

In Qatar, PM thanks Emir for release of 8 Navy vets

'Discussed Ways To Deepen Ties Across Sectors'

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

PM Narendra Modi Thursday thanked Qatar Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani for the release of eight ex-Indian Navy personnel, saying India was gratified to see them return home, in a bilateral meeting.

While no agreement was signed during the visit, govt officials said Modi's engagements in Qatar would help further deepen India's cooperation with Qatar in a range of areas, including trade, investment, energy and regional security.

In his meetings in Doha, Modi also discussed the ong-



PM Modi is welcomed by Emir of Qatar in Doha on Thursday

oing conflict in West Asia, emphasising the need to uphold peace and stability in the region and beyond.

"We reviewed the full range of India-Qatar relations and discussed ways to deepen cooperation across

various sectors. Our nations also look forward to collaborating in futuristic sectors which will benefit our planet," said Modi in a post on X after the meeting.

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Who Gave How Much To Whom? Court Orders EC To Make Details Public By March 13

'Unconstitutional, arbitrary': SC junks electoral bonds 5-0

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'UNLIMITED CORPORATE FUNDS AGAINST FREE & FAIR POLLS'

VERDICT EXPLAINED

- > Anonymity of electoral bonds (EBs) violates citizens' right to information
- > Corporate donors have bigger influence on political process than individual donors
- > Voters need to know whether there's quid pro quo between donors and political parties
- > Allowing loss-making companies to donate limitlessly encourages quid pro quo even more
- > This is a matter of fundamental rights. So, amendments to I-T Act, Companies Act & Representation of the People Act allowing anonymous, limitless, non-disclosed company contributions invalid
- > EBs as a means of political funding is therefore unconstitutional
- > Anonymous donations of up to ₹20,000 by other means can continue. Cap on corporate donations back

► Voters' right to know trumps companies' right to hide, P 20

WHAT THE BENCH SAID

“Democracy does not begin and end with elections... EB scheme is not the only means for curbing black money in electoral financing. There are other alternatives

Contributions made by individuals have a degree of support or affiliation to a political association. Contributions by companies are purely business transactions

Political contributions give a seat at the table to the contributor... (this) translates into influence over policy making

...Permitting unlimited corporate contributions authorises unrestrained influence of companies on the electoral process. This is violative of the principle of free and fair elections and political equality captured in the value of 'one person, one vote'

WHAT NEXT

- > SBI to stop issuing bonds immediately, bonds within 15-day validity period yet to be encashed to be refunded
- > SBI to give EC details of every single bond encashed since April 12, 2019 to date
- > Date of purchase, name of buyer, denomination, parties receiving EBs to be submitted by March 6. EC to publish details on website by March 13

► Last refuge of near-lost causes, P 20

“This will have a far-reaching impact on our electoral democracy

—Prashant Bhushan

BJP had made electoral bonds a medium for taking bribe and commissions. Today this has been proven

—Rahul Gandhi | CONG

EB scheme was brought in for transparency in electoral funding

—Ravi Shankar Prasad | BJP

► Explainer: 5 Wrongs, 2 Rights, 1 Test, P 22

EB RECEIPTS TILL 2022-23 (In ₹cr)



Full List On P 20

► 'Puts premium on opacity, must go', P 20

New Delhi: Supreme Court on Thursday struck down as unconstitutional the electoral bond scheme introduced by BJP govt in 2018 that allowed big-ticket anonymous corporate contributions to political parties. It directed State Bank of India to immediately stop issuing bonds and furnish up-to-date details of such contributions since April 2019 for publication on Election Commission's website by March 13.

A bench of CJI D Y Chandrachud and Justices Sanjiv Khanna, B R Gavai, J B Pardiwala and Manoj Misra unanimously rejected the central rationale of the electoral bond scheme — need to protect the identity of donors to save them from possible harassment — and ruled that voters could not be kept in the dark about huge donations to political parties when money played a significant role in elections.

The bench held that secret corporate funding of political parties, possibly for a quid pro quo, breached voters' right to information, adversely impacted purity of free and fair elections and polluted democracy by disturbing political equality in polls. Amendments enacted to ensure the

anonymity and non-disclosure were arbitrary, it ruled.

Though unanimous in their rejection of the bond scheme, the bench put across its stand through two separate but concurring verdicts — one written by the CJI and the other by Justice Khanna.

The order did not interfere with the existing scheme of al-

lowing anonymous donations to political parties up to an amount of Rs 20,000 by any individual or company. Contributions through cheques, drafts and bank transfers by corporate entities and duly reflected in the party's statement to EC would not be affected by this ruling, the court clarified.

What it stopped was unli-

imited anonymous contributions by companies. Apart from full disclosure, the court also brought back the 2013 cap of 7.5% of average net profit of a company in the last three years on corporate donations. From 1985 to 2013, it was 5% of average net profit.

Justice Chandrachud, writing the judgment for himself

and Justices Gavai, Pardiwala and Misra, and Justice Khanna in a concurring judgment invalidated the bond scheme and enabling amendments carried out in Finance Act, 2017, Representation of the People Act, Companies Act and Income Tax Act.

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'Op Dunki' in Nepal

Nepal police busts trafficking racket, frees 11 Indian hostages, arrests 8 Indians mafia

■ **By Shirish B Pradhan**

KATHMANDU, Feb 15 (PTI)

ELEVEN Indian nationals, mostly students, held hostage for over two weeks with a promise to facilitate travel to the USA, were rescued as Nepal police busted a human trafficking racket and arrested eight Indian mafia along with their Nepali accomplice here.

Nepal police named it 'Operation Dunki' as the case turned out to be similar to the situation shown in popular Indian actor Shah Rukh Khan's 2023 movie Dunki. The rescued persons and mafia members came mostly from the Indian

States of Punjab and Haryana.

The 11 persons were kept as hostages in a rented house for more than two weeks on the outskirts of Kathmandu, police said on Thursday.

The operation began on Wednesday night and the raid continued till the wee hours.

The agents, including the Indian mafia members, charged the Indian nationals, mostly students, Rs 4.5 million per person with the false promise of sending to the USA, and an additional USD 3,000 was charged as a visa fee upon their arrival in Kathmandu, SSP Bhupendra Bahadur Khatri told a press meet here.

Japan slips into recession, becoming the 4th-largest economy

TOKYO, Feb 15 (AP)

JAPAN'S economy is now the world's fourth-largest after it contracted in the last quarter of 2023 and fell behind Germany.

The Government reported the economy shrank at an annual rate of 0.4% in October to December, according to Cabinet Office data on real GDP, though it grew 1.9% for all of 2023. It contracted 2.9% in July-September. Two straight quarters of contrac-

UK economy enters recession

LONDON, Feb 15 (PT)

THE UK economy has officially entered recession as a result of falling gross domestic product (GDP), spelling trouble for Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in a general election year as he had made "growing the economy" a key plank of his premiership.

Latest UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) data on Thursday revealed that the country's GDP shrank 0.3 per cent between October and December 2023 and by 0.1 per cent in the July to September quarter. A recession is defined as two consecutive three-month

(Contd on page 5)

tion are considered an indicator an economy is in a technical recession.

Japan's economy was the second largest until 2010, when it was overtaken by China's. Japan's nominal GDP totalled USD 4.2 trillion last year, while Germany's was USD 4.4 trillion, or USD 4.5 trillion, depending on the currency conversion. A weaker Japanese yen was a key factor in the drop to fourth place, since comparisons of

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Army chief, US counterpart discuss ways to enhance ties

■ By Lalit K Jha

WASHINGTON, Feb 15 (PTI)

INDIAN Army chief General Manoj Pande has held high-level professional discussions with his American counterpart General Randy George and other senior military officials on matters of bilateral importance and ways to enhance mutual commitment towards global peace and security.

Pande, who is on a four-day official visit to the US beginning February 13, is the first Indian Army chief to visit the country in several years.

"The discussions were aimed at aspects of bilateral importance and further enhancing mutual commitment towards global peace and security," according to an official post on X by the Additional Directorate General of Public Information of the Indian Army.

During his ongoing official



Army Chief General Manoj Pande with senior military officers in Florida. (PTI)

visit, General Pande reviewed the US Army Honour Guard on arrival at Fort Myers and thereafter, in a solemn ceremony, paid respect by laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Arlington

National Cemetery.

Later he engaged in "high-level professional discussions" with Chief of Staff of the US Army General Randy George and other senior military leaders, the official post said.