

People of Kerala ready for change: Rahul Gandhi; pitches for UDF govt

NEW DELHI: People of Kerala are ready for change, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said on Friday, as he pitched for a UDF government in the state.

"Team UDF is Team Kerala," he said in a post on X.

"Each candidate reflects the voice, the aspirations and the trust of the people of Kerala. This is a collective of experienced leaders and young change-makers - a strong team of men and women who understand the intricacies of the constituencies they represent," Gandhi said in his post.

"For me, Kerala is home and the people of Kerala are family. I owe a great debt to the people for everything they have taught me and for the love



and warmth they have embraced me with - I will always be your partner," the former Wayanad MP said. "The message from Kerala is clear - the people are ready for change, they seek a government that listens, understands, and de-

livers with honesty. "Along with the coming UDF government, I will do everything to help build a better future for this beautiful state," the leader of opposition in Lok Sabha said. "Kerala will win. UDF will lead," he said, pitching

for the United Democratic Front in Kerala.

Gandhi's message came a day after the Congress released its list of 92 candidates for the April 9 assembly election in the state.

Determined to take on the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), the Congress on Thursday banked on its state leadership to see it through, deciding against fielding any of its MPs.

The party braved internal pressures by banking on its Kerala leadership rather than sending parliamentarians to fight the polls.

The Congress is contesting 92 seats, leaving others for its allies in the UDF and some independents.

The Congress has been out of power in the southern state for a decade.

Edu Min to organise Bharat Innovates deep-tech pre-summit on Mar 21-22

NEW DELHI: The Ministry of Education, it operates under the strategic guidance of the principal scientific adviser to the government of India.

The programme is conceived as a global accelerator for Indian deep-tech, building enduring bridges between India's higher education innovation ecosystem (startups, labs and research parks) and global stakeholders including corporates, investors, incubators, universities and governments.

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The Bharat Innovates Deep-Tech Pre-Summit will showcase innovations across 13 critical technology domains, including advanced computing, health-



care and MedTech, space and defence, energy and sustainability, semiconductors, biotechnology, smart cities and mobility, blue economy, next-gen communications, agri and food technologies, advanced materials, manufacturing and industry 4.0 and disaster

management," an official statement said.

"These innovations, nurtured within India's premier institutions such as IITs, IISc and leading research ecosystems represent the next generation of globally competitive technologies emerging from India's academic backbone. The event will serve as the national selection and launchpad for India's global innovation delegation.

"Through curated pitch sessions, investor engagements and industry partnerships, the event will accelerate the journey of Indian startups from Technology Readiness Levels (TRL 3-9) to global deployment and scale," it added.

Delhi HC quashes look-out circulars against NDTV founders Prannoy, Radhika

NEW DELHI: The Delhi High Court on Friday quashed look-out circulars (LOCs) issued against NDTV founders Prannoy Roy and Radhika Roy in 2021 following a case lodged against them by the CBI, saying they cannot be subjected to an indefinite restriction on their right to travel abroad.

Asserting that the right to travel abroad is an integral part of the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21 of the Constitution, Justice Sachin Datta held that the continued operation of the LOCs against the petitioners is an unjustified curtailment of their fundamental right, which cannot be sustained in law.

Justice Datta observed that the investigation against the couple was pending for more than five years, during which the petitioners never attempted to evade the process of law, and that a chargesheet had not even been filed yet.

The judge also noted that the petitioners have not been summoned for investigation for several years and there are no allegations of non-cooperation.

"In the absence of any material demonstrating either non-cooperation, flight risk or any concrete prejudice to the investigation, the continued operation of the LOC against the petitioners cannot be justified merely on unsubstantiated grounds of 'economic inter-



est' or 'larger public interest,'" the court said.

"The impugned LOC is hereby quashed," it ordered.

The court nonetheless directed the petitioners to furnish an undertaking affirming that they would appear before the investigating authority when required and render full cooperation in any ongoing proceeding.

It also asked the couple to assure that they would provide all material or documents requested by the investigating agency, as may be available within their power or possession.

The Roys filed petitions in 2021 challenging the LOCs opened against them at the behest of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) pursuant to the lodging of two FIRs in 2017 and 2019.

The 2017 CBI FIR was registered on a complaint from an individual, Sanjay Dutt, of Quantum Securities

Limited over alleged irregularities in the repayment of a loan offered by the ICICI Bank to RRPR Holdings Private Limited linked to the Roys, resulting in a purported loss of Rs 48 crore to the bank. The CBI, however, filed a closure report in the case in 2024.

The 2019 FIR was registered against the NDTV founders over allegations of violation of FDI norms. The CBI had said the LOC issued against the petitioners pursuant to the 2019 case was valid. In the 46-page judgment, the court observed that the material on record did not indicate any attempt by the petitioners to evade the investigation or abscond, and they continued to participate in the legal proceedings.

It also noted that while the petition was pending, the petitioners were allowed to travel abroad on several occasions and they consistently returned to India.

Alvida Jumma held in Sambhal Jama Masjid amid tight security

SAMBHAL: A large number of Muslims offered prayers at Shahi Jama Masjid here for Alvida Jumma, or farewell prayers, amid tight security arrangements.

Alvida Jumma prayers are observed on the last Friday of Ramzan, marking a significant emotional and spiritual farewell to the holy month.

Additional Superintendent of Police Kuldeep Singh said the prayers successfully concluded at several mosques, including Sambhal's Shahi Jama Masjid, and comprehensive police security arrangements involving all the station house officers were put in place.

Police personnel will be deployed for Saturday's Eid celebrations as well, he said.

Prosecution conclude arguments during charge hearing in Zubeen Garg death case

GUWAHATI: The prosecution on Friday completed its arguments during charge framing before a local court here in the Zubeen Garg death case, the deceased singer's wife said.

Talking to reporters after attending the hearing, Garima Saikia Garg said, "On the second day of the hearing of charge framing, the prosecution completed its arguments. The defence lawyer of one of the accused, Amrit Praba Mahanta, placed half of his arguments."

Amrit Prabha's lawyer will conclude his arguments on the next date of hearing, when the other defence lawyers will also make their arguments, she added.

The Kamrup Metropolitan District and Sessions Court, which is hearing the case, has set the next date of hearing on March 30.

The 52-year-old singer died while swimming in the

sea on September 19 last year in Singapore, where he had gone to attend the fourth North East India Festival (NEIF).

Acting on a request from the state government, the Gauhati High Court has ordered for setting up of an exclusive fast-track sessions court to conduct day-to-day trial proceedings in the case, nominating District Judge of Baksa, Sharmila Bhuyan, to preside over it.

Till the exclusive court becomes operational, the current one hearing it will conduct the hearing on a daily basis, the High Court had said.

A Special Investigation Team (SIT) of Assam Police's CID had probed the death of the singer and filed its charge sheet before a local court here in December.

A five-member special public prosecutors' team had been appointed earlier by the government for the

case.

NEIF chief organiser Shyamkanu Mahanta, the singer's manager Siddharth Sharma, and his two band members, Shekhar Jyoti Goswami and Amrit Prabha Mahanta, are facing murder charges, while his cousin and suspended Assam Police DSP Sandipan Garg is charged with culpable homicide not amounting to murder.

Garg's two PSOs, Nandeswar Bora and Prabir Baishya, are also in jail, charged with criminal conspiracy and criminal breach of trust by misappropriating funds or property entrusted to them.

A separate enquiry is also underway by local authorities in Singapore, with a coroner's court recently ruling out foul play and stating that Garg was severely intoxicated and had drowned off Lazarus Island after declining a life jacket.

Husband has to equally participate in household chores as he is not marrying a maid: Apex Court

NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court on Friday said a husband has to equally participate in household chores like cooking, cleaning and washing as he is not marrying a maid but a life partner.

The observations came from a bench of Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta which was hearing a petition filed by a man challenging an order of the Karnataka High Court.

The high court had set aside a trial court order granting divorce to the man on the ground of cruelty.

During the hearing before the apex court, the counsel appearing for the man said the mediation between the parties had failed.

He said the marriage between the parties took place in May 2017 and since 2019, the couple is separated.

"I (man) want a divorce. The trial court granted a divorce on the ground of cruelty," the counsel said.

The bench asked what the cruelty was as alleged in the matter.

The counsel appearing for the man said the woman had indulged in improper behaviour and was not cooking food.

"You have to equally participate in all these. Cooking, cleaning, washing, everything. Today's times are different," Justice Nath observed, adding the high court was right that it might not be a ground for cruelty.

"You are not marrying a maid. You are marrying a life partner," Justice Mehta observed. The bench was told that both of them were working in a government school. "Call both parties physically. We would like to speak to them," the bench said. It posted the matter for hearing on April 27 and asked both parties to remain present before it.

Mamata making 'desperate' claims ahead of polls, says Bengal BJP chief

KOLKATA: West Bengal BJP chief Samik Bhattacharya on Friday said Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's allegations that the saffron party is bringing in outsiders to foment trouble across the state reflect her "desperation" ahead of the assembly elections.

Addressing a press conference at the state BJP headquarters, the Rajya Sabha MP said, "Going by the logic put forward by the TMC supremo, it raises questions about the failure of police to keep vigil and monitor the entry of elements allegedly carrying arms and ammunition to create law and order problems."

"Actually, Mamata Banerjee, being a seasoned politician, knows her party will not be in power after the assembly polls. Hence, she is manufacturing this narrative and making provocative statements," he said.

Releasing the candidate list on March 17, Banerjee alleged that some officials from outside the state had been brought in to assist the BJP in the electoral process.

"They have brought in scores of people from outside the state to help the BJP. If you come across such outsiders in your locality, do

inform," she had said while addressing her party workers.

Bhattacharya alleged that the TMC would blame the BJP and the Election Commission, "an independent body", if any incident takes place to suit its agenda.

He also alleged that TMC workers had attacked BJP workers and journalists in the past.

"When Mamata Banerjee makes such comments, she should explain how many FIRs were registered in cases of attacks on BJP workers and journalists, and how many of the accused were arrested. None," he said.

Asserting that the BJP-led Centre does not intend to topple any democratically elected government, Bhattacharya said, "We are not Congress. We do not have the DNA to topple a democratically elected government."

Responding to allegations by Banerjee and her party leaders that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had threatened action against TMC leaders, he said, "Modiji had said that those named in FIRs for attacks on BJP workers in the 2021 post-poll violence would be prosecuted as per law."

Rain in parts of Punjab, Haryana; temperatures hover below normal

CHANDIGARH: Rain lashed parts of Punjab and Haryana on Friday, with temperatures hovering below normal limits.

For the second consecutive day, rain lashed Chandigarh throughout the day, and the showers led to a sharp drop in mercury here. The maximum here dropped to 18.8 degrees Celsius, ten notches below normal, according to the MET.

Ambala, Panchkula, Narnaul, Rohtak, Mohali, Patiala, and Rupnagar were among the other places which received rain in the two states.

On Thursday too, rain lashed many places in Punjab and Haryana, leading to a sharp drop in temperatures. The maximum temperatures on Friday again registered a sharp drop.

In Punjab, Amritsar recorded a maximum of 23.7 degrees Celsius, four notches below normal. Ludhiana recorded a high of 21.6 degrees, seven degrees below normal.

Patiala recorded a maximum of 20.3 degrees Celsius, nine notches below normal.

In Haryana, Ambala recorded a high of 18.5 degrees Celsius, ten degrees below normal limits.

Illegal opium cultivation unearthed, one detained; fourth case in state in 15 days

RAIGARH: Illegal cultivation of opium on around one acre of land was unearthed in a village in Chhattisgarh's Raigarh district, marking the fourth such case in the state in the past 15 days, officials said on Friday.

The illegal cultivation was found along a river in Amaghat village under the Tamnar police station area, a police official said. Acting on a tip-off, a police team reached the spot, seized the opium crop, and detained one person, identified as Marshal Sanga (40), in this connection, he said.

The accused is a native of Khunti district in neighbouring Jharkhand and is married to Sushma Khalkho from the Tamnar area, he said.

For the past few years, he had been living at his in-laws' place. Under the pretext of cultivating watermelon, cucumber and vegetables, he had taken farmland on lease from local farmers and was secretly growing opium, he

said. Further investigation into the matter is underway, he said.

On March 6, police unearthed illegal opium cultivation on around 5.62 acres of land at a farmhouse in Samoda village in Durg district. A local BJP leader, Vinayak Tamrakar, along with Vikas Vishnoi and Manish Thakur, was arrested under relevant provisions of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act and arrested in connection with the case.

Authorities seized opium plants weighing 62,424.4 kg, estimated to be worth around Rs 8 crore, from the farm. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) later suspended Tamrakar, a functionary from the party's Kisan Morcha unit after the matter came to light. In another case, police detected illegal opium cultivation on about 3.67 acres of land in Tripuri Ghosradand village in Balrampur-Ramanujan district on March 10. Seven persons

were arrested in connection with the case and opium plants weighing 4,344.569 kg, estimated to be worth around Rs 4.75 crore, were seized in the case. In a separate action in Turrepani (Khajuri) village under the Korandha police station limits in same Balrampur-Ramanujan district on March 12, a joint team of the revenue, police and forest departments busted illegal opium cultivation on about 1.47 acres of land. Around 18 quintals and 83 kg of opium plants, valued at approximately Rs 2 crore, were seized and two persons were arrested under provisions of the NDPS Act.

Following these cases, Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai had said illegal cultivation of narcotics would not be tolerated under any circumstances and instructed all departments to carry out a thorough investigation and ensure stringent action against those involved.

Punjab to add 100 Aam Aadmi Clinics this month, 400 more planned: Mann

CHANDIGARH: Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Friday listed several health sector initiatives his government has taken, announcing that 100 more 'Aam Aadmi Clinics' will become operational this month, with 400 more to follow.

Mann said previous governments had neglected the health sector, but it has been a key focus sector for the AAP government.

The CM at a news conference here said that tendering for medical colleges at Kapurthala and Hoshiarpur has been done.

"All formalities have been completed. For a medical college in Malerkotla, land has been purchased, and on Eid, I will visit Malerkotla and will gift it to the people," he said.

The Punjab CM said his government started Mukh Mantri Sehat Yojana under which cashless medical treatment of up to Rs 10 lakh will be provided to every family.

About the Aam Aadmi Clinics, Mann said that 883 are operational, in which various kinds of tests and

medicines are free, and 100 more will be dedicated on March 28 and 400 more clinics are being set up, he said.

The CM said the number of people visiting the OPD in the Aam Aadmi Clinics has crossed five crore, indicating people's trust in them.

About the Mukh Mantri Sehat Yojana, Mann said 25 lakh beneficiaries have been registered under the scheme so far and 1.60 lakh people have availed treatment.

To run the scheme smoothly, in the current fiscal, a provision of Rs 1,200 crore has been kept while Rs 2,000 crore has been earmarked for 'Mukh Mantri Sehat Yojna' for 2026-27, he said.

"As against this, the Centre has earmarked Rs 9,300 crore for the Ayushman Bharat scheme. For over three crore people in our state, we have provided Rs 2,000 crore under the Mukh Mantri Sehat Yojana," he said.

Mann alleged that several conditions under the Ayushman Bharat scheme limit the number of benefi-



ciaries.

The chief minister was accompanied by state Health Minister Dr Balbir Singh.

The Punjab government scheme offers cashless treatment of up to Rs 10 lakh per family per annum, with

no income cap, in the government and private hospitals empanelled across the state.

Mann said detailed brochures regarding the Mukh Mantri Sehat scheme will be available in Aam Aadmi Clinics soon.