

Biden in the line of fire over Israel arms ultimatum



The International Press : US President Joe Biden is facing backlash from lawmakers in both parties over his ultimatum that a major Israeli offensive in the city of Rafah would result in a shut-off of some US weapons.

Biden's decision to go public with the ultimatum in an interview with CNN's Erin Burnett last week was greeted with pointed criticism across the GOP spectrum on Sunday, and vocal concern among Democrats.

"On the one hand, they're saying too many Palestinian civilians have been killed. With the other hand, they're depriving us of the precision guided weapons that actually cut down on civilian casualties," Republican Sen. JD Vance of Ohio told CNN's Dana Bash on "State of the Union," though Biden specifically mentioned withholding bombs and artillery shells deemed by the administration as indiscriminate and imprecise.

"So if you're worried about Palestinian casualties, the stated policy here actually doesn't make a ton of sense," Vance said. The US is also reviewing the potential sale or transfer of other munitions, including Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) kits, to Israel. But these transfers are not imminent and would occur in the future, a US official said.

The president's announcement last week amounted to a turning point in US-Israeli ties since the seven-month conflict between Israel and Hamas began in October. Still, the president's aides said the message shouldn't have been a surprise to their intended recipients in Israel given repeated warnings to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Earlier this month, Biden signed off on a pause of 3,500 bombs to Israel that administration officials feared would be dropped on Rafah — where Israel has issued evacuation orders for some of the estimated 1.4 million civilians sheltering there as it appears poised to continue its advancement on the southern Gaza city.

And last week, Biden told Burnett that if Israel goes into Rafah, "I'm not supplying the weapons that have been used historically to deal with Rafah, to deal with the cities — that deal with that problem."

Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina called the ultimatum "the worst decision in the history of the US-Israeli relationship." A frequent White House critic, Graham called on the Biden administration to "keep the weapons flowing" and sit down with Israel.

GOP Sen Rick Scott of Florida, meanwhile, told Fox News on Sunday that Biden's decision sends "a horrible message for Israel" and claimed that the president is "unfortunately, now part of the pro-Hamas wing of his party."

But the backlash hasn't just fallen along party lines. On Friday, a group of 26 House Democrats sent a letter to Biden saying they are "deeply concerned about the message the Administration is sending to Hamas and other Iranian-backed terrorist proxies by withholding weapons shipments to Israel."

The group of House Democrats, led by Rep Josh Gottheimer of New Jersey, also requested a briefing from the White House to get more information on Biden's decision, as well as how and when aid appropriated by Congress for Israel will be delivered.

Democratic Rep Adam Smith of Washington state, however, highlighted the kinds of weapons being withheld. "The president was not as clear on this in the Erin Burnett interview as he should have been," he said Sunday on Fox News, adding: "All that has been held back to date are dumb, 2,000-pound bombs because the

president feels — and I think rightly — they should not be used in Rafah. Other Democrats have offered more forceful defenses of Biden, who arrived at his ultimatum decision after multiple rounds of phone calls with Netanyahu, starting in mid-February. Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut told Bash in a separate interview on "State of the Union" that Biden was "learning the mistakes of US military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan."

"What we learned in both of those efforts was that you cannot defeat terrorist ideology. You cannot defeat a terrorist movement," he said. The president, Murphy said, "is telling Israelis we will be partners but you have to understand the pace of civilian casualties, the amount of disaster is, in the long run, going to make Hamas stronger, is going to make it more likely that Israel will be attacked again, and is going to make other terrorist organizations that have designs to attack the United States stronger."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Sunday that the US believes Israel has killed more civilians than Hamas terrorists as part of its war in Gaza, and that Israel needs to do more to mitigate civilian deaths.

"While Israel has processes, procedures, rules, regulations to try to minimize civilian harm, given the impact that this operation, this war in Gaza has had on the civilian population, there have not been applied consistently and effectively," Blinken said on CBS' "Face the Nation."

The Ministry of Health in Gaza reported Sunday that the number of people killed in the enclave as a result of Israeli military operations has risen above 35,000. **State Department report on Israel use of US weapons**

Last week, the State Department released a report saying it is "reasonable to assess" that US weapons have been used by Israeli forces in Gaza in ways that are "inconsistent" with international humanitarian law but stopped short of officially saying Israel violated the law.

Democratic Sen. Chris Van Hollen of Maryland told CBS' Margaret Brennan on "Face the Nation" that "I think there's enough on the books to be able to point to specific cases and make specific determinations. And on that score, the administration did duck the hard questions."

Pressed if he fears the report helped give political cover to Netanyahu to continue deadly strikes in Israel, Van Hollen said he worries the administration did not provide "an unvarnished accounting of the facts and the law."

The report did not find that Israel has withheld humanitarian aid to Gaza in violation of international law, despite conflicting reports. "By not calling that out flatly and saying that there have been arbitrary restrictions put on it [humanitarian aid], I fear that we have set a very, very low bar, a very low standard for what's acceptable," Van Hollen said. "And I think that will come back to haunt us."

Murphy said the report "could have gone further" but added it does "accurately explain the complexity of this. And let's just also be clear about that. Yes, I believe that there have been some very disastrous decisions on proportionality created by Israeli military."

Democratic Sen. Chris Coons of Delaware, defending Biden from Van Hollen's criticisms over the State Department report, said, "I think President Biden has taken forceful action — so much so there's been a lot of blowback for his recent public statement."



Indian polls: Voting begins in 4th phase; 96 seats up for grab

The International Press : Millions of Indians today began casting their votes in the fourth phase of polling in parliamentary election encompassing 96 constituencies across ten states and union territories.

Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir will vote today in the general election for the first time since the revocation of Article 370 and abolition of the area as a state in August 2019 when Srinagar constituency goes to poll amidst tight security.

A total of 17.7 crore voters are eligible to line up at 1,92,000 polling booths in the fourth phase, the second-largest phase in the 2024 election cycle in terms of number of constituencies after the first round when 102 constituencies had gone to poll on April 19, reports our New Delhi correspondent.

After phase four, polling will be over in 379 out of the total of 543 Lok Sabha seats.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is seeking a rare, third straight term in a vote which pits his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) against an alliance of more than two dozen opposition parties, including main rival Congress.

The first three phases of the election, which were held on April 19, April 26 and May 7, saw a voter turnout of 66.1, 66.7 and 65.68 percent respectively compared to corresponding phases in the 2019 polls.

Analysts say the lower-than-expected turnouts may have prompted Narendra Modi to shift focus in his campaign speeches from the theme of development to accusing main rival Congress of planning to extend welfare benefits to Muslims

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Modi is trying to woo voters with promises of development, social welfare schemes and Hindutva. The opposition is promising cash dole, lakhs of jobs and rein in inflation. After the seventh and last phase of polling on June 1, the counting of votes is scheduled for June 4.

The run up to today's polling saw electioneering rhetoric turning shriller over issues of economic disparities and religious divisions.

The voters' turnout in the fourth phase will be closely watched as marginally lower figures in the first three phases compared to corresponding rounds in the 2019 general elections has raised concerns over voter apathy in an election without a single strong issue.

The lower turnout has raised doubts over whether BJP and its allies can win the landslide predicted by opinion polls.

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at the expense of disadvantaged tribal groups and castes. Congress has denied making any such promise. As the electoral juggernaut rolls on in West Bengal, the fourth phase of the Lok Sabha elections will witness high-profile contests in six of the eight constituencies.

Among those in the fray are bigwigs like Congress' Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury (Baharampur), TMC's Shatrughan Sinha (Asansol), Mahua Moitra (Krishnanagar) and Yusuf Pathan (Baharampur) as well as BJP's S S Ahluwalia (Asansol) and Dilip Ghosh (Bardhaman-Durgapur).

In Uttar Pradesh, the fourth phase is set to cover 13 parliamentary constituencies on Monday, with all eyes on key battlegrounds like Kannauj, where Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav is seeking re-election and Kheri from where federal minister Ajay Mishra is contesting.

The fourth phase will see voting completed in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Madhya Pradesh. Other states which are going to polls today are Uttar Pradesh (13/80 seats), Maharashtra (11/48 seats), Madhya Pradesh (8/29 seats), West Bengal (8/42 seats), Bihar (5/40 seats), Jharkhand (4/14 seats), Odisha (4/21 seats) and Jammu and Kashmir.

So far, voting has concluded for all seats in the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Meghalaya, Assam, Manipur, Karnataka, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tripura; the Andaman and Nicobar islands; and the Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Daman, Diu, Lakshadweep and Puducherry union territories.

Putin removes defence minister Shoigu



The International Press : Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday moved to replace defence minister Sergei Shoigu in a major shake-up to Russia's military leadership more than two years into its Ukraine offensive.

Putin proposed economist Andrey Belousov as Shoigu's replacement, according to a list of the ministerial nominations published by the Federation Council, Russia's upper house of parliament.

The move comes at a key time in the conflict with Russian troops advancing in eastern Ukraine and having just launched a major new ground operation against the northeastern Kharkiv region. Despite a string of military setbacks in the first year of the campaign — including the failure to capture the Ukrainian capital Kyiv and retreats from the Kharkiv and southern Kherson regions — Putin had stood by Shoigu until now.

That included when Wagner paramilitary chief Yevgeny Prigozhin launched a bloody insurrection last year calling for Shoigu's removal. Explaining the timing of the decision, the Kremlin on Sunday said it needed the defence ministry to stay "innovative".

"The defence ministry must be absolutely open to innovation, to the introduction of all advanced ideas, to the creation of conditions for economic competitiveness," state media quoted Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov as saying in a briefing on the appointments. "The battlefield is won by whoever is more open to innovation," Peskov said. "That is likely why the president has settled on the candidacy of Andrey Belousov," he added.

Belousov, who has no military background, has been one of Putin's most influential economic advisers over the last decade. UK defence minister Grant Shapps said the Ukraine conflict had left more than 355,000 Russian soldier casualties under Shoigu's watch as well as "mass civilian suffering".

"Russia needs a Defence Minister who would undo that disastrous legacy" and end the conflict, "but all they'll get is another of Putin's puppets," he wrote on X, formerly Twitter. **Siberian retreats** Shoigu, 68, was appointed Russian defence minister in 2012 and has had a decades-long political career of unmatched longevity in post-Soviet Russia.

Council, replacing his longstanding ally Nikolai Patrushev. The Kremlin also said Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff, would stay in post overseeing daily military operations in Ukraine. Along with Shoigu, Gerasimov had been targeted by a hardcore group of influential pro-offensive military bloggers for Moscow's perceived military failures.

Prigozhin, who marched on Moscow calling for the pair's removal, died in an unexplained plane crash weeks after his aborted mutiny. **Key moment** Putin is constitutionally required to name a new set of government ministers — or reappoint existing ones — following his victory in a March election devoid of opposition. Lawmakers in Russia's rubber-stamp parliament need to approve the president's nominations, which they are set to do over the coming days.

The future of Patrushev, an arch-hawk who is sometimes seen as a possible successor to Putin, was unclear. There was no immediate high-level reaction to the shake-up in Ukraine. The changes come at a crucial time in the conflict, which had been showing signs of a stalemate for months.

Putin casts the fight against Ukraine as a near-existential battle for his country, calling it just one front of a "hybrid war" between Russia and the West.

His presence at the centre of power in Moscow predates that of Putin himself. Prior to Russia launching its full-scale military campaign on Ukraine in February 2022, he was seen as one of Putin's most trusted lieutenants. The pair were regularly photographed on macho nature retreats in the Siberian wilderness, hunting and fishing together.

In one famous snap from 2017 shared by the Kremlin, they are sitting bare-chested under the sun on a beach by a lake. On Sunday, Putin simultaneously issued decrees naming Shoigu as the new secretary of the Security

Canada arrests fourth Indian national in killing of Sikh activist



The International Press : A fourth Indian national was charged by Canadian authorities Saturday in the 2023 killing of a separatist Sikh leader in Vancouver. Amandeep Singh, 22, was already being held for unrelated gun charges before being charged with "first-degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder" in the slaying of Hardeep Singh Nijjar.

Three other Indian nationals were arrested this month. The killing sparked a diplomatic row between Ottawa and New Delhi when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau linked Indian intelligence to the killing. Nijjar — who immigrated to Canada in 1997 and became a citizen in 2015 — had advocated for a separate Sikh state, known as Khalistan, carved out of India.

He had been wanted by Indian authorities for alleged "terrorism" and conspiracy to commit murder — allegations he denied. He was shot dead on June 18, 2023, by masked assailants in the parking lot of the Sikh temple he led in suburban Vancouver. Trudeau announced several months later that Canada had "credible allegations" connecting Indian intelligence to the slaying.

India dismissed the allegations as "absurd" and responded furiously, briefly curbing visas for Canadians and forcing Ottawa to withdraw diplomats. In November, the US Justice Department charged an Indian citizen living in the Czech Republic with allegedly plotting a similar assassination attempt on American soil.

Prosecutors said in unsealed court documents that an Indian government official was also involved in the planning. The shock allegations came after US President Joe Biden hosted Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a rare state visit, as Washington seeks closer ties with India against China's growing influence.

US intelligence agencies have assessed that the plot on American soil was approved by India's top spy official at the time, Samant Goel, the Washington Post reported in April. Canada is home to some 770,000 Sikhs, who make up about two percent of the country's population, with a vocal minority calling for an independent state of Khalistan.

96 constituencies go to polls in 4th phase today



The International Press : A string of high-profile ruling BJP and opposition politicians will be in the fray as millions of Indians cast their votes 96 constituencies across ten states and union territories in the fourth phase of India's marathon Lok Sabha elections today.

The voting begins at 7:00am and ends at 6:00pm with a favourable environment for voting as the met office said the heatwave that was partly blamed for lower voter turnout in the first three phases of polling will not affect the fourth phase. In this phase, 17.7 crore eligible voters will seal the electoral fates of 1,717 candidates in EVMs in 1.92 lakh polling stations.

opposition alliance is seeking to corner the government on issues relating to jobs and price rise. An engrossing battle is expected in West Bengal where some prominent candidates are trying their luck in the fourth phase. Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury of Congress is contesting from Baharampur constituency against Trinamool Congress' candidate and former cricketer Yusuf Pthan. Trinamool Congress lawmaker Mahua Moitra, who has been a outspoken critic of the ruling BJP, is contesting from Krishnanagar while actor-turned-politician Shatrughan Sinha is trying his luck from Asansol.

The other leading politicians in fray tomorrow include federal minister Giriraj Singh of BJP, Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, BJP's Arjun Munda and G Kishan Reddy. The fourth phase also features Hyderabad where actress Maadhavi Latha of BJP is contesting against Asaduddin Owaisi, a four-time MP from the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen party. The first three phases of the

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Ramcharitmanas, Panchatantra, and Sah day loka-Locana enter 'UNESCO's Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Regional Register'

The Ramcharitmanas, Panchatantra and Sahdayaloka-Locana have been included in 'UNESCO's Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Regional Register'. This inclusion is a proud moment for India, a confirmation of the country's rich literary heritage and cultural legacy. It signifies a



Srinagar PC records 36.58% voter turnout at 8 pm, highest in many decades

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Editorial

VISIT TO CAM RANH BAY, VIETNAM BY INDIAN NAVAL SHIP KILTAN

INS Kiltan arrived at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam on 12 May 24 and received a warm welcome by Vietnam People's Navy and Indian Embassy. The visit is part of the Operational Deployment of the Indian Navy's Eastern Fleet. This visit is poised to further strengthen the longstanding friendship and cooperation between the two maritime nations. India and Vietnam share comprehensive strategic partnership. Furthering the ties, the visit by Indian Naval Ship Kiltan is focused on activities including professional interactions, sporting, social exchanges and community outreach reflecting the shared values of both navies.

The visit will conclude with a Maritime Partnership Exercise at sea between the Indian Navy and Vietnam People's Navy. The exercise would further enhance the interoperability and exchange of best practices. INS Kiltan is an indigenous ASW corvette, which was designed by the Indian Navy's Directorate of Naval Design and built by Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers (GRSE), Kolkata. INS Kiltan is the third of four P28 Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) corvettes.



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The International Press : The Ramcharitmanas, Panchatantra and Sahdayaloka-Locana have been included in 'UNESCO's Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Regional Register'. This inclusion is a proud moment for India, a confirmation of the country's rich literary heritage and cultural legacy. It signifies a step forward in global cultural preservation efforts, highlighting the importance of recognizing and safeguarding the diverse narratives and artistic expressions that shape our shared humanity. By honouring these literary masterpieces, society not only pays homage to the creative genius of their creators but also ensures that their profound wisdom

and timeless teachings continue to inspire and enlighten future generations. The 'Ramcharitmanas', 'Panchatantra', and 'Sahdayaloka-Locana' are such timeless works that have deeply influenced Indian literature and culture, shaping the nation's moral fabric and artistic expressions. These literary works have transcended time and place, leaving an indelible mark on readers and artists both within and outside India. It is noteworthy that 'Sahdayaloka-Locana', 'Panchatantra', and 'Ramcharitmanas' were authored by Acharya Anandvardhan, Pt. Vishnu Sharma, and Goswami Tulcidas, respectively. The Indira Gandhi National

Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), played a vital role in securing a historic moment during the 10th meeting of the Memory of the World Committee for Asia and the Pacific (MOWCAP). At the gathering in Ulaanbaatar, 38 representatives from member states convened alongside 40 observers and nominees. Advocating for three Indian nominations, IGNCA ensured their placement in 'UNESCO's Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Regional Register'. Professor Ramesh Chandra Gaur, Dean (Administration) and Head of the Department, Kala Nidhi Division at IGNCA, successfully presented these three entries from India: The Ramcharitmanas, Panchatantra, and

Sahdayaloka-Locana. Prof. Gaur effectively defended the nominations at the Ulaanbaatar convention. This milestone accentuates IGCA's dedication to preserving and promoting India's cultural heritage, reaffirming its commitment to global cultural preservation and the advancement of India's literary legacy. This marks the first time IGCA has submitted nominations to the Regional Register since its inception in 2008. After undergoing rigorous deliberations and receiving recommendations from the Register Subcommittee (RSC), and subsequent voting by member state representatives, all three nominations secured inclusion, thereby marking significant Indian entries predating the inception of the Register in 2008.

ICG apprehends fishing vessel with four crew off the Mumbai coast; 30,000 litres of illicit diesel & Rs 1.75 lakh cash seized



The International Press : Indian Coast Guard (ICG) apprehended a fishing vessel Aai Tuljai, with four crew members onboard, about 27 nautical miles southwest of Mumbai on May 12, 2024. An ICG Fast Patrol Vessel and an Interceptor Boat apprehended the suspected vessel involved in illegal diesel smuggling. After a thorough search of the vessel, a cache of approximately 30,000 litres of illicit diesel, with an estimated value of Rs 30 lakh, concealed within its fish holds was seized. Also, a sum of Rs 1.75 lakh in unaccounted cash

was confiscated. Interrogation of the arrested crew revealed their intent to peddle their illegal wares to unsuspecting fishermen. The apprehended vessel was escorted by ICG Interceptor Boat to the Mumbai harbour, where it was handed over to the authorities of the Department of Customs for proper investigation and legal proceedings. Other Coastal Security Agencies, including the Police, Fisheries, and Directorate of Revenue Intelligence, were also brought into the fold to ensure a comprehensive action against this maritime menace.

Srinagar PC records 36.58% voter turnout at 8 pm, highest in many decades

The International Press : In the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, the fourth Phase of voting for General Elections to 18th Lok Sabha concluded peacefully today with a 36.58% voting as of 8 PM in the districts of Srinagar, Ganderbal, Pulwama, and Budgam & Shopian Districts partly. Polling took place in 2,135 polling stations across the Srinagar Parliamentary constituency with live webcasting at all the polling stations. Voting started at 7 a.m. across the PC with long queues of enthusiastic voters waiting to cast their votes. Voters of Srinagar, Budgam, Ganderbal, Pulwama, and Shopian showed up in record numbers to cast their votes in a show of faith and enthusiasm in the election process. This was the first general election in the valley after



the abrogation of Article 370 and the enactment of the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019. There are 24 candidates in the fray as compared to 12 in 2019 general election. Polling personnel including security personnel worked tirelessly to ensure that an atmosphere of calm, peace and festivities welcomed voters at the polling stations. More than 8,000 polling staff were on duty to

cater to the over 17.47 lakh strong electorate. Command-and-Control centers have been working 24x7 in Srinagar as well as Jammu since the 16th of March, the date of announcement of the General Elections 2024 to ensure free, fair, and inducement-free elections. At every polling station, basic minimum facilities of water, electricity, toilet, ramp, verandah/ waiting room etc. were made. Wheelchairs and volunteers were provided

as and when required. In order to ensure inclusive voting, polling stations managed by women, specially-abled persons and by youths were set up. There were 21 green and eco-friendly polling stations. Media facilitation was done through passes for more than 600 journalists. The Commission has enabled Kashmiri migrant voters residing at various relief camps in Delhi, Jammu, and Udhampur to also have the option of voting in person at designated special polling stations or using postal ballot. 21 Special Polling Stations were established at Jammu, 1 at Udhampur and 4 at Delhi. Planned, consistent and targeted interventions to promote voter awareness as part of SVEEP activities has contributed to the noteworthy rise in voter turnout.

Director General Defence Intelligence Agency Lt Gen DS Rana embarks on an official visit to Tanzania

The International Press : Director General Defence Intelligence Agency (DG DIA) Lieutenant General DS Rana has proceeded on an official visit to the United Republic of Tanzania. The aim of this visit, scheduled from 13-15 May 2024, is to further reinforce the robust defence ties between the two nations and discuss opportunities for regional security collaboration. During his visit, the DG DIA is scheduled to interact with senior military leadership of Tanzania, including the Chief of Defence Staff of Tanzania Peoples' Defence Force, General Jacob

John Mkunda, and his counterpart Maj Gen MN Mkeremy, Chief of Defence Intelligence. In his visit to the Tanzanian National Defence College, he will discuss India's Security Perspective with future leaders of the TPDF. The meetings will be aimed to foster mutual understanding and strengthening bilateral defence cooperation. Lt Gen DS Rana will also inaugurate the newly set up Defence Wing at the High Commission of India, Dar Es Salaam. As a gesture of goodwill towards expanding military cooperation, he will present the

TPDF with Indian manufactured Bullet Proof Jackets. At the Command and Staff College CSC Arusha the DG DIA will inaugurate the Library and lay the foundation stone for gymnasium that are being facilitated through Government of India assistance. India shares close, warm and friendly relations with Tanzania, which is bolstered by robust capacity building and avenues for defence cooperation. The visit of the Indian Military delegation is expected to further strengthen the elevated Strategic Partnership with Tanzania.

News Continue

96 constituencies go to polls in 4th phase today

Contd. from P/1 election, which were held on April 19, April 26 and May 7, saw a voter turnout of 66.1, 66.7 and 65.68 percent respectively compared to corresponding phases in the 2019 polls. A total of 969 million people are registered to vote in 543 parliamentary constituencies this time. Akhilesh Yadav is contesting in Kannauj constituency in Uttar Pradesh eyeing to wrest the seat held by Subrata Pathak of BJP who had defeated Akhilesh's wife Dimple in the previous general elections in 2019. Baharampur constituency in West Bengal is also poised for a significant contest. Here, Congress and TMC, allies in the Opposition's INDIA bloc, will compete against each other. Following the failure in seat-sharing negotiations, TMC fielded Yusuf Pathan as its candidate from this constituency. Mahua Moitra is trying her luck from Krishnanagar where she faces the challenge of returning to parliament after her suspension last year due to her alleged involvement in a controversy over cash for asking questions in Lok Sabha last year. Moitra, who secured this parliamentary seat for the first time in 2019, aims at a big win against BJP nominee and debutant Amrita Roy who hails from a royal family. The fourth phase will see voting completed in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Madhya Pradesh. Other states which are going to polls tomorrow are Uttar Pradesh (13/80 seats), Maharashtra (11/48 seats), Madhya Pradesh (8/29 seats), Bihar (5/40 seats), Jharkhand (4/14 seats), Odisha (4/21 seats) and Jammu and Kashmir. So far, voting has concluded for all seats in the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Meghalaya, Assam, Manipur, Karnataka, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tripura; the Andaman and Nicobar islands; and the Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Daman, Diu, Lakshadweep and Puducherry union territories. The fifth phase will kick off on May 20 and the sixth on May 25, before the election heads towards the seventh and final phase on June 1. Separately, all 175 seats in Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly and 23 seats in Odisha Legislative Assembly will go to polls today.

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US sanctions test China's 'no limits' friendship with Russia

Chinese banks are tightening scrutiny over trade with Russia for fear of incurring strict new US sanctions over the Ukraine war, testing the "no limits" friendship between the two countries. China's trade with Russia



Britney Spears in intense fight with boyfriend exits hotel barefoot

Britney Spears's latest condition has left everyone concerned. The pop star was involved in an intense altercation with her boyfriend, resulting in her leaving a hotel in what witnesses described as a "terrible condition." The



US sanctions test China's 'no limits' friendship with Russia



The International Press : Chinese banks are tightening scrutiny over trade with Russia for fear of incurring strict new US sanctions over the Ukraine war, testing the "no limits" friendship between the two countries. China's trade with Russia has hit record highs in recent years, drawing accusations that it is helping buoy its longtime ally's economy, with President Vladimir Putin due to visit Beijing in May. But Washington's recent vow to go after financial institutions that help Moscow fund the conflict has tested the boundaries of Beijing's bonhomie -- and left its banks fearful of getting cut off themselves. An executive order by President Joe Biden in December permits secondary sanctions on foreign banks that deal with Russia's war machine, allowing the US Treasury to cut them out of the dollar-led global financial system. Since then, several Chinese banks have halted or slowed transactions with Russian clients, according to eight people from both countries involved in cross-border trade. "At the moment, it's tough to get money in from Russia," said one Chinese clothing wholesaler as he sat outside his store at a cavernous trade centre in downtown Beijing this week. "The banks don't give a reason... but it's probably due to the threat (of sanctions) from America," he said, as a handful of Russian visitors browsed shelves of Chinese electronics, leather bags and tea. Traders said banks are imposing extra checks on cross-border settlements to rule out any risk of exposure to sanctions -- screening that can take months and has jacked up costs, sparking cash flow crises at smaller import-export businesses. Another business owner told AFP on condition of anonymity they had been forced to close their China operations and return to Russia as they "cannot get any money from customers". The traders declined to be identified due to the sensitivity of discussing Beijing and Moscow's trading relationship. The payment hold-ups have coincided with a fall in Chinese exports to Russia during March and April, down from a surge early in the year. "Even though the sanctions were imposed to (hinder) the export of certain items from China, they have some impact on ordinary trade," Pavel Bazhanov, a lawyer serving Russian businesses in China, told AFP. The slowdown in payment processing contrasts "starkly" with the rapid handling of yuan-denominated transactions in the past, he said. "Better safe than sorry" Trade between China and Russia has boomed since the Ukraine invasion and hit \$240 billion in 2023, according to Beijing's customs figures. But reports that Russian companies were struggling to clear payments with Chinese banks first emerged in the Russian media at the start of the year. The Kremlin admitted the problem in February, with spokesperson Dmitry Peskov later slamming "unprecedented" US pressure on China. Beijing has not publicly acknowledged the delays but its foreign ministry told AFP it opposed "unilateral and illegal US sanctions". Behind the scenes, however, Chinese banks are ensuring they do not put targets on their backs, analysts said. "Finding out whether the payments are related to the Russian military-industrial complex... is creating a considerable challenge for Chinese companies and banks," said Alexander Gabuev, director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin. "They are operating on better-be-safe-than-sorry principles, which reduces the volume of transactions," he told AFP. Mending US ties President Xi Jinping and Putin have made much of their countries' "no limits" friendship, and the Russian leader told a business forum last month a visit to China had been planned for May. But slowing domestic growth in China has created incentives for Beijing not to invite further damage to its economy, the Wilson Center's William Pomeranz said. Other experts said the banks' newfound caution reflected Beijing's desire to manage its rivalry with the United States ahead of this year's election. Ties between the world's two largest economies have steadied in recent months after years-long spats over trade, technology and other issues. Chinese officials may have directed banks to scrutinise Russia payments to ensure they not create "a wedge issue in the US election," said Wang Yiwei, head of the Institute of International Affairs at Renmin University of China. "China would not be stupid enough" to let a major bank fund Russia's war, Shanghai-based international relations scholar Shen Dingli said. "(They) won't give the US the option to impose full sanctions." No greenbacks Part of the solution could be a move long touted by countries keen to shield themselves from US sanctions: financial systems independent of the US dollar, experts said. Alexandra Prokopenko, a former advisor at Russia's Central Bank, told AFP that Moscow's wartime pivot to Asia has seen the "fine-tuning of a system for cross-border payments in national currencies (yuan and rubles)". The system allows banks to skip traditional financial infrastructure like the SWIFT messaging system, insulating them against the effects of sanctions, she said. Current payment glitches show that approach is "not a panacea", Prokopenko told AFP. But "Moscow and Beijing are quite adept at adapting processes to an ever-changing environment," she said.

UK ban on selling arms to Israel would strengthen Hamas, says Cameron



The International Press : A UK ban on selling arms to Israel would only strengthen Hamas, the foreign secretary has told the BBC. Lord Cameron said while he would not support a major ground offensive in the Gaza city of Rafah, the UK would not copy US plans to stop some arms sales. He said the UK supplies just 1% of Israel's weapons and warned Israel must do more to protect civilians and allow humanitarian aid through. Labour's Jonathan Ashworth said he did not want British-made arms used in Rafah. This week US President Joe Biden upended part of one of the world's most significant strategic relationships by saying the US are "not supplying the weapons" if Israel went ahead with a planned invasion of Rafah - the southern Gaza city where about 1.4 million people have been sheltering. The UN says more than 80,000 people have fled Rafah since Monday, with Israeli tanks reportedly massed close to built-up areas. Israel has said it will proceed with planned operations in Rafah despite the US and other allies warning that a ground offensive could lead to mass civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis. Its prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has pledged to eliminate Hamas battalions he claims are based in Rafah. Speaking on Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg, Lord Cameron said he would not support a full-scale offensive on Rafah until he saw Israel's "plan to protect people". But he argued the US "is in a totally different position" to the UK, because of its "a massive state supplier of weaponry". Lord Cameron said the last time he was urged to end weapons sales to Israel, when three Britons were killed in an air strike on aid workers in Gaza, "a few days later there was a brutal attack by Iran on Israel". "Just to simply announce today that we will change our approach on arms exports, it would make Hamas stronger and it would make a hostage deal less likely," he adds. He said he wanted instead to focus on "hammering away every day" on getting humanitarian aid into Gaza.

would be "a risk that we should not take". "Aiding war crimes" Labour MP Zarah Sultana accused the government of not following its own rules by supplying weapons to Israel. The government's Strategic Export Licensing Criteria prevents weapons sales "if there is a clear risk that the items might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law". Ms Sultana said the scale of arms sales to Israel "does not matter". "We are aiding and abetting what are war crimes happening on a daily basis" she told the BBC. Labour's position on Gaza has shifted since Hamas' 7 October attacks sparked a full-blown Israeli military operation in the area. Last year, 10 Labour frontbenchers quit over the party's failure to call for a ceasefire in Gaza as it instead backed a "humanitarian pause" to allow aid to flood into the country. But in February, Labour began calling for an "immediate ceasefire" after the situation in Gaza "evolved". Mr Ashworth, a senior member of the shadow cabinet, said he did not "want to see British-made weapons used" in an invasion in Rafah. "A full-scale offensive into Rafah will be a catastrophe beyond description," he said. He called on the government to publish the legal advice it has been given on arms sales to Israel.

স্বল্পস্বল্প সুন্দরবন ঘুরে দেখতে চান

সুন্দরবনের বেড়াতে যাওয়ার বিশ্বস্ত প্রতিষ্ঠান

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CINEMA

Shahid Kapoor Reveals Two Ex-Girlfriends Cheated On Him In An Old Interview; Curious Fans Speculate WHO The Actor Might Be Talking About

The International Press : Bollywood actor Shahid Kapoor stole the hearts of the audience when he made his debut with Ishq Vishkk. From then on he was touted as a chocolate boy, for his sweet facial features and adorable smile. He went on to become a versatile performer who often leaves the netizens impressed. As he is currently busy shooting for his upcoming projects, a video from Neha Dhupia's show surfaced on the internet where he opened up about two of his ex-girlfriends who cheated on him. As the video went viral, fans started speculating who he was talking about. A netizen shared the video clipping on the subreddit BollyBlinds N Gossips, where Shahid arrived at the show with his wife

Mira Rajput Kapoor. Neha proceeds to ask him if anyone has cheated on him and who they are. Mira chimes in and corrects the former. She asks her to rephrase the question by telling her to ask how many. As the Chup Chup Ke actress asks him how many women have cheated on him, the 43-year-old actor bursts out laughing and says, "I'm sure about one, I have major doubts about another one. So, I think a couple of them. I'm not going to name any of them." Well, the clip instantly went viral on Reddit, leaving fans to speculate on who the Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya actor was talking about. Many stated that it must be Priyanka Chopra and Kareena Kapoor. One wrote, "Neha saying - you should name them as if she can



Jyotika Makes SHOCKING Revelations About Her Bollywood Debut; Srikanth Actress Says, 'Didn't Get Work Post My Debut Film'

The International Press : Actress Jyotika made her return to Bollywood with Ajay Devgn and R Madhavan starrer Shaitaan. Having made her debut in the 1997 film, Doll Saja Ke Rakhna, the movie failed to impress the audience. She failed to create a lasting impression on the viewers with her performance. She went on to work in the South entertainment industry, predominantly in the Tamil industry, where she became one of the acclaimed actresses of her generation. After making a comeback in Bollywood with Shaitaan, she is all set to star in Srikanth, where she essays the role of Rajkumar Rao's mentor. In an interview with the Free Press Journal, opened up about working in Hindi films again and why she chose to start a career in the South. The 45-year-old actress shared that it feels great to work in the Hindi film industry again, especially since the North and South have "blended". She expressed how she made her comeback at the "best time" as great talents from both regions were coming together. Opening up about how much Bollywood has changed ever since her debut in 1997, she revealed that she doesn't know.



The Ponmagal Vandhal actress told the Free Press Journal, "I was never a part of Bollywood. I don't know how it has changed but I feel, the old formulas are still existing that film has to run (laughs). I didn't get work post my debut film so I moved down South and made my career out there. There were no roadblocks, there were no roads only for me to go as my film didn't make any noise." Further in the interview, she was asked what kind of films she would like to do in Bollywood going forward. Jyotika jokingly mentions that the names of the movies should start with 'S', referring to the buzz surrounding Shaitaan and Srikanth. She added, "I am honestly looking for that three scene role in a film where women walk out with their head high. I am in mid 40s and women are a lot more than the way they are portrayed on-screen." Srikanth is all set to release on May 10, 2024. The film stars Rajkumar Rao, Sharad Kelkar, Jyotika, and Alaya F in the lead roles.

Britney Spears in intense fight with boyfriend exits hotel barefoot



The International Press : Britney Spears's latest condition has left everyone concerned. The pop star was involved in an intense altercation with her boyfriend, resulting in her leaving a hotel in what witnesses described as a "terrible condition." The 42-year-old was photographed exiting the posh Hollywood hotel the Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles, early Thursday. Emergency services responded to the call, with reports of a female being injured. The Gimme More singer was involved in a heated argument with her boyfriend, Paul Richard Soliz that reportedly turned physical after they partied in the hotel, TMZ reports. According to eyewitnesses, Spears left their hotel room in a dishevelled state and an ambulance was called to the scene. "She may have injured her leg in the process." Brian Humphrey, Los Angeles' fire department official confirmed Page Six that an Ambulance was called at the place of the incident. "At 1:00 a.m. an ambulance arrived on the premises. I can confirm no one was transported. Services left the scene at 1:17 a.m. The police department were not called." Britney was seen leaving the hotel barefoot, wrapped in a blanket, with her hair dishevelled and holding onto a pillow. Despite an ambulance being summoned to the hotel, the pop star did not get into it. "We received a 911 call reporting an adult female, who had been injured," an LAFD re told the outlet. "The caller did not have much information regarding the nature of the injury. We sent one ambulance to the location." They added. Fans and close friends were initially concerned when it was reported earlier that the pop star was getting closer to her ex-housekeeper Paul after she finalised her divorce from Sam Asghar. Insiders at the time said they were worried about Paul's criminal record. The outlet reported Paul has been convicted of several misdemeanours, as well as a felony, involving the threat of harming a child as per the court documents obtained.

Sports News

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Mbappe denied dream PSG farewell after Champions League exit



The International Press : Kylian Mbappe will not get his dream farewell from Paris Saint-Germain after their shock Champions League exit at the hands of Borussia Dortmund on Tuesday deprived him of playing his last game for the club in the final at Wembley next month. The 2018 World Cup winner will leave PSG after seven years when his contract expires at the end of this season, with Real Madrid his likely next destination. He had hoped to sign off by leading the Qatar-owned club to Champions League glory for the first time in their history, and they were the favourites to see off Dortmund at the Parc des Princes in the semi-final second leg. But they failed to overturn a one-goal first-leg deficit, with Mats Hummels scoring the

only goal on the night to give Dortmund a 2-0 aggregate victory. Mbappe was one of four PSG players to hit the woodwork in the second half, and coach Luis Enrique complained his side -- who had 31 attempts on goal -- had been "unlucky". "I don't really like to talk about bad luck," Mbappe said a short while later. "When you are good, you don't hit the post, you score. I tried to help the best I could. When I say we needed to be more clinical, I am the one who has to be scoring. But this is life, we need to pick ourselves up." It will be hard for PSG to do that, given how close they were to reaching the final for the second time, four years on from their defeat against Bayern Munich in Lisbon. That will forever remain as

close as Mbappe came to lifting the European Cup with his hometown team, for whom he is their all-time top scorer with 255 goals. A total of 42 of those have come in Europe's elite club competition, but he could not add to that tally across the two legs against Dortmund. "The end of his dream" was the headline in sports daily L'Equipe, which gave a scathing assessment of the France captain's performance, awarding him a mark of two out of 10. - Another European disaster? - Being knocked out by the team who sit fifth in the Bundesliga looks like a disaster for a club who have invested as much as PSG over the years since the Qatari takeover of 2011. It is the latest in a long line of huge disappointments in the Champions League

knockout rounds, still headed by their 6-1 defeat by Barcelona in the last 16 in 2017 after they won the first leg 4-0. "PSG hit their heads against the glass ceiling on a night when the sky seemed to be the limit," reflected Vincent Duluc in L'Equipe. "The truth is that this elimination is quite the gigantic collapse given the gigantic opportunity that was on offer." However, the truth is also that this PSG side was not seriously expected to get this far, despite the presence of Mbappe. A massive overhaul of the squad was undertaken ahead of this season following the departures of Lionel Messi and Neymar, and Luis Enrique was brought in to oversee the new project. "The objective I set out when

Sangakkara backs Samson as India keeper for T20 World Cup

Rajasthan Royals captain Sanju Samson has made his case to be India's first-choice wicketkeeper at the T20 World Cup, the team's director of cricket Kumar Sangakkara has said. Samson has been playing as well as we could for every trophy," the Spanish coach said on Tuesday. His side have already won Ligue 1 and Mbappe's last game will now be the French Cup final against Lyon on May 25. - Lack of experience - But perhaps a lack of experience at this level ultimately cost them -- according to statisticians Opta, their starting line-up had an average age of 24 years and 157 days, the youngest for any team in a Champions League semi-final since Arsenal against Manchester United in 2009. Luis Enrique will have to hope the experience garnered by his young players can help them next year. "We need to remember that it is a new project with a new coach, with lots of changes. There are lots of positives and good things to take forward into next season," captain Marquinhos told broadcaster Canal Plus. It is hard to imagine how PSG can be better equipped to win the Champions League without Mbappe, though, even if they will surely spend big money on a replacement. The coach has regularly either left Mbappe out of his team or taken his star player off in domestic league games over the last three months, apparently in the name of planning for next season. That strategy has not ultimately helped PSG win the one trophy they really crave in this campaign, and Mbappe -- now aged 25 -- will hope to finally get his hands on it after leaving Paris.

Sangakkara backs Samson as India keeper for T20 World Cup



The International Press : Rajasthan Royals captain Sanju Samson has made his case to be India's first-choice wicketkeeper at the T20 World Cup, the team's director of cricket Kumar Sangakkara has said. Samson has been named in India's 15-member squad as wicketkeeper-batsman alongside Delhi Capitals skipper Rishabh Pant, who has also impressed in the Indian Premier League after his return to cricket following a horror car crash. He smashed 86 off 46 balls on Tuesday but the knock went in vain, with the Capitals winning by 20 runs at home. Samson has been in prime form with 471 runs in 11 matches and Tuesday's match was his fifth half-century of the season. Sangakkara played down the Pant versus Samson debate in the post-match press conference but made his choice clear. "It's really up to Rahul Dravid and Rohit Sharma and how they see the combination," Sangakkara told reporters. "But he has made his case, so hopefully he'll have a good run in the World Cup." Samson has been an

Tuchel tells players to find their inner child at Bernabeu

Playing against Real Madrid in a Champions League semi-final is what many of Bayern Munich's players would have grown up dreaming about and manager Thomas Tuchel wants his side to rediscover their inner child at the Bernabeu on Wednesday.



understated leader of his team, who are all but through to the play-offs with eight wins in 11 matches, and is third in the batting list behind Virat Kohli (542) and Ruturaj Gaikwad (541). Pant, who has been lauded for his glove work and batting after recovering from his crash in December 2022, is also among the top 10 batsmen with 413 runs from 12 matches. "With Sanju, the biggest thing about this season for him is having a lot of clarity about the way he should bat," former Sri Lanka wicketkeeper-batsman Sangakkara said. "There are certain stages of the game that he seems to lose a bit of concentration, which we've addressed from past seasons," he added. "He's changed his mindset about the importance of rest and recovery, rather than just training all the time and being tired mentally and physically." This year is Samson's first in a World Cup squad and Sangakkara said he is a team man. "He's a special player and when he's fresh and focused there's nothing he can't do," said Sangakkara.

The International Press : Playing against Real Madrid in a Champions League semi-final is what many of Bayern Munich's players would have grown up dreaming about and manager Thomas Tuchel wants his side to rediscover their inner child at the Bernabeu on Wednesday. After last week's 2-2 draw in Germany, Bayern will have to beat Real in their own back yard if they are to reach the final at Wembley. With Bayer Leverkusen ending Bayern's 11-year Bundesliga reign by securing the league title last month, the six-times European Cup winners have only one trophy left to fight for this season. Tuchel spent several minutes talking to his players in an empty Santiago Bernabeu stadium on Tuesday and said that he told them they needed to find extra motivation within themselves. "It is important to connect with your own inner child. When we were little we played these games in the garden. So now we are here and that's our chance to make it true," he told a press conference in Madrid. "I think both teams have to endure defending and suffering when their opponents have the ball. It is extremely difficult to steal the ball from Real Madrid. Both teams are very, very strong in the transition game. It gets very complex. You need luck and precision. Then everything is possible at this stage." Bayern were undone by a clinical Real in the first leg, with the German side dominating for large periods without putting their opponents to the sword. Two goals from Real's Vinicius Jr. either side of efforts from Leroy Sane and Harry Kane left the tie poised on a knife edge, but with Real favourites to advance with the second leg in Spain. Real, the record 14 times winners, have an aura in the Champions League, but Tuchel said the Spaniards' record holds no fear for his side. "Bayern are also one of the most successful and dominant clubs in the world and we have an obligation to do our best when we step on the pitch tomorrow," he said. "You don't talk about myths, that would make it harder for us. It is already one of the toughest stadiums to win but not impossible. We are not here to enjoy the moment." Bayern reached the Champions League's last four for the first time since winning the competition in 2020, while Madrid last lifted the trophy in 2022 with an amazing run of comeback wins at home to reach the final. Real are bidding to win their sixth Champions League title in 10 years having clinched a record-extending 36th LaLiga crown on Saturday. The Bavarians, however, have endured a disappointing domestic run and Tuchel will exit at the end of the season. "Real Madrid are an amazing team but we need to be confident in ourselves and help each other, we can't be stuck or afraid. We need to make something positive from the pressure," Bayern goalkeeper Manuel Neuer said. "Against a team like Real Madrid, it's the little things that matter. Nobody wants to make a mistake because both teams have very good offensive power."

Rejuvenated Scamacca seeks Euro glory with Atalanta and Italy



The International Press : Gianluca Scamacca will lead the line in Atalanta's bid to reach their first ever European final as the striker's hot form puts him firmly in the frame for Euro 2024. A classic centre-forward, Scamacca has had an up-and-down first season back in Italy with Atalanta but is in the form of his life on the eve of Thursday's second leg of their Europa League semi-final with Marseille. The 25-year-old has scored 10 times and set up another in his last 12 matches, and his fizzing low finish last week ensured Atalanta came away from the Stade Velodrome with a 1-1 draw after having their backs to the wall for large parts of the first leg in southern France. He will be the focal point of Atalanta's exciting attack in front of passionate home fans in Bergamo who have once again seen their traditionally provincial club punch way above its weight. Scamacca has scored 18 goals in all competitions this term with the bulk of those strikes coming after he was left out of the Italy squad for March's friendlies with Venezuela and Ecuador. He was dumped by Luciano Spalletti after the Azzurri coach, in a February interview with the Gazzetta

Dello Sport, blasted footballers "playing on the PlayStation until four in the morning". Spalletti named no names in an unexpected tirade against modern players' apparently flagging commitment to football but eyes immediately turned towards Scamacca, who was left out despite Italy having a long-standing problem of finding reliable strikers. - 'Chit-chat and rumour' - Scamacca, from Rome, has a roughneck presence due to his size and array of tattoos and has had to deal with embarrassing headlines involving his family. In March 2021 his estranged father smashed up cars -- including one belonging to the police -- outside Roma's training ground for no apparent reason and a few months later his grandfather burst into a bar in Scamacca's childhood neighbourhood of Fidene and threatened people with a knife. "I've had to deal with prejudice since I was 16-years-old but I know what kind of person I am, and I only need to show it to the people who care about me," Scamacca said after scoring in Atalanta's 3-0 win at Napoli in March. "I don't give any importance to chit-chat and rumour."

Scamacca's form has come at a perfect time for both club and country, as Italy defend their European Championship title in Germany this summer after missing out on a second consecutive World Cup. Atalanta meanwhile, whose trophy cabinet contains seven lower league titles and the 1963 Italian Cup, are looking to go one better than in 1988 when they reached the last four of the Cup Winners' Cup as a Serie B team. Gian Piero Gasperini's side have, like Scamacca, been inconsistent for much of the season but are eyeing a historic climax to the campaign, with an Italian Cup final with Juventus coming up next week and Champions League qualification also up for grabs. Scamacca netted in Atalanta's hard-fought win at relegated Salernitana on Monday which moved his team into Serie A's fifth and final spot for Europe's elite club competition. The next fortnight will decide whether Atalanta finally win a trophy which would be just reward for years of investment and development which have taken Atalanta from nowhere to the brink of European glory.

Sara Curtis, the Italian swimmer breaking records and barriers



The International Press : Sara Curtis will be among Italy's youngest athletes at the Paris Olympics but the teenage swimming sensation is a confident figure unconcerned about reaction to her mixed-race background. The 17-year-old, whose performances in the pool have led to comparisons with former Olympic and world champion Federica Pellegrini, was raised by an Italian father and Nigerian mother in the Piedmont region of northwest Italy where race, ethnicity and identity are key political battlegrounds. In a country now led by the far-right government of Giorgia Meloni, racist abuse of sportspeople is a long-standing problem. But confident Curtis, a four-time gold medal winner at the European junior championships, tells AFP she is unflustered by being a rare black face in her sport. "I consider myself lucky as I've never had anything like that (racist abuse) happen to me," Curtis says. "But if I were to ever meet someone who saw what I am as a problem I wouldn't make a big deal out of it. It

wouldn't make a big difference to me because it's not my problem, it's theirs. "If you look at my sport there is this element regarding black athletes. There just aren't that many of them. "But honestly it's not something I'm too bothered by. They can say what they want, that I'm a black girl, that it's strange. But it's strange for you, not for me." - Olympic aims - Curtis, who also tried her hand at basketball despite being "completely uncoordinated", "basically grew up in water" after her parents brought her to the pool aged two years old. "The only thing I can remember from when I was little was that it was really cold and I actually hated it to be honest," jokes Curtis. She has since become one of Italy's brightest swimming prospects, qualifying for the Olympics in March with a junior European record of 24.56sec in the 50 metres freestyle. That time was also a new Italian record, comfortably beating the 24.72sec set by Silvia Di Pietro, 14 years Curtis' senior, in the 2022 European Championships in

Rome. A month later Curtis then swam a junior world-record time of 26.08sec in the short course backstroke, shaving 0.05sec off the mark set by American Olivia Smoliga, an Olympic gold winner in 2016 and multiple world champion. "I didn't expect it at all... I thought I was going to have a mediocre time in April even though I was feeling good... It was really unexpected because it was a very quick time. I was flying, it was really great," said Curtis. Publicly she is not talking up her chances in Paris, with her coach Thomas Maggiora telling AFP during one of Curtis' training sessions in her hometown of Savigliano that the Los Angeles Games in 2028 are her real target. "I'm aiming to develop, both physically and mentally because the Olympics were always a dream of mine," she said. "This year's were a goal but one I really looked at as being quite far off. Just taking part will be brilliant." - "Makes me laugh" - "I'm kind of superstitious so

I'm going to keep my personal ambitions to myself. Maybe it's a bit early to think about winning a medal. I have a bigger aim further down the line, but for now a semi-final or a final could be something to aim for." Curtis views as laughable the likes of Roberto Vannacci, an Italian Army general who said in a best-selling book "The World Upside Down" that volleyball star Paola Egonu, whose parents are Nigerian, has features that "do not represent Italian-ness". Despite being the subject of three separate investigations -- including one for allegedly inciting racial hatred -- Vannacci was named last month as a candidate for June's European Parliament elections for Italy's hard-right League party. "When I hear those sorts of comments it makes me laugh to be honest, it makes you think that we've been a bit left behind the times (in Italy)," said Curtis. "But what an athlete does is independent of their skin colour. Those comments don't affect me and they won't ever affect me."