

SHORT TAKES

Criminal wanted for 2022 robbery held

New Delhi: A man wanted for allegedly looting jewellery, cash and phones at gunpoint in Delhi's Samaypur Badli area in 2022 was arrested by the Delhi police, an official said on Sunday. Sunder Paswan, who has multiple cases of robbery, burglary and murder, was arrested by the crime branch near GB Pant Hospital on Friday. He had been absconding for over two years after obtaining interim bail, the official said. In 2022, he and his three associates looted ₹3.5 lakh, gold jewellery and mobile phones in Samaypur Badli. "After securing interim bail during his trial, he evaded surrender by frequently changing locations. A non-bailable warrant was issued against him. Acting on secret information, a team apprehended him in Delhi," the officer said. During interrogation, Paswan admitted to his involvement in multiple criminal cases, he added.

BJP ministers flag off various projects

New Delhi: Delhi minister Parvesh Verma flagged off various projects of PWD on Sunday. Mr Verma, the PWD minister, inaugurated the strengthening work on Ring Road. He also inspected and reviewed the progress of the Barapullah extradosed bridge project and directed the project team to expedite the execution work. During his inspection, he also inspected Moolchand Pump House. Apart from him, various ministers and legislatures also flagged off various projects in their respective jurisdictions. MLA Satish Upadhyay inaugurated the strengthening work of Outer Ring Road in Malviya Nagar while Tri Nagar MLA Tiaak Ram Gupta inaugurated the strengthening work of Ring Road from Prembari Pul to Punjabi Bagh crossing.

Associate of Neeraj Bawana gang held

New Delhi: A suspected associate of the Neeraj Bawana gang was arrested from the Hari Nagar area, a Delhi police official said on Sunday. Deepak Sharma (28) had been declared a proclaimed offender in an Arms Act case, he added. The police received information that Sharma was hiding in Hari Nagar where he was expected to meet an associate. Acting on the tip-off, they launched an operation and nabbed the accused on February 20, the official said. Sharma has a history of criminal activities and is a close associate of key Bawana gang member Rakesh alias Sunny, he said. The arrested accused is facing seven cases related to snatching and Arms Act violations, registered across several police stations in Dwarka, he added.

ATISHI: MCD WILL REGULARISE 12K ON CONTRACT

New Delhi: The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) will regularise 12,000 contractual workers in its House meeting on Tuesday, AAP leader Atishi said. Hitting back, the BJP said that, while being in power in the Delhi government, Atishi used to make false promises, and she continues to do so even today. During a press conference alongside MCD mayor Mahesh Khinch, deputy mayor Ravinder Bhargadwaj, and Leader of the House Mukesh Goel, former Delhi chief minister Atishi announced the decision, stating the AAP is committed to regularising temporary workers in the party-led MCD. "In the last two years, we have made 4,500 (contractual) workers permanent. Now, in the MCD House meeting on February 25, we are set to regularise 12,000 more employees across all departments, including sanitation workers, junior engineers, senior engineers, gardeners, and other contractual staff," she said. Atishi also drew a parallel with the AAP's governance in Punjab, where temporary teachers are being made permanent, reinforcing the party's commitment to workers' rights. "AAP delivers on its promises. This decision will be the biggest of its kind in the city's history," she added.

■ 'Will ensure BJP fulfils promises, especially ₹2.5K aid for women'

Atishi becomes 1st woman to be LoP in Delhi Assembly

AVINASH PRABHAKAR JHA
NEW DELHI, FEB. 24

Former Delhi chief minister and MLA from Kalkaji constituency Atishi was chosen as the Leader of the Opposition in the Delhi Assembly at a meeting of AAP MLAs here on Sunday. With this, Ms Atishi becomes the first woman to hold the post. AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal was also part of the meeting of the party's 22 MLAs where Atishi was picked. During the meeting, AAP's Delhi unit convenor Gopal Rai said by consensus all AAP MLAs have chosen Ms Atishi as the Leader of the House.

Burari MLA Sanjeev Jha proposed Ms Atishi's name as LoP and all MLAs supported the proposal, said Mr Rai, who is also the MLA from Babarpur. Speaking at a press conference, Ms Atishi thanked the party chief



Former Delhi chief minister and AAP leader with mayor Mahesh Khichi addresses a press conference in New Delhi on Sunday.

— PTI

Arvind Kejriwal and all the MLAs. "AAP will show what a strong Opposition's role is in the House and will raise all issues with full force. AAP will ensure that the BJP fulfils all its promises as the party in power. Specifically, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's

▶ **ATISHI SAID, 'AAP will show what a strong Opposition's role is in the House and will raise all issues with full force'**

promise to provide ₹2,500 to women in the city by March 8. We promise that we will make the Rekha Gupta-led BJP govern-

ment fulfil this promise."

The first session of the Delhi Assembly will begin on February 24. In the three-day session, the ruling BJP government has said that pending CAG reports against the performance of the previous AAP government will be tabled in the House.

On the expected tabling of CAG reports, Ms Atishi said it is a routine procedure and that she had sent these reports to the House as CM.

Mr Kejriwal, in a post on X, said, "I congratulate Atishi ji for being elected as Leader of AAP in the House. AAP will play the role of constructive Opposition in the interest of the people of Delhi."

The BJP ousted AAP from power in Delhi, winning 48 of the 70 seats in the assembly polls held on February 5. Mr Kejriwal, Mr Sisodia and several top leaders of the party lost their seats in the polls.

Delhi CM meets Shah, Rajnath & other leaders

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 24

Delhi chief minister Rekha Gupta on Sunday met Union home minister Amit Shah at his residence in New Delhi. The chief minister further met Union defense minister Rajnath Singh.

In a social media post, Mr Shah said that the people of Delhi have shown unwavering faith in the leadership and public welfare policies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He added that keeping their trust intact, the tenure of Ms Gupta as a chief minister will definitely take Delhi to new heights and will fulfil the aspirations of the people.

Mr Singh extended his best wishes to her to take Delhi on the path of development and good governance.

Later in the day she first called on the Union health minister Jagat Prakash Nadda, then met the Union commerce minister Piyush Goyal, followed by a meeting with the Union minister for housing & urban affairs and power, Manohar Lal Khattar, at their respective residences.

Govt exchequer left empty by previous regime: Gupta

SHASHI BHUSHAN
NEW DELHI, FEB. 24

Delhi chief minister Rekha Gupta on Sunday claimed that the previous AAP government had left an "empty public exchequer" before the BJP dispensation, and assured that ₹2,500 monthly financial assistance for women would be implemented with detailed planning.

Ms Gupta raised concerns over "empty public exchequer" soon after attending a meeting of the BJP legislators at the party's Pt. Pant Marg Office. The meeting was called to discuss the party's floor strategy for the first session of the newly-constituted 8th Delhi Assembly, scheduled from Monday. Addressing a press conference after the meeting, the newly-appointed chief minister said several rounds of discussions have been held with the officers over the implementation of the "Mahila Samridhi Yojna" under which ₹2,500 per month is to be paid to the eligible women in Delhi.

"The condition which the (previous) government has left for us... When we sat with officers to review



Delhi chief minister Rekha Gupta meets Union home minister Amit Shah in New Delhi.

— PTI

the financial status of the current government, we found that the government exchequer was empty," Ms Gupta said on a question about the preparation to implement the scheme. She, however, assured that the scheme will be implemented with detailed planning.

The chief minister stressed that the BJP government was focused on its job at hand to serve the people and attacked the AAP saying its "work and vision" has already been seen by the people in the last decade.

Mr Gupta also said that the most important thing

of the three-day session was the tabling of the 14 CAG reports. "Every single rupee of the hard-earned money of the public that was misused by the previous governments, will be accounted for," the chief minister said.

Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva said that the BJP government's only agenda is to ensure 'Viksit Delhi' and alleviate the pains and problems of the people.

The focus of the meeting was also on evolving a mechanism for better coordination between the government and the party organisation in the coming days.

Woman's body found in toilet, one arrested

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 24

A woman's body was found stuffed in a sack inside a public toilet in Ashok Vihar area of northwest Delhi, an official said on Sunday.

The police claimed to have solved the blind murder case and arrested a 50-year-old man. "On Saturday, the police responded to a call and discovered body of a 22-year-old woman, later identified as Nandini alias Kallu, a vagabond from Gudmandi in Model Town. An FIR was registered and further investigation was taken up. Multiple teams were deployed to crack the case," said the senior police officer.

Complete desilting of 24 drains by May 31: NGT tells govt dept

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 24

To prevent flooding during monsoon, the National Green Tribunal has directed the irrigation and flood control department of the Delhi government to submit an undertaking that the desilting works of 24 drains in the national capital will be completed by May 31. The green body was hearing the issue of desilting of the 24 drains, which fall in the Yamuna.

The tribunal directed the additional chief secretary to appear virtually on the next date of hearing to inform the tribunal about adhering to the timeline and ensuring there was no flooding during the monsoon. The matter has been posted for further pro-

ceedings on February 27. In a recent order, the bench of NGT chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava noted that the I&FCD had submitted a report dated February 20 about the status of desilting the drains along with details regarding the timeline for completion of the work.

According to the report, the timeline for completing the desilting work across all drains is May 31. Most of the work has been completed by February 14 in Moat drain of Vijay Ghat (84.92 per cent), followed by Civil-Military drain (78.51 per cent), Maharani Bagh drain (50.24 per cent), Abul Fazal drain (49.21 per cent), Kushak drain (48.93 per cent), Tuglakabad drain (37.34 per cent) and Sunehri Pul drain (36.87 per cent).

The bench, also comprising judicial member Justice Sudhir Agarwal and expert member A. Senthil Vel, said "It has been pointed out that if the desilting work is not completed by the I&FCD within the timeline then this year monsoon will start and the residents of the colony from where these drains are flowing may face the same flooding or overflowing problem of these drains which they had faced in the previous monsoon."

Man smuggling ₹6.08 crore gold necklace nabbed at IGI

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 24

A man who was smuggling in a gold necklace studded with diamonds worth ₹6.08 crore was arrested upon arrival at the IGI Airport from Bangkok, officials here said on Sunday.

Detailed examination of the baggage and personal search of the passenger resulted in the recovery of a diamond-studded gold necklace weighing 40 grams, having a total value of ₹6,08,97,329 (Rs



A gold necklace being recovered by the customs department at the IGI Airport in New Delhi.

6.08 crore), the Delhi customs said in a post on X.

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 24

The public works department has reportedly shortlisted three residential accommodation options for Delhi's chief minister Rekha Gupta. Two of these residential bungalows are located in central Delhi and the third is along Rajpur Road in north Delhi. Officials said all of these have been shortlisted after undertaking repairs.

"These bungalows have been shortlisted from our residential pool but are

not finalised yet. These will be offered to the new CM and she may visit the houses to finalise the one she seems fit. The finalised house will then be approved and allocated through the general administration department. We are not sure by when the CM will finalise the house," a PWD official said.

As far as the new official residence of Ms Gupta is concerned, officials said that the three options are compliant with security measures under the Z-category cover that has been

Stormy scenes expected in Delhi Assembly 1st session

CAG reports, Sheesh Mahal issues to be raised

SANJAY KAW
NEW DELHI, FEB. 24

The first session of the newly elected 70-member Delhi Assembly, beginning Monday, is expected to be stormy as the BJP government is set to table long-pending 14 CAG reports, which examine the financial and administrative performance of the previous AAP government in the national capital.

The CAG reports, which are to be tabled in the House on February 25, have been at the centre of a fierce battle between the BJP and the AAP, with the former accusing the previous administration of delaying their release to hide alleged corruption. The reports relate to the excise department, mohalla clinics and the Delhi transport corporation. A few reports had been sent to the Delhi government way back in August 2023.

The nod to table the CAG reports, which were pending since the tenure of the previous AAP government, was given by CM Rekha Gupta in the first Cabinet meeting she chaired after taking oath. Ms Gupta has also hinted that the CAG reports could bring uncomfortable revelations for the Opposition. "They are worried that once the CAG reports are tabled, many records will be exposed," she remarked.

During the AAP's tenure, Rohini MLA Vijender Gupta, who is all set to be elected as the Speaker of the new



BJP MLA Arvinder Singh Lovely and other leaders at the BJP office in New Delhi on Sunday.

— PTI

Assembly, along with six other BJP legislators had filed a petition in the high court last year, seeking its direction to the Speaker to call a session of the Assembly for tabling the CAG reports. Mr Gupta had also accused the AAP government of deliberately withholding the reports out of fear that those would expose the corruption within the administration.

Some BJP legislators are likely to raise the issue related to the renovation of 6, Flag Staff Road bungalow, which was the residence of Arvind Kejriwal during his tenure as the chief minister and was dubbed the "Sheesh Mahal" by the saffron party to highlight the alleged corruption in the run-up to the Delhi elections. The bungalow was allotted to Mr Kejriwal in 2015 and is owned by the Delhi government's public works department.

On October 14, 2024, Mr Gupta, who was the Leader of the Opposition in the Delhi Legislative Assembly then, had filed a complaint with the Central vigilance commission alleging illegal construction at 6, Flagstaff Road bungalow, following which the CPWD was asked to conduct an inquiry into the allegations of irregularities in the construction of the bungalow.

As per the Legislative Assembly bulletin, the first session of the eighth Delhi Assembly will begin on Monday, with newly elected MLAs taking oath at about 11 am, followed by the Speaker's election at 2 pm. Lieutenant-governor V.K. Saxena will address the House on Tuesday before the CAG reports are tabled. The session will resume on February 27 for discussions on the motion of thanks.



Delhi lieutenant-governor V.K. Saxena during the inauguration of DDA's flower festival 'Palaash 2025' in New Delhi.

— PTI

Court slams police, refuses charges against AAP's Jha

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 24

Pulling up the probe officer for the delay in investigation, a Delhi court has refused to take cognisance of a chargesheet against former AAP MLA Rituraj Govind Jha and others in a case of allegedly defying police order during a protest in March 2024.

Additional chief judicial magistrate Paras Dalal said even if it was assumed that he disobeyed the order, such disobedience was not shown to have caused any obstruction, annoyance or injury, to any person lawfully employed. Since no offence has been made out from the police report, this court declines to take cognisance of the offence."

On March 24, 2024, Mr Jha, along with councillor Ravindra Bhardwaj and other workers of the AAP, gathered and started protesting when the model code of conduct was in effect and they tried to burn effigy of the Prime Minister and Enforcement Directorate. The accused were detained for defying police order and were charged under section 188 (disobedience to order of a public servant) IPC.

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Motorcyclist dies, 1 hurt after falling from flyover

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 24

A 27-year-old man died and his relative sustained serious injuries after their motorcycle plunged off the Geeta Colony flyover in Delhi's Shahdara on Sunday noon, an official said.

According to the police, a PCR call was received at 3:02 pm, reporting that two people on a motorcycle had fallen from the flyover and were rushed to the hospital by bystanders.

"Upon arrival at the scene, teams found a damaged motorcycle at the accident site," said the police officer.

The victims were identified as Sonu (27), of Sarita Vihar and another Sonu from Bhagirathi Vihar.

Both were transported to Dr Hedgewar Arogya Sansthan, where the younger Sonu was declared brought dead, while the other remained unconscious.

"Medical examination confirmed that both were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the accident. Preliminary inquiries revealed that the two men were maternal uncle (mama) and nephew (bhanja) traveling from Bhagirathi Vihar to Sarita Vihar when the accident occurred," said the officer.

SHORT TAKES

61 ambassadors will visit Assam: Himanta

Guwahati/Jorhat: Over 60 heads of missions of different countries will be on a trip to Assam from Sunday, during which they are set to visit the Kaziranga National Park, witness a mega Jhumur dance performance and attend a business summit in an endeavour by the state government to showcase its potential, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said. External affairs minister S. Jaishankar is leading the delegation of ambassadors for the trip during which the focus of the state government will be to highlight the peaceful atmosphere here so that the countries which have negative travel advisory against the state are convinced to withdraw it, Mr Sarma added. Addressing a press conference at Guwahati, the CM said, “External affairs minister S. Jaishankar, along with heads of missions of 61 countries and families of about 22 of them, will reach Jorhat today.” — *PTI*

Punjabi actress Sonia Mann joins AAP

Chandigarh: Punjabi actress Sonia Mann on Sunday joined the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the presence of party’s national convener Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi. Mr Kejriwal, along with other AAP leaders, welcomed Mann into the party, said a party statement. “Mann, the daughter of Kirti Kisan Union leader Baldev Singh has been actively involved in social service for a long time and often raises important social and political issues through social media,” the AAP said. Mann on her part said that she is “impressed by the work of the Aam Aadmi Party government in Punjab”. “I decided to join the AAP. I felt that only this party could provide me with an opportunity to work for people,” she said. — *PTI*

Punjab ASI among 2 arrested for extortion

Chandigarh: An assistant sub-inspector of police was among two arrested in connection with an extortion racket busted by the Punjab police. Surjit Singh, the ASI, was posted in Batala. He has been dismissed from service. The other arrested accused has been identified as Ankus Maini. In a major breakthrough, Batala police bust a major extortion racket run by US-based Gurdev Jassal and apprehended two persons, director general of police (DGP) Gaurav Yadav said in a post on X on Sunday. Jassal’s associates fired at the petrol pump of a Kalanaur-based businessman with an intention to intimidate and extort him. “After continuous threat calls and demand of ₹1 crore, the businessman eventually paid ₹50 lakh February 11,” Mr Yadav said. Singh and Maini were held for their involvement in and distribution of extortion funds, he said. — *PTI*

‘HALF OF WORLD DEVOTEES TOOK DIP AT KUMBH’

Agra/Mahakumbh Nagar, Feb. 23: Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath on Sunday said 62 crore devotees have come to Maha Kumbh so far, and out of about 120 crore Sanatan Dharma followers in the world, half of them have already taken the holy dip. Addressing the seers in the presence of Kamkoti Peethadheeswar Jagadguru Shankaracharya Shankar Vijayendra Saraswati Maharaj at the Maha Kumbh Mela Mahotsav held at Mahakumbh Nagar, the CM said, “Which is that religion and sect in the world where such a large number of devotees are coming and expressing their faith within a specific time frame?” He said, “This (Kumbh) has become a medium for the followers of Sanatan Dharma to express their gratitude towards their seers, the ‘rishis’ tradition of India, their ‘dev’ tradition and their festivals and celebrations.” Mr Adityanath said Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Peeth has always been at the forefront of promoting Sanatan Dharma. “The wide influence of this peeth across the country strengthens Sanatan Dharma,” Mr Adityanath said. — *PTI*

Army Chief on France visit to boost defence ties

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 23

Army Chief Gen. Upendra Dwivedi will hold wide-ranging talks with his French counterpart Gen. Pierre Schill in Paris on Monday focusing on boosting military cooperation between the two countries. The Army chief began a 5-day visit to France on Sunday with an aim to strengthen India-France military collaboration.

At Les Invalides, Paris, the day will begin with a guard of honour followed by discussions with Gen. Schill, Cemat (Chef d’Etat-Major de l’Armée de Terre). The meeting aims to foster stronger military ties. Gen. Dwivedi will also visit the Ecole Militaire for a briefing on future combat command (CCF), the technical section of the French Army (Stat), and the battle lab Terre at Versailles.

On February 25, Gen. Dwivedi will travel to Marseille to visit the 3rd Division of the French Army, focusing on Shakti, bilateral training, and the scorpion modernisation programme. On February 26, he will witness a live firing demonstration of the scorpion division in Carpiagne.

On February 27, the Army Chief will visit the Neuve Chapelle Indian War memorial to lay a solemn wreath in honour of the fallen Indian soldiers who participated in World War I.

The visit aims to enhance military collaboration and explore new avenues of cooperation with France.



Artistes perform at Indira Gandhi Athletic Stadium in Guwahati on Sunday during a rehearsal for “Jhumoir Binandini”, an attempt to set a world record for the largest participation in a Jhumoir dance event, ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit. — *PTI*

In Modi’s paathshala, BJP MPs, MLAs get public bonding tips

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY
BHOPAL, FEB. 23

The historic Minto Hall, rechristened as Kushabhau Thakre International Convention Centre, here on Sunday turned into a classroom for the BJP lawmakers with Prime Minister Narendra Modi tutoring them how to remain connected with their respective constituents ‘round-the-year’.

Mr Modi, who began a two-day tour to Madhya Pradesh in the afternoon, was seen moving from table to table where MLAs and MPs were seated, sharing tips with them on how to connect with the people and win their confidence. “The lawmakers must realise that they are ‘jan sevaks’ (public servants), and should behave like a ‘jan sevak’.” He should endeavour to be a good political person by being accessible to the people in all situations to solve their problems”, he told them.



People during the foundation stone laying of Bageshwar Dham Medical & Science Research Institute by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Madhya Pradesh's Chhatarpur. — *PTI*

Mr Modi also tipped them off on how to keep in touch with the people in their respective constituencies regularly. “The PM made us feel like our guardian by giving valuable tips on how to become a good lawmaker”, a BJP MLA told this newspaper while emerging from the Convention Centre.

No mobile phone or any electronic gadget was allowed into the Centre and the media’s entry into

the venue of the meeting was also barred.

All the 163 BJP MLAs, 36 Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha members of the party from Madhya Pradesh and some BJP leaders attended the “Paathshala” (classroom) of Mr Modi. Later, Mr Modi had dinner with them.

The PM is scheduled to inaugurate the two-day Global Investors Summit here on Monday before winding up his tour to MP.

Merc-for-posts claim mars Marathi fest

‘Gaye Guzare log’: Uddhav slams Neelam Gorhe for controversial remark

SONU SHRIVASTAVA
MUMBAI, FEB. 23

The annual Marathi literary meet held at New Delhi found itself in a controversy over the allegations levelled by Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena leader Neelam Gorhe, who, while speaking at the event, said that posts in the Uddhav Thackeray-led party were obtained through monetary means, including gifting of Mercedes cars.

Speaking at the 98th All India Marathi Literary Festival held in New Delhi, Ms Gorhe, the deputy chairperson of the Maharashtra Vidhan

Parishad (Legislative Council), claimed that positions within Shiv Sena (UBT) were secured through monetary means, including the gifting of Mercedes cars. “If you gave two Mercedes, you would get one post,” she said during a chat at the Sammelan. The 70-year-old Gorhe is a four-time Shiv Sena MLC and had joined Shinde in July 2023.

Her comments evoked an angry reaction from the Shiv Sena (UBT) leaders, who questioned her claims. “My party has never asked me for a single rupee. I rose from being an ordinary worker in rural areas to LoP in

the Council. If what Gorhe said was true, there would have been a line of Mercedes vehicles at Matoshree (the Bandra residence of Uddhav Thackeray),” said Ambadas Danve, who is Leader of the Opposition in Vidhan Parishad.

In his sharp reply, Mr Thackeray said, “I don’t want to respond to *gaye guzare log* (good-for-nothing people). I don’t take cognizance.”

Meanwhile, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay Raut dashed off a letter to the literary meet organisers seeking explanation and apology. The event was held under political pres-

sure, Mr Raut said.

In his letter to Usha Tambe, chairperson of the Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Sahitya Mahamandal, Mr Raut said, “Numerous topics discussed at the 98th Literary Meet were unrelated to literature. It appears that the event was held under some political pressure. The platform of the Sahitya Mahamandal was grossly misused.”

An apology should be tendered for hosting such events, he said. Mr Raut also claimed Ms Gorhe told reporters she paid ₹50 lakh to participate in the programme and had gifted a Mercedes car to Usha Tambe.

Budget will be tabled in Maha House March 10

AGE CORRESPONDENT
MUMBAI, FEB. 23

The Mahayuti government in Maharashtra will table its first budget on March 10 after winning a thumping victory in the Assembly election last November.

The business advisory committee (BAC) in a meeting held on Sunday finalised that the budget session will be held from March 3 to March 26 in Mumbai. However, the Opposition parties have objected to the duration of the budget, arguing that it is of five weeks, but the incumbent government has kept it for only three weeks.

The meeting of the BAC for state Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council was held at the state legislature.

7 held for murder of man linked to FIR against KCR

Hyderabad, Feb. 23: Seven persons were arrested in Jayashankar Bhupalpally district of Telangana in connection with the murder of a man, who had filed a complaint against former chief minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao and others, alleging corruption in the Kaleshwaram irrigation project, police said on Sunday.

Based on investigation so far, the police said N. Rajalingamurthy (50), was stabbed to death over a land dispute with the accused, on February 19 when he was going on a bike in Jayashankar Bhupalpally town.

Rajalingamurthy had a dispute with the accused over an acre of land and both sides approached a court, superintendent of

Cong will hold AICC meet April 8-9 in Guj

BJP’s ‘anti-people policies’, Constitution on agenda

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 23

The Congress on Sunday announced that it will hold its AICC session in Gujarat’s Ahmedabad on April 8 and 9 to deliberate on the challenges posed by the BJP’s “anti-people” policies, its alleged attack on the Constitution and charting the party’s future road map. The session will commence on April 8 with an extended Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting, followed by the AICC delegates’ meeting on April 9.

In a statement, Congress general secretary, in-charge organisation, K.C. Venugopal, said the upcoming session will serve not only as a platform for crucial deliberations but also as a reaffirmation of the Congress party’s collective resolve to address the concerns of the common people and

▶ **THE CONGRESS** will launch a massive public outreach campaign called “Samvidhan Bachao” and “Rashtriya Padayatra” soon, Venugopal said

present a strong alternative vision for the nation. “This significant gathering will bring together AICC delegates from across the nation to deliberate on the challenges posed by the anti-people policies and the relentless attack on the Constitution and its values by the BJP, while charting the party’s future course of action,” Mr Venugopal said.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge will preside over both the meetings, which will be attended by Congress Parliamentary Party chairperson Sonia Gandhi, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, all

chief ministers of the Congress-ruled states, national office bearers, senior party leaders, and other AICC delegates, Mr Venugopal added.

This AICC session is being convened as a continuation of the resolutions adopted at the Belagavi Extended CWC meeting (Nava Satyagraha Baithak), which commemorated the 100th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi’s presidency at the 1924 Congress session, he said.

Recognising the urgent need to preserve, protect, and promote the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, Bhimrao Ambedkar, and the Constitution, it was decided that between January 26, 2025 and January 26, 2026, the Congress will launch a massive, nationwide public outreach campaign called the “Samvidhan Bachao Rashtriya Padayatra”, Mr Venugopal recalled.

Loan interest to be refunded for SHGs, says Odisha CM

AGE CORRESPONDENT
BHUBANESWAR, FEB. 23

In a landmark move aimed at empowering women, Odisha chief minister Mohan Majhi announced the refund of interest on loans taken by Self Help Groups (SHGs) across the state. The announcement was made at the inauguration of the nine-day “Subhadra Shakti Mela” here at Janata Maidan on Saturday evening, signaling significant financial relief for over three lakh SHGs.

According to the announcement, the interest on loans up to ₹10 lakh will be refunded to the respective groups, a decision set to be implemented in the financial year 2024-25. This initiative underscores the state government’s commitment to enhancing the financial autonomy of women-led SHGs, which play a vital role in rural development and community empowerment.

The state will forgo ₹300 crore in interest as part of this measure, aimed at alleviating financial burdens and enabling SHGs to reinvest in their ventures.

‘Folly to be wise...’: Tharoor’s cryptic post amid Cong rift

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 23

The tension between Congress MP Shashi Tharoor and the party-high command shows no signs of easing. Mr Tharoor declined to comment further on the internal party criticism he faced after praising the Kerala government’s policies in an article and acknowledged Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s US visit.

“No comments at all. Go watch the match; it’s an important match today,” the Thiruvananthapuram MP said when questioned byreporters at New Delhi airport on Sunday.

Mr Tharoor had earlier posted poet Thomas Gray’s quote: “Where ignorance is bliss, ‘tis folly to be wise.”

Defending his stance, he stated, “For 16 years, I have been in politics. When any government does something right, it should be acknowledged, and when it fails, it should be criticised.”

His remarks followed an interview with a Malayalam podcast, reported by a leading English daily. Mr Tharoor warned that if Congress



Shashi Tharoor

did not expand its appeal, it would remain in the Opposition in Kerala for the third consecutive time. He also noted that many workers felt the party lacked strong leadership in the state. He further said he had been elected MP four times from Thiruvananthapuram and, if Congress did not need his services, he had “other options” such as writing and speaking tours.

The second part of the interview is expected February 26.

Rahul Gandhi and Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge have since met Mr Tharoor. Earlier, K.C. Venugopal had advised him to adhere to the party line.

For now, an uneasy calm prevails. If the deadlock persists, it could spell serious trouble for Congress in Kerala.

India will host meet to mark role of women peacekeepers

New Delhi, Feb. 23: India will host a two-day conference beginning Monday on women peacekeepers at UN missions to highlight their contributions.

The conference will bring together women peacekeepers from 35 troop contributing countries (TCCs) from the Global South.

External affairs minister S. Jaishankar will deliver the keynote address.

The conference is being organised by the ministry of external affairs (MEA), in collaboration with the defence ministry and the centre for United Nations peacekeeping (CUNPK).

“The first-ever conference for women peacekeepers on the theme “Women in Peacekeeping: A Global South Perspective” will take place in New Delhi on February 24 and 25,” the MEA said.

The United Nations will be represented by under-secretary-general, department of peace operations, Jean-Pierre Lacroix and United Nations special coordinator Christian Saunders.

They will join other stakeholders pertaining to the peacekeeping domain, the MEA said in a statement. — *PTI*



SHORT TAKES

Accident in Guj takes lives of 5 WB tourists

Surendranagar: Five tourists from West Bengal were killed and five others injured in a road accident in Gujarat's Surendranagar district on Sunday, the police said. The accident occurred on a national highway around 4.30 pm near Navi Morwad village in Limbdi taluka, said J.N. Gamara, sub-inspector of Chuda police station. A group of tourists from West Bengal were travelling in a tempo traveller when the vehicle crashed into a dumper, he said. They were returning after visiting places several like Diu and Gir and had their flight from Ahmedabad two days later, the official said. Two women and three men died at the time of the accident and remaining five, who got injured, were rushed to a hospital at Sayla in the district for treatment, he said. The bodies have been sent for post-mortem, he added. — *PTI*

Yellow alert for rain in HP's four districts

Shimla: The local meteorological department office on Sunday issued a yellow warning for heavy rainfall, cold day, thunderstorm and lightning in four districts of Himachal Pradesh — Chamba, Kangra, Kullu and Mandi — on Wednesday and Thursday. Light rain occurred at isolated places since Saturday evening and Manali received 5 millimeters of rain, Kasol 2 millimeters, Shimla 1.8 mm, Kufri and Kotkhai 1 millimeters each. Hailstorm was witnessed in Himachal Pradesh's Jubbarh-atti in the suburbs of Shimla town while fog engu-lf-ed parts of Bilaspur, the meteorological department said. Keylong was the coldest at night recording a low of minus 9 degree Celsius while Una was the hottest during the day with a high of 26.8 degree Celsius. The state received 52.5 millimeters rains during the winter season from January 1 to February 23 against normal rainfall of 163 millimeters, a deficit of 68 per cent. — *PTI*

Woman injured by gunfire in J&K

Jammu: A 21-year-old woman was seriously injured by gunfire at her residence in Jammu and Kashmir's Rajouri district on Sunday, officials said. Shivani, the daughter of Girdari Lal, was fiddling with a licensed 12-bore gun at her Sunderbani residence when it went off, causing injuries to her, they said. The officials said the woman was given first aid locally and later referred to in Jammu and Kashmir's Government Medical College hospital, Jammu, for specialised treatment. The police have registered a case and further probe is on, the officials said, adding it was premature to say whether the gun went off accidentally or the victim tried to commit suicide. — *PTI*

PM lauds India's AI rise, Isro's century

■ **Continued From Page 1**
to think about why this is happening, as excess weight or obesity gives rise to many kinds of problems and diseases.
“We can together deal with this challenge with minor efforts. For example, one method I suggested was “reducing the consumption of edible oil by 10 per cent. Decide that you will use 10 per cent less oil every month. You can decide that while buying oil for cooking, you will buy 10 per cent less oil. This will be an important step towards reducing obesity,” he said.
The Prime Minister also played out messages from double Olympic medalist javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra and boxing champion Nikhat Zareen, who urged people to adopt healthy lifestyles. Cardiac surgeon Dr Devi Shetty's message was also shared during the broadcast.
Noting that March 8 is observed as International Women's Day, Mr Modi said that this is a special occasion to salute India's Nari Shakti. He called on people to celebrate, honour and salute the indomitable power of women.
Highlighting the contribution of Hansa Mehta, Mr Modi said that she had brought to the fore the contribution of women from all over the country, right from the making of the national flag to sacrificing their lives for its sake.
“She was of the belief that the saffron colour in our tricolour also reflects this sentiment. She had expressed confidence that our women power will make its valuable contribution in making India strong and prosperous.

USAID funded 7 India projects, no links to voter turnout: Govt

\$17bn were provided to India in various sectors: FinMin report

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 23

Amid a raging political row over the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) alleged role in influencing Indian elections, the finance ministry's latest annual report disclosed that the agency funded seven projects worth \$750 million in 2023-24.
“Currently, seven projects worth a total budget of \$750 million (approx.) are being implemented by the USAID in partnership with the Government of India. For the financial year 2023-24, an obligation of a total of \$97 million (about ₹825 crore) has been made by the USAID under the seven projects,” the ministry's annual report for 2023-24 said.
The report comes at a time when political controversy erupted in the

country earlier this month after the Elon Musk-led department of government efficiency or DOGE claimed that it had cancelled a \$21 million grant to India to boost ‘voter turnout’, while US President Donald Trump also repeatedly claimed that the USAID under the previous administration led by Joe Biden allocated \$21 million in funding to India for “voter turnout”.
The department of economic affairs under the Union finance ministry, which is the nodal department for bilateral funding arrangements, has also shared the details of projects funded in 2023-24 in the report. During the year, no funding was made for enhancing voter turnout but for projects related to agriculture and food security programmes; water, sanitation

■ **FOR THE financial year 2023-24, an obligation of a total of \$97 million (about ₹825 crore) has been made by the USAID under the seven projects**

and hygiene (WASH); renewable energy; disaster management and health.
The report also said that funds were committed to sustainable forests and climate adaptation programmes and energy efficiency technology commercialisation and innovation projects. The USA's bilateral development assistance to India started in 1951 and it is mainly administered through USAID. Since its commencement, USAID has provided economic assistance of over USD 17 billion to India in various sectors for over 555 projects.

External affairs minister S. Jaishankar on Saturday said, “The information put out by the Trump administration is ‘concerning’ and that the government is looking into it. The USAID was allowed in India ‘in good faith, to do good faith activities’, and suggestions are being made out of America that ‘there are activities which are in bad faith,’” Mr Jaishankar had said.
On the other hand, the Congress party on Sunday accused the BJP of indulging in “anti-national work” by spreading “fake news from America” and asserted that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and EAM S. Jaishankar will also have to answer as to why the government is silent when US President Donald Trump and Elon Musk are “insulting” India repeatedly.

2 tribals killed in wild elephant attack in Kerala

Kannur (Keralam), Feb. 23: A man and a woman, from tribal community, were allegedly trampled to death by a wild elephant in the Aralam farm area of this district on Sunday evening, police said here.
The victims have been identified as Velli and Leela, residents of the 13th block.
The incident occurred in the 13th block of the Aralam tribal resettlement area when they went out to collect cashew nuts.
Police and forest department officials have arrived at the site.
The 13th block, particularly the Odachal region, is known for wild elephant incursions. — *PTI*

■ ‘BJP indulging in anti-national work’ Why PM, EAM silent despite Trump ‘insulting’ India: Cong

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 23

Amid the USAID funding row, the Congress on Sunday accused the BJP of “anti-national work” by spreading “fake news from America” and asserted that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and external affairs minister S. Jaishankar will also have to answer as to why the government is silent when US President Donald Trump and Elon Musk are “insulting” India repeatedly.
Congress general secretary in-charge Jairam Ramesh said, “BJP is a procession of liars and illiterates. The news about \$21 million, on which the BJP and their bootlickers were jumping on, turned out to be fake. The \$21 million in 2022 was not for ‘voter turnout’ in India but for Bangladesh.”
The Congress leader said in a Hindi post on X that

■ **THE OPPOSITION party had on Thursday demanded a white paper on the funds received in India from developmental agencies, aid mechanisms and multilateral forums**

ever since the Trump administration's DOGE said on February 16 that the USAID had cancelled the \$21 million funding for “voting in India,” the BJP has been making fabricated allegations against the party.
“But now it is coming to light that this entire news is fake. When the money has not even reached India, then what would be the cancellation?” he said.
The Congress leader added the controversy revolves around two USAID grants listed by DOGE, which were routed through the Washington-based Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening

(CEPPS). He added that CEPPS was set to receive a total of \$486 million from USAID, with DOGE mentioning that the funds included “\$22 million for Moldova and \$21 million for voter turnout in India.”
Mr Jairam said, “Is it the case that the country's self-respect has been compromised in the process of begging for mercy for Adani?” Trump for the fourth time in recent days has claimed that the Biden administration allocated \$21 million in funding to India for voter turnout, evoking a sharp response from Congress which urged the Prime Minister to talk to his friend and strongly refute the allegation.
The Opposition party had on Thursday demanded a white paper on the funds received in India from developmental agencies, aid mechanisms and multilateral forums.

SC to hear AIDS drugs shortage PIL on Mon

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 23

The Supreme Court is slated to hear on Monday a plea on alleged shortage of anti-retroviral therapy drugs for treating HIV patients in the country.
A bench is scheduled to hear the petition filed in 2022 by NGO “Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS” and others.
The Centre had, in July last year, apprised the top court that the government was ensuring availability of free, life-long anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs for all people living with HIV through anti-retroviral therapy centres under the national AIDS control programme. It had said as on date, there was adequate stock of all ARV drugs nationally under the programme.
The petitioners' counsel had said in view of the developments which had taken place since the filing of the petition, presently there was no shortage of ART drugs.
However, the counsel had flagged certain difficulties in regard to the process of procurement and quality of the drugs.
The SC had suggested a meeting between the Centre, national AIDS control organisation and an organisation working for AIDS patients to discuss issues of quality and shortage of ARV drugs for treating HIV patients.

‘Hit-and-run cases 38% of all crashes in Mumbai in 23’

Mumbai, Feb. 23: Hit-and-run incidents accounted for 38 per cent of all the fatal crashes on Mumbai roads in 2023, and majority of the victims, at 54 per cent, were pedestrians, as per a report published by the city traffic police.

Occupants of the two and three-wheeler vehicles and pedestrians were majority of the victims in the road crash deaths here in 2023, an official on Sunday said quoting the data. Mumbai reported 374 deaths in 351 road crashes in 2023, marking a 39 per cent decrease since 2015, as per the report which comprised an in-depth analysis of the accidents data of that year.
Among those deaths, two and three-wheeler occupants comprised 48 per cent and pedestrians 40 per

Speeding car kills toddler, mother critical in Mumbai

Mumbai, Feb. 23: An 18-month-old boy died and his mother was seriously injured after a car hit them while they were sleeping on a footpath in Mumbai's Wadala area, a police official said on Sunday. The incident took place on Balaram Khedekar Road on Saturday, the RAK Marg police station official said.

“Priya Nikhil Londhe (29) and her son Vardaan were sleeping on the footpath when a speeding car driven by Kamal Vijay Riya (46) hit them. The toddler died on the spot, while Priya sustained injuries. Riya was arrested under BNS provisions for causing death by negligence,” the official said. — *PTI*

cent, said the report published recently by the Mumbai traffic police in association of the Bloomberg Philanthropies Initiative for Global Road Safety. Males continued to

account for most of the deaths at 82 per cent, with those in the 20-39 years age group making up the largest number of fatalities among the males at 47 per cent, as per the the data. — *PTI*

Scientists call for open access to X's data for academic research

New Delhi, Feb. 23: Researchers are calling for free access to social media platform X's data for academic analyses, insights from which can help understand trends in political engagement.
Efforts of a research group from Saarland University, Germany, were halted abruptly when X's owner Elon Musk blocked free access to X's data for academic research purposes in June 2023. The US-based entrepreneur acquired the platform, then known as Twitter, in October 2022.
The team wanted to know whether Twitter

prioritised tweets from politicians from the right of the political spectrum between 2021 and 2023.
“It is simply not acceptable that access to these vast amounts of data is either unaffordable or provided so selectively that no meaningful analyses can be conducted,” lead researcher Ingmar Weber, a professor of AI and chair for societal computing at Saarland University, said.
“The researchers called for implementation of legislation to ensure that academic researchers can regain access to social network data. — *PTI*

Hope fades for T'gana tunnel workers

Nagarkurnool (Telangana), Feb. 23: Despite relentless efforts by the Indian Army, NDRF and other agencies, no breakthrough was achieved on Sunday in the rescue operations to extricate eight persons who have remained trapped for over 30 hours inside a tunnel after a section of it collapsed in the SLBC project, with prayers on for their well-being.
Telangana minister J. Krishna Rao told reporters that the chances of survival under the circumstances are “not that good.”
“Muck has piled up too high inside the tunnel,

making it impossible to walk through. They (rescuers) are using rubber tubes and wooden planks to navigate through it,” Krishna Rao, who went inside the tunnel, told reporters.
“We can't say. We are hopeful, but the kind of incident that took place was very serious and chances are we can not say. The chances of survival we can not predict. Chancer are not that good,” he said when asked about the chances of survival of the trapped persons.
Krishna Rao said some survivors swam across the tunnel after the incident

■ **TELANGANA MINISTER J. Krishna Rao told reporters that the chances of survival under the circumstances are not that good.**

happened.
Videos released by the state government showed rescuers navigating through thick muck, tangled iron rods, and cement blocks.
Minister Uttam Kumar Reddy said there were about 70 people working in the tunnel on Saturday morning when a part of it collapsed. Most of them could escape and return using their internal train

or locomotive there after the incident.
“But eight people have been missing since yesterday. We are hoping and praying that they are safe...” Mr Reddy said.
The final 200 meters stretch of the collapsed section of the tunnel has been filled with water and silt, the minister said, indicating the difficulty that the rescue teams are faced with to reach the spot.
Uttam Kumar Reddy said getting heavy machinery into the tunnel became difficult due to the terrain, but officials are working on alternate methods to remove the debris. — *PTI*

Army to deploy AI ‘track and shoot’ at LoC

■ **Continued From Page 1**
That is the problem which nobody in the world thought about. So, what we did was we made a network of secondary cameras. We place them at intervals of 500 meters, 1 km, 2 km, depending upon the terrain requirement. If we are not getting the line of sight from one direction, we will get this line of sight from any other direction,” said Col. Dogra. “So, a terrorist can hide from one direction but he cannot hide from every direction because he has to move.” “If any of the secondary cameras picks up the movement, that camera will quickly give direction to the weapon where to point. 10 millisecond is the reaction time which our weapon has,” he said.
“And very intentionally we have used a medium machine-gun (MMG). MMG fires in a big area like at 2 km, it makes a kill box of around 50 meters by 50 meters. Even if a terrorist tries to run, he will still get hit. One more feature which we have put in this is it is firing at the future position. If a terrorist is going in some direction, we are predicting the time taken by a bullet to travel, and other parameters. So, we are firing at the future position. A lot of work has been done on this,” he added.
“From the beginning we have developed it for the Line of Control. Whenever any terrorist is crossing the Line of Control, he uses the areas which are full of vegetation, trees and bushes, so that his movement is not tracked,” said Col. Dogra.

Leaders get backing to weaken India: PM

■ **Continued From Page 1**
foreign forces inimical to India support them to weaken our country and our religion,” he said. Mr Modi praised Bageshwar Dham seer Dharendra Shastri for making efforts to spread awareness about the mantra of unity in the country for a long time. He said the seer has taken another pledge for the welfare of the society and humanity by initiating the move to establish a cancer research institute.
“The spiritual centre of Bageshwar Dham will soon be a health centre as well,” he said, adding, “Serving the people to alleviate their sufferings is the true religion.”
The PM further said: “Our temples, monasteries and holy sites have always played the dual role as both centre of worship and hub for scientific and social thought. Our sages have provided us with the science of ayurveda and yoga, which is now globally recognised.”
Referring to Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, Mr

Modi said crores of people have taken holy dip at Triveni Sangam and received blessings of saints and hermits.
Calling the ongoing religious congregation “Maha Kumbh of unity”, Mr Modi said the gathering at Prayagraj will ‘continue to strengthen India's unity’.
The PM also referred to the eye camp opened at Prayagraj on the sidelines of Maha Kumbh and said the “Netra Maha Kumbh” has facilitated eye treatment for over 2-lakh people, although it has not garnered much attention.
The Prime Minister also lauded the religious institutions and trusts that are running large hospitals across India and many science and research institutes, providing healthcare to crores of people.
Mr Modi said when the country gave him the opportunity to serve, he made the mantra of ‘sabka saath, sabka vikas’ his government's resolution. “A key foundation of sabka saath, sabka vikas is ‘sabka ilaaj, sabko arogya’,

which means healthcare for all,” he said.
In his address, referring to the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Mr Modi said the provision of toilets in houses has improved hygiene in the families, saving them thousands of rupees in medical expenses.
Mr Modi said before he came to power at the Centre in 2014, the poor feared the cost of treatment more than the illness, as any ailment in the family meant severe financial stress. “The Ayushman scheme introduced by the Centre has ensured treatment for the poor up to ₹5 lakhs, thus reducing the burden of medical treatment on them. The scheme is now available to elderly people above 70 years of age, irrespective of whether the family is poor, middle class, or wealthy,” he said.
The PM also underlined the measures undertaken by the Centre to empower women by launching initiatives like “Lakhpati Didi” and “Drone Didi”.

Cong panel to decide aspects of future polls

■ **Continued From Page 1**
looking into all electoral aspects, including alliances. So, somebody senior like Priyanka Ji should lead the committee. Since she is senior it will be easy for her to speak to senior leaders of the alliance partners for better coordination.”
Another Congress insider said: “The committee will

screen ticket aspirants based on winnability, loyalty, and performance. Candidates with poor electoral records or controversial backgrounds may be rejected. This will make the committee one of the most powerful within the party, and its chief will emerge as a key power centre.” Ms Priyanka Vadra's involvement will ensure that

the charge of favouritism, which is often faced by those in charge of various states during ticket distribution, will be negated. Her active participation will also bring gravitas to the entire exercise. Interestingly, she has been holding long meetings with Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge about her role in the organisation.



THE ASIAN AGE

24 FEBRUARY 2025

Tussle over USAID funding for India may not end soon

Thrice in three days US President Donald Trump questioned the USAID's alleged \$21 million fund for raising the voter turnout in India, which his administration and his adviser Elon Musk said had been cancelled last week.

Never short of drama, the Indian political scene is going through a whole new episode of contrasted finger pointing with the Government of India, which sees a very deeply troubling pattern of external interference in the world's biggest poll process, and the Congress, which was bound to become a suspect party in such funding, crying themselves hoarse.

Unless the government goes deep into this matter and establishes whether such a fund was, in fact, given to Indian entities and for how long, nothing but conspiracy theories can keep springing out of it. No one is the wiser thus far about who got these funds, if indeed some of the suggested \$21 million did trickle through to India

An investigative newspaper report that suggested the said \$21 million was for Bangladesh rather than India has been flagged by the Congress to defend itself of charges that somehow its friends and voters were beneficiaries while the ruling BJP party disbelieves it as just some more obfuscation in a smoke and mirrors kind of intrigue.

Truth to tell, US regimes over the last several decades have been known to have worked overtime in bringing about regime changes. In fact, Robert F. Kennedy Jr, a vaccine sceptic who is now the US health secretary, is on record as saying that the US may have brought about 50 changes of regime over the last seven decades.

It is a different matter that regime changes attributed to the US administration, or its deep state, have invariably invited disaster, as in Iraq and elsewhere like Bangladesh. So believable is the theory that the US has brought about regime changes as per its whims and fancies that the fund to get more voters to the booths is not to be dismissed out of hand.

And yet, given Indian expertise or lack of it at forensically proving money trails as witnessed in so many money laundering cases failing to get the accused convicted in a court of law, it is safe to assume that the mystery of the \$21 million will remain a political football that will continue to be kicked here and there like in a soap opera.

The one factor that becomes most relevant in this case is that the US President Trump, who has spoken up most often in this regard, is so flip-pant about facts that the alternative reality he builds inevitably takes precedence over truth. For example, his inconsistencies in saying Volodymyr Zelenskyy is not needed in peace talks with Russia one day and saying on the next that the Ukrainian leader must sit with Vladimir Putin at the negotiating table is just the latest example of shifting opinions.

If official India, with the help of the Reserve Bank and the finance ministry which can track inward remittances, can establish who got US money for a seemingly inane democratic objective like a higher voting percentage in a country that already has the most voters in the world who exercise their franchise, they would be doing a lot to throw light on this fund flow for alleged regime change objectives. The pity is this controversy will fester rather than come to a quick conclusion.

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Need to rebuild trust in Manipur

After leaving Manipur in anarchy for one-and-a-half years, the Union government appears to have woken up to the dangers posed by the status quo and come up with plans to nudge the state back to peace. The send-off to the divider-in-chief N. Birendra Singh as chief minister was the first step, and it is being followed by a call to the people and rebels of all hues to surrender the arms they have looted from police stations with a comprehensive crackdown warning announced at the end of the deadline of February 26.

The positive response from the people and rebels to the call by the governor to return the arms must work as a platform for the government to take the next step. It is estimated that around 2,000 of the 6,000 looted weapons including rifles, grenades and grenade-launchers have been deposited, while hope abounds of more returns. The immediate task before the government is to convince the citizens that it will be a fair enforcer of the law of the land and that returning the arms is the best course of action to be followed. But it will also have to erase the scars that partisan projects of the previous administration have left in the minds of the tribal population.

The folly of governments has often been to believe that they can rely on the might of the armed forces to disarm and subjugate. But such a strategy has hardly succeeded, instead resulting in massive bloodshed as long as the root cause of the disaffection stayed in place. Winning the trust of the people who belong to diverse ethnic, cultural and geographic groups is the most important goal now. Once that is achieved, finding common cause for all to live peacefully and work towards prosperity will come easier. All along the way, the government must resist the temptation to take recourse to physical force and instead avail the tools proffered by federalism and democracy.

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KAUSHIK MITTER

Editor

K. SUBHAKAR

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Subhani



Trump's USAID flip-flops: India shakes, China gains



K.C. Singh

The freshly minted US department of government efficiency (DOGE), led by billionaire Elon Musk, began examining the American government's expenditures promptly after President Donald Trump was sworn in on January 20. The revelations began tumbling out, especially on the Musk-controlled social media platform X, formerly Twitter. Distorted facts and exaggerated figures have been critical to Mr Trump's politics. The attack on the US Agency for International Development (USAID) followed this trend.

There was an uproar in India when President Trump, speaking in Miami, brought focus on the alleged \$21 million funding for enhancing voter turnout in India. He provocatively questioned whether some previous US government was "trying to get somebody else elected". The BJP could not resist promptly using it to target the Opposition, especially the Congress Party. A national newspaper the following day exposed flaws in the charge, after examining the USAID data. They concluded that the sum perhaps had gone to Bangladesh, and not India. In any case, the said sum amounting to around ₹182 crores or less, depending on the dollar-rupee rate, would be a drop in the ocean of Indian electoral spending, declared and undeclared.

The United States is not alone in budgeting large sums for foreign development assistance. During the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro, it was proposed that the developed nations should commit 0.7 per cent of their gross national product to overseas assistance. In 2011, the US only touched 0.20 per cent. The pre-Trump figures showed that the USAID outlay was \$41 billion out of the total government budget of \$6 trillion, or 0.014 per cent. Thus,

the DOGE may end up harming America's image abroad out of proportion to the amounts that it may actually save by curtailing USAID drastically.

The USAID programme began in November 1961, inspired by the global vision of President John F. Kennedy. The US already had foreign development assistance programmes, employing almost 6,400 personnel. But President Kennedy told the US Congress, when recommending the bill, that the 1960s would be the Decade of Development. But no nation runs a charity without clear strategic objectives. The US aimed to globally expand democracy and free markets in an era of decolonisation and the Cold War. The US wanted to expand not only its influence but also to spread its model of democratic governance across the world, as a counter to the then Soviet Union's Communist model.

The objectives of USAID were thus quite diverse. It covered disaster relief, poverty alleviation, technical cooperation, socio economic development, health and family welfare, education, democracy, environment and "bilateral interests". The last element would cover support for civil society organisations monitoring governmental performance. This foray into the civil affairs of any nation even involved working alongside military personnel, if the United States military had already intervened there. Two cases in point would be Afghanistan and Iraq. In both, despite the expenditure of trillions of dollars, transition to a liberal democratic structure has failed.

India's external affairs ministry may call Mr Trump's remarks "deeply disturbing" and others loudly protest against foreign interference in the Indian elections, but the nexus between USAID funds and voters get-

The planned reduction of USAID employees from 10,000 to 294 would globally cripple development assistance. For instance, 20 million HIV patients, among them 50,000 children, may lose treatment.

ting significantly influenced is missing. In particular, the involvement of Opposition parties in such an episode is even less likely. There have been occasional charges in the past of the CIA working in tandem with USAID. But actual US success in manipulating elections in even small countries has been rare. In a country of India's size, it would be even more difficult if not impossible. But from the time of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi the "foreign hand" theory has been employed by governments to taint their opponents and garner public support.

The planned reduction of USAID employees from 10,000 to 294 would globally cripple development assistance. For instance, 20 million HIV patients, including 50,000 children, may lose treatment. Clinical trials involving HIV, malaria, cholera, cervical cancer and tuberculosis would get interrupted, if not abandoned. The bulk of USAID funds have gone to sub-Saharan Africa and Europe & Eurasia. Allegations exist of a US role in the change of government in Bangladesh. This indicates American priorities in South Asia. India's BJP government being a US-friendly one negates the argument about any US attempt to change it.

India's foreign assistance programme began in 1964, despite itself being an aid recipient for decades after Independence in 1947. In fact, aid to Nepal was given even as early as the 1950s. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) was at its core. It covered various areas of training for foreign civil and defence personnel. In 2012, India established the Development Partnership Administration (DPA), in the ministry of external

affairs, on the lines of USAID.

This clubbed together the existing mechanisms of foreign aid to thereafter cover lines of credit, grants-in-aid for development projects, capacity building, humanitarian assistance and cultural and heritage partnership. Even India would calibrate its aid depending on a country's strategic importance, including the need to isolate it from Chinese or Pakistani influence. Indian public sector companies like Rail India Technical and Economic Service (RITES) have used training and aid abroad to open doors for future business opportunities.

The present brouhaha raises a number of questions. Firstly, knowing President Trump's propensity for fact-free allegations and misconstrued data, the Indian government should have been careful before fuelling a domestic political controversy. Secondly, the USAID agenda has always included a pro-democracy sub-theme. Thus, even if it financed some civil society groups to advance that, of which so far there is little proof, how is the Opposition involved? Considering that the Union government has been targeting civil society groups and withdrawing the permission of many to use foreign funds, why were the USAID funds not detected?

Reports have appeared that Starlink, owned by Elon Musk, the DOGE supremo, faced an inquiry by USAID. The freezing of all foreign aid will face legal challenges, which may linger for months. However, the pain inflicted on the hungry and ailing in low-income nations, especially in southern Africa, will be immediate. So too would be the damage to America's global reputation and influence. It can allow China to exploit the vacuum and gain influence. India too needs to activate its DPA to ensure that the space vacated by the United States is not cornered by China.

Targeting India's Opposition parties, based on the Trumpian disinformation, is thus a wild goose chase.

The writer is a former secretary in the external affairs ministry. He tweets at @ambkcsingh.

LETTERS

LAWYERS AT FAULT

Such are the levels of intolerance and hate that lawyers in MP are alleged to have to have beaten up an interfaith couple who had gone to register their marriage. Lawyers are supposed to uphold the law and it raises a big question on their training as well as their capacity to uphold the law. The compulsory registration of live-in couples has also created such incidents especially in the northern states. Those who are capable of beating a pregnant woman are barbarians. But why only the common folk have to face the wrath of protectors of Hindu women?

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

SHAKTIKANTA BACK

THE APPOINTMENT of Shaktikanta Das, former RBI governor as second principal secretary to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has not come as a surprise at all. Mr Das is the one who spearheaded Mr Modi's disastrous 2016 demonetisation drive while the then RBI governor Urjit Patel took a back seat through the whole process. He became the automatic successor to Mr Patel when he left his seat in protest against certain economic decisions of the government. Again, it was he who was heading the Central bank when it allegedly failed to give precise numbers of the demonetised currencies returned and the actual number of currencies printed and released to various banks! This is in fact a post newly created exclusively for Das.

Tharcus S. Fernando
Chennai

UPHILL RESCUE

THREE teams of engineers and rescuers have assessed the strength of the Srisailem Left Bank Canal (SLBC) tunnel in Telangana's Nagarkurnool in which eight men are trapped. But rescuing them is an uphill task. The tunnel was being built to carry Krishna river water to Nalgonda district. The tunnel roof collapse occurred due to seepage from the hillocks above. Now the tunnel is filled with water and it is impossible to drill from above due to presence of thick sheets of rock. The men are 13.5 km inside the 9.5 metre tunnel. To add to this, there were two collapses inside the tunnel 150 metres away from each other.

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

₹500 for the best letter of the week goes to Sujit De (Feb. 21). Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com.

Sunil Gatade



A resurgent BJP clear and present danger for India's regional parties

After me, the deluge", Louis XV of France had once famously predicted. The same holds true for regional parties across India in the wake of the defeat of Arvind Kejriwal and his Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi after a fierce fight — if they fail to reinvent, reorient and revive.

The BJP's hat trick in Delhi after securing victories in Maharashtra and Haryana has turned the world's largest party into a bugbear for its detractors, especially the regional parties, which are not on a strong wicket.

This is notwithstanding the fact that Congress Party remains the favourite punching bag of the Prime Minister, who has time and again openly advocated the controversial campaign of a "Congress-mukt Bharat". But that is another story.

The fact is that the regional parties have neither the stamina nor the strength or character to survive in a sustained fight given their present condition.

Go no further than Maharashtra. The state offers a perfect example of how an underdog BJP after the Lok Sabha elections has made mincemeat of the once powerful Maha Vikas Aghadi in the Assembly polls a few months ago. This is despite the charges levelled by the Congress, Sharad Pawar's NCP and Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena faction that the BJP had played foul in the polls.

Arvind Kejriwal may have been the slippery character of Indian politics, but he was a hard-nosed strategist and an effective orator and organiser who

brought a new grammar to politics in the national capital with his trademark welfare politics. He might be authoritarian in nature, but he had full hold over his party and politics, unlike most other regional leaders.

Both the BJP and the Congress were forced to follow the Kejriwal model in Delhi, which is a reflection of the fact that the model is going to stay, overtly or covertly.

The BJP's strategy aimed at tearing apart the AAP is visible with the ruling party seeking to make deep inroads in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, controlled by Mr Kejriwal, by hook or crook.

The defeat in Delhi will undoubtedly cast a dark shadow over AAP-ruled Punjab sooner than later.

"What goes up has to come down" — aptly applies in the case of Mr Kejriwal and his party due to the fact that in the fast lane to glamour and power, he made many detractors within and outside.

But what is also certain is that the Delhi Assembly outcome is a wake-up call for regional parties aspiring to play kingmaker in national politics. If Mr Kejriwal can fall despite being seen as the smartest of the lot, the rest are likely to be far more vulnerable. This is because the BJP's next target will be the beleaguered regional parties bedevilled by internal conflicts.

Not a single regional party is in good shape, and nor did they learn much from the emergence of the BJP as the world's largest party and its wicked ways.

Even worse is that the leadership of most of the regional parties has not come up by the dint of their hard work. They are the dynasts who are enjoying power and position because of the legacy left by their father or uncle. Instead of actually being regional parties, rooted in the causes of their regions, they have evolved into "family" parties.

Take the instance of Samajwadi Party's Akhilesh Yadav. At least half a dozen of his near relatives are either MPs or MLAs, and some of them are his close advisers. Some have even joined the BJP in search of greener pastures.

The case of Tejashwini Yadav of the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar is not all that different. Tamil Nadu chief minister M.K. Stalin's son Udhayanidhi is the state's deputy chief minister, while J&K CM Omar Abdullah is the son of National Conference president Farooq Abdullah.

Jagan Mohan Reddy, Sukhbir Singh Badal, H.D. Kumaraswamy, Uddhav and Raj Thackeray, Omar Abdullah, Mehbooba Mufti, Chirag Paswan, Hemant Soren, Ajit Pawar and Jayant Chaudhary are enjoying or have enjoyed power due to dynasty.

Marginalising them is child's play for the BJP under Narendra Modi and Amit Shah. They can either ally with the BJP for their survival or confront it with like-minded parties unitedly. If you align with the BJP, you have to play second fiddle or, worse, become a vassal. There is no other fate.

The Opposition INDIA alliance being in tatters is

not a good thing for them, and the tragedy is that they are the prime reasons for the pathetic plight of the bloc. Everyone who is anyone in the INDIA bloc wants the leadership. Right or wrong, an impression is that some of them are playing into the hands of the BJP to embarrass and weaken the Congress.

The impressive victory in Delhi after a hard-fought battle has put the BJP in the driver's seat, which will force its friends and foes to pause and reflect on the way ahead.

In poll-bound Bihar, neither chief minister Nitish Kumar's JD(U) nor any other NDA allies can afford to be taciturn.

With Assembly polls in five states due next year, the regional parties will have to be extra-cautious. It is introspection time for the regional parties at a time when, next year, Mamata Banerjee is seeking a fourth term in West Bengal and the Left is hoping to come to power for the third time in Kerala. Assembly polls are also due in Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and BJP-ruled Assam. None of them have pro-incumbency.

The problem is that none of the regional parties have realised the clear and present danger when every single day counts. The disarray in the Opposition camp is not a good augury. The anti-BJP forces must realise that "we must all hang together, or we will all hang separately".

The writer is a journalist based in New Delhi

SHORT TAKES

32 INDIAN FISHERMAN NABBED BY SL

Colombo, Feb. 23: Sri Lankan authorities on Sunday arrested 32 Indian fishermen and seized 5 fishing boats for allegedly venturing into the territorial waters of the island nation, the Navy said.

The Sri Lankan Navy in a statement said the arrests occurred during a special operation in the sea area north of Mannar.

"Five Indian fishing boats were seized and 32 Indian fishermen apprehended while they were poaching in Sri Lankan waters," the statement said on Sunday.

WILL CREATE UNITY GOVT: CONGO PRESIDENT

Kinshasa (Congo), Feb. 23: Congo's President says he is going to launch a unity government, as violence spreads across the country's east and pressure mounts over his handling of the crisis.

On Saturday, in some of his first statements since Rwandan-backed rebels captured major cities in eastern Congo, President Felix Tshisekedi, told a meeting of the Sacred Union of the Nation ruling coalition not to be distracted by internal quarrels.

"I lost the battle and not the war. I must reach out to everyone, including the opposition."

HOSTAGES TAKEN AT HOSPITAL, GUNMAN KILLED

York, Feb. 23: A man armed with a pistol and carrying zip ties entered a Pennsylvania hospital's intensive care unit on Saturday and took staff members hostage before he was killed by police in a shootout that also left an officer dead, authorities said.

Three staffers at UPMC Memorial Hospital, including a doctor, a nurse and a custodian, and two other officers were shot and wounded in the attack, York County District Attorney Tim Barker said.

A fourth staff member was injured during a fall, Barker said.

ARRESTS AFTER ISLAMIST ATTACK IN FRANCE

Mulhouse, France, Feb. 23: French police have made several arrests since a man went on a stabbing rampage, killing one and wounding several others in what President Emmanuel Macron called an "Islamist terrorist act", anti-terror prosecutors told AFP on Sunday.

The knife-wielding suspect, identified by prosecutors as a 37-year-old Algerian-born man, was arrested in the eastern city of Mulhouse.

He was on a terrorism watch-list and subject to deportation orders.

A further three people were in custody.

EX-PM THAKSIN SORRY FOR THAI MASSACRE

Bangkok, Feb. 23: Former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra apologised on Sunday over the deaths of scores of Muslim protesters who suffocated in Army trucks two decades ago in the country's south.

The apology is believed to be the first he has made in public over the incident known as the "Tak Bai massacre", and comes nearly four months after the statute of limitations expired and murder charges against seven suspects were dropped.

The massacre has long stood as an emblem of state impunity in Thailand's Muslim-majority southernmost provinces.

SPAIN SMASHES RING OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Madrid, Feb. 23: Spanish police said on Sunday they had dismantled a human trafficking ring they said had exploited more than 1,000 women in the past year, mainly Colombians and Venezuelans.

"The victims, mainly of South American origin, were lured to Spain with bogus job offers," police stated, adding they had rescued 48 women in an operation which brought 48 arrests.

Most of those detained, including two Colombian women and one Spaniard were held near the eastern city of Alicante.

Trump defends mass migrant deportations

Prez says he's sending home undocumented foreigners

Washington, Feb. 23: US President Donald Trump has defended the mass deportation of undocumented foreign nationals, saying his administration draining the swamp by sending home fraudsters, cheaters, globalists and deep state bureaucrats.

Trump has made the mass deportation of undocumented migrants a key policy. Addressing the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) outside Washington on Saturday, he said, "The fraudsters, liars, cheaters, globalists, and deep state bureaucrats are being sent packing."

"Illegal alien criminals are being sent home. We're draining the swamp and restoring government by the people," he said.

As of 2022, unauthorised immigrants represented 3.3 per cent of the total US population and 23 per cent of the foreign-born population, according to Pew Research Centre.

Trump has moved to overhaul parts of the US immigration system since returning to office and promised "mass deportations" and arrests. The department of homeland security posted on X that, as of February 3, its agents had arrested 8,768 people.

Three batches comprising a total of 332 Indians have already been sent back to India from the US amid an intensified crackdown by the Trump administration against illegal immigrants. —PTI



US President Donald Trump dances on stage after speaking at the Conservative Political Action Conference at the Gaylord National Resort Hotel and Convention Centre in Oxon Hill, Maryland, on Saturday. — AFP

OFFICIALS NOT FOR IMMIGRATION TO FACE MUSIC

Atlanta (US), Feb. 23: Republican state lawmakers seeking to aid President Donald Trump's crackdown on illegal immigration are threatening local officials who resist with lawsuits, fines and even potential jail time.

Lawmakers in more than 20 states this year have filed legislation targeting so-called sanctuary policies that limit cooperation with federal immigration authorities, according to an *Associated Press* analysis. — AP

Kash tells staff to ignore Musk's justify-work email

Washington, Feb. 23: The new director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Kash Patel has reportedly told the agency's staff to ignore Elon Musk's request to justify their work or lose their jobs. "For now, please pause any responses," reads a message sent by FBI on Saturday to all FBI personnel, calling for employees to wait for a coordinated response from the bureau.

Elon Musk and the department of government efficiency (DOGE) has been tapped by President Donald Trump to shrink the size of the federal government, which he has called "bloated" and full of "people that are unnecessary." Patel's pushback seems to show that not all Trump officials may be onboard with Musk's aggressive cuts.

Since Trump's inauguration, thousands of federal employees have been fired or have accepted the

administration's offer to resign now and receive six months of wages.

While mass layoffs have sparked outrage among Democratic lawmakers, unions, and members of the public, Trump has stood by DOGE and Musk's work, expressing his approval of what he called a "force of super-geniuses."

"Federal employees will receive an email requesting to understand what they did last week," the Tesla CEO said. —

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Trump gets middling grades on Americans' top issues, says poll

Washington, Feb. 23: Americans give President Donald Trump middling marks on his handling of the economy and efforts to shrink the government and are unimpressed by some of the early fights he has picked, such as proposals to take over Gaza, a *Reuters* /Ipsos poll shows.

The poll, conducted February 13-18, asked more than 4,000 US adults nationwide whether they supported a range of positions staked out by Trump and how much the issues would motivate them to vote in the future.

The results point to Trump putting considerable effort into policies that many Americans don't

● A NOTABLE portion of Trump's 2024 voters broke with some of the President's early actions and ideas.

like, or don't consider very important.

A wave of frustration over prolonged inflation helped power Trump to victory in November, and a majority of respondents — 58% — said inflation would be a major factor in deciding their vote in future elections. But just 32% approved of the job Trump was doing on inflation.

Views of the economy by households deteriorated this month to the lowest level in over a year, according to a widely followed survey by the University of Michigan.

Just 25% of respondents — and only half of Republicans — said they supported Trump's idea of having the US government take over Gaza and resettlement Palestinians elsewhere.

"I thought that was a moronic idea because it's infeasible," Willard Moore, a Republican lawyer in New York City who participated in the poll, referring to the Gaza proposal. "If you did it, it would cost a lot of money, and at the end what would you have, some sort of resort? Like, what good is that for anyone?" A notable portion of Trump's 2024 voters broke

with some of the President's early actions and ideas. About a third of Trump voters opposed the proposal to end birthright citizenship and one in five opposed his administration's move to end diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

Americans do consider Trump's push to downsize government important, but are divided mostly along party lines on whether they support it.

Sixty per cent of respondents said the so-called department of government efficiency task force for cutting federal spending would influence their vote in the next federal elections — 2026. — Reuters

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Sixty per cent of respondents said the so-called department of government efficiency task force for cutting federal spending would influence their vote in the next federal elections — 2026. — Reuters

Thousands mourn Nasrallah

Beirut, Feb. 23: Tens of thousands of mourners dressed in black vowed support for Hezbollah at the Beirut funeral of slain leader Hassan Nasrallah on Sunday, after the group was dealt major blows in its last round of hostilities with Israel.

Hezbollah's leader Naim Qassem vowed "resistance" was not over as tens of thousands mourned slain chief Nasrallah at his funeral, demonstrating continued support for the group after a devastating war with Israel.

Women wailed as a black truck carrying the coffins of Nasrallah and Hashem Safieddine — Nasrallah's chosen successor killed in another Israeli air strike



The coffins of Hezbollah's slain leaders Hassan Nasrallah and Hashem Safieddine are paraded during their funeral ceremony at the Camille Chamoun Sports City Stadium on the outskirts of Beirut, on Sunday. — AFP

before he could assume the post — slowly moved through the crowd, topped with two black turbans and draped in Hezbollah's yellow flag.

The September killing of the leader, who led the movement for more than

three decades, dealt a heavy blow to the Iran-backed group's reputation as a fighting force.

Hezbollah, which played a major role in the country's politics, has had a support base in the majority Shiite Muslims. — AFP

ISRAEL RAMPS UP OFFENSIVE IN WEST BANK

Qabatiya (West Bank), Feb. 23: Israel's defence minister said on Sunday troops would remain "for the coming year" in parts of the occupied West Bank where they have launched a weeklong offensive and would prevent displaced Palestinians from returning, as Israel deepens its crackdown. Israel launched a broad offensive on the northern West Bank on January 21 — two days after the ceasefire that paused the war in Gaza took hold. — AP

Conservatives will win, say German exit polls

Berlin, Feb. 23: Germany's conservative CDU/CSU alliance led by Friedrich Merz won Sunday's elections with between 28.5 and 29 per cent of the vote, according to first TV exit polls.

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) followed in second place with 19.5 to 20 per cent, roughly doubling its result in the last election in 2021, based on initial figures from public broadcasters ARD and ZDF.

The leader of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) hailed the party's election result Sunday after exit polls gave it a record 19.5 to 20 per cent of the vote.

"We have achieved a historic result," the party's top candidate Alice Weidel told cheering supporters at the AfD's election night party in Berlin, adding that the anti-immigration party was now "firmly anchored" in the political landscape.

Earlier in the day, Germans voted in a national election that is expected to restore power to Friedrich Merz's conservatives while the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party is forecast to achieve its best result yet in Europe's ailing economic powerhouse.

Merz's CDU/CSU bloc has consistently led polls but is unlikely to win a majority given Germany's fragmented political landscape, forcing it to sound out coalition partners.

Those negotiations are expected to be tricky after a campaign that exposed sharp divisions over migration and how to deal with the AfD in a country where far-right politics carries a particularly strong stigma because of its Nazi past.

That could leave unpopular Chancellor Olaf Scholz in a caretaker role for months, delaying urgently needed policies to revive Europe's largest



German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Friedrich Merz, leader of Germany's conservative Christian Democratic Union, cast their votes, on Sunday. — AFP

● THE FAR-RIGHT Alternative for Germany (AfD) followed in second place with 19.5 to 20 per cent, roughly doubling its result in the last election in 2021, based on initial figures from public broadcasters ARD and ZDF.

economy after two consecutive years of contraction and as companies struggle against global rivals.

It would also create a leadership vacuum in the heart of Europe even as it deals with a host of challenges, including United States President Donald Trump's threats of a trade war and attempts to fast-track a truce deal for Ukraine without European involvement.

Germany, which has an export-oriented economy and has long relied on the US for its security, is particularly vulnerable.

Germans are more pessimistic about their living standards now than at any time since the financial crisis in 2008.

The percentage who say their situation is improving dropped sharply from 42% in 2023 to 27% last year, according to pollster Gallup.

Attitudes towards migration have also hardened in a profound shift in German public sentiment since its "Refugees Welco-

me" culture during Europe's 2015 migrant crisis.

Polls opened at 0800 local time (0700 GMT) and closed at 1800 (1700 GMT) when vote counting will start and exit polls will be released. About 60 million people in Germany were eligible to vote.

Sunday's election follows the collapse last November of Scholz's coalition of his centre-left Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens and pro-market Free Democrats (FDP) in a row over budget spending.

The SPD is heading for its worst result since World War Two.

The election campaign has been dominated by fierce exchanges over the perception that irregular immigration is out of control, fueled by a series of attacks in which the suspected perpetrators were of migrant origin.

A Syrian refugee was arrested over the stabbing of a tourist at Berlin's Holocaust memorial on Friday. Prosecutors said he had been planning "to kill Jews".

The campaign has also been overshadowed by the unusually forceful show of solidarity by members of the Trump administration — including V-P J.D. Vance and tech billionaire Elon Musk — for the anti-migrant AfD and broad-sides against European leaders. — Agencies

Ready to quit presidency for peace, says Zelenskyy

Says step in exchange for Nato membership

Kyiv, Feb. 23: Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Sunday he would "immediately" quit as Ukraine's president in exchange for the country gaining Nato membership.

Zelenskyy, who was democratically elected the President of Ukraine in May 2019, was asked if he would be willing to "give up" being President of Ukraine in exchange for peace. "Yes, I am happy, if it is for the peace of Ukraine," he told the press conference.

"If you need me to leave this chair, I am ready to do that, and I also can exchange it for Nato membership for Ukraine," he said. His comments came after US President Donald Trump called him a "dictator without elections" earlier in the week.

Ukrainian legislation bans elections during martial law, which has been in place since Russia launched its invasion in February 2022. Few Ukrainians support the idea of a poll at a time when Russia's invasion has forced millions to flee abroad, and when Ukrainians are dying. — AFP



Members of the Ukrainian community stage an event to mark three years since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Bucharest, Romania, on Sunday. — AP

Trump wants Ukraine to give back aid money

National Harbour, United States, Feb. 23: US President Donald Trump said on Saturday he was trying to get money back for the billions of dollars sent to support Ukraine's war against Russia.

His comments came as Washington and Kyiv negotiate a mineral resources deal Trump wants as compensation for the

wartime aid his predecessor Joe Biden gave Ukraine.

It was the latest twist in a whirlwind first month since he took office, during which he has upended US foreign policy by making diplomatic overtures towards the Kremlin over the heads of Ukraine and Europe. — AFP

RESPIRATORY | CRISIS

Double pneumonia is an infection that can inflame both lungs, make breathing tough

Condition of Pope critical, spent 'tranquil' night

Vatican City, Feb. 23: Pope Francis, in critical condition battling double pneumonia, had a "tranquil" night and rested following a respiratory crisis and blood transfusions, the Vatican said.

The pope was admitted to Rome's Gemelli hospital on February 14 after experiencing difficulty breathing for several days and subsequently had pneumonia diagnosed in both lungs. The Vatican described his condition as critical for the first time on Saturday, reporting that

the 88-year-old Francis had needed supplemental oxygen and blood transfusions that day after a "prolonged asthma-like respiratory crisis".

"The night was tranquil, the pope rested," the Vatican said in a one-sentence update on Sunday morning without providing further information. A further update on the pope's condition is expected later in the day.

Archbishop Rino Fisichella, a senior Vatican official, told participants at a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica

on Sunday morning they should make their prayers for Francis "stronger and more intense".

The Diocese of Rome, which the pope leads, announced a special Mass for Sunday evening to pray for Francis, so that he will have "the strength necessary to get through this moment of trial".

Double pneumonia is a serious infection that can inflame and scar both lungs, making it difficult to breathe. The Vatican has described the pope's infection as "complex", saying

it is being caused by two or more microorganisms.

Francis, who has been pope since 2013, has suffered bouts of ill health in the past two years.

Pope is particularly prone to lung infections because he developed pleurisy as a young adult and had part of one lung removed.

Near the Vatican on Sunday morning, pilgrims were expressing concern for the pope's condition.

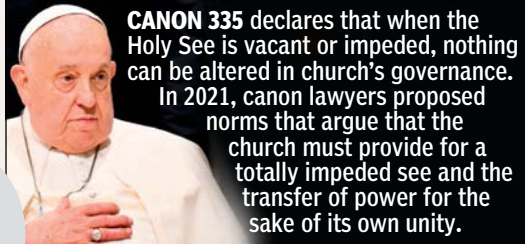
"I am very, very sad," said Elvira Romana, from Italy. — Reuters

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN POPE BECOMES SICK?

WHILE THE Vatican has detailed laws and rituals to ensure the transfer of power when a pope dies or resigns, they do not apply if he is sick or even unconscious.

AS A RESULT, even though Pope Francis remains hospitalised in critical condition, he is very much in charge.

10 DAYS to be Francis' hospital stay duration on Monday.



2021

It was same length of his hospital stay for surgery to remove 33 cm (13 inches) of his colon.

MARCH 13, 2013

Francis was elected the 266th pope.



quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	75,311.06	-0.56
Nifty 50	22,795.90	-0.51
S&P 500*	6,013.13	-1.71
Dollar (₹)	86.72	0.00
Pound Sterling (₹)	109.69	0.33
Euro (₹)	90.781	0.36
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	86,020,000	+0.01
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	74.25	-0.24
IN 10-Yr bond yield	+6.708	-0.004
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.431	-0.068

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Coal imports remain flat in April-Dec. period

India's coal imports remained flat at 201.30 million tonnes (MT) in April-December period of FY25. The country's coal import was 201.52 MT in the year-ago period, according to junction services. Coal import in December declined to 19.28 MT over 23.35 MT in December of FY24. "The high stock position in domestic market and lower demand led to a drop in import volumes," junction MD and CEO Vinaya Varma said.

New Shop to increase stores to 600 in 2025

Tech-enabled convenience retailer New Shop is on track to double store count to 600 by year-end, a tally that would include rebranded 24Seven stores, and is also eyeing overseas expansion. Moreover, a possible new round of funding this year would be aimed at bringing in new investment partners to handhold and guide the firm through the next phase of growth.



Trident plans greenfield expansion in India

Textiles firm Trident Group is charting out plans for greenfield expansion in India, which is gradually emerging as a quality and brand sourcing hub, while domestic consumption is also expected to multiply going forward, its CEO Samir Joshi said. The group, which has earmarked ₹1,000 crore capex for FY26, is currently at a planning stage for its expansion plans and to announce it sometime next year, he said.

Marico likely to see double digit growth in FY25

Marico expects to deliver a double-digit revenue growth in FY25 helped by sequential improvement with price hike and better volume, its MD and CEO Saugata Gupta said. However, he also mentioned that as far as profitability is concerned there is inflationary pressure on material inputs in second half of FY25 and operating margin should be in broad region of 20 per cent with cost management system.

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Friday crash in US mart gives jitters to investors

Foreign investors sold stocks worth ₹30,588 cr in February

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, FEB. 23

A huge fall in the US equity markets on Friday is likely to raise concerns for domestic investors when the market opens on Monday. Domestic benchmarks Sensex and Nifty-50 closed lower last week after a volatile week. The US market benchmarks suffered the worst single-day on Friday fall since December 18, 2024 as the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 1.69 per cent following weaker-than-expected economic performance. The S&P 500 also fell 1.71 per cent from record high touched earlier during the week and Nasdaq Composite fell 2.2 per cent.

Meanwhile, crude oil prices declined. Brent-crude futures slipped to about \$74 a barrel, breaking a four-session rising streak. "The upcoming week is set to be dynamic for global and Indian markets, driven by key macroeconomic data releases. Market sentiment will be shaped by the US and

STOCK TRADE DYNAMICS

THE US MARKET benchmarks suffered the worst single day fall since December 18, 2024 with the weaker than expected economic reports.

US PCE inflation data influences Fed policy expectations, affecting global liquidity and capital flows into Indian markets

BRENT-CRUDE futures slipped to \$74 a barrel, breaking a four-session rising streak.

ANALYSTS SAY revival of foreign investment in India will happen when economic growth and corporate earnings revive.

THE UPCOMING WEEK is set to be dynamic for global and Indian markets, driven by key macroeconomic data releases.

— PUNEET SINGHANIA, Director, Master Trust Group

India GDP data, inflation, and core PCE data," said Puneet Singhania, director, Master Trust Group. "The release of US personal consumption expenditure (PCE) and US core PCE will be of significance. The US PCE inflation data influences Fed policy, affecting global liquidity and capital flows into Indian markets," he said. With foreign investors

continuing to sell stock in February, analysts say the revival of foreign investment will happen in India when economic growth and corporate earnings revive. FPIs have sold stocks worth ₹30,588 crore in February so far. "After Trump's victory in US presidential elections, the US market has been attracting huge capital inflows from rest of

world. But recently, China has emerged as a major destination of portfolio flows. The Chinese president's new initiatives kindled hopes of a growth recovery in China. Since Chinese stocks continue to be cheap, this 'sell India, buy China' trade may continue," said V K Vijayakumar, chief investment strategist, Geojit Financial Services.

India must correct US data mismatch

SANGEETHA G. CHENNAI, FEB. 23

India should correct the trade data anomalies with the US before getting into a bilateral trade agreement. It can also propose a zero for zero tariff strategy to minimise the impact of reciprocal tariffs instead of bilateral trade. Before entering talks, India has to correct the discrepancies in the trade data reported by India and the US for CY 2024, said GTRI. According to India's Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics, India's exports to the US was \$73.7 billion and imports from the US were \$39.1 billion. However, as per US data, India's exports to the US stood at \$91.2 billion, while imports from India

were \$34.3 billion. This large gap in reported figures needs to be reconciled before any trade negotiations proceed. Further, India needs to identify tariff lines where India can eliminate tariffs for US imports without harming domestic industries and agriculture. "We may exclude most agriculture lines from this list. To prepare such a list, India can refer to its FTA tariff offers to Japan, Korea, and Asean as a starting point. This list should be discussed with the US before April," said Ajay Srivastava, founder, GTRI. If the US accepts, reciprocal tariff may be low or near zero for India. Though this zero for zero tariff violates WTO MFN rules, it is less harmful compared to negotiating a full FTA deal.

GRSE SIGNS SHIP REFIT DEAL WITH MAURITIUS FIRM

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, FEB. 23

Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers (GRSE), a defence PSU, has signed a major refit contract for the Mauritius government's ship *MCOS Barracuda*, an offshore patrol vessel of the Mauritius National Coast Guard. Originally, built by GRSE, this vessel is the first export warship built and delivered by an Indian shipyard. "The refit project underscores GRSE's commitment to excellence and its growing role as a global leader in ship refit services. In a recent success story, GRSE completed the refit of the Seychelles National Coast Guard Vessel in May 2024. This initiative is a key component of India's efforts to bolster maritime security and support strategic nations in IOR," it said.

LIC hikes stake in banks, FMCG, telecom firms

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, FEB. 23

Largest equity market investor Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) raised stake in banks, financial services, FMCG, telecom companies during the October-December 2024 quarter while the insurer booked profit in IT companies and select banks.

Market saw heavy selling by foreign investors in October, November 2024 while some foreign buying was reported in December 2024. However, the continued purchases by domestic insurers, mutual funds and pension funds kept market stable despite volatility.

A study of LIC's shareholding pattern in 30 Sensex companies at the end of third quarter of FY25 shows that it raised share in 16 companies while it pared stake in 10 companies and stake remained unchanged in two companies (Adani Ports and SEZ, Tata Motors) and were below

LIC SHARE HOLDING IN FIRMS		
COMPANY	JULY-SEPT. 2024(%)	OCT.-DEC. 2024(%)
Maruti	3.51	4.36
IndusInd Bank	4.73	5.23
Asian Paints	6.61	7.15
Ultratech Cement	1.98	2.32
Nestle India	2.79	4.12
Hindustan Unilever	5.31	5.57
HDFC Bank	5.37	5.48
Reliance Industries	6.34	6.52
Bharti Airtel	4.12	4.24
Larsen & Toubro	12.31	12.61
ITC	15.17	15.34

Source: BSE, FC Research

one per cent in Axis Bank and Zomato.

The big buys by the life insurer were Maruti Suzuki, IndusInd Bank, Asian Paints, Ultratech Cement, Nestle India, Hindustan Unilever, HDFC Bank, Reliance Industries, Bharti Airtel, Larsen & Toubro and ITC.

Other significant buys were Kotak Bank, Bajaj Finserv, Bajaj Finance and Power Grid.

As a contrarian investor, Life Insurance Corporat-

ion booked profit in IT companies such as Infosys, TCS, HCL Technologies, Tech Mahindra as IT stocks rallied during the third quarter.

In State Bank of India and ICICI Bank also, LIC stake came down during third quarter as it booked profit when their shares were near one year high in mid-December, 2024. Sun Pharma, Titan, NTPC, Mahindra & Mahindra also saw LIC's stake fall slightly.

Free-look option worries insurers

FALAKNAAZ SYED MUMBAI, FEB. 23

The government's plan to introduce a one-year free look cancellation period for insurance policies while being customer centric, may result in policy returns by majority holders, potential misuse by agents, and financial losses for insurance firms.

The free look period is the timeframe during which policyholders can cancel their policy without penalties if they believe it was mis-sold.

An insurance official told *Financial Chronicle*, "A one-year free look cancellation period means a person could return their life insurance policy on 364th day and ask for premium to be returned but the insurer has covered the risk of life for 364 days. The risk cover started from date of commencement of the policy and if policy holder had died the next day, the nominee would be entitled to full sum assured."

"Secondly, the insurance

company has paid 40 per cent commission to the agent, has incurred administrative costs towards policy and cannot recover all costs. Thirdly, other financial products such as mutual funds have exit loads while fixed deposits have a penalty if redeemed before maturity," added insurance official.

Vignesh Shahane, chief executive officer of Ageas Federal Life Insurance, "While one year free look period is certainly customer centric there is a chance that it could be misused by agents and customers and lead to financial losses for insurers. One month is sufficient time for policyholders to understand the terms and conditions and realise if it was mis-sold to them or not," added Shahane.

Earlier, the finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman has asked the insurers to extend the free look period for insurance policies from current one month to one year to curb the mis-selling.



WHAT ARE GPUS?

GRAPHIC PROCESSING unit (GPU) designed initially for image and video rendering. Later, its ability to perform vast numbers of calculations in parallel led to adoption in diverse fields including artificial intelligence (AI).

WHY DOES AI NEED A LARGE NUMBER OF GPUS?

GPUS ARE IDEAL for AI models as they can perform parallel processing and easy to compute large data sets. Large-scale AI training often requires multiple GPUS, ranging from 2-4 for medium-sized models to 4 or more for very large models.

HOW MUCH POWER DOES AN AI GPU CONSUME?

AN AI GPU can use 700 watts at peak usage whereas a mid-range gaming GPU might only use around 150 watts. So, if 14,000 GPUS deployed for AI computing approximately 9.8 million watts of electricity is used.

WHO PRODUCE GPUS?

US COMPANIES hold a major share in GPUS production. Nvidia alone holds about 80 per cent of the global GPU market share followed by Intel and AMD. Meanwhile, India plans to have indigenous GPU in the next 3 to 5 years.

WHO ARE PROVIDING GPUS TO AI PORTAL?

TEN COMPANIES Yotta Data Services, E2E Networks, Jio Platforms, AWS, Tata Communications and others will provide diversified AI GPUS, including Intel Gaudi 2, AMD MI300X, NVIDIA H100, H200, A100, and AWS Tranium.

WHY IS NPU BETTER THAN GPU FOR AI?

SOUTH KOREA to procure above 18,000 GPUS and Saudi Arabia already procured 3,000 GPUS from Nvidia for developing the AI ecosystem. Indonesia also made an agreement with Nvidia for developing AI.

WHY IS NPU BETTER THAN GPU FOR AI?

NEURAL processing unit (NPU), also called an AI accelerator, is faster in performing AI tasks and uses less power than GPU.

THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT IS GOING TO LAUNCH AN INDIAN AI COMPUTE PORTAL WHICH WILL COVER UP TO 40 PER CENT OF COMPUTE COSTS. THE GOVERNMENT IS PROCURING AROUND 14,000 GRAPHICS PROCESSING UNITS (GPUS) FOR THE PORTAL FROM 10 COMPANIES.

GPUS FUTURE

PAY | TIME

Experts predict average wage hike between 4% and 8.5% this year

Salary hike in IT sector to be moderate

New Delhi, Feb. 23: Salary increments in India's \$250 billion IT services sector are projected to be moderate in fiscal year 2025, as companies navigate a complex landscape of global economic uncertainties, evolving skill demands, and the increasing adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), according to experts.

Industry experts predict an average wage increase of 4-8.5 per cent, a notable step down from previous years, signalling a shift towards more pragmatic compensation strategies. "The outlook for salary

hikes this year is quite cautious," noted Krishna Vij, VP, TeamLease Digital. "This slowdown is largely due to global economic challenges, reduced discretionary spending, and shifting business priorities." Companies are being more conservative with their salary budgets, and many have even pushed their appraisal cycles beyond the usual April-June period, she said, which has made salary revisions less predictable in the current scenario. "Organisations are shifting to skills-based pay, leveraging Tier II hiring



for cost efficiency. Instead of salary hikes, retention bonuses, ESOPs, and project-based incentives are being implemented as compensation strategies," Vij said. Reed & Willow chief executive officer Janoo Moti-

ani said, "The days of double-digit hikes seem behind us - at least for now. The industry is settling into a more pragmatic rhythm, with average hikes expected to hover between 5 per cent and 8.5 per cent. This aligns with the cautious optimism seen across the sector. TCS has taken the lead, announcing hikes ranging from 4-8 per cent effective April 2025, setting the tone for the rest of the industry. However, Infosys, HCLTech, Wipro, and Tech Mahindra are holding off on final announcements," she shared. While this might seem

like a conservative approach, she said, it reflects the market reality - tempered growth, rise of AI-led efficiencies, and shifting client demands are influencing how companies allocate compensation budgets. The distribution of salary hikes is expected to vary significantly across different employee levels. According to Adecco India, mid-level and senior-level employees with in-demand skills, particularly those related to artificial intelligence (AI), and strong performance are likely to receive larger increases. —PTI

India-Asean free trade talks in April

New Delhi, Feb. 23: The next round of negotiations for reviewing the India-Asean free trade agreement (FTA) in goods is expected in April, though the pace of talks is slow, an official said.

A FTA in goods between India and 10-nation bloc Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was signed in 2009.

The ASEAN trade deal came into force in January 2010. In August 2023, both sides announced a complete review of the existing agreement in goods by 2025. "The pace

of talks is slow," the official said.

ASEAN as a group is India's one of major trade partners with about 11 per cent share in the country's global trade.

The review of the agreement is a long-standing demand of Indian industry and India is looking forward to an upgraded pact which will address current asymmetries in bilateral trade and will make trade more balanced. India is asking for the review to eliminate barriers and misuse of the pact. —PTI

SHORT TAKES

Bumrah receives his ICC awards

Dubai: India pacer Jasprit Bumrah on Sunday received his ICC honours, including the Men's Cricketer of the Year and Men's Test Cricketer of the Year awards, before the start of the Champions Trophy match between India and Pakistan here.

Bumrah is not playing in the Champions Trophy as he has been sidelined with a back issue.

The 31-year-old was present here to collect the awards, which also includes a place in the Men's Test and T20I Teams for 2024.

The ICC posted photographs of Bumrah with each of his four awards — including two caps — and wrote on X, "Jasprit Bumrah receives his #ICC Awards and Team Of The Year caps for a stellar 2024." Bumrah had also met his India teammates on Sunday during their warm-up drills before the match against Pakistan.

Bumrah had an outstanding Test season last year, taking 71 wickets in 13 matches with the second-best effort coming from England's Gus Atkinson who claimed 52 wickets in 11 matches. — PTI

Ian says bye to journalistic career

New Delhi: Legendary cricketer Ian Chappell's insightful writings, critical reviews and anecdotes from his playing days will be missed after the Australian icon called curtains on his more than five-decade-long journalistic career, penning his last piece on Sunday.

The 81-year-old fondly recalled some of the best moments he has written about, including the legendary battle between Sachin Tendulkar and the late spin wizard Shane Warne in the 1998 Chennai Test, as well as VVS Laxman's iconic 281 against Australia in Kolkata, in his last column for *ESPNCricinfo*.

"There have been many pleasures from writing, notably Sachin Tendulkar combating Shane Warne in Chennai. Other highlights included writing about the genius of Brian Lara, Ricky Ponting's aggression, and VVS Laxman's classic 281 in Kolkata," Chappell wrote. However, he felt the time was right for him to "put down the pen and pack away the computer", adding that retirement from journalism was as emotional as stepping away from cricket. — PTI

Barcelona battle to keep Liga lead

Barcelona: Barcelona were below par but earned a 2-0 win at Las Palmas on Saturday to move back top of La Liga.

After Atletico Madrid beat Valencia 3-0 to temporarily take pole position, the Catalans replaced them with a narrow victory on the road and sit one point ahead of the Rojiblancos. Substitute Dani Olmo produced a fine finish before Ferran Torres drilled home to settle the game and earn Barca revenge for a shock home defeat by Las Palmas earlier in the season.

Champions Real Madrid, third, can pull level on points with Barcelona if they beat Girona at home on Saturday. Julian Alvarez bagged a brace as Atletico were able to climb to the top of the pile for a couple of hours.

The Argentina international reached nine league goals for the season with his first half double before Angel Correa steered home the third late on. — AFP

Man, Bhagirathi emerge champs

New Delhi: Uttarakhand's Man Singh and Bhagirathi Bisht respectively won the men's and women's titles at the Apollo Tyres New Delhi Marathon race here on Sunday.

The 35-year-old Singh, the 2024 Asian Marathon Championship winner, clocked an impressive time of 2:15:24s to emerge winner in a competitive men's elite field.

Pardeep Chaudhary (2:15:29s) and Akshay Saini (2:15:34s) were right on his heels, but finished second and third respectively.

Bhagirathi, also from Uttarakhand, claimed the top spot among elite women with a time of 02:48:59s. Thakor Bharatjee (02:49:16) and Ashwini Jadhav (02:50:48) won the silver and bronze respectively.

A marathon race covers a distance of 42.195km. National badminton team chief coach Pullela Gopichand and former Indian cricket captain Ajinkya Rahane flagged off the races. — PTI

KOHLI PUNCH

Virat hits 51st ODI ton as India all but seal CT semifinal slot with thumping win over Pakistan

Dubai, Feb. 23: Virat Kohli showcased his penchant to lord over Pakistan in ICC tournaments once more as the batting icon's glittering unbeaten 100 helped India claim an authoritative six-wicket win over their traditional rivals and all but seal a semifinal spot in the Champions Trophy here on Sunday. The victory should be enough for India, who are now on top of Group 'A' with four points, to make the last four. However, Pakistan are staring at early elimination from the eight-team event after their second successive loss.

Chasing a tricky 242, India rode on Kohli's 51st ODI ton, Shreyas Iyer's classy 67-ball 56 and Shubman Gill's brilliant start of 46 off 52 balls to overhaul the target with more than seven overs to spare.

Kohli rebelled against his own modest recent form and a dangerous opposition to peel off a memorable knock that took 111 balls and was punctuated with seven fours.

Pakistan, on the other hand, are on their way out of the tournament of which they are the hosts.

Once again, they ran into their old nemesis — Kohli. The 36-year-old had several demons of his own to tame — a lean run, recurring form of dismissals and struggles against spin.

But he slayed each one of them, in a manner befitting a batter who also became the quickest to 14,000 ODI runs during the course of the knock.

Pakistan might have hoped to hustle him a bit through pacers Shaheen Shah Afridi and Haris Rauf.

But Kohli drove them on the up with elan or pulled them with audacity as Pakistan's premier pacers transformed into dejected figures after the early high of Afridi casting Rohit Sharma (20 off 15 balls) with a peach of a yorker.

Perhaps, the biggest hope Pakistan harboured against Kohli would have been leg-spinner Abrar Ahmed, considering the Indian's recent travails against England's Adil Rashid.

Kohli did have a couple of tough moments against Ahmed but none big enough to put him in distress. He largely dealt with him in singles, cutting down risks. But the Pakistan quicks offered him enough chances to free his arms.

At the other end, Iyer flowed with a variety of shots but a 103 metre six off spinner Salman Agha was the standout hit during his tenure, in which he assisted Kohli to raise 114 runs for the third wicket.

Iyer had to walk back to the hut after Imam-ul-Haq pulled off a stunner at covers off spinner Khushdil Shah although replays suggested that the ball might have been grounded. But by then, India had already shut the door on Pakistan. — PTI

SCORECARD

Pakistan: Imam-ul-Haq run out (Axar) 10, Babar Azam c Rahul b Pandya 23, Saud Shakeel c Axar b Pandya 62, Mohammad Rizwan b Axar 46, Salman Aga c Jadeja b Kuldeep 19, Tayyab Tahir b Jadeja 4, Khushdil Shah c Kohli b Rana 38, Shaheen Shah Afridi lbw b Kuldeep 0, Naseem Shah c Kohli b Kuldeep 14, Haris Rauf run out (Axar/Rahul) 8, Abrar Ahmed not out 0. Extras (lb-8, w-9) 17. **Total (all out in 49.4 overs) 241.**

Fall of wickets: 1-41, 2-47, 3-151, 4-159, 5-165, 6-200, 7-200, 8-222, 9-241.

Bowling: Mohammed Shami 8-0-43-0, Harshit Rana 7.4-0-30-1, Hardik Pandya 8-0-31-2, Axar Patel 10-0-49-1, Kuldeep Yadav 9-0-40-3, Ravindra Jadeja 7-0-40-1.

India: Rohit Sharma b Afridi 20, Shubman Gill b Abrar 46, Virat Kohli not out 100, Shreyas Iyer c Imam b Shah 56, Hardik Pandya c Rizwan b Afridi 8, Axar Patel not out 3. Extras (w-11) 11. **Total (for 4 wickets in 42.3 overs) 244.**

Fall of wickets: 1-31, 2-100, 3-214, 4-223.

Bowling: Shaheen Shah Afridi 8-0-74-2, Naseem Shah 8-0-37-0, Haris Rauf 7-0-52-0, Abrar Ahmed 10-0-28-1, Khushdil Shah 7.3-0-43-1, Salman Agha 2-0-10-0.

Kohli quickest to score 14k runs in ODI cricket

Dubai, Feb. 23: India superstar Virat Kohli on Sunday created history as he became the quickest batter to score 14,000 runs in One-Day Internationals, surpassing the legendary Sachin Tendulkar's previous record, during the Champions Trophy clash against Pakistan here.

Kohli is now only the third batter in ODI cricket to have scored 14,000 runs, after the

● Coincidentally, both Kohli and Tendulkar scored their 14,000th ODI run against Pakistan.

legendary Indian Sachin Tendulkar (18,246 runs) and Sri Lanka's Kumar Sangakkara (14,234 runs).

Kohli is the quickest ever to the milestone, having completed his 14,000 ODI runs in 287

innings. Before him, Tendulkar had taken 350 innings to reach the feat while Sangakkara took 378 outings.

Coincidentally, both Kohli and Tendulkar scored their 14,000th ODI run against Pakistan. The India No. 3 needed only 15 runs on Sunday to reach the milestone, which he did with a four through covers off Haris Rauf in the 13th over of the run chase. — PTI

Virat Kohli plays a shot against Pakistan during their Champions Trophy match in Dubai on Sunday. — AP

CHAMPIONS | TROPHY

Confident Kiwis aim for semi spot

Rawalpindi, Feb. 23: A confident New Zealand side will be eager to seal their semifinal spot when they take on Bangladesh, who will be fighting for survival, in their Champions Trophy Group 'A' match here on Monday.

The Black Caps started their campaign in dominant fashion, defeating hosts Pakistan by 60 runs. This emphatic victory placed them at the top of Group 'A' with a healthy net run rate of 1.200. A win on Monday will put them within touching distance of a semifinal berth.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, suffered a six-wicket loss to India and currently sit third in the group with a net run rate of -0.408. They must secure a victory to stay in contention for the knockout stage.

New Zealand looked clinical in their opening match, and their recent triumph in the tri-series has further helped them adapt to the conditions in Pakistan.

However, they now face a selection dilemma with the potential return of Rachin Ravindra from a head injury. In his absence, Devon Conway and Will Young opened the innings. Initially, Young was expected to make way for Ravindra, but the right-hander's century against Pakistan has complicated the decision — in a positive way.

Moreover, Young has consistently proven his ability to handle spin bowling effectively. Dropping him would also disrupt the left-hand-right-hand combination at the top, which could be crucial for New Zealand's

CHAMPIONS TROPHY 2025		Match 6
Group A		
Bangladesh vs New Zealand		
Feb 24, 2:30 pm IST		
Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium		
Rank 9	Rank 4	
Head-to-Head in ODIs		
Matches played: 45		
Bangladesh won: 11		
New Zealand won: 33		
Highest Total		
Bangladesh: 309/6		
New Zealand: 341/7		KBK

batting strategy.

Meanwhile, Conway appears to be regaining his best form. Apart from this selection call, New Zealand look well-settled and are unlikely to make further changes to their playing XI.

Bangladesh, however, face an uphill task and must regroup quickly after their disappointing defeat against neighbours India.

The pressure will be on their top order to deliver, as their batting struggles were evident in the previous match.

If not for the 154-run sixth-wicket partnership between Jaker Ali and Towhid Hridoy, Bangladesh would have struggled to even reach 100. Their bowlers performed well but lacked the runs to defend.

Adding to their woes, sloppy fielding cost them valuable opportunities, and they will need a significant improvement in that area if they hope to challenge a quality side like New Zealand. — PTI



Josh Inglis

ENGLAND-BORN INGLIS SHINES FOR AUSTRALIA

Lahore (Pakistan), Feb. 23: England-born Josh Inglis described his match-winning century for Australia against his native country in the Champions Trophy on Saturday as "special", and admitted the days he supported the English in sport "are long gone".

Inglis was born in the northern city of Leeds but relocated to Perth as a 14-year-old.

Since then, the wicket-keeper/batsman has established his international credentials, firstly as a white-ball player and then making his Test debut last month.

On Saturday the 29-year-old smashed an unbeaten maiden ODI hundred against the country of his birth to help Australia to a record Champions Trophy chase of 352 runs and a five-wicket win in Lahore.

Asked if he still supports England, Inglis replied: "Those days are long gone, I think. But I still support (Manchester) City in football.

"I've already had a few

● Inglis was born in the northern city of Leeds but relocated to Perth as a 14-year-old. Since then, the wicket-keeper/batsman has established his international credentials, firstly as a white-ball player and then making his Test debut last month.

messages from England, so that's been nice."

On making a century, he added: "I think it's really special. It doesn't matter who it's against. I think, like I said before, it's a really tight, quick tournament. You've got to be right on it from the first game.

"So, I think that's probably the most pleasing thing, to get a win on the board in game one."

Inglis brought Australia's tough chase back on track from a precarious 136/4 with a fifth-wicket stand of 146 with Alex Carey who made a solid 63-ball 69.

— AFP

At 36, tough to play huge knocks: Virat

Dubai, Feb. 23: Virat Kohli said his plan was to attack the pacers and take less risk against the spinners in the high-pressure Champions Trophy clash against Pakistan here on Sunday and having steered the team home with a sparkling hundred, his 36-year-old body is happy to get a week-long break before the next game.

Kohli got majority of his runs from running the quick singles and doubles as he collected only seven fours in his 100 not out off 111 balls.

"At 36, a week off is very good. It takes a lot out of me to put in that much effort," said the superstar referring to the last Group 'A' clash against New Zealand on March 2.

He completed his 51st ODI hundred with a four off the last ball of the match. Heading into the high-stakes game, Kohli



India's Axar Patel (second from right) celebrates with Kuldeep Yadav after he run-out Pakistan batter Imam-ul-Haq (second from left) during their Champions Trophy match at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium on Sunday. — AP

had his fair share of struggles against the spinners. "It feels good to bat in that manner in an impor-

tant game, where a spot for semis was there to be taken, after Rohit (Sharma) fell (20 off 15

balls). My job was clear — to control the middle overs, not take risks against spinners and take

on pacers.

"I was happy with the template, it's how I play in ODIs," said Kohli at the post-match presentation after scoring his fourth hundred against Pakistan.

When asked about his approach in the innings, Kohli said: "I have a decent understanding of my game. It's about keeping the outside noise away, take care of my energy levels and thoughts.

"It's easy for me to get pulled into expectations and frenzy around games like these (India-Pakistan). I kept telling myself I'll give my 100 per cent while fielding. It's why I take pride in it. When you put your head down and go about your work, things work out."

He also credited Rohit, Shubman Gill (46) and Shreyas Iyer (56) for taking on the pacers on a tricky pitch.

— PTI

