contribute towards the efficient performance of the supervisory functions, aid in imparting technical domain knowledge, and enable effective enforcement of the laws and regulations governing the securities markets. **AGENCIES**

Four arrested in Navi Mumbai for IPL betting

Police have arrested four persons in Navi Mumbai, among them a scrap dealer and a caterer, for allegedly placing bets on cricket matches of the ongoing Indian Premier League (IPL), police said on Monday. Officials of the Crime Branch of the Navi Mumbai police on Sunday night raided a premises in the city and arrested them for accepting bets on IPL matches on mobile phones. Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) Crime Vinayak Vast said. They also seized mobile phones and cash totalling Rs 3,20,600 from the quartet, he said. Offences under relevant provisions of the IPC, the Information Technology Act and the Indian Telegraph Act were registered against the four identified as Iftekar Ahmed Ishrak Ahmed Khan, 31, scrap dealer, Alokumar Shiv Kumar Gupta, 45, a jockey in a club, Imran Salim Sheikh, 25, a chemical dealer, and Mohammad Yusuf Mohammad Yunus Dadda, 42, a caterer, the police said. **AGENCIES**

SBI hikes lending rate by 0.1%, EMLs to go up

NEW DELHI: The country's largest lender State Bank of India (SBI) has raised its marginal cost of funds based lending rate (MCLR) by 10 basis points (bps) or 0.1% across all tenures, a move that will lead to an increase in EMLs for borrowers.

The lending rate revision by SBI is likely to be followed by other banks in the days to come. With the increase, EMLs will go up for those borrowers who have availed loans on MCLR, not for those, whose loans are linked to other benchmarks. SBI's EBLR rate is 6.65%, while the repo-linked lending rate (RLLR) is 6.25 effective April 1.

Banks add Credit Risk Premium (CRP) over the EBLR and RLLR while giving any kind of loan including housing



and auto loans. The revised MCLR rate is effective from April 15, as per the information posted on SBI website.

With the revision, one-year MCLR has increased to 7.10%, from the earlier 7%.

An overnight, one-month and three-month MCLR rose by 10 bps to 6.75%, whereas a six-month MCLR increased

to 7.05%.

Most of the loans are linked to the one-year MCLR rate.

At the same time, two-year MCLR increased by 0.1% to 7.30%, while three-year MCLR rose to 7.40%.

From October 1, 2019, all banks including SBI have to lend only at an interest rate linked to an external bench-

Govt measures expected to push MSME's growth in 2022: ASSOCHAM-CRISIL study

NEW DELHI: Lauding the large part played by the MSMEs (Medium, Small, and Micro Enterprises) in India's economic rebound, the latest ASSOCHAM-CRISIL joint study adds that the sector is expected to achieve mid-teen growth in fiscal 2022 with the pick-up of economic activities.

The report, titled, 'MSMEs back to the grind', is jointly conducted by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) with CRISIL. "Amidst the global pandemic, India has found its innate strength to brave the storm and focus on developing its domestic ecosystem, to support both the Indian and the global markets. The Aatmanirbhar Bharat vision that has been laid by the Hon'ble Prime Minister has enthused the Indian industry with confidence that will help us enhance our global play,"



says Mr Deepak Sood, Secretary General, ASSOCHAM.

Considered to be the engine of economies around the world, the MSME segment in India alone is estimated to have 6.3 crore units, which employs over 11.10 crore people. The sector accounts for 27% of GDP and is crucial to the functioning of the economy, including in terms of employment generation, exports, and lending opportunities. The

sector was the worst hit during the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown that followed in 2020.

Crediting MSMEs for putting the country on the firm path of economic recovery in 2022 after having had it tough in 2021, Bhushan Parekh, Director, CRISIL SME Solution, elaborated in the report, "A raft of measures by the government under its Aatmanirbhar Bharat banner has provided re-

prieve to MSME segment in recent months. These include Rs 20,000 crore subordinate debt for stressed MSMEs, Rs 50,000 crore equity infusion through MSME Fund of Funds (SRI Fund), 3-lakh crore Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) for businesses, including MSMEs (which was subsequently increased to Rs 5-lakh crore in Union Budget 2022-23), change in definition of what constitutes an MSME, and no global tenders for government procurement up to Rs 200 crore."

The report also notes that if MSME lending by banking and non-banking finance companies (NBFCs) in fiscal 2021 rose to 7% on-year, then the credit is expected to grow by 7-9% (around Rs 18-lakh crore) on-year in fiscal 2022 supported by favourable government measures as well as rise in demand. **AGENCIES**

India Post Payments Bank launches 'Fincluvation'

On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of Indian Independence & ongoing Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, India Post Payments Bank (IPPB), a 100% government owned entity under Department of Posts (DoP) announced the launch of Fincluvation—a joint initiative to collaborate with Fintech Startup community to co-create and innovate solutions for financial inclusion.

Speaking on the occasion of the launch, Ashwini Vaishnav, Minister of Railways, Communications and Electronics & IT, said, the country made rapid strides in FINTECH space in Global Tech world leading innovations like UPI, Aadhaar. "Fincluvation is a step in this direction, an Industry first initiative to create a powerful platform to mobilize the start-up community towards building meaningful financial products aimed at financial inclusion. Combination of IPPB's Banking stack, DoP's trustworthy doorstep service network and the techno-functional acumen of start-ups can deliver unmatched value to the citizens of the country."

"Fincluvation will be a permanent platform of IPPB to co-create inclusive financial solutions with participating start-ups. IPPB and DoP collectively serve close to 430 million customers through neigh-



bourhood post office and at their doorsteps via more than 400,000 trusted and capable Post Office employees and Gramin Dak Sevaks - making it one of the largest and trusted postal networks in the world", said Shri Devusinh Chauhan, Minister of State for Communications. Fincluvation invites startups to Participate, Ideate, Develop and Market intuitive and tailored products and services that can be taken to the customers. Startups are encouraged to develop solutions aligned with any of the following tracks-

Creditization - Develop Innovative & Inclusive credit products aligned with the use cases of target customers and take them to their doorsteps through Postal network.

Digitization - Bring convenience through convergence of traditional services with Digital Payment Technologies such as

making the traditional Money Order service as Interoperable Banking service.

Any Market-led solutions that can help solve any other problem relevant to IPPB and/or DoP in serving the target customers

Intersection of technology with financial services coupled with traditional distribution networks is opening up new set of business opportunities. Conventional model of technology procurement led product creation by banks often lacks value in user experience leaving huge gap between customer expectations and service delivery. Traditional technology firms fail to meet these expectations with a deficit of ownership in product creation. "Our citizens have varied and complex needs that need careful thought, empathetic product design, and rapid prototyping among users. With Fincluvation, we want

to crowd-in the best minds to develop technology-led financial solutions for Bharat", said Shri Vineet Pandey, Secretary, Department of Posts & Chairperson, Postal Services Board.

Fincluvation will allow the start-ups to work with IPPB and DoP experts to develop solutions and conduct pilots using the postal network and IPPB's technology stack. Successful pilots can then mature into long-term partnerships. "Through Fincluvation, we wanted to create a platform that can provide an opportunity for start-ups to work together with us in understanding the needs of the underserved customers to deliver products with a positive impact and more importantly in a cost effective manner", said Shri J Venkatramu, MD & CEO, IPPB.

Fincluvation mentors will work closely with the start-ups to tweak products to the customer needs and align the go-to-market strategies with operating models of IPPB and DoP.

Fincluvation Launch Event:

About India Post Payments Bank

India Post Payments Bank (IPPB) has been established under the Department of Posts, Ministry of Communication with 100% equity owned by

Government of India. IPPB was launched by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi on September 1, 2018. The bank has been set up with the vision to build the most accessible, affordable and trusted bank for the common man in India. The fundamental mandate of IPPB is to remove barriers for the unbanked and under-banked and reach the last mile leveraging a network comprising 160,000 post offices (145,000 in rural areas) and 400,000 postal employees. IPPB's reach and its operating model is built on the key pillars of India Stack - enabling Paperless, Cashless and Presence-less banking in a simple and secure manner at the customers' doorstep, through a CBS-integrated smartphone and biometric device. Leveraging frugal innovation and with a high focus on ease of banking for the masses, IPPB delivers simple and affordable banking solutions through intuitive interfaces available in 13 languages. IPPB is committed to provide a fillip to a less cash economy and contribute to the vision of Digital India. India will prosper when every citizen will have equal opportunity to become financially secure and empowered. Our motto stands true - Every customer is important; every transaction is significant, and every deposit is valuable.

SAI sanctions Rs 1.28 Crore for participation of 30 Wrestlers at Sr. Asian Championship in Mongolia

Tokyo Olympian Anshu Malik is looking forward to the Senior Asian Championships in Mongolia, starting April 19, as a much-needed exposure competition ahead of Commonwealth Games and Asian Games. A total of 20 wrestlers from the men's team across the Freestyle and Greco-Roman categories and ten from the women's team will compete at the event.

The tour has been sanctioned at cost to the Government to the tune of an overall of Rs 1.28 Crore for both teams. The competition in Mongolia is seen as a good exposure competition ahead of the Commonwealth Games and the Asian Games, scheduled later this year. Tokyo 2020 medalists Ravi Dahiya and Bajrang Punia, among others, will also be competing in Mongolia.

"I have been a part of various international camps and I'm happy to get all these world-class facilities at the SAI national centre of excellence on Lucknow," said Anshu. "I thank the Wrestling Federation of India too for setting up the camp here ahead of the Sr. Asian Championship and the CWG and Asian Games this year.

"Me and my teammates are looking forward to the best of performance from the upcoming tournaments," added Anshu. While the women's team has been a part of the SAI Lucknow training centre, the men's wrestlers have been a part of the SAI regional centre Sonapat ahead of the Sr Asian Championship.

List of participants:

Men's team: Freestyle - Ravi Dahiya, Mangal Kadiyan, Bajrang Punia, Naveen, Yash, Gaurav Baliyan, Deepak Punia, Viky, Satyawart Kadiyan, Anirudh Kumar; Greco-Roman - Arjun Halakurki, Gyanender, Neeraj, Sachin Sehrawat, Vikas, Sajjan, Harpreet Singh, Sunil Kumar, Ravi, Prem.

Women's team: Manisha, Swati Shinde, Sushma Shokeen, Anshu Malik, Sarita Mor, Manisha, Radhika, Sonika Hooda, Nikki, Sudesh. **AGENCIES**



CBI now part of Interpol's anti-child abuse database

NEW DELHI: Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has joined the international child sexual exploitation database of Interpol, a move which will bolster its fight against sex abuse of minors and help in identification of victims and abusers using sophisticated analytics software, officials said.

Sources in the agency said the CBI recently joined a select group of agencies of 67 countries that are connected to the database.

Interpol database on paedophiles and disseminators of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) on the internet relies on multi-media from various countries which are analysed based on a specialised "image comparison software" to identify the victim and the accused from photos and videos, they said.

Once the national central bureau of a country, the CBI in the case of India, gets that information they proceed against them



according to local laws.

The Interpol mechanism takes help from financial institutions, internet service providers and software developers, besides cross-sector partners, in tracking CSAM and shutting down illegal distribution channels.

The database with over 2.7 million images and videos on an average helps in the identification of seven abuse victims across globe every day with over 27,000 victims and over 12,000 abusers identified so far, the

Interpol website states.

The tool not only helps sharing of information among various investigation officers but also avoids "duplication of effort and saves precious time" as it tells the investigators if the images have already been identified in another country.

The CBI had last year cracked a major network of paedophiles and distributors of CSAM who were selling the illicit content on social media for just Rs 10 for 60 videos with payments received through Paytm. **AGENCIES**

India's Sugar exports exceed 10 million tons: Piyush Goyal

India's Sugar Exports witnessed an astounding growth of 291% from USD 1,177 million in FY 2013-14 to USD 4600 million in FY 2021-22. As per DGCI&S data, India exported sugar to 121 countries across the globe.

Sugar export jumped 65 per cent in 2021-22 corresponding to previous year. The growth was achieved despite logistical challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic in the form of high freight rates, container shortages, etc.

Highlighting the historic achievement in a tweet, Union Minister for Commerce and Industry, Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution and Textiles, Piyush Goyal said that Modi government's policies were helping farmers increase their income by tapping global markets.

According to the DGCI&S data, India had exported sugar worth of USD 1965 million in 2019-20, which rose to USD 2790 million in 2020-21 and USD 4600 million in 2021-22.

In 2021-22 (April-February), India has exported sugar worth of USD 769 million to Indonesia, followed by Bangladesh (USD 561 million), Sudan (USD 530 million) and U.A.E (USD 270 million). India also exported sugar to Somalia, Saudi Arab, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Nepal, China, etc. Indian sweetener has also been imported by USA, Singapore, Oman, Qatar, Turkey, Iran, Syria, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Germany, France, New Zealand, Denmark, Israel, Russia, Egypt, etc. **AGENCIES**



FinMin meets IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva in Washington

Union Minister for Finance & Corporate Affairs Nirmala Sitharaman had a bilateral meeting with Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director, International Monetary Fund (IMF), on the sidelines of the International Monetary Fund-World Bank (IMF-WB) Spring Meetings in Washington D.C. today.

Both, the Finance Minister and the Managing Director, were accompanied by senior officials like Anantha V. Nageswaran, Chief Economic Advisor, Ministry of Finance, Government of India, and Ms Gita Gopinath, FDMO of IMF.

During the meeting, they discussed issues of importance for India besides several issues currently being faced by the global and the regional economies.

Georgieva highlighted the resilience of India which remains the fastest-growing country across the globe despite challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Georgieva also referred to an effective policy mix followed by India that was well targeted. She lauded India for its contribution to the capacity development activities of the IMF.

Georgieva praised India's vaccination programme and the help extended to its neighbour and other vulnerable economies. The IMF MD



particularly brought reference to the help India is providing to Sri Lanka during their difficult economic crisis. Sitharaman indicated that IMF should support and urgently provide financial assistance to Sri Lanka. The Managing Director assured the Finance Minister that the IMF would continue to actively engage with Sri Lanka.

Discussing the recent geopolitical developments, Sitharaman and Georgieva raised concerns about its impact on global economy and the challenges linked to the rising energy prices due to it.

Explaining India's policy approach, Sitharaman mentioned that an accommodative fiscal stance was also accom-

panied by major structural reforms, including the bankruptcy code and targeted help to MSME and other vulnerable sections.

Sitharaman said that Monetary Authority fully supported and complemented these efforts with an accommodative stance.

The Finance Minister further stated that India has been helped by good agricultural output, supported by a good monsoon during the COVID pandemic period. Agricultural exports, along with other exports, have also sharply increased. India is entering into new economic activities which will help resolve some of the global supply chain issues, She concluded. **AGENCIES**

Russia launches fight for industrial heartland says Ukrainian officials

After days of regrouping and reinforcing, the Russian military began a new and potentially climactic phase of the war in Ukraine by launching its long-feared, full-scale ground offensive to take control of the country's industrial heartland, the Donbas, Ukrainian officials said. The stepped-up assaults began Monday along a broad front of over 300 miles (480 kilometers), Ukrainian officials said. The Russian troops have begun the battle for the Donbas, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced in a video address. He said a significant part of the entire Russian army is now concentrated on this offensive.

Moscow-backed separatists have been fighting Ukrainian forces for eight years in the mostly Russian-speaking Donbas and have declared two independent republics that have been recognized by Russia. Russia has declared the capture of the Donbas to be its main goal in the war since its attempt to seize the capital, Kyiv, failed. No matter how many Russian troops are driven there, we will fight, Zelenskyy vowed. We will defend ourselves. Before the offensive got underway, Russia bombarded the western city of Lviv and other targets in what appeared to be an intensified bid to grind down the country's defenses. The Ukraine military's general staff said Russian President Vladimir Putin's forces had intensified assaults in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions both part of the Donbas and in the area of Zaporizhzhia.

On Monday morning, "almost along the whole front line of the Donetsk, Luhansk and Kharkiv regions, the occupiers attempted to break through our defenses, Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of Ukraine's national security council, told Ukrainian media. Fortunately, our military is holding out. They passed through only two cities. **AGENCIES**

Govt of India bound by assurance given to Portugal on Abu Salem: Union home secy

The Government is bound by the assurance given by the then deputy Prime Minister L K Advani to the Portugal government that the maximum sentence handed out to gangster Abu Salem will not exceed 25 years, the Union home secretary has told the Supreme Court.

In an affidavit filed in pursuance to the apex court's April 12 order, Union Home Secretary Ajay Kumar Bhalla said the assurance would come into effect once the period of 25 years expires on November 10, 2030.

"It is respectfully submitted that the Government of India is bound by the assurance dated December 17, 2002. The period of 25 years, which is mentioned in the assurance, will be abided by the Union of India at an appropriate time subject to the remedies which may be available, the affidavit said. The home secretary submitted that Salem's contention about non-compliance of assurance is premature and based on hypothetical surmises and



can never be raised in present proceedings.

He also stated in his affidavit that judiciary is independent in deciding all cases including criminal cases in accordance with the applicable laws without in any way being bound by any position taken by the executive. The matter is listed for hearing before a bench of Justices S K Kaul and M M Sundresh on April 21. The top court had earlier asked the Centre to make its stand clear on the issue.

It had said that the stand on the commitment made by the Union of India would have wide ramifications the next time the

country wants to bring back any fugitive.

The top court had said that it is not satisfied with the affidavit filed by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) which said that the assurance given by India to Portugal on the maximum sentence during the extradition of Salem, a convict in the 1993 Mumbai serial blast case, is not binding on Indian courts.

On February 2, the top court had sought a response from the Centre on a plea filed by Salem, serving life imprisonment for his role in the 1993 Mumbai serial blasts case, contending that his imprisonment cannot

extend beyond 25 years as per the terms of the extradition treaty between India and Portugal. It had granted four weeks to the Centre to respond on a plea by Salem claiming that the 2017 judgement of TADA court sentencing him to life imprisonment was against the terms of the extradition treaty.

Salem had contended that life imprisonment awarded to Salem is against the assurance given by the Indian government to Portugal from where he was extradited.

His plea said, "Even despite the categorical assurances by the Government of India that the appellant will not be sentenced for more than 25 years which assurances formed part of judicial proceedings right till the Supreme Court of Portugal and upon which the extradition order was passed, there was a complete and gross violation by the TADA Court when it imposed sentences of life imprisonment for certain offences." **AGENCIES**

China's economy grows still-weak 4.8% in January-March

China's economic growth edged up to a still-weak 4.8 per cent over a year ago in the first three months of 2022 as spreading coronavirus outbreaks prompted the shutdown of major industrial cities.

Growth crept up from the previous quarter's 4 per cent following a slump triggered by tighter government controls on use of debt by China's vast real estate industry, official data showed Monday. Compared with the previous quarter, as other major economies are measured, growth declined to 1.3 per cent from 1.4 per cent.

First quarter growth was well below the ruling Communist Party's official target of 5.5 per cent for the year. Forecasters have said that will be hard to



meet without more government stimulus spending. Retail spending, factory output and investment in factories, real estate and other fixed assets rose.

The national economic recovery was sustained and the operation of the economy was generally stable, said a government statement. Authorities have suspended access to Shanghai and some other industrial cities

to contain virus outbreaks under the ruling party's zero-COVID strategy to isolate every infected person. Global automakers and other manufacturers have stopped or reduced production due to supply disruptions.

The ruling party already was promising tax refunds to businesses to reverse the slump that began in mid-2021. Last week, Premier Li Keqiang, the No. 2 leader, called for quicker action to get help to struggling entrepreneurs. Retail sales rose by a modest 3.3 per cent over a year earlier after consumer demand was hurt by a government appeal for the public to avoid travelling during February's Lunar New Year holiday, normally a time for gift-giving and banquets. **AGENCIES**

PM lays the foundation stone of WHO Global Centre for Traditional Medicine in Jamnagar

The Prime Minister laid the foundation stone of WHO Global Centre for Traditional Medicine (GCTM) in Jamnagar today, in the presence of the Prime Minister of Mauritius Pravin Kumar Jugnauth and Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus, Director-General, World Health Organization (WHO). GCTM will be the first and only global outpost centre for traditional medicine across the world. It will emerge as an international hub of global wellness. Video messages from the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and President of Maldives were played on the occasion. Union Ministers Dr Mansukh Mandavia, Sabananda



Sonowal, Munjapara Mahendrabhai and Chief Minister of Gujarat Bhupendrabhai Patel were among those present.

Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus, Director-General, World Health Organization (WHO) thanked the Prime Minister Modi for his leadership in providing all

the support for the establishment of WHO Global Centre for Traditional Medicine in Jamnagar. The DG termed the centre as a truly global project as 107 WHO member countries have their country specific governmental offices which means the world will come to

India for its leadership in the traditional medicine. He said traditional medicines products are abound globally and the centre will go a long way in bringing the promise of the traditional medicine to fruition. For many regions of the world traditional medicine is the first line of treatment. The New Centre will focus on data, innovation and sustainability and will optimize the use of traditional medicine, he added. The centres five main areas will be research and leadership, evidence and learning, data and analytics, sustainability and equity and innovation and technology, said Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus.

The Prime Minister of Mauritius Pravin Kumar Jugnauth also thanked the Prime Minister for associating Mauritius with the occasion. He highlighted the importance of indigenous medical system and herbal products in various cultures. He said that there could not have been more opportune time than now for establishment the centre. He underlined the personal contribution of the Prime Minister Modi in taking leadership in establishment of the Centre. "We are extremely grateful to Prime Minister Narendra Modi ji, Government of India and the Indian people for this generous contribution", said Pravin Kumar Jugnauth.

India & Finland discuss possible areas of co-operation in quantum computing for virtual Centre of Excellence



Delegates from India and Finland discussed possible areas of co-operation in quantum computing and a roadmap for the collaborative virtual Centre of Excellence (CoE) that has been planned to be set up.

"The two countries are trying to get academic and industrial partners which can help develop quantum science and technology for the betterment of humankind in particular and the planet in general. We are committed towards global excellence in this field to achieve the best possible technologies in the shortest possible time," said Secretary Department of Science and Technology (DST), Dr. S Chandrasekhar while addressing the delegates at a round table meeting organized at DST.

Dr. Chandrasekhar stressed on the necessity to chalk out the strengths and weaknesses of both countries in this area and to work together towards a plan to overcome the weaknesses by establishing a core group which will drive the initiative.

The meeting was held a day after the signing of the Joint Declaration for setting up the Indo-Finnish Virtual Network Centre on Quantum Computing in the presence of the Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) Science & Technology; Minister of State (Independent Charge)

Earth Sciences; MoS PMO, Personnel, Public Grievances, Pensions, Atomic Energy and Space, Dr. Jitendra Singh and Visiting Finland Minister of Economic Affairs, Mr Mika Lintila. Mr. Petri Peltonen, Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, Finland, underlined the need to join the best of Finland with the best of India, use the scientific ecosystems, and the strong IT communities of both the countries and strengthen them in a way that can facilitate spin-offs.

"Our aim is towards a product and research-driven collaboration which can work towards supercomputing devices, sensors, communication technologies, space technologies, and many others," said Dr. KR Murali Mohan, Adviser, DST while highlighting the potential for collaborations through the National Mission for Interdisciplinary Cyber-physical Systems and through Quantum Enabled Science and Technology (QuEST) program

Dr. Mika Tirronen, Counsellor, Education & Science, Embassy of Finland, spoke about the strength of Finland quantum computing like infrastructure, heritage, public funding, innovation-driven industry, its strong quantum ecosystem as well as the Nordic spirit of perseverance.

In a veiled attack, Imran blames Pak Army Chief for his ouster

LAHORE: In a veiled attack on Pakistan's Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa, former prime minister Imran Khan has alleged that "some elements" in the powerful establishment who indulged in "bad practices" were responsible for his unceremonious ouster from power.

According to experts, Khan, who was ousted from power on April 10 after the National Assembly passed a no-confidence motion against him, had apparently lost support of the Army after he refused to endorse the appointment of the ISI spy agency chief last year. Finally, he agreed but it soured his ties with the Army.

Addressing party workers on Twitter at night, Imran said: "There are also humans in institutions. If one or two individuals do something wrong, the entire institution is not responsible. If one person (in an apparent reference to Army chief Gen. Bajwa) makes a mistake, this does not mean that the whole institution is at fault."



Former information minister Fawad Chaudhry told a news channel on Wednesday that relations between the establishment and Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government had strained for months.

We tried our best, including myself, to remove misunderstandings with the establishment but could not succeed," he said. The Pakistan Army, which has ruled the coup-prone country for more than half of its 73 plus years of existence, has hitherto wielded considerable power in the matters of security and foreign policy.

Khan, 69, is the only Pakistani prime minister to be ousted in a no-confidence motion in Parliament. He was replaced by Shehbaz Sharif of the Pakistan

Muslim League-Nawaz's (PML-N). He called on his supporters to reach Minar-i-Pakistan in Lahore on Thursday to make it the biggest-ever rally in the country's history.

The cricketer-turned-politician said that all institutions are not corrupt but some "elements indulge in bad practices". Khan, in the same breath, praised the Army, saying "Pakistan needs the Armed forces more than Imran Khan. Had the strong Army not been here, Pakistan might have been dismembered into three pieces." Since his ouster, there have been anti-Bajwa and anti-judges trends on social media, forcing the Army chief and the chief justice of Pakistan to condemn the smear campaign.

Both the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Federal Investigation Agency launched a crackdown on PTI social media activists and arrested 15 people. Such Twitter trends could not be curbed despite the action. **AGENCIES**

Pak PM Shehbaz Sharif's Cabinet takes oath

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's 34-member Cabinet was sworn in on Tuesday after several days of delay, with Senate Chairman Sadiq Sanjrani administering the oath to new ministers as President Arif Alvi did not attend the ceremony.

The ceremony was scheduled to be held on Monday, but President Alvi had refused to administer the oath to the lawmakers, compelling the government to postpone it.

Pakistan Peoples Party's (PPP's) chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari was not among the ministers. Earlier, there was speculation that he would be the country's next foreign minister. Initially, 31 federal ministers and three ministers of state took the oath to join Prime Minister Sharif.

Last week, Sanjrani administered the oath of office to Prime Minister Sharif after President Alvi, a member of ousted premier Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, went on 'sick leave ahead of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader's inauguration. Sharif's Pakistan Muslim



League-Nawaz (PML-N) got 13 ministries and nine ministries have been given to Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP).

Four ministries were handed over to Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) and Muttahida Quami Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) got two ministries.

Other coalition partners including Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) and Jamhuri Watan Party (JWP) got one ministry each in the new set up.

Two state ministers from PML-N and one state minister from PPP were also appointed. One member of the PPP and

two members of PML-N have been appointed advisors to the Prime Minister.

Lawmakers from the PML-N who took oath are Khwaja Asif, Ahsan Iqbal, Rana Sanaulah, Ayaz Sadiq, Rana Tanveer, Khurram Dastgir, Saad Rafique, Mian Javed Latif, Mian Riaz Pirzada, Murtaza Javed Abbasi, Azam Nazir, Marriyum Aurangzeb and Miftah Ismail. Khurshid Shah, Naved Qamar, Sherry Rehman, Abdul Qadir Patel, Shazia Marri, Murtaza Mahmood, Sajid Hussain Tori, Ehsan-ur-Rehman and Abid Hussain from the PPP have also joined the Cabinet. **AGENCIES**



Priyanka, Nick name their baby **MALTI MARIE CHOPRA JONAS**

MUMBAI: Actor Priyanka Chopra Jonas and her pop star husband Nick Jonas have reportedly named their daughter Malti Marie Chopra Jonas. In January this year, the couple announced via social media that they have become parents to their first child via surrogacy.

American entertainment website TMZ, which has obtained the birth certificate of the baby, said the couple's daughter is named Malti Marie Chopra Jonas. She was born just after 8 PM on January 15 at a hospital in San Diego. Priyanka Chopra Jonas, 39,

and the 29-year-old American singer in December 2018 in Jodhpur in an elaborate wedding.

On the work front, Chopra Jonas's upcoming slate include Jim Strouse-directed rom-com Text For You, Amazon thriller series Citadel, produced by

Russo Brothers, Sangeet, an unscripted series co-produced with Nick. She will also produce a film with Amazon Studios on the life of Ma Anand Sheela, the former

aide to late godman Osho Rajneesh. Back home in India, she will be seen in Hindi movie Jee Le Zaraa alongside Katrina Kaif and Alia Bhatt. It is directed by Farhan Akhtar. **AGENCIES**



R Madhavan 'overwhelmed' after son Vedaant bags gold medal at Danish Open swimming meet



MUMBAI: Actor R Madhavan says he is "overwhelmed and humbled" with his son Vedaant's winning streak after he scored his second medal, a gold, in swimming at the Danish Open in Copenhagen. The 16-year-old bagged gold in the men's 800m freestyle and bettered his personal best time by a whopping 11:48 to stop the clock at 8:17.28, edging past local swimmer Alexander L Bjorn by 0.10 to stand atop the podium on Sunday night. Madhavan took to Insta-

gram and posted a video of his son from the ceremony. "Today it's a Gold in 800m for @vedaantmadhavan. Overwhelmed and humbled. Thank you Coach @bacpradeep sir @swimming-federation.in @ansadxb and the entire team," the 51-year-old actor wrote. last Friday, Vedaant had won the silver medal in the 1500m freestyle event, before bettering his 200m freestyle time to finish 12th overall in the event. The Danish Open concludes on April 19. **AGENCIES**

Ranveer Singh says he is as obsessed with films as he was 10 years ago

MUMBAI: Crediting Sanjay Leela Bhansali for moulding him as an actor, Bollywood star Ranveer Singh on Tuesday said his collaborations with the filmmaker helped his realise that the "craft of acting is limitless".

Singh, 36, got a breakthrough film debut with 2010's rom-com "Band Baaja Baarat", backed Yash Raj Films, and has since starred in movies such as "Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela", "Bajirao Mastani", "Padmaavat", all directed by Bhansali, and others like "Lootera" and "Gully Boy".

He is awaiting the release of "Jayeshbhai Jordaar", a social comedy written and directed by debutant filmmaker Divyang Thakkar.

When asked about what keeps him going in his film journey, Singh said he has become even more obsessed with the craft over the years. "I must mention Mr. Bhansali, who has really



moulded me as an artiste along the way. I have learnt that the craft of acting is limitless. There are no boundaries, you can make your own rules as you go. I just want to keep exploring.

"My hunger for characters, stories, and work is becoming even more insatiable. I'm obsessed with films, characters, and this whole world. As obsessed as I was 10 years ago,

if it's possible, I'm even more obsessive about my craft now," the actor told reporters here.

Singh, who last starred in the 2021 sports drama "83", said he wants the audience to be "surprised" with every new film he does.

"Even when I heard the character of Jayeshbhai Jordaar, I felt I will play this kind of part for the first time in 10 years. Personally, I don't

want to repeat myself. You will get to see a complete never-seen-before Ranveer in this film," he added.

Singh said he wants to be part of "clean family entertainers" like "Jayeshbhai Jordaar". "I am going through a phase... where the pandemic has happened. I feel everyone in the family should go to theatres to watch a film and 'Jayeshbhai Jordaar' is that kind of a film that will make you laugh, cry, give you a message and entertain you as well," he added.

Produced by Yash Raj Films and Maneesh Sharma, who directed "Band Baaja Baaraat", "Jayeshbhai Jordaar" also stars Boman Irani, Ratna Pathak Shah, and "Arjun Reddy" breakout actor Shalini Pandey.

Pandey, who made her Hindi acting debut with the ZEE5 film "Bamfaad" in 2020, said working in a Yash Raj Films project has made her parents proud. **AGENCIES**

Oscar's effect: Tony Awards introduce 'no violence' policy ahead of 2022 show

Tony Awards have introduced a new 'no violence' policy ahead of their 2022 show following the controversy surrounding the slapping incident involving Will Smith and Chris Rock at the Oscars.

The award show's producers revealed the new procedure which clarifies how they'd handle an individual "in the event of an incident" in a letter to ticket buyers on Wednesday, according to the Hollywood Reporter.

Oscars live show was briefly interrupted when Will Smith, this year's best actor winner, slapped the comedian and presenter on the stage for cracking a joke about wife Jada Pinkett-Smith's hair.

The incident shocked the Hollywood audience attending the movie gala and those who tuned in through their screens. Smith, who later apologised to the comedian and the Academy, has been banned from Oscars and their other related events for a decade.

The Tonys are the first known major award show to publicly institute a new no-violence policy following the Oscars on March 27.

In the letter obtained by THR and sent by Tony Awards Productions to possible ticket buyers for the 75th annual show, producers wrote, The Tony Awards has a strict no violence policy.

In the event of an incident, the perpetrator will be removed from the event immediately, the letter read. **AGENCIES**



Ram Charan's wife Upasana pays obeisance at Sachkhand Sri Harmandar Sahib



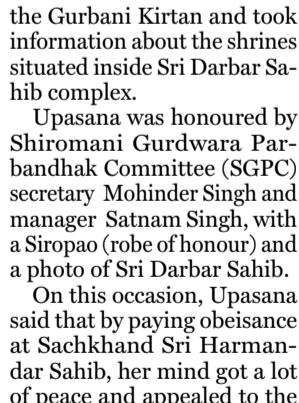
AMRITSAR: Wife of south Indian actor Ram Charan, Upasana today expressed devotion after paying obeisance at Sachkhand Sri Harmandar Sahib and she also listened to

the Gurbani Kirtan and took information about the shrines situated inside Sri Darbar Sahib complex.

Upasana was honoured by Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) secretary Mohinder Singh and manager Satnam Singh, with a Siropao (robe of honour) and a photo of Sri Darbar Sahib.

On this occasion, Upasana said that by paying obeisance at Sachkhand Sri Harmandar Sahib, her mind got a lot of peace and appealed to the Sangat of south to visit the holy shrine. **AGENCIES**

Yoodlee Films announces a Punjabi film with Gippy Grewal



MUMBAI: Production house Yoodlee Films on Wednesday announced a Punjabi film featuring Gippy Grewal.

The yet-to-be titled film is directed by Amarpreet Chhabra, who has helmed TV series "Saas Bina Sasural", "Baalveer", and is written by acclaimed writer-actor Naresh Kathooria, who is known for superhits like Carry On Jatta franchise, Chandigarh Amritsar Chandigarh, Bhaji In Problem, Mr & Mrs 420 among others.

Yoodlee Films, the cinematic arm of Saregama India has been exploring the regional movie-scape with films in Tamil, Malayalam and Marathi and now in Punjabi cinema, said Siddharth Anand Kumar, Vice President, Films, Saregama India. Gippy Grewal has been

leading a creative renaissance in the Punjabi film industry for many years with unique storylines in hit films. This project strengthens our commitment to bring quality Punjabi cinema to audiences around the world, Kumar said in a statement.

Grewal, best known for films like "Carry On Jatta", "Lucky Di Unlucky Story", "Bhaji in Problem" and "Jatt James Bond" among others, said he is happy to have collaborated with Yoodlee Films on this film.

Punjabi cinema is making huge strides and has a growing fan base not just across India but abroad as well and Yoodlee Films genuinely wants to add to this movement by co-creating quality films with regional talent. I respect this approach and am glad that we will be working together, Grewal said.

The upcoming feature will also star the actor's son Shinda Grewal, who was recently seen in the Diljit Dosaanj-starrer Honsla Rakh.

Chhabra said it is great to push the envelope in Punjabi cinema and work with a team that wants to add to the resurgence of fresh ideas in the industry. The film will go on the floors between July and August 2022 and will release in February 2023. **AGENCIES**

POTPOURRI

Julia Roberts says she turned down romantic comedies for 20 years as good scripts didn't exist

Hollywood star Julia Roberts, who ruled the romantic comedy scene in the 90s, is returning to the genre after a gap of 20 years with "Ticket to Paradise" opposite George Clooney.

The "Notting Hill" star said she avoided the genre for almost two decades because there were no scripts that matched the level of her famous films like "Pretty Woman" or "My Best Friend's Wedding".

Other than her brief appearances in ensemble rom-com "Valentine's Day" and "Mother's Day" and romance drama "Eat Pray Love", the actor's last rom-com outing was 2001's "America's Sweethearts".

Roberts, 54, told The New York Times that she was not avoiding the genre, it's just that good scripts did not come her way. People sometimes misconstrue the amount of time that's gone by that I haven't done a romantic comedy as my not wanting to do one, Roberts said.

If I had read something that I thought was that Notting Hill level of writing or My Best Friend's Wedding level of madcap fun, I would do it. They didn't exist until this movie that I just did that Ol Parker wrote and directed.

Roberts said she would have said no to "Ticket to Paradise" if it was not for Clooney, 60, her co-star in films such as "Ocean's Eleven" and "Money Monster". She thought the film



worked only with Clooney. Lo and behold, George felt it only worked with me. Somehow we were both able to do it, and off we went, Roberts said about returning to the genre.

When asked by NYT if she avoided romantic comedies for 20 years because there wasn't a single good script, not one, Roberts answered, Yeah.

Here's the thing: If I'd thought something was good enough, I would have done it, Roberts said.

But I also had three kids in the last 18 years. That raises the bar even more because then it's not only is this material good? It's also the math equation of my husband's work schedule and the kids' school schedule and summer vacation. It's not just, Oh, I think I want to do this. I have a sense of great pride in being home with my family and considering myself a homemaker.

The actor, who is married to cinematographer Daniel Moder, said she felt a sense of responsibility with her children as they get older.

As they get older, and particularly with my daughter, I do have a sense of responsibility for showing my children that I can be creative and that it's meaningful to me so meaningful that for periods of time I will choose to focus on that almost more than my family, which has been hard for me to come to terms with.

In the NYT interview, Roberts also debunked one of the long standing rumours about her iconic smile being insured for USD 30 million. No. What am I insuring it against? How would you do that? I mean, if my smile was insured, there would be someone at my house on a nightly basis saying, You need to floss longer. **AGENCIES**

Batting stalwart Virat Kohli is mentally "overcooked" and needs to take a break from cricket in order to serve the country for at least another six-seven years, feels ex-India coach Ravi Shastri. Kohli has been going through a lean patch with just two 40-

plus scores to show in last seven innings for Royal Challengers Bangalore in the current IPL season. The 33-year-old from Delhi, who hasn't scored a century in the last 100 matches across formats, had stepped down from T20 captaincy both for India and

"Whether it's 2 months or a month-and-a-half, whether it's after England or before England. He needs a break because he has got 6-7 years of cricket left in him and you don't want to lose that with a fried brain." **AGENCIES**

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