

Naresh Agrawal joins BJP, takes dig at SP, Jaya

New Delhi, Mar 12 : Samajwadi Party's Rajya Sabha member Naresh Agrawal, who has changed parties frequently in his three-decade-old political career, on Monday joined the BJP here and straightaway stoked a controversy saying "film actor and dancer" Jaya Bachchan has been preferred over him for candidature by the SP in the upcoming elections to the Upper House, remarks which were denounced by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj. Union Minister Piyush Goyal, who held a press conference to announce the entry of Agrawal at the party headquarters, and BJP spokesperson Sambit Patra were visibly embarrassed by the remarks. Patra sought to contain the damage by calling an end to the briefing before saying that BJP respects the contribution of every individual whichever field they work in.

However, Swaraj termed his remarks "improper and unacceptable". "I was compared with a person working in the films... I was rejected for those who dance in films, work in films. I found it not proper. Nobody found it proper," said Agrawal, who is set to retire from the Rajya Sabha on April 2. He was referring to the re-nomination of renowned film actor Jaya Bachchan by the Samajwadi Party for yet another Rajya Sabha term from Uttar Pradesh in the coming biennial elections, ignoring Agrawal's claim.

With its reduced strength in the Uttar Pradesh assembly following assembly elections last year, the Samajwadi Party is in a position to win only one Rajya Sabha seat from the state. Sushma Swaraj conveyed her disapproval of Agrawal's remarks in a tweet. "Shri Naresh Agrawal has joined Bharatiya Janata Party. He is welcome. However, his comments regarding Jaya Bachchan ji are improper and unacceptable," she said.

During the press con-

ference, Agrawal also announced that his son Nitin Agarwal, who is a Samajwadi Party MLA, will vote for the BJP in the biennial elections to the upper house.

He described his joining the BJP as "homecoming" and said he would unconditionally do whatever the party wanted him to. "I have not joined the Bharatiya Janata Party for any Rajya Sabha ticket, nor have I set any condition," Agrawal, who has been one of the most vocal critics of the Narendra Modi government and the BJP in the last few years, lauded the Prime Minister and BJP chief Amit Shah.

"I am inspired by the Prime Minister and Yogiji. The fact that one after the other all states are going to BJP proves that the entire country is with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership," he said. Agrawal also said he felt that he cannot serve the entire country till he was in a national party. Referring to Samajwadi Party leaders Mulayam Singh Yadav and Ram Gopal Yadav, Agrawal said he will continue to respect them for the regard they

SC seeks BCI response on practising lawyers in legislatures



New Delhi, Mar 12 : The Supreme Court on Monday sought the Bar Council of India's (BCI) response on a plea seeking to debar lawyers from practising during the period they are members of Parliament or state assemblies.

A bench of Chief Justice Dipak Misra, Justice A. M. Khanwilkar and Justice D. Y.

Chandrachud sought the response from the BCI -- apex body for regulating the legal practitioners -- as Attorney General K. K. Venugopal said that the same petitioner with similar prayer had moved the top court and same was dismissed last year.

He referred to March 31, 2017, order by which the bench of Chief Justice Jagdish Singh

Khehar (since retired) and Justice D.

Y. Chandrachud had dismissed the plea by Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay, holding: "The prayer made in this petition do not fall within the realms of our jurisdiction under Article 32 of the Constitution."

The Attorney General also told the court that Parliament meets only for a limited period during a year and what would the lawmakers do when parliament is not in session.

He told the court that the Rajya Sabha members do not have a constituency to go and nurture and that entire country is their constituency.

Senior counsel V. Shekhar appearing for the advocate-petitioner tried to defend the present PIL, saying that the one filed in 2017 was different. As he tried to

argue the matter, the court asked him to reserve it for a later date.

The top court had on February 16 sought the assistance of Attorney General K. K. Venugopal in the hearing of the plea by Upadhyay who has cited the Bar Council of India's Rules that bar lawyers from practising during the period they are members of Parliament or a state assembly.

The petitioner had contended that the legislators who are also practising in the court

were in a conflict of interest situation because as lawmakers, they are doing many things that have bearings on the functioning of the judiciary.

He had pointed to "serious conflict" of interest, contending that as parliamentarians, they (practising lawyers) have the power of voting on

the impeachment of judges of the Supreme Court and the high courts, and such a situation "may allow the judges to feel beholden to them and to oblige them".

Rule 49 in Chapter VI of the Bar Council Rules say:

"An advocate shall not be a full-time salaried employee of any person, government, firm, corporation or concern, so long as he continues to practise, and shall, on taking up any such employment, intimate the fact to the Bar Council on whose roll his name appears and shall thereupon cease to practise as an advocate so long as he continues in such employment."

In a two-fold plea, Upadhyay seeking to oust the lawyers-cum-lawmakers from the practising, had alternately sought a declaration that

Rule 49 is ultra vires the Constitution and its basic structure so as to permit all public servants to practise as advocates.

He had argued that the prevailing practice of legislators also appearing before the courts as lawyers is discriminatory to other public servants who are barred from simultaneously pursuing the legal profession and is violative of Article 14 of the Constitution guaranteeing equality before law.

"A salaried person and particularly a public servant cannot practice as an advocate, but legislators are practising which is violation of

Article 14 of the Constitution. Legislators take fee from litigant and salary from the public exchequer, which is professional misconduct," Upadhyay has said in his public interest plea.

HC grants bail to Amanatullah Khan in CS assault case

New Delhi, Mar 12 : The Delhi High Court on Monday granted bail to Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) legislator Amanatullah Khan who was arrested for allegedly assaulting Chief Secretary Anshu

Prakash last month.

Justice Mukta Gupta granted bail to Khan asking him to furnish a personal bond of Rs 50,000 with two sureties of the like amount.

"Petitioner (Khan) is

not required for any custodial interrogation and no useful purpose shall be served by keeping them under incarceration," the bail plea moved by Khan's advocate Mohd.

Irsad said.

Advocate Irsad also said that Khan is a sitting MLA who is working for the betterment of society and intends to dedicate his entire life to the service of the people

On February 19, the Chief Secretary had alleged that he was beaten up by AAP legislators Prakash Jarwal and Amanatullah Khan in the presence of Chief Minister Arvind

Kejriwal at the CM's residence, where the top bureaucrat had been called for an emergency meeting.

Last week the high court granted bail to Jarwal.

Ten dead, 14 injured in TN forest fire

Chennai, March 12 : Ten trekkers have died and 14 seriously injured in a massive forest fire on the Kurangani Hills here in Tamil Nadu, an official said on Monday. Chief Minister K. Palaniswami ordered a probe into the incident.

The hill is located in Theni district, around 520 km from here. Speaking to IANS on phone, a Revenue Department official in Madurai said: "The injured have been admitted to hospitals in Madurai. As per our information, they have suffered burn injuries of up to 40 per cent."

The Chief Minister has ordered a solatium of Rs 400,000 each to the families of the dead, Rs 100,000 each to the seriously injured and Rs

50,000 each to those who suffered minor injuries.

According to the official, one person after getting admitted to the Government Hospital in Madurai got himself transferred to a private hospital and another person left for Chennai.

"Of the 27 rescued from the hills, 10 persons did not suffer any injuries and others suffered burn injuries," Theni District Collector Pallavi Baldev told reporters.

Nine persons lost their lives in the hills and one in the hospital.

Indian Air Force (IAF) helicopters brought the remains of eight of the killed from the hills. The bodies have been sent for identification and would be handed over to the relatives after autopsy. Speaking to reporters,

Palaniswami said the trekking expedition had been done without getting the necessary permission from the Forest Department.

Independent legislator and sidelined AIADMK leader T. T. V. Dinakaran said the careless attitude of the Forest Department was the main reason for the deaths. He said the forest fire was reported in the Kurangani Hills for the past 15 days but the Forest Department had not issued any prior warning notice.

DMK leader M. K. Stalin expressed grief over the death of the trekkers while PMK founder S. Ramadoss demanded streamlining of trekking activity.

The IAF mounted a search and rescue operation on Sunday. Apart

from its 15 commandos, the IAF pressed three of its helicopters in the rescue mission.

The commandos flew from the Sullur Air Base near Coimbatore late on Sunday and climbed the hills. What had started as an adventure trip for the trekking group of eight men, 25 women and three children turned into a nightmare on Sunday afternoon as they were caught up in the massive blaze.

The group had camped at a place up in the hills on Saturday night. They were supposed to return on Sunday.

Speaking to the media on Sunday, Baldev had said more than 20 trekkers were from the Chennai Trekking Club (CTC) and the others from Erode and Tiruppur.

According to the website, the CTC is a non-profit, volunteer group which organises outdoor sports, environmental conservation and social activities throughout the year on weekends and weekday mornings.

"Founded in 2008 the group has grown to one of the most active and largest in South India with over 40,000 members and hundreds of activities throughout the year. All activities are free -- expenses are shared equally among participants," says the website www.chennai-trekkers.org

A Fire and Rescue Services department official told IANS that the Kurangani terrain was tough and the approach to the disaster spot was not motorable.

Anxious moments for Congress as Rathwa files RS nomination in Gujarat

New Delhi, Mar 12 : The opposition Congress had some anxious moments after former Union Minister Naransinh Rathwa and party spokesperson Ameer Yagnik on Monday filed their nominations as its candidates for two of the four Rajya Sabha seats from Gujarat. The opposition party is backing independent candidate P.

K. Valera, a former bureaucrat, who threw his hat in the ring at the last minute due to technical hitches with Rathwa's candidature.

Indian Premier League Chairman and Congress leader Rajeev Shukla, party sources said in Delhi, was ready at the eleventh hour to fly to Gandhinagar in a chartered flight to ensure the Congress did not lose a sure seat if Rathwa's papers were rejected.

But the airport authorities refused permission since re-carpeting was in progress.

However, Rathwa managed to show evidence about his valid vote in his hometown Chhotaudepur.

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has fielded three candidates, including two sitting Rajya Sabha members.

Besides Union Minister of State Parshottam Rupala and Mansukh Mandavia, the ruling BJP has fielded senior leader Kiritsinh Rana, stating there could be cross-voting due to Valera's nomination as a third candidate backed by the Congress.

INTERNATIONAL

British PM May to make statement about nerve attack on Russian spy

London, Mar 12 : Prime Minister Theresa May will bring Britain's parliament up to date on the investigation into a nerve agent attack on a former Russian spy on Monday, and one senior lawmaker expected her to point the finger of blame at Moscow. Sergei Skripal, 66, and his daughter Yulia, 33, have been in hospital in a critical condition since March 4 when they were found unconscious on a bench outside a shopping centre in the southern English cathedral city of Salisbury. May has warned that if Russia is behind the poisoning of Skripal, a former colonel in GRU military intelligence, then Britain will respond robustly. Russia has denied any involvement in the attack which also struck down a British policeman.

The chairman of the British parliament's foreign affairs committee, Tom Tugendhat, said the attack looked like state-sponsored attempted murder and he thought May, who chaired a meeting of top ministers and security officials, would say Russia was responsible.

"Frankly I would be surprised if she did not point the finger at the Kremlin," Tugendhat told BBC radio. May will address parliament at

1630 GMT.

Even though Britain has not officially blamed Russia, the affair has driven already poor relations lower.

Russia's foreign ministry said London was whipping up anti-Russian hysteria while state TV went further, accusing Britain of poisoning Skripal as part of a special operation designed to spoil Russia's hosting of the soccer World Cup this summer.

Tugendhat said Russia's so-called oligarchs, who have amassed fortunes during President Vladimir Putin's 18-year rule, should be denied entry to the luxuries of London and the West.

The British capital has been dubbed "Londongrad" due to the large quantities of Russian money that have poured in since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

British counter-terrorism police say a nerve agent - usually a small molecule based on phosphorus that interferes with the transmission of nerve signals - was used on Skripal and his daughter. But they have refused to specify which poison was used. A British policeman who was one of the first to attend to the stricken spy was also affected by the nerve agent. He is now

conscious in a serious but stable condition, police said. In a broadcast on Sunday, Russian state TV suggested Britain itself had poisoned Skripal to upset the soccer World Cup which Russia is hosting in June and July.

"They tried to pin the blame on Russia, but if you think it through the poisoning of the GRU (military intelligence) colonel was only advantageous to the British," Dmitry Kiselyov, the country's top pro-Kremlin presenter said. "An excellent special operation," said Kiselyov. "Skripal is cheap expendable material," he said, and after the special operation Russia would then have to "justify itself".

Seoul, Mar 12 : North Korea's silence on its upcoming summits with the United States and South Korea is probably due to caution over organising its stance on the meetings, the South said on Monday, as China's leader urged patience. North Korean media mentioned a visit by a delegation from the South last week, but no coverage has been seen of leader Kim Jong Un's invitation to meet U.S. President Donald Trump or the South Korean president to discuss the future of North Korea's nuclear weapons programme.

"We have not seen nor received an official response from the

Britain very close to Brexit transition deal with the EU: minister

London, Mar 12 : Britain is very close to agreeing the details of an implementation period with the European Union for its transition out of the bloc, junior Brexit minister Robin Walker said on Monday. Britain has said it will adhere to EU regulations for a time-limited period after it leaves the European Union in March 2019, and hopes the details of this transition, or implementation, period, will be finalised at a summit with the EU on March 22-24.

"We recognise how important it is to secure the deal on the implementation period as soon as possible. I want to stress that we are very close to a deal at this time," Walker said in a speech at the Institute of Directors in London. Britain says the implementation period will give businesses certainty heading into next year, as the rest of Britain's future relationship with the EU is yet to be agreed upon.

A spokesman for Prime Minister Theresa May said earlier that Britain was still confident it could reach agreement with the EU on a transition period after Brexit at the EU summit this month.

Britain has said it expects the transition period to last around two years after its departure date, although the European Union has said it should end earlier, on Dec. 31, 2020.

North Korean "caution" seen in announcing stance on upcoming summits: Seoul

North Korean regime regarding the North Korea-U.S. summit, Baik Tae-hyun, spokesman for the South's Ministry of Unification, told a regular news conference. "I feel they're approaching this matter with caution and they need time to organise their stance."

The South Korean officials who took Kim's invitation to Washington are visiting China and Japan this week to update their neighbours on the talks.

South Korea's National Security Office chief, Chung Eui-yong, who led the delegation, heads to Russia on Tuesday after

meeting Chinese President Xi Jinping, the South Korean president's office said. In Beijing on Monday, Xi told Chung the Korean peninsula faced an important opportunity for talks. "At the same time, all sides must exercise patience and be attentive, and show political wisdom, to appropriately face and dispel any problems and interference to resuming the talks process," state media cited Xi as saying. China looked forward to smooth talks between the two Koreas and between the United States and North Korea and substantive progress in the denuclearisation process and nor-

malisation of ties, Xi added.

Chung expressed thanks for China's role at a meeting earlier with China's top diplomat, State Councillor Yang Jiechi, noting the "active support and contribution from President Xi Jinping and the Chinese government". Trump agreed to meet Kim Jong Un by the end of May and the two Koreas will hold a summit by the end of April. A venue has not been decided for the North Korea-U.S. summit, while Kim and the South's president, Moon Jae-in, will meet at the truce village of Panmunjom straddling the border of the two Koreas.

Trump says watching courts before acting on gun age limits

Washington, Mar 12 : U.S. President Donald Trump put responsibility for raising the age limits on gun purchases to the courts and U.S. states on Monday, saying he would wait for judicial rulings before acting. "On 18 to 21 Age Limits, watching court cases and rulings before acting. States are making this decision. Things are moving rapidly on this, but not much political support (to put it mildly)," he wrote on Twitter. The proposal to raise the minimum age for buying guns from 18 to 21 was not part of a modest set of gun safety proposals announced on Sunday night by Trump administration officials,



which included training teachers to carry guns in schools and improving background checks. Trump has said he

believes armed teachers would deter school shootings and better protect students when they happen. The idea, already in place in some states, is backed by the National Rifle Association gun lobby.

The Republican president, who championed gun rights during his 2016 campaign, vowed to take action to prevent school shootings after a gunman killed 17 students and faculty at a high school in Parkland, Florida, on Feb. 14.

The modest fixes proposed by the White House stepped back from some of the more sweeping changes Trump had considered after the latest school shooting.