

OTHER STORIES

SOUTHERN ZONAL COUNCIL MEET IN TIRUPATI PUT OFF

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 1

The 29th edition of Southern Zonal Council meet scheduled to be held at Tirupati on March 4 under the chairmanship of Union minister for home Amith Shah was put off.

Union home secretary Sanjeev Gupta in a statement said that it had been decided to postpone the council meet due to certain unavoidable administrative exigencies.

A communication to this effect reached the chief secretary Adityanath Das.

The SZC comprising states including Telangana, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Andhra Pradesh as members and union territories including Andhraman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep as special invitees were supposed to attend the meet.

DOOR DELIVERY OF RATIONS A FAILURE, SAYS TULASI REDDY

DC CORRESPONDENT
KADAPA, MARCH 1

Andhra Pradesh Congress Committee working president N. Tulasi Reddy has termed as failure the new scheme of delivering rations at doorsteps.

Speaking to reporters at Vempalle in Kadapa district on Monday, he pointed out that neither ration dealers nor vehicle owners or consumers are happy with the scheme that is costing the exchequer ₹830 crore.

Ration dealers fear they will lose their shops. Vehicles owners are worried about why they have agreed for the scheme. Card holders are suffering as they do not know when the vehicle will arrive and, hence, unable to attend to their regular work.

The APCC chief said YSRC government has been “undemocratic” in obstructing former chief minister N. Chandrababu Naidu from visiting Chittoor district by detaining him at Renigunta airport. He wondered how police could even take away his phone. “Is this tyranny, democracy, or dictatorship,” he asked.

PAIPEDU VILLAGE HAS ONLY HOME DELIVERIES

from page 1

“We are strictly following the custom for many years. Neighbours and friends supply drinking water for families that do not have a male member on such occasions,” she said.

Paipedu, located at a hillock about 23km away from the mandal headquarters of Mudiugubba in Kadiri revenue division has no road access even from the gram panchayat headquarters of Madannagari Palle, about 3km away.

The area is badly hit by fluoride presence in ground water and the water from a bore well that existed in the village with 7.8Ph is not used for drinking purpose.

Previously, a 3km-long pipeline existed from Madannagaripalle connecting the village to the water tank and it served drinking water for Paipedu. “The pipeline was badly damaged during the erection of a road and water supply stopped a year ago. Since then, the entire village depends on the small pond,” a villager said.

No action was initiated by the gram panchayat and the rural water supply wing to solve the water problem. During the time when there was drinking water supply via the pipeline, the women even during their periods fetched water from it, and no custom prevented them from doing so.

The pond draws in rainy water as also depends on ground water sources, which are not pure for consumption but the people have no alternative source.

Landowner P. Venkataiah came forward to donate land for drilling a bore well about a km away from the village, with less chances of fluoride content. “I shall donate the land, but the government should bear the expenses to drill a bore well and install a pipeline into village,” he told DC.

Interestingly, the entire village follows another female custom. The women will have only home deliveries and will not go to hospitals for child birth. The medical department tried to create awareness among them while the health care workers are concentrating on the village to reduce such post-delivery complications.



YSRC activists take part in a campaign rally for the upcoming GVMC elections at the 38th Ward near Burujupeta in Visakhapatnam on Monday. — DC

SEC permits 14 people to file nominations again

Candidates should submit Form-B on March 3 before 3 pm

DC CORRESPONDENTS
VIJAYAWADA/
VISAKHAPATNAM, MARCH 1

The State Election Commission permitted 14 nominees who were either prevented from filing their nominations or were forced to withdraw their nominations in the urban local body election process held March, 2020, to file their nominations in the ensuing urban local body polls scheduled to be held on March 10.

The SEC issued orders here on Monday, providing an opportunity to the following persons to file their nominations. They are: D. Vimala from Ward No. 2, R. Sadasivam from Ward No. 8, C.N. Saravanan from Ward No. 10, A. Mun Emma from Ward No. 21, G. Surya Kumari from Ward No. 41 and A. Chandra Mohan from Ward No. 45 at Tirupati municipal corporation.

S. Munni from Ward No. 9, C. Geethamma from Ward No. 14 and B. Chandra Kala from Ward No. 28 are permitted to file their notations at Punganur municipality.

Kotte Venkatachalapathi from Ward No. 20 and Kayanur Abdul Rahiman from Ward No. 31 at Rayachoti municipality.

The SEC issued a schedule for these persons. Accordingly, filing of nominations is scheduled from March 1 to 2 from 11 am to 3 pm. Scrutiny of nominations is on March 2 after 3 pm. Withdrawal of candi-



N. Ramesh Kumar holds a review meeting with the officials on the upcoming local body polls at Visakhapatnam collectorate on Monday. — DC

TD NAMES PEELA AS VIZAG MAYOR CANDIDATE

Visakhapatnam: TD state president K. Atchannaidu, at a meeting held in Visakhapatnam on Monday, announced the name of Peela Srinivasa Rao as the mayoral candi-

date of the party.

There were four aspirants for the mayor post. They were former MLA Gandhi Babji, Kaki Govind, Sheikh Nazir and Peela Srinivasa Rao.

datures to be on March 3 upto 3 pm.

The remaining schedule of election activity is synchronised with the common schedule for ULBs. The candidates fielded by the political parties should submit Form-B on March 3 before 3 pm.

The SEC also issued orders reviving the candidature of three persons who were forced to withdraw their candidature under duress, coercion during the last election process.

Accordingly, Madduru Hariprasad Reddy from Ward No. 6, Shaik Rahamatulla from Ward No. 11 and Manjula Divya Dharani from Ward No. 15 from

Yerraguntla Nagar Panchayat.

The SEC maintained that after receiving reports from the district elections authorities on forced withdrawal of nominations and prevention of candidates from filing their nominations in urban local body election process held in March, 2020, it issued orders accordingly.

Later in the day, the state election commissioner visited Visakhapatnam and held a meeting with the leaders from several political parties. He suggested to the officials to hand over voter slips to the voters before March 7 in Visakhapatnam.

Naina compares CM's smile with 'Atom Bomb'

DC CORRESPONDENT
RAJAMAHENDRAVARAM,
MARCH 1

Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy's smile is explosive and as powerful as an atom bomb while his love for the people of his state is immense, said international table tennis player Naina Jaiswal.

She was speaking at a 'Yuvatha-Haritha' programme, taken up by the Rajamahendravaram Municipal Corporation, which is an initiative of local MP Margani Bharat here on Monday.

She appreciated Jagan Mohan Reddy's governance and his attitude. She said that MPs like Mr Bharat were ably assisting the Chief Minister to go ahead with the welfare and development schemes. She said that protecting nature and the environment would help the future generations and sapling and growing plants is crucial for the society to survive.

Bharat called the students to participate in Yuvatha-Haritha programme to provide a good future to the future generations.

He said that 13 main roads in the city would become green covers with students actively participating in the green drive.

Arts College students participated in sapling of plants across dividers on the busy Anala Venkatappara road.

YSRC city coordinator Akula Satyanarayana, Rural Coordinator Chandana Nageswar, Airport Authority director Chandrapu Rajareddy and others were present as were several skaters from the district.

Sharmila may launch party in TS on April 19

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, MARCH 1

Y.S. Sharmila, daughter of former chief minister of combined AP late Y.S.

Rajasekhar Reddy, is likely to announce the launch of her new political party in Telangana on April 9.

According to sources close to her, Sharmila will

make public her party's name at a massive public meeting planned at Khammam on April 9, after holding the last Atmeeya Sammelanam.

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The district medical and health officers in the districts have started issuing statements on the eligibility of new category of beneficiaries, the procedure for registration in CoWIN-2.0 app and other details on Monday only instead of

doing so on previous days.

With regard to private hospitals where the Covid-19 vaccine to be administered at the cost of ₹250 per each dose, a good number of them procured the stocks of vaccine by Monday afternoon. As they are not having any idea of how many people

would turn up to undergo vaccination by paying the charges, they are procuring only very limited stocks of the vaccine with an exception for big hospitals.

On the other hand, the district level health officials were also briefed on how to go about the imple-

Naidu's sit-in protest is a drama, says Peddireddy

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, MARCH 1

Panchayat Raj Minister Peddireddy Ramchandra Reddy has slammed TD chief Nara Chandrababu Naidu over his sit-in protest at the Tirupati airport on Monday. “Naidu is conspiring to disrupt peace in the state and his protest is a political drama to mislead the public,” he said.

Peddireddy told the media here that Chandrababu was a “conspirator who used to confuse the public with fake political screenplay.”

“Mr Naidu, you got 40 years of experience in politics. Are you aware of the Covid-19 restrictions? Do you know that the election code is in place? You should clarify how can massive protests be staged amidst these restrictions,” he asked the TD chief.

The minister said, “Although Chandrababu knew that there were no irregularities in the local body elections, he set out on a visit to create the illusion that something bad was going on in Chittoor district. His drama is purely meant for large-scale publicity in his yellow media.”

Claiming that the YSRC supporters have won over 90 per cent of the seats in the panchayat elections, the minister exuded confidence that the party would achieve better results in the municipal, mandal and ZP polls.

“Naidu will eventually lose the upcoming municipal and parishad elections. No one from his party is even coming forward to file nominations. He engaged himself in mudslinging on the state government and is propagating lies through his media that something unfair and illegal is going on in the state.”

“Who shot the video of

Sajjala lashes out at Naidu for 'nuisance'

DC CORRESPONDENT
ANANTAPUR, MARCH 1

State government adviser Sajjala Ramakrishna Reddy lashed out at Telugu Desam chief N. Chandrababu Naidu for creating a nuisance through protests in the state.

“Mr Naidu is in the final stage of politics and nobody will believe him. Even his party leaders expressed unwillingness to contest in municipal and other upcoming polls following successful welfare schemes,” Sajjala Ramakrishna Reddy stated.

He was on tour in the district on Monday.

Reacting to the protests by Naidu at the Tirupati airport, after the police denied permission to attend for protest which would create law and order problem without obtaining permission from State Election Commission, Ramakrishna Reddy objected the leader of the opposition who disregarded State Election Commission guidelines and tried to create law and order problem.

Without any prior permission from SEC, he tried to create a scene at Tirupati airport.

Chandrababu's drama at the Tirupati airport? Who released it to the media,” he asked while accusing Naidu of making all the commotion with a conspiratorial air.

“No one detained Naidu at the airport. The police treated him very politely and provided him with food by 2pm and later took him to the lobby. The

NAIDU FLOUTING DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES: MLA

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 1

YSR Congress MLA Ambati Rambabu lambasted the TD supremo N. Chandrababu Naidu for trying to take the law into his hands and flouting democratic principles.

Speaking to media persons on Monday, the YSR Congress spokesperson alleged that Naidu staged high drama at the Renigunta airport to mislead the people and gain sympathy from the people in the state.

He said that the police had already issued notices on Sunday disallowing the protest due to the elections code and flayed Naidu for ignoring the orders from the police in order to stage protest with mala fide intentions.

He said that as Naidu suffered defeat in the recently held gram panchayat polls, he was trying to stage protest in Chittoor district to claim that something unfair had happened to him.

police had written to Naidu in advance that he will not be allowed to stage a protest, as Police Act 30 is in place due to election code and due to the Covid-19 restrictions. He however arrived here and sat down, posing for visuals before his pro-media. Police treated him with dignity,” the minister added.

Naidu tries in vain to get out

from page 1

Naidu was obviously nonplussed. He tried in vain to get out and take part in two protests by the opposition party — one at Gandhi statue in Tirupati and the other at Gandhi Circle in Chittoor. The protests were planned to denounce the alleged high-handedness of the YSRC on the TD cadre to withdraw nominations from the coming civic polls.

The TD chief was also supposed to meet and extend solidarity to a Tirupati-based party activist RP Srinivas, whose tea stall was under threat of being razed by municipal officials following filing of nominations for the civic body polls by his wife.

“The TD chief was not allowed to stage protests in Tirupati, as he had no permission. We have informed this to him but he didn't pay any heed, which is why we had to detain him there itself,” Tirupati SP Ch. Venkata Appala Naidu said with a straight face.

“The TD leaders submitted an application late on Sunday night, seeking permission for a protest with 5,000 people at the Gandhi Statue, close to the RTC bus stand and railway station. Police rejected the plea, saying the model code of conduct was in force,” the SP added.

As per the visuals coming out of the airport, the TD chief squatted inside the arrival lounge and then turned it into a sit-in protest for almost nine

hours. Police officials were seen trying to pacify the visibly upset former CM.

In a video tweet, the Opposition leader was heard saying: “What is this? What is this... don't I have fundamental rights to meet the collector? What is happening to this country? I worked for 14 years as chief minister. I am leader of the Opposition. What is this tamasha? Why did you detain me? You didn't give me permission... I will sit right here.”

Naidu asked the police to let him meet the district collector and the SP to get a clarification on the issue. It took nearly half-a-day for the district official machinery to reach up to Naidu.

According to sources, the joint collector (development) V. Veerabrahmam and Chittoor SP S. Senthil Kumar met the Opposition leader at the airport. Naidu talked bitterly to them about the alleged high-handedness of the ruling party. By evening, Naidu was ushered into a flight headed for Hyderabad.

Tension prevailed in several parts of Chittoor district on Monday and TD leaders tried to reach out to Naidu at the Tirupati airport. Many leaders including former minister N. Amarnath Reddy, MLC Dora Babu, district party president Pulivarthi Venkatamani Prasad, former TD MLA M. Suguna, former TUDA chairman G. Narasimha Yadav, have been placed under house arrest.



SHORT TAKES

AP REPORTS 58 FRESH CASES OF COVID, NO DEATH

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 1

Andhra Pradesh registered 58 fresh cases of Covid-19 and no death in the last 24 hours.

The state health authorities reported on Monday that out of 20,269 samples tested, 58 persons were found infected with Covid-19. Out of a total number of 1,39,74,400 samples tested so far in the state, 8,89,974 persons were found infected with the virus and of them, 8,82,080 were recovered while undergoing treatment while 725 infected persons are still active with the virus.

Among the daily cases of Covid-19 infections, Chittoor recorded the highest at 11 followed by 10 in Kadapa, eight in East Godavari, seven in Guntur, six in Kurnool, four each in Nellore and Sriakulam, three in Anantapur, two in West Godavari and one each in Krishna, Prakasam and Visakhapatnam and zero cases in Vizianagaram.

With regard to the cumulative active cases, Chittoor topped the state with 138.

Bahadur Singh takes over as chief of ENC

Vice-Admiral Ajendra is an alumnus of the NDA

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, MARCH 1

Vice-Admiral Ajendra Bahadur Singh, took over as the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief (FOC-in-C), Eastern Naval Command from Vice-Admiral Atul Kumar Jain, in an impressive Ceremonial Parade held at the Naval Base in Visakhapatnam on Monday.

Vice-Admiral A.B. Singh inspected the Ceremonial Guard and reviewed platoons of naval personnel drawn from various ships and establishments of the ENC. The ceremony was attended by all Flag Officers and Commanding Officers of ships, submarines and establishments.



The new Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Naval Command, Vice Admiral Ajendra Bahadur Singh (right) assumes charge from the outgoing Vice Admiral Atul Kumar Jain.

Later, he also paid homage to martyrs who made the supreme sacrifice in service of the nation, by laying a floral wreath at the War Memorial on Beach Road, Visakhapatnam.

Commissioned on 1 July 1983, Vice-Admiral Ajendra Bahadur Singh

is an alumnus of the prestigious National Defence Academy Khadakvasla. He held various Operational Staff and Command Appointments in his career spanning over 38 years.

He has commanded Indian Naval Ships Veer (Missile Vessel),

Vindhyagiri (Frigate), Trishul (Guided Missile Frigate) and Viraat (Aircraft Carrier). The officer has rich operational experience of Op Pawan in Sri Lanka and Op Parakram on the Western Seaboard as the Fleet Navigating Officer of Western Fleet. He has also been the Chief of Staff at Western Naval Command during the period of intense Op activity in early 2019.

He has commanded the Eastern Fleet and is familiar with the peculiarities of Eastern Seaboard, and was closely associated with the response to Super Cyclone Hudhud in 2014.

For his distinguished service, he was awarded the Vishisht Seva Medal in 2011 and Ati Vishisht Seva Medal in 2016.

BIE EXTENDS LAST DATE FOR PAYMENT OF EXAMINATION FEE

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 1

The Board of Intermediate (BIE) Education extended due dates for the payment of examination fee for first year students to March 5.

The BIE secretary V. Ramakrishna in a statement issued on Monday stated that the first year

students appearing for Intermediate Public Examinations in March 2021, including regular and vocational, attendance exempted candidates appearing for humanities and those with change of group, to pay fee in the office of college principal by the last day on March 5. Principals are to remit fee

to the BIE account or through online transfer by March 6. Submission of MNRs and fee paid data in the concerned RIO office to be done by March 8.

There is also a provision to pay examination fee directly by the candidate/parent through online form BIE official website 'bie.ap.gov.in.'

AUDIT EMPLOYEE IN ACB TRAP IN KADAPA

DC CORRESPONDENT
KADAPA, MARCH 1

Anti-corruption officials on Monday arrested Abdul Jabbar, a senior assistant in the district audit office, for taking a bribe.

As per ACB DSP P. Kanjakshan, Jabbar demanded ₹5,000 to send the file related to the retirement benefits and gratuity of Kuraku Pedda Venkataiah, who retired as an office subordinate in the Kadapa irrigation office.

SRISAILAM TEMPLE GEARS UP FOR ANNUAL BRAHMOTSAVAMS

DC CORRESPONDENT
ANANTAPUR, MARCH 1

Lord Mallikarjuna Swamy and Goddess Bramarambhika temple in Srisailam of Kurnool district is gearing up for annual Brahmotsavams on the occasion of Mahashivarathri. Srisailam temple executive officer K.S. Rama Rao released a brochure for the annual Brahmotsavams in Srisailam on Monday.

The executive officer said the 10-day long annual fete will be commenced from March 4 and concluded on March 14 following all nec-

essary traditions. Brahmotsavams will be started on March 4 formally by starting rituals at yaga sala, and dwajarahanam will be performed in the evening.

As part of daily vahana sevas, bringi seva on March 5, Hamsavahana Seva on 6, Mayura Seva on 7, Ravanavahan seva on March 8, Pushpapallaki seva on 9, Gajavahana seva on March 10, Nandi Vahana seva on 11, Brahma rathotsavam will be performed on March 12 and Aswa vahana seva on March 14. Durga Malleswara Swamy temple would give clothes to lord and goddess on March 6.

NSTL, NIOT TO WORK IN NAVAL RESEARCH

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, MARCH 1

Director of Chief Guest National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT), Ministry of Earth Sciences Dr G.A. Ramadass while delivering

an invited talk on Ocean Research – a civilian perspective, explained in detail, the work being carried out by NIOT in emerging and futuristic areas of oceanography. He reiterated the commitment of NSTL and NIOT.

PANEL CALLS FOR AP BANDH ON MARCH 5 TO PROTEST PRIVATISATION OF VSP

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, MARCH 5

Steel Plant Parirakshana Porata Committee called for State wide bandh on March 5.

The district committee of CPM, which announced sup-

port to the bandh, on Monday appealed to all the trade union leaders and members to make the bandh success in all mandals and district headquarters to put pressure on the central government.

Man who bought minor girl arrested

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, MARCH 1

The police on Monday arrested the 45-year-old man, who offered money to a daily wager family and bought their 12-year-old girl and attempted a sexual assault on her a couple of days ago in Dampuru in Vidavaluru mandal.

According to the police, the accused M. China Subbaiah, a resident of Girijan Colony of Kothuru in Nellore rural segment, whose wife had left him following marital discord, had his eye on the minor girl. He resides with his sister and their family and works in a mango garden as a watchman.

He recently sold out his plot

for ₹40,000 and paid ₹10,000 to some lenders and gave ₹20,000 to his son. He spent ₹3,000 for his expenses and paid hospital bills of ₹7,000 to his sister's daughter, the older one. After paying the hospital bill, he married his sister's younger daughter in Nidiguntapalem ST Colony and shifted her to Dampuru on Wednesday night.

On Thursday night, the girl was heard screaming and crying at her house, by the neighbours, who alerted the integrated child development services (ICDS) officials.

They rescued the girl from the man and called the police on Friday. Before the police arrived at the spot, the man escaped from the spot.

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SHORT TAKES

C'GARH ALLOCATES ₹30 CR FOR 'RAM GAMAN' CIRCUIT

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY | DC BHOPAL, MARCH 1

An allocation of ₹30 crore has been made in the annual budget of Chhattisgarh for 2021-22 towards the development of places in Chhattisgarh visited by Lord Ram during his 14-year-exile.

This was announced by Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel while presenting annual budget for 2021-22 in the Assembly on Monday. Chhattisgarh government in August last had unveiled a ₹137.45 crore ambitious project envisaging development of "Ram Van Gaman Tourism Circuit" linking 75 sites in Chhattisgarh, said to be visited by Lord Ram during his 14-year-exile.

Baghel has earlier written a letter to the Union tourism minister Pralhad Patel urging him to sanction the project under the Centre's scheme, Ramayan circuit of swadesh darshan. The letter cited various researches in the field which suggested that Lord Ram spent 10 years out of his 14-year-exile period at various places in Chhattisgarh. Folk songs of Chhattisgarh also establish this, the letter said.

Research work in the field suggests that Lord Ram spent some time in 51 places out of the 75 sites he had visited in Chhattisgarh during his exile, according to the letter. The state government plans to develop nine out of these 75 sites in the first phase at a cost of ₹30 crore.

NIA ARRESTS 4 FROM J&K FOR NARCO TERRORISM

DC CORRESPONDENT SRINAGAR, MARCH 1

National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Monday arrested four persons from Jammu and Kashmir allegedly involved in smuggling of heroin and other narcotic drugs worth million of rupees from across the Line of Control (LoC).

The money obtained through the sale of the contraband locally and in other parts of the country would be transferred to a major militant outfit to help it in carrying out "terrorist activities" in the Valley, the agency claimed.

A statement issued by the NIA here said that the case of "narco-terrorism" was registered by it in June last after the J&K police seized 21 kilograms of heroin and cash amount of ₹1,35,89,850 from the members of a drug syndicate operating in the Union Territory.

The accused who were formally arrested by the agency in Srinagar have been identified as Altaf Ahmed Shah, Showkat Ahmad Parray, Mudasar Ahmad Dar and Amin Allaie alias Hilal Mir—all residents of Kashmir Valley.

The NIA said that the case was initially registered under an FIR filed at a police station in Handwara area of frontier Kulwara district on June 11, 2020.

WARRANT ISSUED AGAINST KANGANA RANAUT

SONU SHRIVASTAVA | DC MUMBAI, MARCH 1

A magistrate court in Mumbai on Monday issued a bailable warrant against Bollywood actor Kangana Ranaut, as she failed to appear before it despite issuance of summons in connection with a defamation complaint filed against her by lyricist Javed Akhtar.

Metropolitan Magistrate R.R. Khan had issued summons to Ranaut on February 1, with a direction to appear before the court on March 1.

On Monday, when the matter was called out for hearing, Ranaut was not present in the court following which the court issued a bailable warrant against her. With issuance of the warrant the court deferred hearing on this matter till March 22.

After hearing Akhtar and his lawyer Niranjan Mundargi the Magistrate court had ordered the Juhu police to file a report in December 2020.

The police had sought further time to submit the report and the court had ordered Juhu police to file the report by January 18, 2021, however, they had sought further time.

Finally, the police submitted the report in February and in the report police stated that the offences alleged against Kangana are made out for further investigation.

BJP trying to woo Christian voters ahead of Assembly polls in Kerala

Saffron party had secured close to 15 per cent votes in the last Assembly polls in 2016

GILVESTER ASSARY | DC THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, MARCH 1

The BJP in Kerala is hoping to improve its electoral fortunes with the help of Christian votes in the coming Assembly elections.

The party which had secured close to 15 per cent votes in the last Assembly polls in 2016, believes that the support of Christians is crucial to convert the votes into seats. Two prominent leaders of the BJP called on Cardinal Mar George Alanchery who is the Major Archbishop of Syro Malabar Church in Kochi on Monday.

BJP state president K. Surendran who arrived in Kochi as part of his statewide Vijay Yatra, met the cardinal at the Kerala Catholic Bishops Conference headquarters in Kochi. Though the BJP leader maintained that it was only a courtesy call, sources said the issues related to Assembly elections also figured in the discussions.

Soon after Surendran left, Karnataka deputy chief minister C.N. Ashwath Narayan who is also in charge of Assembly elections in Kerala, drove straight to the Catholic Bishops Conference headquarters and held discussions with Cardinal Alanchery and other leaders of the Syro Malabar Church. The BJP has deputed Narayan who is known to have close ties with Christian denominations running educational institutions in Bengaluru and other parts of Karnataka.

Though Narayan also said that it was a courtesy visit, he admitted that political issues also came up for discussions during the meeting which went on for more than 30 minutes. He told media persons that the BJP was hopeful of getting a sizable Christian vote in the coming elections. The party is focussing on Christian dominated constituencies in central Travancore, he said and added that a good number of Christian candidates will figure in BJP's candidate list this time.

More central leaders of the BJP are expected to meet Church leaders in Kerala in the run up to the polls.

The BJP which had only one member in the outgoing 140 member Kerala Assembly has been working assiduously to woo the Christians. Senior Kerala BJP leader and Mizoram Governor P.S. Sreedharan Pillai had taken the initiative to resolve the dispute between Jacobite and Orthodox factions in the state. The two churches are engaged in a decades old battle regarding the ownership of various Churches and associated properties.

Christians form about 19 per cent of the state's 3.5 crore population. The Christian vote is decisive in Pathanamthitta, Kottayam, Idukki, Ernakulam, parts of Kannur, Malappuram and Wayanad. Latin Catholic population plays a key role in the outcome of polls in coastal districts.

Though the BJP had



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi eats ice apple from a roadside stall during his election campaign for the forthcoming Tamil Nadu Assembly polls, in Kanyakumari district on Monday. He tweeted about "three alternatives" that the Centre has given to people as he went on to suggest that consumers have been left with no choice. "Prices of LPG cylinders hiked yet again. For people, these are Modi government's alternatives — Wrap up businesses, throw away cooking stoves and eat up jumlas (false promises)," his tweet said.

● **SENIOR KERALA BJP leader P.S. Sreedharan Pillai** had taken the initiative to resolve the dispute between Jacobite and Orthodox factions in the state. The two churches are engaged in a decades old battle regarding ownership of various Churches.

made an attempt to woo the Muslims as well by appointing A.P. Abdullakutty as national vice president of the party, the possibility of the community favouring the saffron party is remote. Abdullakutty who was a former firebrand leader of CPM was elected to parliament twice. After quitting CPM he joined Congress and became an MLA. Now he is one of the main faces of BJP.

Former union minister Alphons Kannanthanam who was also once CPM MLA, had joined the BJP and made a central minister during the previous Modi ministry. Now he is a Rajya Sabha member.

CPM may relax criteria for senior ministers

DC CORRESPONDENT THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, MARCH 1

Though the CPM had decided to strictly enforce the norm of not repeating MLAs who have won back to back elections, there are enough indications on the ground that this criteria would be relaxed in the case of senior ministers of the outgoing Pinarayi Vijayan Cabinet.

The Alappuzha district secretariat of the CPM has recommended the names of finance minister Thomas Isaac and PWD minister G. Sudhakaran for one more time from Alappuzha and Ambalapuzha constituencies respectively considering their high chances of victory. If approved by the

state leaders the coming election would be Sudhakaran's eighth and Isaac's fifth electoral battle.

With the CPM aiming for a repeat, the party does not want to take any chances by keeping its popular leaders out of electoral contests in the name of norms. Party sources said if the norms are enforced strictly then at least 28 sitting MLAs of the CPM including 7 ministers will have to stay out of contest. As per norms finance minister Thomas Isaac, PWD minister G. Sudhakaran, fisheries minister J. Mercykutty Amma, local bodies minister A.C. Moideen, general education minister C. Raveendranath, higher education minister K.T. Jaleel, industries minister

E.P. Jayarajan and Law minister A.K. Balan should not be in the fray. Besides, Speaker P. Sreeramakrishnan will also have to sit out.

The party feels that it would be suicidal to keep the ministers, especially those who have performed well, out of electoral fray in such a crucial election. However, the final decision on fielding the ministers will be taken at the state committee meeting to be held later this week.

Meanwhile, the seat sharing talks of ruling LDF remained inconclusive on Monday. The CPM top leadership had a one on one meeting with the leaders of the alliance partners at the party headquarters AKG Centre in Thiruvananthapuram.

DMK firms up ties, seat deals 20,000 troops on stand-by for WB

G BABU JAYAKUMAR & D. SEKAR | DC CHENNAI, MARCH 1

DMK President M.K. Stalin announced his grand plan for unveiling a 10-year vision document for the state in its public meeting to be held on Sunday even as his party started finalising seat sharing with its allies, one after the other.

Though the talks with the Congress ran into rough weather over the numbers, the DMK leaders assigned to hold talks with the alliance partners managed to bring around the MMK and IUML by offering them two and three seats respectively.

Delegations from the VCK and MDMK held talks on Monday and have agreed to return to the table after holding discussions with their leaders. But insiders say there was no



M.K. Stalin

big hitch on finalising the agreement though again the bone of contention is the numbers and the question of which symbol they will be contesting under.

Since the DMK would like its smaller allies to contest in its popular 'Rising Sun' symbol, most of the parties seem to have a different view on that. The IUML has already made it clear it would face the elections in its 'ladder' symbol, the MMK is yet to decide on what symbol to go for. The two Communist par-

ties are expected to hold talks in the next couple of days and the Congress, too, whose state leaders were camping down south in view of Rahul Gandhi's visit to the southern district, will resume negotiations this week itself.

DMK is said to be keen on finalising the alliance by next week as the party is keen on making use of the ground that it levelled at Siruganur in the outskirts of Trichy for a magnificent State conference, earlier scheduled for March 14.

While the DMK had a grand plan to bring together the party's booth committees to Siruganur and brief them all on how to approach the coming elections, the announcement of the poll schedule and the kicking in of the Model Code of Conduct had led to the abandoning of the conference.

DC CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, MARCH 1

Even as Union home ministry will deploy between 80,000-1,00,000 security personnel for the eight phase West Bengal Assembly polls, sources said an additional 20,000 troops will be kept on standby in case reinforcements need to be rushed at a short notice. All senior para-military forces officers deployed in Bengal have been directed to also co-ordinate with local SSPs and Election Commission observers for deployment and maintaining law and order during the poll process.

Home ministry sources said that they had received intelligence inputs from multiple agencies that

PUNJAB CM SAYS PRASHANT KISHOR HAS JOINED HIM

Chandigarh, March 1: Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh on Monday said poll strategist Prashant Kishor has joined him as his principal advisor.

Happy to share that @PrashantKishor has joined me as my Principal Advisor. Look forward to working together for the betterment of the people of Punjab!, said Amarinder Singh in a tweet.

The development assumes significance as the Punjab Assembly elections are due early next year.

Currently, Kishor's company, Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC), is assisting Mamata Banerjee's Trinamul Congress (TMC) in the West Bengal elections.

Kishor had handled the Congress poll campaign in the 2017 Punjab Assembly elections. The Congress in 2017 had stormed to power by bagging 77 seats in the 117-member Assembly.

Kishor was the brain behind Punjab Congress programmes like Coffee with Captain and Punjab Da Captain to drum up support for the party.

Last year, the Punjab CM had said Kishor told him that he would be "quite happy" in handling the election campaign of the Congress in Punjab for the 2022 Assembly polls.

His claims had come amid media reports that Kishor had said no to handling the party's campaign in the state.

Amarinder Singh had then even said Congress president Sonia Gandhi had left it to him on roping in Kishor for the party's poll campaign in the state.

The CM had then said that he had even asked his party MLAs whether they want Kishor for the next Assembly elections. "Out of 80 MLAs, 55 said yes, they want him," Singh had then said. — PTI



A medic administers the first dose of Covid-19 vaccine to Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar at Indira Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences in Patna on Monday. — PTI

BIHAR TO GIVE COVID VACCINES FREE TO ALL

NAYEAR AZAD | DC PATNA, MARCH 1

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar received the first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine on his 70th birthday on Monday and urged people to get vaccinated as per the central government guidelines. He also announced his government's decision to provide the vaccination free of cost including at private hospitals in the state.

"Our government has decided to provide vaccination free of cost for the people of the state. This facility will also be made available at private hospitals. I, therefore, urge all those who are eligible to get vaccinated", he said.

The announcement comes on the day country started the second phase of its nationwide vaccination drive. The decision to provide free vaccination was taken on Sunday during a meeting chaired by the Chief Minister.

Free vaccination for Covid-19 was one of the key promises made by the NDA during the Bihar Assembly elections.

Kumar who took the vaccine at the state-run super speciality hospital Indira Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences (IGIMS) in the presence of health minister Mangal Pandey said that "I am in good health after taking my first dose. Doctors have fixed March 31 for the second dose of vaccination for me".

He further said that arrangements for vaccination for members of the state legislature have also been made at the hospital.

Later, while responding to the state government's announcement, Bihar BJP in a statement said, "The state is ready for vaccination of elderly and people above 45 years of age. The cost of vaccination in private hospitals of ₹250 will also be borne by the NDA government. The largest vaccination drive in the world is progressing in the country as well as in the state".

Ahead of the second phase of the vaccination drive, Bihar health minister had released data on Twitter claiming that "the total number of healthy patients in the state reached 2,60,594 and recovery rate is 99.26 per cent There are 398 active corona patients in the state".

● **FREE VACCINATION for Covid-19** was one of the key promises made by the NDA during the Bihar Assembly elections.

SHOCKING ORDER

Bombay HC set aside trial court order granting anticipatory bail to accused

Chinese hackers target India's power

Washington, March 1: Amidst the tense border tension between India and China, a Chinese government-linked group of hackers targeted India's critical power grid system through malware, a US company has claimed in its latest study, raising suspicion whether last year's massive power outage in Mumbai was a result of the online intrusion.

Recorded Future, a Massachusetts-based company which studies the use of the internet by state actors, in its recent report details the campaign conducted by a China-linked threat activity group RedEcho targeting the Indian power sector.

The activity was identified through a combination of large-scale automated network traffic analytics and expert analysis. Data sources include the Recorded Future Platform, SecurityTrails, Spur, Farsight and common open-source tools and techniques, the report said.

On October 12, a grid failure in Mumbai resulted in massive power outages, stopping trains on tracks, hampering those working from home amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and hitting the stuttering economic activity hard. It took two hours for the power supply to resume for essential services. — PTI

PARMOD KUMAR | DC WITH AGENCY INPUTS NEW DELHI, MARCH 1

The Supreme Court on Monday asked a government servant accused of repeatedly raping a minor girl if he would marry her. Heading a three judge bench Chief Justice Sharad A. Bobde asked the lawyer appearing for the accused whether his client would marry the victim girl.

Dismissing the petition by the accused as withdrawn, the top court in its order said "However, there shall be stay of arrest of the petitioners for a period of eight weeks. Thereafter, the Trial Court will decide the question of the liberty

of the petitioners." "We are not forcing you to marry. Let us know if you will. Otherwise you will say we are forcing you to marry her," the CJ said, making clear the position of the bench.

As the lawyer upon taking instructions from the accused rapist informed the court that the accused can't marry the victim as he is already married.

"I wanted to marry her. But she refused. Now I cannot, as I am already married. Trial is going on, charges are yet to be framed", accused told the court.

"You should have thought before seducing and raping the young girl. You knew you are a gov-

● **DISMISSING THE petition** by accused as withdrawn, SC in its order said 'However, there shall be stay of arrest of petitioners for a period of eight weeks. Thereafter, Trial Court will decide question of the liberty of the petitioners.'

● **OTHER JUDGES** on the bench included Justice A.S.Bopanna and Justice V. Ramasubramanian.

ernment servant." CJ told the lawyer appearing for the accused.

Other judges on the bench included Justice A.S.Bopanna and Justice V. Ramasubramanian. The top court was hear-

ing a plea filed by the accused against the Bombay High Court's February 5 order cancelling the anticipatory bail granted to him by the trial court in January last year.

Describing it as "atrocious", the Bombay High Court had set aside the trial court order granting anticipatory bail to the accused who has moved the top court against the High court order.

The accused had repeatedly raped the victim when she was 16 year and studying in 9th standard. However, when things came to light, the accused mother dissuaded the victim's mother from reporting the matter to police.

She assured that when the victim will turn 18 she will be married to the accused. But that did not happen and a complaint was filed after a gap of two years.

He has also been accused of offences punishable under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

In his plea filed in the top court, he has referred to the Maharashtra Civil Services (Discipline and Appeal) Rules 1979 and said it pointed out that if a government servant is detained in police custody under criminal charges for a period of 48 hours, then he shall be deemed to have been placed under suspension by an order of appointing authority.

SHORT TAKES

KHASHOGGI FIANCE
WANTS SAUDI'S
MBS PUNISHED

Istanbul: The Turkish fiancée of slain Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi said on Monday that Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman should be “punished without delay” over the murder. The United States on Friday declassified a report that publicly accused the crown prince of approving Khashoggi murder in the kingdom’s Istanbul consulate in 2018.

But the United States stopped short of applying sanctions against the 35-year-old de facto leader, known by his initials MBS.

“It is essential that the Crown Prince, who ordered the brutal murder of a blameless and innocent person, should be punished without delay,” Khashoggi’s fiancée Hatice Cengiz said in a statement posted on her official Twitter account in English and Arabic.

NEW WTO CHIEF
ACCEPTS SWISS
PAPER’S APOLOGY

Geneva: The first woman and first African to lead the World Trade Organisation on Monday welcomed an apology from a Swiss newspaper that had dismissed the seasoned international professional as a grandmother.

“It is important & timely that they’ve apologised,” Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said in a tweet.

The development economist took over as the new WTO chief on Monday after a long, high-powered career serving as minister of finance and foreign affairs in her native Nigeria and 25 years at the World Bank.

CUOMO AGREES
BEHAVIOUR SEEN
AS ‘FLIRTATION’

Albany: New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo acknowledged for the first time Sunday that some of his behaviour with women had been “misinterpreted as unwanted flirtation,” and said he would cooperate with a sexual harassment investigation led by the state’s attorney general.

In a statement released amid mounting criticism from within his own party, the Democrat maintained he had never inappropriately touched or propositioned anyone. But he said he had teased people and made jokes about their personal lives in an attempt to be “playful.” “I now understand that my interactions may have been insensitive or too personal and that some of my comments, given my position, made others feel in ways I never intended. I acknowledge some of the things I have said have been misinterpreted as an unwanted flirtation. To the extent anyone felt that way, I am truly sorry about that,” he said.

AUSSIE CABINET
MIN. ACCUSED
OF RAPE

Sydney: Australia’s Prime Minister rejected calls on Monday to suspend a cabinet minister accused of rape, saying the unnamed official “vigorously denied” allegations that have now been referred to police.

Scott Morrison — already under mounting public pressure to tackle what has been called a toxic sexist culture in Canberra politics — insisted the minister was innocent until proven guilty.

“Allegations of criminal conduct should be dealt with by competent and authorised agencies,” Morrison said, adding it was a “matter for the police.” Morrison recently received a letter detailing allegations that a man currently serving in the cabinet raped a 16-year-old girl in Sydney in 1988.

The woman took her own life last year. The man not been named publicly due to Australia’s defamation laws.

Morrison said he had raised the issue with the minister “who absolutely rejects these allegations.”

“It is the police, in a country where you’re governed by the rule of law, that determine the veracity of any allegations of this nature,” Morrison said in a testy exchange with journalists on Monday. “The police have had this matter referred to them. The individual involved here has vigorously rejected these allegations. And so, it’s a matter for the police.” Police said they had “received a complaint relating to an historic sexual assault,” but “will not be making further comment.”

Covid vaccine IP rights divides WTO

India, South Africa lead calls to waive rights, notion rejected by pharmaceutical giants

Geneva, March. 1: The World Trade Organisation faces calls led by India and South Africa to waive intellectual property rights for Covid-19 vaccines — a notion fiercely rejected by pharmaceutical giants and their host countries.

The WTO will thrash out the divisive issue at its general council meeting on Monday and Tuesday as its new head Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala takes up her post. Some countries see the waiver as a short-cut to ending the novel coronavirus that has hobbled the global economy.

The IP plan was filed by India and South Africa on October 2 and garnered support from a host of developing countries which — correctly — anticipated being left behind in the vaccination race.

The text proposes a temporary exemption from certain obligations under the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), so that any country can produce vaccines without worrying about patents.

The waiver would also cover “industrial designs, copyright and protection of undisclosed information,” and would last “until widespread vaccination is in place globally, and the majority of the world’s population has developed immunity”.

More than 80 countries support the proposal, including Argentina, Bangladesh, the DR Congo, Egypt, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan and Venezuela. Backed by NGOs including the medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF), they think it would facilitate timely access to affordable medical products for all countries in need.

“All Covid-19 health tools



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson bumps elbows with Head Girl Hirah Hussain during his visit to St Mary's C.E. Primary School in Stoke-on-Trent, central England on Monday, to see how their preparations are going ahead of students returning on March 8, after England's third lockdown.

ALL COVID-19 health tools and technologies should be true global public goods, free from the barriers that patents and other intellectual property impose

SIDNEY WONG, MSF's co-director for access to medicines

and technologies should be true global public goods, free from the barriers that patents and other intellectual property impose,” said Sidney Wong, MSF’s co-director for access to medicines.

The idea also has the backing of World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

“If not now, then when?”

Tedros said of the scheme on Friday, condemning the “serious resistance” against it. The International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations is strongly against the proposal.

“Taking away patents now or imposing a waiver wouldn’t give you a single dose more,” IFPMA chief Thomas Cueni told reporters last week.

“It wouldn’t empower you to get the vaccine because you still wouldn’t know how to roll them out on a large scale.” The United States, the European Union and Switzerland — home to major pharmaceutical firms — oppose the idea, along with other wealthy nations including Australia, Britain, Japan, Norway and Singapore.

FRANCE, GERMANY STRUGGLE TO
SELL ASTRAZENECA VACCINE SAFETY

Paris, March. 1: Already facing a daunting Covid vaccination challenge, French and German authorities are fighting to convince more people that a jab from the pharma giant AstraZeneca is just as effective as others.

Stocks of the vaccines from the British-Swedish firm are going unused in both countries, depriving officials of a crucial tool to help end a pandemic that has sparked a social and economic calamity on a scale not seen since World War II.

Only 273,000 AstraZeneca doses have been administered in

France out of 1.7 million received as of end-February, according to health ministry figures.

The poor take-up comes even as the target group for the jabs, health workers over 50 and people with other serious health risks, can get the vaccine directly from their doctor instead of waiting for appointments at vaccination centres.

Experts say it is also cheaper to produce than the two other vaccines approved for Europe, from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, and does not require ultracold storage, making it easier to deploy.

French ex-prez
Sarkozy guilty of
graft, to be jailed

Paris, March. 1: Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy was found guilty of corruption on Monday and handed a three-year prison sentence, in a ruling that deals a major blow to any lingering political ambitions.

The sentence includes two years suspended and the remaining one year would be converted into a non-custodial sentence, meaning it is unlikely Sarkozy will end up behind bars over this case.

He is almost certain to appeal and remains free, with no arrest warrant issued, but he faces several other corruption investigations over campaign financing and alleged influence peddling.

The sentence for seeking to illegally influence a judge is the latest twist in the tumultuous political career of the 66-year-old who remains a favourite for many on the right for his combative style and tough talk on crime and immigration.

The conviction is likely to undermine any attempted comeback to



Nicolas Sarkozy

frontline politics, an ambition he has denied, but which has been promoted by many supporters ahead of 2022 presidential elections.

Wearing a dark suit and tie, Sarkozy showed no emotion as the sentence was read out and he left court without commenting to waiting journalists before heading to his private office in central Paris.

“What a senseless witchhunt, my love Nicolas Sarkozy,” his wife, former supermodel and singer Carla Bruni, posted on Instagram, next to a picture of the couple embracing. “The fight goes on, the truth will out. #injustice.”

Trump hints at Prez re-run in 2024

Washington, March. 1: In his first public speech since leaving the White House, former US president Donald Trump has raised the climate issue while criticising his successor Joe Biden for rejoining the “very unfair” Paris Agreement, saying what good does it do when America is “clean” but China, Russia and India are not.

Speaking at the Conservative Political Action Committee in Orlando, Florida on Sunday, the 74-year-old leader, who left the White House on January 20, came down heavily on the Biden administration for putting the “United States back into the very unfair and very costly Paris Climate Accord without negotiating a better deal.”

“First of all, China does not kick in for 10 years, Russia goes by an old standard which was not a clean standard... but we get hit right from the beginning when it costs us hundreds of thousands and millions of jobs, it was a disaster... but they go back in.

“We have the cleanest air and cleanest water... and what good does it do when we’re clean, but China is not and Russia is not and India is not, so they are pouring fumes... you know the world is a small piece



Former U.S. President Donald Trump addresses the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) held in the Hyatt Regency in Orlando, Florida.

of the universe and we’re trying to protect everything,” Trump said amidst applause from his supporters.

On February 19, the US officially returned to the historic Paris climate accord, 107 days after it left at the behest of former president Trump. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had termed that decision as a “major disappointment for global efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote global security.”

In the past also, Trump has criticised China, India and Russia for pollution. In October last year, he accused China, India and Russia of not taking care of their “filthy air” as he

justified America’s withdrawal from the landmark Paris climate agreement. “Look at China, how filthy it is. Look at Russia. Look at India. The air is filthy,” Trump had said during the final presidential debate with his Democratic challenger Joe Biden in Nashville, Tennessee. Days earlier while speaking to his cheering supporters at an election rally in North Carolina.

Donald Trump told conservatives Sunday he was considering running for president again in 2024, as he reasserted dominance over the Republican Party and warned of a “struggle” for America’s very survival. Echoing the

● **IN OCTOBER** last year, Trump had accused China, India and Russia of not taking care of their “filthy air” as he justified America’s withdrawal from the landmark Paris climate agreement.

grievance politics of his 2016 campaign and the harsh rhetoric of his one-term presidency, the 74-year-old fired up an enthusiastic crowd at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando.

In a keynote speech — his first since leaving the White House on January 20 — he repeated his false claims that he won the election instead of President Joe Biden, and hammered establishment Republicans who voted against him in the latest impeachment drama.

But while he teased his future plans, he left the crowd guessing about whether he will challenge Biden in a rematch.

“With your help we will take back the House, we will win the Senate, and then a Republican president will make a triumphant return to the White House — and I wonder who that will be?” Trump said to a raucous cheer.

PROTESTS GO ON
IN MYANMAR,
DESPITE DEADLY
CRACKDOWN

Yangon, Mar. 1: Police in Myanmar’s biggest city on Monday fired tear gas at defiant crowds who returned to the streets to protest the military’s seizure of power a month ago, despite reports that security forces had killed at least 18 people around the country a day earlier.

The protesters in Yangon were chased as they tried to gather at their usual meeting spot at the Hledan Center intersection. Demonstrators scattered and sought to rinse their faces with water in vain attempts to ease the irritating effects of the gas.

In the capital, Naypyitaw, the country’s ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi made a court appearance Monday via videoconference, the independent Myanmar Now online news agency reported. It said she received a charge under Section 505(b) of the Penal Code for allegedly inciting unrest. Further details of the court appearance were not immediately available.

300 RALLY IN
BANGLA TO
DENOUNCE
PRISON DEATH

Dhaka, March. 1: About 300 student activists rallied in Bangladesh’s capital on Monday to denounce the death in prison of a writer and commentator who was arrested last year on charges of violating a sweeping digital security law that critics say chokes freedom of expression.

The protesters marched through the Dhaka University campus and Dhaka’s streets toward the country’s Home Ministry to also demand the annulment of the digital security law and the release of seven student activists arrested during recent protests denouncing the death of 53-year-old Mushtaq Ahmed.

They broke a barricade by removing barbed wire fences on the way to the ministry, but were intercepted by a few hundred police officers outside the ministry in downtown Dhaka.

“The state must take responsibility. He has been killed, it was not a natural death. How come he was held for nine months in jail without any justice?” said one protester, Mahfuza Akhter.

“We want justice,” she said. There were no immediate reports of any violence. Ahmed’s death Thursday night sparked protests on streets and on social media, and prompted global human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, to urge Bangladesh’s government to conduct a thorough investigation.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, or CPJ, demanded that the government cancel the security act.

BERLINALE | 2021 Winners to be announced on the last day, the Golden, Silver Bear trophies will be given in June

Virtual screenings, gender-neutral awards and Tina

SUPARNA SHARMA | DC NEW DELHI, MARCH. 1

Berlinale, the world’s biggest film festival which usually attracts close to 5,00,000 film fans to the German capital, opened quietly on thousands of laptops across the world on Monday morning and for five worthies at the plush Berlinale Palast theatre.

Sitting at a safe distance from each other in the 1,600-seater theatre were five former Golden Bear winners (the festival’s top prize which goes to the best film) who will pick this year’s winner from 15 films in the festival’s

Competition section. The sixth jury member, Iranian director Mohammad Rasoulof, could not make it. Rasoulof, who won the Golden Bear last year for

There Is No Evil, a film on capital punishment in Iran, has been found guilty of making films that are a “propaganda” tool “against the system” and is under a travel ban. He will be watching films on his laptop.

Usually held for 10 days in February every year, the 71st edition of the International Film Festival of Berlin is a hybrid affair that’s been

cut short and split into two. From March 1-5, Berlinale will run virtually for film critics and industry across the world. The winners will be announced on the last day, but the Golden and Silver Bear trophies will be presented in person, in June, when organisers hope to invite stars for red carpet events and screen films for the public.

Another departure from the past is that this year the festival has gone “gender neutral” in terms of awards. Berlinale is the first international film festival that has replaced best actress and best actor prizes with awards for best lead and supporting performance. The jury is, quite literally, out on

whether this will be a unique way to showcase women’s talent or whether it will end up robbing actresses of yet another chance to be celebrated on the world stage.

Berlinale’s artistic director Carlo Chatrin, speaking about this year’s Competition section, has said that these are “deeply personal films that reflect the disruption brought on by the events of 2020”.

The films competing for the top prize this year are from Germany, France, Romania, Hungary, Mexico, South Korea and Japan. They were either shot or were in post-production during the pandemic.

Films outside the Competition section that

are set to have their world premiere at Berlinale include director Azazel Jacobs’ French Exit starring Michelle Pfeiffer, and the real-life thriller *The Mauritanian*, which stars Jodie Foster and Benedict Cumberbatch. Foster won the Golden Globe for best supporting actress for her performance in *The Mauritanian* on Monday.

Another film that has already created a lot of buzz is *Tina*, a documentary about the queen of rock’n’roll by Oscar winners Dan Lindsay and T.J. Martin (Undefeated). It features never-before-seen concert footage and interviews with the notoriously private 81-year-old superstar.



A still from the documentary *Tina*

DECCAN Chronicle

2 MARCH 2021

G-23's Jammu conclave exposes Cong. faultlines

The Jammu conclave on Saturday of the 23 Congress dissidents (G-23) who wrote to interim party president Sonia Gandhi in August demanding a “full-time and effective leadership”, as well as proper internal party elections, now appears to have fully emerged as a caucus reminiscent of the ginger group that the late V.P. Singh had formed with disgruntled Congressmen to take on then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

The difference is that the anti-Rajiv dissidents challenged a PM, using the same ammunition as the rest of the Opposition, and in time became the principal Opposition. In the Lok Sabha polls that followed, Mr Singh ended up as PM through political stagecraft. This time the circumstances are very different. The Congress is in Opposition and is facing a very determined ruling party under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But, in Jammu, the G-23 have played their real hand.

This can be seen to be in two parts. First, Ghulam Nabi Azad, the former J&K chief minister who days ago retired from the Rajya Sabha, where he was the designated Leader of the Opposition, was projected as Congress president by one of the most important dissidents, Kapil Sibal. Two, in his own remarks, Mr Azad did not fail to make a favourable mention of Prime Minister Modi, a reference to the PM, teary-eyed, marking out the retiring Congress leader for praise in the Upper House recently.

He was critical of the BJP government at the Centre only to the extent of questioning the Modi government's move to constitutionally reduce J&K from a state to a Union territory. He did not question the ending of J&K's autonomy, setting himself apart from the position taken by the Gandhis in Parliament.

It's not clear if all the G-23 leaders will be in the Azad camp for Congress president when the party elections take place. Some of them apparently also see themselves as contenders. But what became evident was that the thrust of the Jammu conclave was against the Congress leadership, though names were not mentioned. The Jammu meet leaders noted that the Congress had become weak and they had come together to strengthen it. Their other objective was to campaign against the BJP. But not much was said about the BJP at the forum.

The G-23 had launched themselves through a letter to the interim chief (which arrived in newspaper offices before it landed with Mrs Gandhi) not long before the Bihar Assembly election. They held their first formal meet in Jammu weeks before Congress will be up against formidable challengers in the Assembly elections in West Bengal, Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, where the Congress government was practically toppled through the BJP's manoeuvring recently.

After the Congress' below par showing in Bihar, the caucus leaders sharply questioned the leadership. They would doubtless have the opportunity to do so again if their party fares poorly in the upcoming state polls and may even pray for the opportunity. However, it hardly behoves an official Congress spokesman in New Delhi, Abhishek Singhvi, to be critical of G-23's Jammu show. The party election has been pushed from January-February this year to June — no doubt with the Assembly polls in view. But this was an executive decision, rather than one formally made consensually, including with the dissidents.

Biden lets Saudis off the hook?

America's strategic interests seem to have prevailed even as US President Joe Biden reprimanded Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman by releasing an intelligence report saying the assassination of critic Jamal Khashoggi was carried out with the prince's tacit approval. Mr Biden stepped back after suspending some arms sales, drawing criticism from his own party that he didn't go the whole hog and sanction MBS, who goes scot-free for the sinister actions of his Rapid Intervention Force lackeys which pursues and silences dissidents at home and abroad.

In calling out the Crown Prince, who is the real power behind his ailing father King Salman, who still occupies the throne, Mr Biden merely sent out the political signal that he is different from Donald Trump and that Saudi Arabia can't expect the same kind of cosy ties it enjoyed with the White House through Mr Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, especially if it breaches human rights as brazenly as, say, Russia did with Alexei Navalny.

The Saudi-US pact goes back eight decades to the Franklin D. Roosevelt era when Americans gained access to cheap Saudi oil in exchange for protection under a bizarre security covenant between the world's oldest democracy and the epitome of an Islamic monarchy. The tensions that came with the release of the intelligence report may only help push the kingdom further towards Russia and China, the latter already Saudi's biggest trade partner.

The prince's actions, which included detention of hundreds of princes and businessmen at a luxury hotel in 2017 aimed at consolidating his power base, may not have endeared him to a more liberal America with its faith in personal freedoms. Mr Biden's moves since moving into the White House has been to reset America's ties with many countries with the focus on first stamping out Mr Trump's erratic and personalised style of handling foreign relations. Can Mr Biden propel America quickly enough into cherishing democratic values and human rights once again? That remains the key question.

DECCAN CHRONICLE

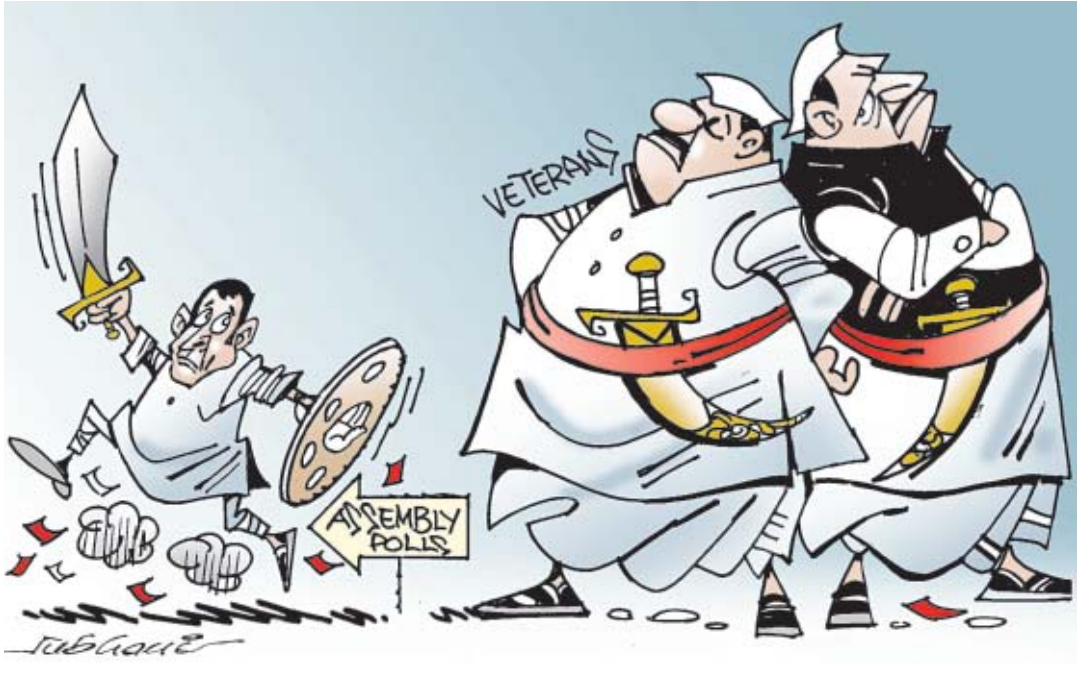
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Gram: CHRONICLE Postal registration no: No./HSD-348/2006-08

Subhani



New online, digital code fails to empower users



Shashidhar Nanjundaiah

The new Information and Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021 under Section 79 of the IT Act has created a flutter. The news media has paid extraordinary attention, space and time to it as it unfolded, and with good reason. Few people dispute the need for some kind of regulation of the digital media. But the debate is over whether it does what is needed. How empowering a tool are the new rules for the public, who are the ultimate users?

From the press statements of minister for information and broadcasting Prakash Javadekar and minister for information technology Ravi Shankar Prasad, it seems that the new rules seek to rein in the online media and the social media platforms by intervening in their content, and that the overarching objective is to get the digital platforms to be enveloped into “the law of the land”. (I draw a technical distinction between “online platform” from “digital platform” — the first is an unbundled series of news stories released across time, while the latter is a package, similar to a printed newspaper.)

Because the interpretations of sensitive laws of the land by government agencies — in regard to the freedom of expression versus sedition, for example — in recent years have been disputed, a certain amount of scepticism with regard to Rules 2021 should be expected. Experts have questioned whether the new rules even pass the test of constitutionality — in terms of rationale, purpose, proportionality, necessity, and possible impingement on people's basic rights.

First, to tease out what is new in the rule. In its artic-

ulation, the rule seeks to empower the user's voice, especially in case content is objectionable to them. The new rule changes the privacy protection norms that the social platforms seek to exercise by drawing a line between acceptable messaging and spreading objectionable messages. The mandating of age-appropriateness in the rule for the over-the-top (OTT) content certainly ensures that parents have the right to monitor which content is available to their child and which content could be abhorrent. International OTT channels do declare the customary caution about the nature of the content. The rule attaches online news to the conventional definition of news, making online-only news platforms adhere to the same Press Council of India and the Cable Act norms as the conventional media do. The rules mandate a self-regulatory mechanism, like the National Broadcasters' Standards Association (NBSA). A three-tier redressal mechanism entails inter-ministerial oversight. Social media companies, or “intermediaries”, would need to disclose the originator of a “mischievous” message.

I would like to take a media literacy point of view here. In a social media world, the user is also a producer of messages. Media literacy has increasingly gained popularity in school and college curricula in several countries after the alarming rise and opiate-like popularity of fake news. Recently, the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism at the Arizona State University introduced a degree programme in media literacy that takes a train-the-trainer approach and teaches journalism students to further educate society. It empowers the user through an under-

standing of messages, modes and meanings. Among other functions, media literacy unlocks the user's understanding of how to decode media messages — including what is omitted and unstated.

Fake news is a significant reason that media literacy has emerged strongly in the education curricula around the world. Facts and fiction are distinguishable quite simply — if you mix facts with fiction, the concoction can still be called fiction, but the other way around should not be acceptable. One would have expected the Rules 2021 to draw that distinction in an effort to stem fake news. In the long run, its mandate to identify — and punish, presumably — objectionable content may act as a threat and thereby a deterrent to fake news mongers. Handing itself the authority to know who the originator of an objectionable message is does empower the government to act against such individuals. But it misses the point on educating the user. The tiered approach of redressal would only empower users to the extent that social media platforms already allow — through complaints about content that one may find objectionable. There is no real way in which to prevent fake news or intimidation or national security threats because there is no scope for prior restraint in the current technology adoption.

The word “media” in the term “social media” is totally misleading — it is merely media in a technology sense of the term. Yet it is an empowering tool like none other in recent history. People tend to use the social media as a public square, mixing facts and fiction, public and pri-

If the government's intent is to provide more rights to its people, it must help soothe the nerves of people who are now confused about what to say on the social media.

vate. Other users exposed to the public discourse have been consuming and re-producing it, essentially dismissing the need for credible information, or for doing any kind of fact check. The new rule does not take care of this problem. How does a user distinguish between the credible and non-credible platforms?

So, the proposed rule on the social media “intermediaries” seems both perfunctory and off the mark. Is it because the real intent is to rein them into a more government-controlled content environment in the name of the “law of the land”, which are being adhered to anyway? In an ideal world, strengthening the hands of the user and empowering the government should be the same thing. But is it possible for a government to use the former as a front for the latter? The decryption-on-demand mandate is a powerful indicator that this could be the result, providing access to the government to whether what people are saying — and perhaps thinking — can be punished if found to be politically inconvenient.

The exemplary and now routine arrests of seemingly ordinary individuals who are seen to be endangering the nation's sovereignty have spooked a large number of citizens. If the government's intent is to provide more rights to its people, it must help soothe the nerves of people who are now confused about what to say on the social media. If the government seeks to make genuine efforts through the Rules 2021, it must decontrol, not control, the information flow, but in parallel also launch a national drive to make the user more aware of the importance of real information, drawing a distinction between certified, credible platforms and opinionated individuals pretending to be the disseminators of information.

The writer has led reputed institutes of media and communications, and is the founder of “Being Responsible”, which promotes media literacy. The views expressed here are personal.

LETTERS

LOCAL BODY POLLS

Urban local body polls in Andhra Pradesh provides yet another chance for the opposition parties to make an impact (YSRC & Oppn in big fight over local bodies, March 1). The ruling YSRC expects to sweep the municipal polls as it did in rural areas. But the opposition parties have to prove their relevance.

Sajid Farooq
Kurnool

POSCO STEEL PLANT

The state government's invitation to South Korean steel major POSCO to establish a steel mill in the state is a welcome move (POSCO invited to set up steel plant in state, DC, March 1). It appears that the decision was taken to assuage concerns of Vizag people over the Centre's plans to privatise the iconic Vizag Steel Plant.

K. Lakshman Rao
Visakhapatnam

STATE ELECTIONS

This is with reference to your editorial, (Stakes high in state polls, DC, March 1). It is all but obvious that the BJP will leave no stone unturned to wrest power from the TMC in West Bengal and will try hard to expand its footprint in south. As you stated, the verdict will be crucial and will tell us which way the wind is blowing.

Dr C. Ghanshyam
Visakhapatnam

50 YEARS AGO IN DECCAN Chronicle

PM's narrow escape

BHUBANESHWAR, MARCH. 1 The Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi had a miraculous escape when her Dakota with engine trouble made a forced landing well in time, at Jayakapur airstrip in Koraput district this afternoon.

The pilot of the Indian Air Force plane noticed smoke emitting from the port engine as the aircraft was nearing Jayakapur and later detected oil splashes. He then reduced the power of the engine and made an emergency landing. Fearing a fire in the port engine, the pilot Wg. Cdr. V. Krishnamurthy, manoeuvred a smooth emergency landing at the Jayakapur airstrip, about ten miles from Rayagada.

The sighting of the Dakota over Jayakapur was the signal for a large number of people to rush to the air-field thinking that Mrs. Gandhi was landing there to address them as had originally been planned.

Aakar Patel



As democracy endangered, India's global reputation hit

The Washington Post's editorial board has written that India's claim of being a democracy should be put in question. This headline came after it summed up what was happening in India accurately across the spectrum of governance, from the farm laws being passed without voting in Parliament to young women being jailed because they edited an open-source document.

India's ministry of external affairs did not put out a brave response to this, as it did earlier when a pop star that almost nobody in India had heard of wrote six words (“Why aren't we talking about this?”) over a CNN headline on February 2. India's brave soldiers like Akshay Kumar and Sachin Tendulkar did not respond to the Washington Post either, as they had done to Rihanna. Presumably the Prime Minister did not instruct his minions to react because he does not care about what the Washington Post writes, whereas the pop star has millions of followers.

The Economist, which is the world's most respected magazine, has carried a headline in its latest issue which reads: “The Indian government's pursuit of its critics is not just unfair, but hypocritical”.

Like the Post, this magazine is well-informed about what is going on in India. It says that the Narendra Modi government's actions have made it globally look “mean and silly”.

The government had not responded to this either, though presumably it will have to do something. One reason is that The Economist has referred to the Indian government's promotion of Gurujii Golwalkar through an official tribute earlier in February. The magazine told its readers that “Mr Golwalkar believed that Nazi Germany's management of its Jewish problem 'represented a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by'”.

Let us examine what the Washington Post has claimed, that we are not a democracy. The West doesn't see democracy beginning and ending at the polling station. It has to be accompanied by civil liberties, fundamental rights and access to justice. All of these ingredients together form what the government structure, which they consider democracy.

In our case, we believe elections are democracy. But there is a problem here. India achieved freedom at the group level in 1947. Independence meant that control of the State was transferred

from a set of people led by foreigners to Indians entirely. This gave Indian citizens the space to determine how to govern themselves and write their own laws to enjoy individual freedoms and civil liberties.

Freedom at the group level meant essentially the right to vote. This was available, but restricted, in the British period too. Freedom at the group level liberated India from a system that already included voting rights, legislatures and lawmaking ability for Indians. It was on limited subjects, however.

After 1947 India should have focused on individual freedoms so that the exercise could be deepened. Here India stumbled. The State (meaning, the apparatus of government) did not relinquish its rights to citizens. It contested the space and asserted itself over citizens on essential freedoms.

The rights — to freedom of speech and expression; practice any profession or occupation; peaceful assembly; to form associations; freely practice and propagate religion; not to be deprived of life and liberty — do not exist in India today. These rights are fundamental, which enjoy a high degree of protection from encroachment by the State. But

they are not available to Indians today despite what the Constituent Assembly wanted. The State has taken them away and many never existed in the first place.

There are so many laws that regulate and criminalise free speech that it is difficult to know where to start. Sedition, criminal defamation and criminal contempt are a start. They don't exist in the nations where our laws are derived from (India's Constitution isn't based on Manu Smriti, but the constitutions of other nations).

The Supreme Court in the 1950s ruled while the Constituent Assembly guaranteed freedom to practice “any” profession or “carry out any occupation”, it could not allow butchery of cows because that offended Hindus; and while the Constitution was supreme, Hindu sentiment was more supreme.

Protest (peaceful assembly) has been criminalised, right to propagation has been criminalised and so has the right to occupation. The freedom of speech is criminalised with sedition, criminal defamation and criminal contempt laws.

The State sought to regulate these freedoms by so-called “reasonable restrictions”, which overturned the

rights themselves. This was always the case in India. However, this government has pushed the rights of the State over the rights of Indian citizens to the point where it will crush individuals who stand up to the State. This is what the Washington Post and Economist are writing about. The reason the Indian government is silent on these accusations is that they are true.

We can tell a pop singer to shut up because she is a young woman. It's slightly more difficult to tell the Washington Post and Economist to get lost, so silence is the next best option. What is left unsaid is that this is not something that will pass over. The Indian government's continued actions and its refusal to reverse what it is doing to its citizens has come at a cost to India's global reputation. We are too close to the story as it unfolds before us in real time today to be able to calculate what this cost is. But it is substantial, and entirely avoidable. It's a different matter that the Indian government today does not care what it does to Indians as long as it can continue on its path.

The writer is a columnist and a senior journalist

quick BITES

INDICATORS	%
Sensex	49,849.84 1.53
Nifty 50	14,761.50 1.60
S&P 500*	3,898.07 2.28
Dollar (₹)	73.55 -0.09
Pound Sterling (₹)	102.40 0.02
Euro (₹)	88.40 0.78
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	45,520▼241 0.00
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	65.02 0.93
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.209 0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.426 -0.030

* As of 8:30 PM IST

SBI reduces home loan rates to 6.70%

State Bank of India said it has reduced interest rates on home loans by up to 10 basis points (bps) and is offering loans starting from 6.70 per cent rate. The new rates are based on loan amount and Cibil score of the borrower, and are available till March 31, 2021. The bank said the home loan interest rates will start from 6.70 per cent for loans up to Rs 75 lakh and 6.75 per cent for loans in the range of Rs 75 lakh-Rs 5 crore.

WTO to hold ministerial meet in late 2021



World Trade Organization members agreed to hold the next major ministerial meeting in Geneva, Switzerland in late 2021, delegates said. The biennial conference was originally set to be held in Kazakhstan last year but was delayed due to the pandemic. The WTO's director-general Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala who began work on Monday hopes the meeting will provide a venue for a deal on fisheries subsidies and WTO reforms.

Govt expects ₹3.39 L cr from maritime summit

The government is aiming to attract investment worth Rs 3.39 lakh crore during Maritime India Summit 2021 in various projects. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to inaugurate Maritime India Summit 2021 (MIS 2021) on Tuesday, which will be held virtually and is likely to be participated by many nations, including Russia, Uzbekistan, Qatar, Denmark, Iran, Afghanistan, and Armenia.

Credit demand may double to 9-10% in FY22

On the back of government and regulatory measures, which helped the economy to recover faster than expected, bank credit is seen growing 400-500 bps to 9-10 per cent in FY22, a Crisil report said. While bank credit growth had contracted 0.8 per cent in the first half of this fiscal, it recovered sharply in the third quarter by growing 3 per cent QoQ. In Q4, too, it should clock 3 per cent growth, Crisil said.



■ Sales jump 12% at Maruti, 29% at Hyundai Cars regain speed, clock 24% growth in February

MICHAEL GONSALVES
PUNE, MARCH 1

Major carmakers on Monday reported robust double-digit sales in February, bringing cheers to the automakers depressed from the prolonged Covid pandemic that had hit them hard.

The top 10 carmakers who produce 97 per cent of the total domestic sales clocked a 24 per cent growth in domestic volumes in February at 298,694 units against 241,533 units sold in February 2020.

Maruti Suzuki, India's biggest car maker by sales, said it sales in February jumped 11.8 per cent to 1,52,983 units from 1,36,849 units it sold a year ago.

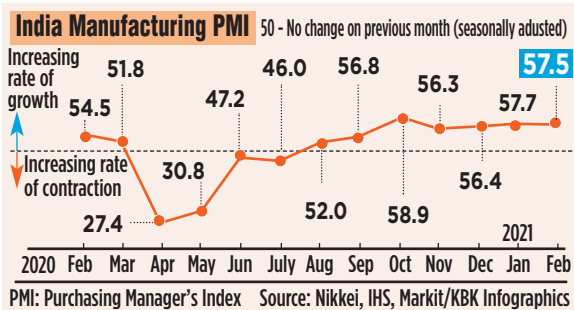
Sales at its rival Hyundai, the second largest carmaker, also rose 29 per cent to 51,600 units, up from 40,010 units.

Tata Motors reported an 119 per cent jump in sales to 27,225 units, up from 12,430 units.

Korean brand Kia Motors logged a 7 per cent rise in volumes to 16,702 units against 15,644 units.

Mahindra and Mahindra, the SUV specialist, also reported 41 per cent jump in sales last month to 15,391 units, up from 10,938 units a year ago.

Japanese carmaker Toyota registered a 36 per cent sales growth last month. It sold 14,075 units compared to 10,352 units in February 2020. Toyota attributed this sales growth to new launches like Innova Crysta and



Mfg PMI stays in expansion zone

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO
NEW DELHI, MARCH 1

Strong demand and increased output helped India's factory activity to stay in expansion for the seventh straight month in February. Although the Nikkei Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index, or PMI, compiled by IHS Markit, eased slightly to 57.5 in February from 57.7 in January, it remained well above the 50-level separating growth from contraction.

"Better demand conditions and successful marketing campaigns reportedly underpinned a fur-

ther increase in new orders during February. Although easing from January, the pace of growth remained sharp in the context of historical data," IHS Markit said.

Pollyanna De Lima, economics associate director at IHS Markit, said, "Indian goods producers reported a healthy inflow of new orders in February, a situation that underpinned a further upturn in output and quantity of purchases. This was evident from a quicker rise in outstanding business and another decline in inventories of finished goods."

Fortuner facelift and Fortuner Legendier in January.

French car brand Renault posted 26 per cent growth in February volumes to 11,043 units against 8,764. The company has started dispatches of their latest model Kiger to its showrooms.

Honda Cars sold 28.3 per

cent more cars at 9,324 units last month, up from 7,269 units it sold last year.

Sales at MG Motor registered its best-ever monthly retail at 4,329 units last month, marking a growth of 215 per cent compared to February 2020. China's SAIC-owned British carmaker registered this

GST COLLECTIONS SEE 7% YoY RISE AT ₹1.13 L CRORE

FC BUREAU
NEW DELHI, MARCH 1

For the fifth month in a row, the goods and services tax (GST) mop-up crossed the Rs 1-lakh crore mark in February. GST collections in the month stood at Rs 1.13 lakh crore, which is 7 per cent higher year-on-year but lower than the all-time high of nearly Rs 1.20 lakh crore recorded for January, government data showed on Monday.

"Out of the total GST for the February month, the Central GST was Rs 21,092 crore, State GST was Rs 27,273 crore, Integrated GST was Rs 55,253 crore (including Rs 24,382 crore collected on import of goods) and compensation cess was Rs 9,525 crore (including Rs 660 crore collected on import of goods)," the finance ministry statement said.

It said the government settled Rs 22,398 crore to CGST and Rs 17,534 crore to SGST from IGST.

growth on account of robust demand for Hector facelift, Hector Plus, and Gloster.

Riding on the success of the Magnite SUV, Nissan Motor saw 313 per cent growth in February volumes to 4,244 units as against 1,028 units sold in the same month last year.

IDBI BANK TO SET OFF ₹45,580-CR LOSSES AGAINST SECURITIES PREMIUM ACCOUNT

New Delhi, Mar. 1: LIC-controlled IDBI Bank will set off its accumulated losses worth Rs 45,586 crore against the balance in the securities premium account, according to the bank's draft scheme.

Its accumulated losses (or debit balance of profit and loss account) at the end of March 31, 2020, stood at Rs 45,586 crore. They were at Rs 44,739 crore as on December 31, 2020.

The accumulated losses as on March 31, 2021, shall be ascertained after the audited financial statements are approved by the bank's board, said the lender.

The bank's authorised share capital is Rs 25,000 crore.

The issued, subscribed and paid-up share capital is worth Rs 10,752.40 crore and the security premium is of Rs 50,732.27 crore.

IDBI Bank said the balance standing to the credit of securities premium account of the bank as per audited financial statements for FY20 and as on April 1, 2020, it is Rs 49,669 crore.

This balance as on December 31, 2020, stood at Rs 50,718 crore as per the unaudited financial statements.

Last month, its board had approved a proposal for setting off the bank's accumulated losses by April 1, 2021, in full or partially, by using the balance in the securities premium account. —PTI

₹77K crore bids for spectrum on Day 1

New Delhi, March 1: India's first auction of spectrum in five years attracted Rs 77,146 crore of bids on the opening day on Monday, with Reliance Jio, Bharti Airtel, and Vodafone Idea participating in the bidding process—a response that the government said was better than expected.



There were, however, no takers for spectrum in 700 MHz and 2500 MHz bands on the first day, and the auctions will conclude on Tuesday.

About 2,308.80 MHz of spectrum, that carry telecom signals, in seven bands worth nearly Rs 4 lakh crore at the reserve or start price, was offered for bidding in the auction that began on Monday.

Communications minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said Rs 77,146 crore worth of spectrum was bid on the first day but there were no takers for the airwaves in the premium 700 MHz as also 2500 MHz bands. The response from players and the bids received surpassed government's internal estimates that had anticipated bids worth Rs 45,000 crore.

"The winning bids that have come till 6 PM today is Rs 77,146 crore. We thought since there are only three players, and spectrum replacement is happening...our estimation was that the bids will touch about Rs 45,000 crore, but it is a matter of assurance that it has gone as high as Rs 77,146 crore," Prasad said.

The bidder-wise details were not available immediately. A total of 2,308.80 MHz spectrum is being

put to auction, out of which there have been bids for 849.20 MHz so far, an official release said.

Bids were received in 800 MHz, 900 MHz, 1800 MHz, 2100 MHz and 2300 MHz bands, as players gave the prized 700 MHz band a miss on the first day of auctions.

"Total value of spectrum put to auction was about Rs 4 lakh crore. In this, 700 MHz band was a costly band, and that cost itself is Rs 1.97 lakh crore," the minister said adding that the government will take a call on 700 MHz band, used for 5G, in case it remains unsold in the ongoing auctions.

Excluding 700 MHz and 2500 MHz bands, the bidding accounted for 60 per cent of the spectrum that was put to auction.

The 700 MHz band went unsold during the 2016 auctions, too. During 2016, when there were seven bidders, the spectrum sold was 41 per cent by quantity and 12 per cent by value of the total spectrum put to auction. The corresponding figures in the 2021 spectrum auction so far are 37 per cent and 19 per cent respectively, with three participants. —PTI

Chinese hackers target Indian vaccine makers

KRISHNA N. DAS
NEW DELHI, MARCH 1

A Chinese state-backed hacking group has in recent weeks targeted the IT systems of two Indian vaccine makers whose coronavirus shots are being used in the country's immunisation campaign, cyber intelligence firm Cyfirma told Reuters.

Rivals China and India have both sold or gifted Covid-19 shots to many countries. India produces over 60 per cent of all vaccines sold in the world.

Goldman Sachs-backed Cyfirma, based in Singapore and Tokyo, said Chinese hacking group APT10, also known as Stone Panda, had identified gaps and vulnerabilities in the IT infrastructure and supply chain software of Bharat Biotech and the Serum Institute of India (SII), the world's largest vaccine maker.

"The real motivation here is actually exfiltrating intellectual property and getting competitive advantage over Indian pharmaceutical compa-

MINISTRY SAYS NO MALWARE IMPACT ON POWER SYSTEM

New Delhi, March 1: The Ministry of Power on Monday said there is no impact on operations of Power System Operation Corporation (Posoco) due to any malware attack and that prompt actions are taken on advisories issued against such threats.

The ministry was responding to a study by a private US company which suggested that a China-linked group targeted India's power grid system via malware.

"In the case of Serum

nies," said Cyfirma chief executive Kumar Ritesh, formerly a top cyber official with British foreign intelligence agency Mi6.

He said APT10 was actively targeting SII, which is making the AstraZeneca vaccine for many countries and will soon start bulk-manufacturing Novavax shots.

"In the case of Serum

Institute, they have found a number of their public servers running weak web servers, these are vulnerable web servers," Ritesh said, referring to the hackers.

"They have spoken about weak web application, they are also talking about weak content-management system. It's quite alarming." —Reuters

BPCL to sell NRL stake to OIL, EIL for ₹9.9K cr

New Delhi, March 1: Privatisation-bound Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) on Monday said it will exit Numaligarh refinery in Assam by selling its entire stake to a consortium of Oil India Ltd and Engineers India Ltd for Rs 9,876 crore.

The sale of Numaligarh Refinery Ltd clears the way for privatisation of India's second-largest fuel retailer.

In keeping with the Assam Peace Accord, the government had decided to keep Numaligarh Refinery Ltd (NRL) in the public sector. As part of this, BPCL was to sell its entire 61.65 per cent stake to state-owned firms.

A consortium of Oil India Ltd, Engineers India Ltd and the Government of Assam expressed interest in buying the stake and the BPCL board on Monday approved the sale.

"The board of directors of BPCL at the meeting held on March 1, 2021, has approved the proposal for sale of entire equity shares of 445.35 crore held by BPCL in NRL to a consortium of OIL and EIL and to Government of Assam,"

the firm said in a filing to the stock exchanges.

Total consideration will be Rs 9,875.96 crore.

The consortium of OIL and Engineers India Ltd is likely to acquire 49 per cent and the rest 13.65 per cent will be sold to the Government of Assam.

NRL operates a 3 million tonnes per annum oil refinery in Assam.

OIL currently holds 26 per cent equity in NRL while the Government of Assam has around 12.35 per cent.

Department of Investment and Public Asset Management secretary Tuhin Kanta Pandey in a tweet said, "privatisation process of BPCL moves ahead with BPCL Board deciding to exit from NRL at a consideration of Rs 9,875.96 cr for its 61.65% stake with transfer of control. OIL, EIL and Government of Assam will be picking up the stake".

Post-NRL, sale, BPCL would be left with three refineries at Mumbai, Kochi (Kerala) and Bina (Madhya Pradesh).

The government is selling its entire 52.98 per cent stake in BPCL. —PTI

FINOLEX LENDS HELPING HAND TO WOMEN IN MAHA, TELANGANA

Hyderabad, March 1: Finolex Industries (FIL) through its CSR partner Mukul Madhav Foundation (MMF) has been working for women's upliftment in Maharashtra and Telangana.

MMF and FIL in 2019 had identified 312 widow farmers and taught them the best farming practices, soil testing and selling techniques post-harvesting. For this initiative, MMF collaborated with Krishi Vidyan Kendra, which distributed 30 kg of soy seeds and 15 kg of tur seeds for their first harvest.

Further, 100 women farmers in rural Maharashtra were taught mechanised farming and crop productivity enhancement techniques. These farmers are now training 1,000 fellow women farmers in turn.

FIL and MMF have been working closely in Palghar, Maharashtra since 2017 where they have completed the construction of over 500 toilets for the tribal villagers. In 2019 MMF extended its work to build safe, hygienic and equipped menstruation homes for women. Banishing menstruating women is an unhealthy practice amongst certain tribes in Gadchiroli—a tribal, naaxal-affected and underdeveloped village.

Vulnerable HIV positive mothers and sex workers are being provided with dry groceries on a monthly basis. The affected have been provided with sewing machines to create a livelihood for themselves. Internationally renowned garment house, Kashka, is providing them training and buying back the finished goods.

Business NOTE

Box office collections drop 85% in 2020

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, MARCH 1

Total box office collections of Indian film industry were down 85 per cent in 2020 compared to the previous year.

The box office collections in 2020 stood at Rs 861 crore against Rs 5,613 crore in 2019—a drop of 85 per cent. In fact, in 2019, the collections had grown 30 per cent, from Rs 4,422 crore in 2018, as per a report by Care Ratings.

The fall in collections can be attributed to the significant fall in movie releases during the year to 75. Out of these, just 7



films were released between November 15 and December 25, which clocked total revenues of Rs 36 crore. The remaining 68 films were released between January 1 and March 13 and generated box office revenues of Rs 825 crore. In the previous year, 246 movies had clocked collections of Rs

5,613 crore. An analysis of financials of 44 companies in the film production, distribution and entertainment industry showed total expenditure also declined by nearly three-fourths, which helped minimise losses for players. The industry's loss at the net level stood at Rs 403 crore in Q1 FY21, which reduced to Rs 288 crore in Q2 and to Rs 71 crore in Q3 FY21.

Minimal electricity and water charges and reduction in employee costs through measures like layoffs, retrenchments and reduction in salaries led to lower operational cost.

SHORT TAKES

Varun, Malvika win in Uganda

New Delhi: Indian shuttlers Varun Kapur and Malvika Bansod registered hard-fought wins to clinch the men's and women's singles titles respectively at the 2021 Uganda International in Kampala. Varun had to sweat it out to get the better of seventh seeded Sankar Muthusamy 21-18, 16-21, 21-17 in the men's singles final, while second seed Malvika notched up a come-from-behind 17-21, 25-23, 21-10 victory over compatriot Anupama Upadhyaya in the women singles summit clash. The junior world no. 2 Varun, who has been a consistent performer on the junior circuit and clinched his sixth title earlier this year, won the first game convincingly before losing the second. However, the 17-year-old looked in complete control in the decider and wrapped up the match comfortably in his favour. — PTI

Sayali clinches sub-junior TT title

Indore: Sayali Wani of Maharashtra outwitted Haryana's Suhana Saini 4-3 to emerge champion at the 82nd Cadet & Sub-Junior National Table Tennis Championships here on Monday. Top-seeded Suhana led 3-2 but goofed it up in the crucial sixth game, allowing her Nasik rival to inch ahead. Sayali courageously saved a match point at 9-10. And when she made it 10-all, she grabbed the first chance to go 11-10 up before finishing the game and match in style. In the Cadet Girls' final, M. Hansini notched up a 4-2 victory over Tamil Nadu's Ananya Muralidharan. What stood out on the day was Hansini's better reading of the situation. On the other hand, Ananya relied too much on her backhand blocks and drives. Rarely did she employ her forehand while Hansini was adept at doing both. Her top-spin forehand winners often fetched rewards, saving her whenever in trouble. — PTI

FULL THROTTLE

Kohli & Co. back in nets ahead of final Test

Ahmedabad, March 1: Big guns Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma and Ajinkya Rahane went full throttle at the nets as the Indian cricket on Monday trained in earnest for the upcoming fourth and final Test against England. The fourth Test starts here on Thursday. Captain Kohli, his deputy Rahane and senior opener Rohit were seen batting at the nets in a video posted by the BCCI on Twitter. The three senior players drove, pulled and flicked against the fast bowlers and spinners at the Narendra Modi Stadium here.

Head coach Ravi Shastri was seen interacting with Rohit and Kohli before the two star batsmen sat together for a discussion. Left-arm spinner Axar Patel, who bagged 11 wickets in India's thumping win in the pink ball third Test at the same venue, was seen rolling his arms over at the nets against some of the world's best batsmen.

They were also seen fielding with Rahane, standing next to Rohit in the second slip position, taking a one-handed diving catch to his right. The Kohli-led Indian team lost the first Test in Chennai by 227 runs, but bounced back with a 317-run hammering of the visitors in the second Test.

In the previous match, India shot out England for 112 and 81 to wrap up the Test inside two days on a challenging Motera track.

The Indian team had a full-fledged practice session here on Sunday as well.

— PTI



India's Axar Patel at a training session in Ahmedabad on Monday, ahead of the fourth and final Test against England starting on Thursday. — BCCI

Stop groaning over pitches: Viv

New Delhi, March 1: West Indian batting legend Viv Richards is not amused with past and present English cricketers "moaning and groaning" about the spin-friendly pitches in India and said the visitors did not prepare well for the challenge.

The newly-laid Motera track in Ahmedabad became a subject of debate after India crushed England inside two days in the third Test to go 2-1 up in the four-match series. The severe criticism came from former England captains like Michael Vaughan and a



section of the British media.

All the chatter has not gone down well with Richards, whose incredible range of strokes and fearless approach to the

AUSTRALIA'S HOGG BATS FOR ASHWIN'S RETURN TO ODIs

Sydney, March 1: Former Australia all-rounder Brad Hogg has called for Ravichandran Ashwin's inclusion in India's ODI squad, saying the senior off-spinner is a wicket-taker who also adds depth to batting. Replying to a tweet by a fan, Hogg said Ashwin would be a great addition to Indian side in the 50-over format. "I think it is a great option, gives the batting line up extra depth allowing the top order to be more aggressive at the top," Hogg said in reply to a tweet by a fan asking if Ashwin can make a comeback to One-Day International cricket. "And he is a wicket taking option with the ball, as well as economical. Get him back in. #INDvENG #Cricket," Hogg tweeted. Ashwin, who has featured in 111 ODIs and 46 T20Is, besides 77 Tests, has been out of India's limited overs side for a few years now. He last appeared in an ODI game in June 2017. The 34-year-old played a major role in India's historic Test series victory in Australia earlier this year. In the third Test against England last week, he became the fourth Indian to take 400 Test wickets. The fourth and final Test between India and England begins on Thursday in Ahmedabad. The hosts lead the series 2-1. After the Test series, the two teams are scheduled to play five T20Is and three ODIs. — PTI

People seem to forget that if you're going to India, you should expect that. You are going to spin land. You should basically prepare yourself to know what you're going to encounter.

— VIV RICHARDS
West Indies batting legend

game terrorised the best of bowlers in his prime in every corner of the cricketing world.

"I've been asked questions recently about the Test match that was

played in India, the second and third Test match against England. And I am a little confused about the question really because there seems to be a lot of moaning and groaning about the wicket that they were playing on," Richards said in a video posted on his Facebook page.

"I just felt that the ones who are moaning, in my opinion, should realise that there are times that you're going to get a seaming track, a ball that is basically jumping off a good length and everyone thinks that's a problem for batters," he said. — PTI

Sindhu & Saina eye Swiss treat

Basel (Switzerland), March 1: Reigning world champion P.V. Sindhu will be eager to return to the podium as former winner Saina Nehwal looks to regain her touch in the season-opening Swiss Open tournament beginning here on Tuesday.

Indian men's singles players, too, have tasted success in this tournament with Sameer Verma, H.S. Prannoy and Kidambi Srikanth emerging victorious in 2018, 2016 and 2015 respectively and B. Sai Praneeth finishing runners-up in the last edition.

All four will be looking to relive the moments and extend India's good run at the \$140,000 event which will also resume the extended Olympic qualifying period.

It was here at St. Jakobshalle venue that Olympic silver medallist Sindhu had claimed the world championship gold in 2019, her last title before the Covid-19 pandemic disruption.

The 25-year-old from Hyderabad, seeded second, will look to go the distance again as she opens her campaign against Turkey's Neslihan Yigit.

Sindhu didn't have a good outing in the three events in Thailand recently but the road to the quarterfinal here looks smooth for the Indian where she is likely to confront fifth seed Thai Busanan Ongbamrungphan, an opponent she had beaten at the Toyota Thailand Open in January. Two-time former winner Saina, too, is in the same half but the senior pro will have to overcome players

● **It was here at St. Jakobshalle venue that Olympic silver medallist Sindhu had claimed the world championship gold in 2019, her last title before the Covid-19 pandemic disruption.**

like Korea's sixth seed Sung Ji Hyun and fourth seeded Danish Mia Blichfeldt — whom she is likely to meet — to set up a semifinal face-off with Sindhu.

All eyes will also be on world number 10 men's doubles pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty after their semifinal finish at Toyota Thailand Open.

The Indian pair, seeded second, would look to stretch its good run, especially after a month-long training session under new doubles coach Mathias Boe of Denmark.

The Indian duo will face Scotland's Christopher Grimley and Matthew Grimley in the opening round.

Expectations will be high from Satwik and Ashwini Ponnappa as well after their last-four finish at the previous event. But it will be an uphill climb for the duo as it faces second seeds Indonesians Hafiz Faizal and Gloria Emanuelle Widjaja first up.

In the men's singles, it will be an all-Indian show when Sameer takes on former world number one Kidambi Srikanth in the opening round.

— PTI

Printed and Published from Nellore by **K.Sudhakar** on behalf of
Deccan Chronicle Holdings Limited at PlotNo.527,Chemudugunta (Village),
Venkatchalasatram (Mandal), Nellore. **RNI Registration**
No.APENG/2003/11048 Phones: 2348581, 82 & 83, Fax: 2348580,
Grams: CHRONICLE, Editor: **Kaushik Mitter**

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