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ANANTAPUR | FRIDAY | 30 APRIL 2021



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Quinton guides Mumbai to victory

TABLOID

'This new wave is more infectious & lethal'



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Pvt doctors seek higher rates under Aarogyasri

Claims govt rates for Covid treatment too low

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 29

Doctors have urged the Andhra Pradesh state government to revise the Covid-19 treatment rates under the YSR Aarogyasri scheme in their hospitals as they remained highly unviable for them.

Indian Medical Association's Academy of Medical Specialists national chairman Dr D. Sreehari Rao said, "We urge the state government to revise Covid-19 treatment rates upwards under Aarogyasri scheme as the present rates are not viable given the high wages to be paid to the

doctors and health personnel for risking their lives to treat the patients and also for maintenance costs. We are sure the move will help get more beds into usage for the patients. We also appeal to the government to extend fire NOC for six more months to the hospitals as their applications for renewal are pending with fire authorities for a long time."

Andhra Pradesh has nearly 2,000 private hospitals. Of them, 600-700 hospitals have more than 50 beds each covered under the Dr YSR Aarogyasri scheme.

There are two categories

of private hospitals in the state — those which are already covered under the scheme and the ones which got temporary permission to treat patients for the Covid-19 under the scheme.

For both the categories, the state government had fixed rates. While the patients would be treated for Covid free of cost — reimbursed later by the government — at the empaneled hospitals, non-empaneled hospitals would charge as fixed by the government from the patients.

■ **Page 2: Higher rates will attract more hospitals**

COVAXIN PRICE CUT TO ₹400 PER DOSE TO STATES

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, APRIL 29

Bharat Biotech, that manufactures Covid-19 vaccine Covaxin, on Thursday announced that it was cutting down Covaxin price for state governments, to ₹400 per dose. The company had previously said it will sell each dose to state governments at ₹600, and at ₹1,200 to private hospitals that are offering the vaccination service.

In its announcement, Bharat Biotech said it is "deeply concerned with the critical pandemic circumstances that India is facing at this time", and decided to reduce the price recognising the challenges faced by the healthcare system.

Its decision comes a day after Serum Institute of India made a similar announcement reducing the price of its vaccine Covishield from ₹400 a dose to ₹300 a dose for state governments.

CHAR DHAM YATRA PUT OFF AMID COVID RISE

Dehradun, April 29: Chardham Yatra to the four famous Himalayan shrines in Uttarakhand, which was scheduled to begin next month, has been postponed in view of the massive surge in Covid-19 cases.

Uttarakhand CM Tirath Singh Rawat said conducting the yatra amid the raging pandemic is not possible. However, they will open only for priests to perform regular prayers and not for devotees, he said. Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri are the four famous shrines. —PTI

3K beds at each Covid centre in every dist: Jagan

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 29

Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy on Thursday directed officials to enhance the number of beds in Covid hospitals, set up oxygen manufacturing plants and arrange oxygen tanks at hospitals.

While reviewing the prevailing situation on the spread of Coronavirus and the steps being initiated to contain it with the officials here on Thursday, the Chief Minister directed the authorities to arrange 3,000 beds, including 1,000 oxygen and 2,000 non-oxygen beds, in Covid Care Centres in each district — 39,000 beds across the state.

He also called for the enhancement of rates being paid to empaneled private hospitals for providing treatment to the Coronavirus infected patients and make them applicable for Arogyasri hospitals also.

He wanted the officials to ensure that no hospital

denies treatment to the virus infected patient and instructed them to enhance the wages to FNOs and MNOs working in Covid hospitals. He instructed the officials to recruit the requisite number of doctors, nurses and para-medical staff at all Covid hospitals in the state.

He ordered the officials to set up 42 pressure swing absorption plants to ensure requisite quantity of supply of oxygen in Covid hospitals in addition to procurement of 10 KL capacity oxygen tanks to make available at teaching hospitals and also one KL capacity tanks to be placed at other hospitals.

The officials told the CM that out of 35,644 beds in 422 Covid hospitals (including private) in the state, 21,590 beds were occupied while 79,000 patients were placed at home isolation. Nearly 6,348 patients are taking treatment in Covid centres while 14,862 are allotted oxygen beds.

Doubts on May 1 rollout as vax fall short

VINEETA PANDEY | DC
NEW DELHI, APRIL 29

The vaccine rollout in the fourth phase to cover all adult Indians above 18 is due to begin on Saturday. However, even as several states have said that they are ready to give the jab free to their citizens, they don't have sufficient stocks of the vaccine. Therefore, the rollout would have to be delayed. Across the country, there are signs of utter chaos and a visible shortage of

vaccines. Already, several people above 45 years who are due to get their second dose of the vaccine are unable to receive their shots.

In Delhi, those due to get their second shot got cancellation messages on Thursday.

However, the Centre said the total vaccine doses available as of Thursday was 1.27 crore, while the total consumption of vaccines from January 16 to April 29 was 15.11 crores.

Exit polls give Mamata key edge, DMK ahead

Left to retain Kerala, BJP tipped to return in Assam, win P'cherry

ASHHAR KHAN | DC
NEW DELHI, APRIL 29

The results of a majority of the exit polls predict that West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamul Congress has a hurricane edge that could make her retain power for the third time in West Bengal, while the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) will be a key player in the state, giving a robust challenge to the TMC.

The DMK led by M.K. Stalin is projected to sweep to power in Tamil Nadu, replacing the AIADMK in the first elections without Dravidian stalwarts like M. Karunanidhi and J. Jayalalithaa. The Left Democratic Front is expected to retain power in Kerala, breaking the cyclic nature of the state.

The BJP is tipped to retain power in Assam and also coming to power in Puducherry as part of a coalition, in place of the Congress.

In West Bengal, most of the surveys predict that the ruling TMC will win at least around 150 seats,

SEATS PREDICTED BY EXIT POLLS					
WEST BENGAL			ASSAM		
TOTAL SEATS	294		TOTAL SEATS	126	
AXIS MYINDIA	130-156	134-160	AXIS MYINDIA	75-85	40-50
CNX POLLS	128-138	138-148	CNX POLLS	74-84	40-50
C VOTER	158	115	C VOTER	65	59
TODAY'S CHANAKYA	180	108	TODAY'S CHANAKYA	70+	56+
TAMIL NADU			KERALA		
TOTAL SEATS	234		TOTAL SEATS	140	
AXIS MYINDIA	175-186	38-54	AXIS MYINDIA	104	20-36
CNX POLLS	160-170	58-68	CNX POLLS	72-80	54-64
C VOTER	166	64	C VOTER	91	47
TODAY'S CHANAKYA	164-186	46-68	TODAY'S CHANAKYA	102+	35+
PUDUCHERRY					
TOTAL SEATS	30				
UPA+	6-10				
NDA+	20-24				

with the BJP putting up a formidable fight. The C-Voter survey data projects the ruling TMC

with emerge victorious, with 152 to 164 seats in the state, where a total 292 Assembly constituencies

went to the polls.

■ **Page 4: Some exit polls predict close finish in WB**

YSRC to win Tirupati LS bypoll, predict exit polls

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, APRIL 29

The YSR Congress would retain the Tirupati Lok Sabha seat in the triangular contest between the ruling party, Telugu Desam and the Jana Sena-backed BJP, predicted pollsters on Thursday.

Aaraa projected a massive lead for the YSR Congress in Tirupati over its nearest rival Telugu Desam. The ruling party is projected to get a vote share of 65.85 per cent and TD a mere 23.1 per cent.

HMR Research Pvt Ltd predicted that 41 per cent voters felt Jagan Mohan Reddy's performance as

good and 29 per cent opined it was average and 26 per cent felt the governance was bad. Effective implementation of welfare schemes by the Chief Minister, as expected, played a key role.

In the Nalgonda bypoll in Telangana, the same agency projected that the TRS candidate Nomula Bhagat, the son of the deceased MLA Nomula Narasimhaiah, will scrape through with 3.3 per cent margin or about 7,000 votes.

According to the agency, 38 per cent electorate felt good about the government functioning and 26 per cent found the performance average, while 34

per cent voters rated it as bad.

"Though the initial mood was in strong favour of the TRS which had a margin of 20 per cent, the situation changed a few days before the polling day, thanks to strong consolidation of the Reddy vote in favour of the Congress candidate," said Shivke-shav Amuka, CEO of Mission Chanakya.

A Vizag-based agency Out of the Box however predicted Jana Reddy's victory with over 7,000-vote margin while it said YSR Congress candidate Dr Gurumurthy will win with a majority of 3.5 lakh votes.

NELLORE RUSHES TO CHENNAI BUT DENIED BEDS

DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, APRIL 29

Covid-19 patients, who are unable to get admitted to an ICU or find oxygen-equipped hospital beds in Nellore, are rushing to Chennai in hope of getting better treatment. In most cases, patients have been moving to Chennai only after they are assured of a bed.

However, hospitals are denying admission to patients whose oxygen saturation levels are dwindling. In one instance, Siddique, a 45-year-old from Gandavaram near Nellore, was taken to a hospital in Chennai, after his friends managed to secure a bed for him, on Wednesday.

He was forced to return after the hospital staff denied him admission, stating that his oxygen levels were less than 80 per cent, as against the mandatory 95 per cent. On Thursday, his son Surjeet pleaded with officials of Narayana hospital to get him admission.

Surjeet said the ambulance journey to and from Chennai cost ₹50,000, which he paid for with borrowed money. According to sources, ambulance vehicles have been demanding ₹30,000 to ₹50,000 for a three-hour journey as there is no check despite patients' complaints.

Jagananna Swachh Sankalp on July 8

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 29

The Andhra Pradesh government has decided to launch 'Clean Andhra Pradesh-Jagananna Swachh Sankalp' on July 8 to mark the birth anniversary of late CM Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy.

Reviewing the implementation of several schemes with ministers and senior officials at his Camp Office here on Thursday, Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy directed officials to take

up sanitation works in urban and rural areas and instructed them to take steps to prevent the stagnation of drainwater in villages under the Jagananna Swachh Sankalp scheme. He suggested the slogan: 'Let us clean our village on our own' for the sanitation works.

He wanted top priority for maintenance of sanitation, supply of drinking water and installation of street lights.

■ **Page 2: 100-day rural sanitation drive from May 1**

COVID | IMPACT

Foreign vaccines will be used, India won't export for some time

India to procure oxygen equipments

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI | DC
NEW DELHI, APRIL 29

Foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla on Thursday shared details of the amount of oxygen, medical equipment and drugs that India will be receiving from foreign countries to manage the second Covid wave that has left thousands dead and lakhs infected.

Describing the medical crisis as "unprecedented and exceptional", he said that India is acquiring a

total of 550 oxygen-generating plants, over 4,000 oxygen concentrators, 10,000 oxygen cylinders, 17 cryogenic tankers to store oxygen and lakhs of doses of anti-viral drugs Remdesivir and Favipiravir from abroad.

The US will also be supplying 28 million litres of oxygen to India. Mr Shringla said that the current over three million active cases of Covid have "put considerable pressure on the health care system," and added that India is producing about 67,000 doses

of Remdesivir daily while the requirement now is between two-three lakh doses daily. He also said that India's vaccine producing capabilities are being ramped up as India's domestic requirements are now "significant and pressing". The vaccines that are being acquired from abroad would be utilised for domestic needs, he said.

The statement is an indication that in the immediate future at least, India will not be able to export vaccines in the significant

way in which it had been doing in the past few months since the priority is to vaccinate the country's huge 1.2 billion population as quickly as possible.

Meanwhile, Russia dispatched two special flights on Wednesday night carrying equipment and medicines while the US will operate three special flights — two on Friday and the third on Monday carrying urgently-needed supplies for India. The three special flights from the US will supply a total of

28 million litres of oxygen, 2,000 Oxygen concentrators, hundreds of oxygen cylinders and 17 oxygen generation plants. The two flights from Russia carried a total of 20 oxygen generating plants and the anti-Covid drug Favipiravir. Japan too is expected to soon begin the supply of oxygen concentrators, ventilators and other pharmaceutical products to India.

Oxygen concentrators are also being sourced by Indian companies from China.

WEATHER

Max: 39.0°C
Min: 18°C
RH: 49%
Rainfall: Nil

Forecast: Cloudy sky. Misty morning. Max/Min temp. 39/18 °C

ASTROGUIDE

Plava; Uttarayana
Tithi: Chaitra Bahula Chaviti till 7.14 pm
Star: Jyeshtha till 12.10 pm
Variyam: Nil
Durmuhurtam: 8.26 am to 9.16 am; 12.38 pm to 1.29 pm
Rahukalam: 10.30 am to 12 noon
HIJRI CALENDAR
Ramzan 17,1442 AH
PRAYERS
Fajar: 5:08 am
Zohar: 12:05 pm
Asar: 4:11 pm
Maghrib: 5:47 pm
Isha: 7:02 pm
SUNRISE TOMORROW 06.08 AM
SUNSET TODAY 06.33 PM
MOONSET 07.21 AM
MOONRISE 09.06 PM



COUNTER POINT



Any wave?

SHORT TAKES

US tells citizens to leave India

Washington: The US has advised its citizens not to travel to India or to leave as soon as it is safe to do so and authorised the voluntary departure of family members of its employees in the Indian missions, saying the access to all types of medical care is becoming severely limited in the country amid a massive surge in cases. The US has put India on Level 4 Travel Advisory, the highest level alert.

Vacation for Std 10 students

Vijayawada: The state government on Thursday announced summer holidays for Class 10 students from May 1 to 31 across the state for the academic year 2020-21. In a memo issued on Thursday, the department of school education said that in the wake of the second wave of Covid-19, the state government accorded permission for the closure of academic year 2020-21.

■ **Full report on Page 2**

3-day lockdown in Uttar Pradesh

Lucknow: Amid a surge in coronavirus cases, the Uttar Pradesh government Thursday decided to increase the duration of weekend lockdown by 24 hours, announcing that it will now cover Mondays too. "The weekend closure will now be applicable from Friday 8 pm till Tuesday 7 am," Additional Chief Secretary (Home) Navneet Sehgal said here.

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Committee to monitor Covid-19 patients 24x7

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Year not good for upanayanam

IN BRIEF

**SUMMER HOLIDAYS
FOR CLASS X KIDS
FROM MAY 1 TO 31****DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 29**

The state government on Thursday announced summer holidays for Class 10 students from May 1 to 31 across the state for the academic year 2020-21. In a memo issued on Thursday, the department of school education said that in the wake of the second wave of Covid-19 spreading with high positive rate in the country, the state government accorded permission for the closure of academic year 2020-21 and the declaration of summer vacation to students and teachers for Class 10 from May 1 to 31 with last working day on April 30.

With this, classes for Standard 10 in all schools to be cancelled and the students are permitted to prepare for SSC public exams while staying at their homes from May 1 to 31. The students are directed to report to schools for preparing for the exams under the guidance of teachers from June 1 to 5.

All Class 10 teachers have been asked to support the students through various digital platforms to help them to prepare for the SSC public examinations.

**STRICT CONTROL
MEASURES AT
COUNTING CENTRES****DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, APRIL 29**

Candidates, polling agents, and media persons coming to the counting centres pertaining to the byelection to Tirupati Lok Sabha will be allowed only if they produce evidence for Covid-19 negative results or certificate to prove that they had two rounds of vaccination.

Returning Officer for the election and Nellore district collector K.V.N. Chakradhar Babu revealed the condition imposed by Election Commission while pointing to the counting scheduled for May 2.

He said EC has directed them to take strict Covid containment measures and as part of that they are sanitising the counting centres in Nellore and Tirupati within 100 metres radius and the only Covid-19 negative persons are allowed inside the premises.

People should exhibit either the vaccination certificate or the RT-PCR or RAT test result for entering the premises, he said.

The RO said they are taking measures not to assemble people outside the premises during the counting process for preventing any chance of spreading infections.

He said they are also implementing Covid-19 guidelines inside the counting centre asking the counting personnel to follow them.

Chakradhar Babu said they had arranged protection at the strong rooms where the EVMs were deposited.

**LAND SURVEY
LAUNCHED IN
3 VILLAGES****DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, APRIL 29**

As part of YSR Jagananna Saswatha Bhu Hakku and Bhu Raksha scheme, comprehensive survey of lands was launched on a pilot basis in three villages under the limits of three revenue divisions of Prakasam district on Thursday.

After formally launching the survey at Malleswarapuram in Ongole rural mandal on Thursday, joint-collector (RB&R) J. Venkata Murali said the survey taken up in association with Survey of India would permanently put an end to the litigations related to land matters.

He said boundaries of the lands can be fixed accurately through Hybrid Technology Survey with the help of drones.

The JC added that there will not be any problem even if the stones fixed to identify the boundaries are disturbed as they are fixed as per latitude and longitude based on satellite pictures.

He said that the resurvey will be recorded in the updated basic records.

The pilot survey is being carried out at Malleswarapuram in Ongole division, Mahamkalivari Kandriga village in Jarugumalli mandal of Kandukuru division and Sivapam in Markapuram mandal of Markapuram division.



A health worker carries out a Covid-19 test on a woman at Tummalapalli Kalakshetram in Vijayawada on Thursday. — C. NARAYANA RAO

Committee to monitor Covid-19 patients 24x7

Facilities being ramped up to accommodate 3,000 patients in CCCs**DC CORRESPONDENT
KURNOOL, APRIL 29**

With the rising Covid-19 cases, facilities are being ramped up to accommodate 3,000 patients in Covid Care Centres and 1,000 more in Covid-19 hospitals in Kurnool district.

The district administration has started focussing on the efficient management of oxygen resource as it is feared that current Covid wave turning deadly with no respite in a number of positive cases. About 7,915 active Covid-19 cases are monitored across the district, which is putting more pressure on the scarce medical resources, said an official.

KGGH deputy superintendent Prof. C. Prabhakar Reddy said, "To plan oxygen resources better in the hospital, we have set up an Oxygen Monitoring

● It is learnt that the senior doctors in the KGGH are afraid to treat the Covid patients. The district administration mandated that all medical doctors must be put on Covid duties but the senior doctors in the age group of 45-60 are shying away from the Covid-19 duties.

● The house surgeons, who are more than 220 in the hospital, are pushed into the front line to take the caseload. It is said house surgeons also were apprehensive of postings in the Covid-19 wards as the news of youngsters being affected by the virus was spreading like a wildfire among medical college campuses in the state.

Committee (OMC) to monitor the use of oxygen and regulate supplies 24x7. He said the hospital has 21.5 kilo litres capacity oxygen tanks and a PSA plant to generate 3,000 litres of oxygen per minute is also underway. Though the PSA facility was to be commissioned by Monday, the plant fixation works are still going on dragging on the oxygen supply schedules.

Dr Prabhakar Reddy said the district administration was contemplating placing an order for 500 oxygen concentrators, besides improving the quality of food that was served to the patients in the hospital.

Meanwhile, it is learnt that the senior doctors in the KGGH are afraid to treat the Covid patients. The district administration mandated that all medical doctors must be

put on Covid duties but the senior doctors in the age group of 45-60 are shying away from the Covid-19 duties. The house surgeons, who are more than 220 in the hospital, are pushed into the front line to take the caseload. It is said house surgeons were also apprehensive of postings in the Covid-19 wards as the news of youngsters being affected by the virus was spreading like a wildfire among medical college campuses in the state.

The District Magistrate G. Veera Pandian has asked the Oxygen Management Committee to audit the inventory of remdesivir vials and oxygen availability in all the Covid hospitals in the district.

The OMC was also tasked to maintain the records of availability of ICU beds and act strictly on finding any irregularities.

**TD DEMANDS ₹1 CR
COMPENSATION
FOR KIN OF DOCS****DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, APRIL 29**

TD state spokesperson Anam Venkataramana Reddy demanded ₹1 crore compensation package to the families of doctors involved in the treatment for Covid-19 patients in case of their death.

Reminding that doctors are also human beings and they too are scared to handle the infected patients, especially in the backdrop of the steep increase in the death rate, he rebuked the administration for its inability to follow the successful system established by previous collector Seshagiri Babu and joint-collector Dr Vinod Kumar to arrest the spread of the virus and save the infected during the first phase of the pandemic.

He reminded that the first Covid-19 case in AP was detected in Nellore and the system devised by the previous administration is being followed everywhere.

Commending the then collector for a wonderful job in containing the pandemic, he blamed the present collector and joint-collector for not following the protocols he devised and followed during the first wave. Speaking to the media persons here on Thursday, the TD spokesperson also criticised both the authorities and ruling party leaders for their inaction when ambulance vehicles are robbing Covid-19 patients.

He alleged that the vehicles have been demanding ₹50,000 to ₹60,000 similar to the Heli ambulance charges to transport the critical Covid-19 patients to neighbouring cities.

Venkataramana Reddy also alleged that the ventilator beds were being allotted only after calls from MLAs and ministers.

Higher rates will attract more hospitals in state

From Page 1

Under the non-critical Covid-19 category, treatment rate fixed per day is ₹3,250. Under critical care category, ICU without ventilator and without NIV to cost ₹5,480, ICU with NIV to cost ₹5,980, ICU with ventilator to cost ₹9,580, SEPSIS without ventilator to cost ₹6,280, SEPSIS with ventilator to cost ₹10,380 and septic shock/MODS with ventilator to cost ₹10,380.

The state government has recently reimbursed ₹309 crore to the private hospitals for providing the Covid-19 treatment from April 1, 2020, to April 23, 2021 to benefit over one lakh patients in the state.

As AP is having 1.14 lakh Coronavirus active cases as on Thursday and registering daily surge of more than 10,000 cases, there is a huge demand for beds, medical oxygen and mainly remdesivir injections from the patients.

Though the state government claimed that they are having an adequate number of essentials, there is certainly a shortage in urban centres, forcing patients to look for the private hospitals.

Though some private

Chittoor district has highest active cases

From Page 1

Chittoor found to be having the highest number of Coronavirus cumulative active cases at 15,158 followed by 14,155 in Srikakulam, 12,357 in Nellore, 11,621 in Guntur, 11,108 in East Godavari, 9,161 in Visakhapatnam, 8,070 in Anantapur, 7,915 in Kurnool, 7,732 in Krishna, 6,124 in Prakasam, 4,687 in Vizianagaram, 3,156 in Kadapa and 2,914 in West Godavari.

In terms of deaths cau-

sed by Coronavirus, Anantapur and Vizianagaram recorded seven each followed by six in East Godavari, five each in Chittoor and Visakhapatnam, four each in Nellore and Srikakulam, three each in Kadapa, Krishna and Prakasam, two in Kurnool and one in Guntur. With this, the death toll scaled up to 7,928.

The authorities discharged 8,188 Covid-infected patients after recovery from the hospitals in the last 24 hours in the state.

hospitals are providing Covid-19 treatment under AarogyaSri scheme, many of them are avoiding the scheme and asking the patients to pay from their pocket. They are also asking the patients to arrange remdesivir injections and medical oxygen. If the patients express inability to arrange them, they are collecting hefty charges claiming that they are mobilising them from the black market.

FINANCIAL | DIFFICULTIES

Farmers' bribe demand immediate reduction in inflated fertiliser prices

Inflated fertiliser prices burn holes in farmers' pockets

**NAGESWARA RAO
BALLEDA | DC
KADAPA, APRIL 29**

A year-on-year rise in fertiliser prices has left farmers deeply concerned, with prices having tripled in the past five years. The burden of this increase, which translates into crores of rupees annually, will fall on the farmers of the district.

The price of a complex fertiliser bag has increased from ₹450 to ₹700.

Similarly, the price for one bag of Di-ammonium Phosphate (DAP) has gone up to ₹1,900.

Of the 1,15,836 hectares of area under general kharif cultivation, 46,660 hectares are food grains, 12,842 hectares under pulses, 25,939 hectares under oilseeds, and 28,000 hectares are under commercial crops. Farmers estimate that 1.25 lakh hectares will be cultivated in rabi.

Farmers, who use fertilisers such as urea, DAP,

and complex fertilisers on their crops, estimate that kharif and rabi crops require an average of two-and-a-half to three tonnes of fertiliser annually. However, farmers are using twice as much fertiliser as recommended by the authorities.

Officials said that while a total of 84,745 tonnes of fertiliser, consisting of 35,000 tonnes of urea, 8,850 tonnes of DAP and 28,092 tonnes of complex fertilisers among other, was pro-

Suresh justifies govt move to go ahead with Inter exams

**DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 29**

Justifying the state government's move to proceed with conducting of intermediate exams from May 5 amid the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, minister for education, Adimulapu Suresh said that the decision was made keeping in mind the academic future of the students.

Suresh, while addressing the media, said, "1,452 exam centres have been set up, an addition of 41 centres as compared to last year. On average, a district would have 80 exam centres. The government is taking all requisite measures at these centres to avoid the spread of the virus, especially among students. District col-

● Adimulapu Suresh said that 98 per cent of exams would be completed between May 5 and May 19.

lectors and regional inspection officers have been directed to take these measures."

Further, Suresh said that 98 per cent of exams would be completed between May 5 and May 19. Exams for both first and second year students would be held on alternate days. "Materials for conducting the exams have been sent to the respective exam centres while the question papers will go to concerned police stations," he added.

In addition, 13 Covid-19 special officers, with one each at all 13 districts, have been appointed. These officers will ensure

arrangement of thermal scanners, masks, mobile medical vans and squads at exam centres. They have also been instructed to sanitise the centres every day, and arrange isolation centres for infected students and PPE kits for the needy.

Criticising the politicisation of the intermediate exams issue, Suresh said that the Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy had taken a decision to go ahead with the exams solely to safeguard the academic future of students, and urged opposition parties to not make baseless allegations as it would affect the morale of students and their parents. "Merely giving pass certificates would not benefit students in any way," he added.

**100-DAY RURAL
SANITATION DRIVE
FROM MAY 1****From Page 1**

He called for roping in municipalities and panchayat raj for sanitation works in both the rural and urban areas. He also asked the officials to avoid any deficiency in service with regard to collection of garbage and other services.

He felt the need to divert the domestic sewage to treatment plants and called for preparation of standard operating procedures on handling solid waste. He also directed the authorities to provide vaccination, uniforms, gloves, masks and other requirements to the sanitation staff in every municipality and gram panchayats.

The officials, meanwhile, informed the CM that they were going to take up the sanitation drive in the villages for 100 days from May 1 onwards in the state.

Under the YSR Jala Kala programme, it was decided to drill two lakh borewells all over the state and to provide 1.5 lakh pump sets to the small and marginal farmers. This step is expected to benefit three lakh farmers and nearly five lakh acres of land to get water for cultivation of crops.

The CM instructed the officials to come up with SOP on installation of borewell for the benefit of the farmers and said that the farmer should be informed on the date of installation of the borewells in addition to fixing power connection and pump set within one month after finding water in the borewell. He issued a target to drill 20,000 borewells in each Assembly segment per month.

Under Jal Jeevan Mission, the CM directed the officials to pay attention on the source of water, storage and supply so that the JJM could be implemented in the Jagannanna Colonies successfully.

He said that as the water consumption in the summer could be more, he instructed the officials to prepare proper plans. He directed the officials to come up with a protocol on periodical cleaning of water tanks in the villages.

The CM also asked the officials to come up with an action plan on installation of four lakh LED bulbs in the state as their usage was helping to save nearly ₹160 cr per annum.



People wear protective face shields and masks while they sit in a queue to get vaccinated at an Urban Primary Health Centre at Chinnawaltair in Visakhapatnam on Thursday. — K. MURALIKRISHNA

Covid test results to be out in 24 hrs, says Deputy CM

**DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 29**

Deputy Chief Minister and minister for health Alla Kali Krishna Srinivas said that steps were taken to release Covid-19 test results in 24 hours.

The Deputy CM told media persons here on Thursday that they were going to raise the wages to FNOs and MSOs working in mortuaries to ₹15,000 from ₹13,000. He said that a committee to be set up to avoid private hospitals charging more from the Coronavirus infected patients to provide treatment and announced to release ₹30 crore to avoid any issues during supply of oxygen through pipelines in the

hospitals.

The Deputy CM also announced that a committee was set up to enhance rates for providing treatment to Coronavirus infected patients in private hospitals to give them some relief and added that at present, an amount of ₹3,250 was being charged for general services and an amount of ₹10,380 was being charged for critically ill patients. He assured to enhance treatment charge to ₹16,000 for critically ill patients and asked the private hospitals to provide quality treatment.

The minister also said that the number of daily Covid-19 tests were enhanced to 80,000 from 30,000 in the last 10 days.

CLEAR BACKLOG SWAB SAMPLES FOR RT-PCR TEST: JAWAHAR REDDY**DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 29**

Andhra Pradesh Covid Command and Control Centre chairman K.S. Jawahar Reddy directed the health authorities to clear all backlog swab samples for RT-PCR tests in 48 hours and asked them to archive those collected more than seven days ago and test them if anyone ask for it with sample identity.

The chairman reviewed measures being taken up to control spread of Coronavirus in the state with the officials here on Thursday. Speaking on the occasion, he directed the authorities to resume rapid antigen tests in the next 48 hours.

He called for efforts to arrange admission in Covid-19 hospitals to the patients in serious condition and send those having mild symptoms to Covid Care Centres by keeping oxygen beds available.

He felt the need to initiate steps to airlift cryogenic oxygen tankers with the support from the Defence authorities from Angul in Odisha to AP and also called for conversion of industrial gas into medical gas by holding talks with the local industries, for local supply to the needy patients.

He laid stress for compliance with Covid-19 protocol in disposal of dead bodies of infected patients.

posed by the department of agriculture for use in kharif season, about 3 lakh tonnes of fertiliser was being used. "Of this, about 1.25 lakh to 1.50 lakh tonnes of complex fertilisers and 35,000 to 50,000 tonnes of DAP will be required," they added.

The cost of a 50 kg bag of DAP, which was ₹1,200, has now gone up by ₹500 to ₹700. Similarly, the cost of a 50 kg bag of complex fertiliser has increased from ₹975 to ₹1350-₹1400.

Dealers say that the fertiliser manufacturers have sent them a list with inflated prices.

Considering the rise in prices, there would be an increased burden of ₹10,000 per tonne of fertiliser. According to these numbers, there will be a burden of ₹200 crore on farmers during kharif and rabi seasons.

Farmers are worried about the financial difficulties they would have to endure, if the government

does not reduce these prices.

Gali Chandra, Kadapa district secretary of AP Farmers Association, demanded an immediate reduction in inflated fertiliser prices. "The increase in fertiliser prices has already hit farmers who have been seeing losses in agriculture due to Covid-19 for nearly two years. The farmer community will continue to campaign until the fertiliser prices are reduced," he said.



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IN BRIEF

AP TO WITNESS
RAINS IN THE NEXT
FOUR DAYSDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 29

India meteorological department forecast light to moderate rain or thunder showers very likely to occur at isolated places in north and south coastal AP and Yanam for four days from April 30 to May 4.

The meteorological centre at Amaravati in a release issued here on Thursday warned thunderstorms with lightning are very likely to occur at isolated places in north coastal AP and Yanam for four days from April 30 to May 4 and for two days on May 3 and 4 in south coastal AP. However, thunderstorms with lightning are very likely to occur at isolated places over Rayalaseema on May 4 only. The IMD's inference says that the north-south trough now runs from West Vidarbha to south Tamil Nadu across interior Karnataka at 0.9 km above mean sea level. The north-south trough from east Bihar to south coastal Odisha at 1.5 km above mean sea level has become less marked.



Kudipudi Chittabai

YSR'S KUDIPUDI
CHITTABAI
PASSES AWAYDC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, APRIL 29

Senior YSR Congress leader Kudipudi Chittabai died of cardiac arrest at a private hospital in Kakinada, on Thursday. He was 73.

The former MLA from Amalapuram was suffering from illness and was being treated at the hospital.

Elected as an independent MLA in 2004, Chittabai later joined the Congress during the rule of former chief minister late Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy.

A strong supporter of senior Reddy and his son, the current Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, Chittabai held several posts like coordination committee chairman of Mummidivaram and Amalapuram assembly constituency and convener of parliamentary constituency for BC Association.

Many leaders, including the Chief Minister, expressed their grief and condolences after his death.

HUSBAND HELD FOR
TORCHING WIFE IN
VEMULAPALEMDC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, APRIL 29

Gudur rural police on Thursday apprehended an accused in the murder of his wife at Vemulapalem village in Gudur rural mandal on April 22.

The accused was identified as K. Srihari and the deceased as Subhashini. He had set fire to the woman after dousing her body with petrol at their farm near the village following a heated argument with her.

According to Gudur Rural Circle Inspector P. Srinivasulu Reddy, Srihari was addicted to bad habits and he used to quarrel with his wife frequently demanding money to consume liquor.

Based on the messages she received from the bank, Subhashini recently found that Srihari was withdrawing large sums of money they received through the sale of paddy from the bank account of the family.

Shocked by the withdrawals, Subhashini reprimanded Srihari for drawing the money without her knowledge and misusing it.

In this backdrop, Srihari, who was keeping away from home, invited Subhashini to their farm on April 22 and the couple had heated arguments over money being spent by Srihari.

In a fit of anger, Srihari attacked his wife with a stick and removed a gold chain she was wearing after she fell unconscious. He then set her ablaze, said Circle Inspector Srinivasulu Reddy.

Based on the complaint lodged by the brother of the victim, Gudur rural police registered a case and apprehended the accused on Wednesday.



Relatives of a Covid-19 victim weep outside the Covid block of King George Hospital while the dead bodies were being dispatched for cremation, in Visakhapatnam, on Thursday.

—P. NARASIMHA MURTHY

Docs advise home isolation
for mild Covid symptoms

Awareness on Coronavirus has increased, say doctors

DC CORRESPONDENT
KADAPA, APRIL 29

Amid the rising number of Covid-19 cases, home isolation is the best option for those with mild Covid-19 symptoms, even if they're positive, say doctors.

During the first wave of the pandemic, infected patients were referred to quarantine centres or district Covid-19 hospitals. Only those with mild symptoms were allowed to stay at home in isolation and receive treatment.

However, infected patients with mild symptoms have been isolating at home and seeking treatment, without rushing to hospitals, since March this year. Health officials are also encouraging people to do the same in order to reduce the load on hospitals and health centres.

COVID PATIENTS
WILL BE SENT
HOME IF HEALTH
IMPROVES

Visakhapatnam: The District Medical and Health Officer Dr P. Suryanarayana said patients will be sent to home isolation if their situation improves after four days in the government hospitals to make space for the serious patients. He added that the beds in government hospitals will be given only through 108 call centres, DMHO office and collector's office. He said checks were conducted on eight private hospitals and all of them were found to be full.

PRIVATE SCHOOLS
SEEK WAIVER OF
INTEREST ON
BANK LOANSDC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, APRIL 29

Private school managements have requested the central and state governments to waive interest on their bank loans and also get RBI nod for them to delay the installments and loan dues in view of the difficult Covid-19 situation.

School managements are facing a severe financial crisis and they are not able to even meet the daily expenses, said the school managers' association legal adviser and its East Godavari district unit president, Muthukumilli Srivijay.

He told the media here on Thursday that parents are not able to pay the students' fees and hence school managements expected of the state government to help them.

"The managements are not able to pay the salaries. Nearly 26 school correspondents lost their lives due to financial problems during the Covid19 season," he said.

While more than 669 infected patients were identified in the district on Thursday, 323 patients preferred to seek treatment while isolating at home, as 343 others were being treated in hospitals. The total number of infections in the district stood at 62,625 as of Thursday.

INTELLIGENCE SP DIES OF COVID-19

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 29

T. Ram Prasad, 50 working as superintendent of police, intelligence security wing reportedly succumbed to Coronavirus infection on Thursday.

A native of Kaviti in Srikakulam district,

Prasad worked as SP of vigilance and enforcement in Rajahmundry and also as an additional deputy commissioner of police in traffic in Vijayawada.

He was survived by wife Santhi Sudha, daughter Nikitha and son Nikhil.

While more than 669 infected patients were identified in the district on Thursday, 323 patients preferred to seek treatment while isolating at home, as 343 others were being treated in hospitals.

Doctors say that while people fear the virus less now, the awareness has increased. With more

people consulting doctors as soon as symptoms appear and taking corrective treatment, the number of patients visiting hospitals has reduced.

Dr K.V.N.S. Anil Kumar, district medical and health officer told this correspondent that the government was taking all measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

"We provide the highest level of medical care to those who are under home isolation. We are also offering kits specifically for such people, and they are recovering under medical supervision." Dr Anil Kumar added that there was no shortage of oxygen reserves and beds in the district. Those with Covid-19 symptoms were being identified by ASHA workers, secretaries of the secretariats, volunteers, and others.

Temples to allow
marriage eventsDC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, APRIL 29

Even as the second wave of Covid19 is causing a health havoc, people are getting ready for performing marriages in famous shrines like the Sri Veer Venkata Satyanarayana Murthy Temple at Annavaram, Sri Venkateswara Swamy Temples at Vadapalli in East Godavari and the Dwaraka Tirumala in West Godavari from May 1, when auspicious timings begin for functions.

The Lord Satya Deva temple at Annavaram's executive officer and regional joint commissioner of endowments V Trinadha Rao said as many as 95 marriage events were booked for May and all Covid19

guidelines will be strictly observed in performing these marriages. He said only 25 to 50 persons will be allowed in for each marriage and all temples should strictly adhere to the protocols and guidelines.

The district officials said the same rules will be applicable to Kalyana Mandapams and other venues where they perform functions. Meanwhile, some organisers cancelled their Kalyana Mandapam bookings and are making arrangements to hold the events at their residences.

Joint commissioner of endowments said all Covid guidelines will be strictly observed in performing these marriages.

He said only 25 to 50 persons will be allowed in for each marriage and all temples should strictly adhere to the protocols and guidelines.

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IN BRIEF

Raj CM tests Covid positive

Jaipur: Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot on Thursday said he has tested positive for Covid-19. The 69-year-old Congress leader had isolated himself on Wednesday after his wife Sunita had tested positive. “My Covid-19 test report too came positive today. I have no symptoms, and I am feeling fine. I will continue working while in isolation, following Covid-19 protocols,” the Chief Minister said in a tweet in Hindi. Governor Kalraj Mishra, AICC general secretary in-charge of Rajasthan Ajay Maken, PCC president Govind Singh Dotasra, state Transport Minister Pratap Singh Khachariyawas, Rajasthan BJP president Satish Poonia, Leader of Opposition Gulabchand Kataria and others wished for Gehlot’s speedy recovery. Meanwhile, former Barmer MP Manvendra Singh, his wife and daughter also tested positive for Covid-19. Manvendra Singh is the son of former Union minister Jaswant Singh, who passed away last year.

NGO SEEKS WAIVER OF GST ON DRUGS, MEDICAL SUPPLIES

PARMOD KUMAR | DC NEW DELHI, APRIL 29

An NGO, the Public Policy Advocates, on Wednesday moved the Supreme court seeking to exempt levying of Goods and services Tax on the medicines and medical devices including equipment being used for the treatment of Covid patients in the second wave of pandemic.

Seeking exemption of GST on Remdesivir, Tocilizumab, Favipiravi and other similar generic medicines, the petition by the Public Policy Advocates has described as “unjustified” the levy of GST on the medicines essential for the treatment of Covid including medical grade oxygen, oxygen concentrators, ventilators, Bipap Machines, and other Covid patient care support equipment.

The application said, “the Right to Health in times of pandemic, assumes an ever more crucial significance since affordable healthcare and availability of drugs which are critical to fight moderate and severe cases of illness have to be given paramount importance. This would have the effect of preventing black marketing, hoarding of such drugs and other medical equipment, as well as make sure that the same is available to the citizens at affordable cost.”

The application has been moved by Pritika Kumar – the founder of the Public Policy advocates. The application has been moved in the suo motu matter being heard by the top court relating to the supply of essential medicines, oxygen, manner and method of vaccination, dual pricing of the vaccine and declaration of lockdown.

The top court which had in the last hearing of suo motu petition had said that it can’t be “silent spectator” of the worsening Covid situation and the difficulties being encountered by people in getting drugs, oxygen, hospital beds for the treatment of Covid infected patients.

The petitioner has sought top court direction to GST Council to “expeditiously” convene its meeting to consider exempting from levy of GST – both at the Central and at the state level – the drugs and medical equipment being used for treating Covid patients.

In the interim, till the GST Council meets and takes a call, the petitioner organisation has sought direction to the Centre to issue “appropriate ad hoc guidelines, orders or notifications.”

HOLY SHRINES

Portals of 4 temples will open as scheduled, only priests permitted

Char Dham Yatra deferred amid Covid surge

Dehradun, April 29: Char Dham Yatra to the four famous Himalayan shrines in Uttarakhand, which was scheduled to begin next month, has been postponed in view of the massive surge in Covid-19 cases.

Announcing this here on Thursday, Uttarakhand Chief Minister Tirath Singh Rawat said conducting the yatra amid the raging pandemic is not possible. “Considering the rising cases of corona, it has been decided to suspend the Char Dham Yatra,” Rawat told reporters.

However, the portals of the four Himalayan temples known as Char Dham will open as scheduled, he said.

Only priests will be allowed to perform daily prayers at the shrines and not devotees, the Chief Minister said.

“Though opening on schedule, no pilgrim neither from inside the state nor from outside will be allowed to visit the temples,” he said. Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri are the four famous shrines.

Kedarnath is slated to open at 5 am on May 17, Badrinath

at 4:15 am on May 18, Yamunotri at 12:15 pm on May 14 and Gangotri on 7:30 am on May 15.

Covid-19 cases have been rising drastically in Uttarakhand as in various other states.

They hit a new high in the state on Wednesday with 6,054 people testing positive and 108 succumbing to the virus.

This is the highest single-day spike in Covid cases and fatalities recorded by the state so far.

The state government had drawn much flak for organ-

ising the Kumbh Mela in Haridwar which according to many contributed to the second wave of Coronavirus.

Even the Uttarakhand High Court in an oral observation recently had asked the state government to publish the standard operating procedure for Char Dham Yatra saying it cannot be allowed to become another Kumbh.

It has also asked the state government to control the raging virus and save lives putting aside everything else.

Covid had cast its shadow on the Char Dham Yatra which is considered the backbone of the hill economy last year too delaying opening of the temples for pilgrims by several months.

The delayed opening of the temples for pilgrims coupled with restrictions such as mandatory negative RT-PCR test report, a daily cap on the number of devotees visiting shrines besides compliance with mask wearing and social distancing norms had severely affected the inflow of pilgrims. —PTI

What India needs: 5L ICU beds, 3.5L medicos

Pune, April 29: Forecasting that the Covid-19 pandemic is only going to get worse, noted surgeon Dr Devi Prasad Shetty has said India will need an extra 5 lakh ICU beds, 2 lakh nurses and 1.5 lakh doctors in the next few weeks, and also suggested radical solutions to meet the mountainous challenge.

At present, India has only 75,000 to 90,000 ICU beds and almost all are already occupied — when the second wave of the pandemic hasn’t even reached its peak yet, he said. India is reporting about 3.5 lakh cases a day, and some experts say the number could go up to 5 lakh cases daily at its peak.

While most of the newspaper headlines and prime time television coverage have been over the lack of

oxygen for the patients in ICUs, “I am having sleepless nights for the next headline, which is going to be that patients are dying in ICUs because there are no nurses and doctors to take care of the patients,” he said.

“And this is going to happen. I do not doubt it now,” said Dr Shetty, the chairman and founder of Narayana Health, a chain of 21 medical centres in India, in his online address at the Symbiosis Golden Jubilee Lecture Series in Pune recently.

He pointed out that for every patient who is tested positive, there are 5 to 10 people who are positive but not tested. That means more than 15 to 20 lakh people are getting infected every day in India even now. Statistically, five per cent of the positive

patients need an ICU bed, irrespective of their age. On an average, a patient in ICU spends at least 10 days there. “So you can just imagine what the scenario is. Know what we need to do? We need to create at least five lakh additional ICU beds in the next few weeks,” he said.

“Unfortunately, beds do not treat patients. We need nurses, doctors and paramedics in that order, he said, pointing out that managing Covid patients successfully in ICUs depends mostly on nurses, not doctors. Even before the start of the pandemic, government hospitals across the country had a shortage of 78 per cent of medical specialists.

“Now, we need to produce at least two lakh nurses and at least one and a half lakh doctors in the

next few weeks who are dedicated to managing Covid for the next one year. Because the current pandemic is likely to last for about 4 to 5 months. And then we should be prepared for the third wave,” he said.

Dr Shetty then proceeded to provide out-of-the-box solutions for meeting that need. He said India has about 2.20 lakh nursing students who have finished their three-year GNM (General Nursing and Midwifery) or four-year B Sc courses in various nursing schools and colleges across the country who are preparing for their exam scheduled to take place in the next few weeks.

He suggested that the ministry of health, along with the Indian Nursing Council, should consider

these students as graduates and deploy them to work in Covid ICU wards for one year, after which they will be given graduation certificates. They could also be given preference over others in government jobs, he said.

“Take the approach of drafting for the armed forces when there is an impending war with the enemy country ... This is not peacetime. It is wartime.

“If that is done, I am convinced most of these girls and boys will join the fight against Covid. The battle cannot be won by doctors of my age. No war can be fought by people of my age. You need young people. Most of them are vaccinated and they are naturally in a better position to fight Covid in case they get it.

He said there are also 1.30 lakh young doctors today, working not in Covid ICUs but preparing for NEET exams to get into post-graduate courses where only 35,000 positions are available. An online test for NEET should be conducted immediately and results declared in a few days.

After allowing the 35,000 seats, there will be still one lakh young doctors who are left out, who didn’t get the PG seats. They should be offered a chance during the next year’s PG selection if they work in the Covid ICU for one year, he said. Additionally, there are about 25,000 doctors who have finished their postgraduate training and haven’t yet appeared for the exam. This batch of medical specialists should be told that they can skip

the exam and get the degree provided they work in the Covid ICUs for one year, he suggested.

Also, there are between 90,000 to one lakh doctors who graduated from overseas universities who haven’t been able to pass a national entrance exam. “Identify 20,000 brightest of these kids and ask them to work in Covid ICU for one year for getting a permanent registration,” he said.

“If we can do this successfully in the next few weeks, believe me, we would have conquered the Covid battle. Otherwise, the consequences can be very very serious, mainly because just admitting a patient in a Covid ICU and giving him some oxygen is not going to save their life,” he concluded. —PTI

Scramble everywhere



1) People wait to receive Covid-19 vaccine in Mumbai on Thursday as India set another global record in new virus cases even as the country geared up to open its vaccination rollout to all adults amid snags. — AP

2) Traffic Police personnel take part in a bike rally to spread awareness on Covid-19 in Chennai on Thursday.

3) A health worker collects a swab sample from a BSF jawan during a rapid antigen testing campaign for the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) at Poonch, on Thursday.

— PTI



Bombay HC for 15-day lockdown

Maha extends lockdown-like curbs till May 15

SHAHAB ANSARI & BHAGWAN PARAB | DC MUMBAI, APRIL 29

The Bombay High Court on Thursday asked the Maharashtra government to consider imposing complete lockdown in the state for 15 days.

A division bench of Chief Justice Dipankar Datta and Justice G.S. Kulkarni was of the opinion that a complete lockdown like last year was necessary in order to successfully contain the spread of Coronavirus in the state.

The bench also asked Advocate General (AG) Ashutosh Kumbhakar to ensure the state believed its current restrictions on the movement of citizens were working. The judges also asked him if people with only urgent business were on roads.

The bench clarified that it was not issuing any mandate, however they were of the opinion that the government should consider a lockdown like last year.

The HC also directed the Maharashtra government to ensure municipal authorities conducted an immediate fire audit of all hospitals, nursing homes and Covid care centres across the state.

Referring to Wednesday’s fire in a private hospital in Thane district where four people died, the bench said, “We do not want any more fires in hospitals.”

The bench said a patient does not have time to check if a hospital is fire-compliant or not. “We do not want hospitals turn-

ing into Jatugrihas,” the HC said, referring to the highly combustible house of lac that Duryodhana had built for the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*.

The HC also said it was not trying to pin the blame for the raging pandemic on the state government or municipal corporation, but it was the society’s “collective failure” and that citizens must also act responsibly.

“You want to have everything. You want Kumbh, you want marriages...are you waiting for the third wave?” it asked.

“At least for 15 days if people stay strictly indoors, like last year, we may expect better results. Please advise your government,” the high court told this to the AG.

The HC was hearing a PIL, alleging improper management of Covid treatment in Maharashtra and seeking directions pertaining to shortage of Remdesivir, the key antiviral drug, and oxygen supply.

Advocate General Kumbhakar on behalf of the state and the senior counsel Anil Sakhere on behalf of BMC told the HC that there was adequate stock of Remdesivir and oxygen for hospitals in Mumbai and a safety audit of medical facilities across the state would be conducted.

The court also directed them to also ensure there are no long queues at Covid vaccination centres and make arrangements for the safety of those working in crematoriums.

Meanwhile, the state government on Thursday

evening issued a new order extending Covid restrictions till May 15. People can travel only in emergencies. Shops and markets, except for emergency services, will be allowed to be open for only two hours till 11am every day.

Also, with the rise in cases and deaths showing no signs of decline, the Maharashtra government has extended the lockdown-like curbs in the state till May 15.

State chief secretary Sitaram Kunte on Thursday issued an order, which said, “Maharashtra is continuing to be threatened with the spread of Covid and therefore it is imperative to continue emergency measures to prevent and contain the spread of virus. The government finds it necessary to continue the enforcement of the current restrictions throughout the state till 15th May to break the chain of transmission effectively.”

The strict curbs on movement of people and a host of other activities have been in force in the state since April 14 and were to end on April 30. Essential services have been exempted from the restrictions.

On April 21, the Maharashtra government had imposed more strict restrictions in the state under the ‘Break the Chain’ campaign. Under the curbs, all government offices (centre, state, local administrative), except emergency services related to the coronavirus pandemic, will open with only 15 per cent attendance.

FB blocks #ResignModi posts, restores it later

DC CORRESPONDENT with agency inputs NEW DELHI, APRIL 29

Social media platform Facebook temporarily blocked posts containing hashtags calling on Prime Minister Narendra Modi to resign, then reinstated them on Wednesday, saying the action had been taken erroneously, according to international media reports.

“We temporarily blocked this hashtag by mistake, not because the Indian government asked us to, and have since restored it,” Facebook spokesman Andy Stone was quoted as saying. According to these media reports, #ResignModi was blocked on Facebook for several hours amid national controversy and public anger over the Union Government’s response to the ongoing Covid crisis.

The media reports said the Indian government had ordered U.S. social-media companies to block certain social media posts, saying Covid-related misinformation risked spurring a panic and were disrupting efforts to bring the pandemic under control. A second wave of the

Covid pandemic is currently battering India leading to a severe shortage of hospital beds, oxygen and anti-viral drugs such as Remdesivir. India is now recording over three and a half lakh fresh Covid cases every day while the death toll is now crossing three thousand daily.

Desperate appeals for help have become the norm on social media as people helplessly watch many of their family-members and friends die for want of timely medical care.

A foreign envoy posted in India had also recently told media outlets that his heart bled seeing scenes of hospitals and people asking for hospital beds on social media.

Modi had also recently conceded that the second Corona “storm has shaken the country” when the nation had been full of enthusiasm and self-confidence after “successfully confronting the first wave of Corona.”

The government has also conceded that the current over three million active cases of Covid have “put considerable pressure on the health care

system”.

Just a few days back, Twitter and other social media platforms removed about 100 posts and URLs after the government asked them to remove content that was critical of the handling of the current medical crisis or spreading fake news around the pandemic.

Reports citing Lumen database, an independent research project studying cease and desist letters concerning online content, suggested that more than 50 posts – including those by a Member of Parliament, MLA and filmmakers – were removed by Twitter on government request.

Government sources had said the social media platforms were asked to remove the posts and URLs (uniform resource locators) to “prevent obstructions in the fight against the pandemic” and disruption of public order due to the said posts.

They had added that the order was issued in view of the misuse of social media platforms by certain users to spread fake or misleading information and create panic.

DECCAN Chronicle

30 APRIL 2021

Govt needs to provide free vaccination to all in India

The registration for the third phase of the vaccination programme against pandemic Covid-19 has started with some technical glitches in the registration portal that were promptly corrected. As per the government's account, more than 80 lakh people aged between 18 and 45 years registered themselves for the programme that starts on May 1. The government has made it mandatory for anyone to get a jab in the third phase to register with the portal. It has also said there will be no more free vaccination for this group, which makes up almost half of the eligible population.

The government had injected a lot of hope into the people whose lives and livelihoods were severely battered by the onslaught of the microorganism when it launched the world's largest vaccination programme on January 16 this year but most of the steps it has taken after that belied that hope. And worse, the latest decisions reflect poor understanding of the ground situation and a scornful neglect for the idea of universal vaccination against a deadly pandemic. The government has parliamentary clearance for spending money to get every eligible person vaccinated but has now passed that responsibility on to the state governments so far as its most productive section of the population is concerned. Worse, it has made the private sector an integral part of the programme with little regulatory protocols. The government's decision to allow the private manufacturers to fix the price of the vaccine doses, and then merrily grabbing the opportunity to make super profits, truly reflects the callousness with which it plans to wage the war on the

No elected central government in the world would dare force the elected bodies below them to compete with private companies for a product such as vaccines

pandemic. No elected central government in the world would dare force the elected bodies below them to compete with private companies for a product such as vaccines. There won't be many countries where the citizen's right to vaccination is linked to the acts of a philanthropist entrepreneur who himself is a beneficiary of governmental largesse.

The coordinates about which the people in the Union government work now defy all sense of democracy and decency and the constitutional principles which bind them to seats of power. The right to get vaccinated against a pandemic is nothing less than the right to life and the government is duty bound to protect it. Introducing a technological interface such as a registration portal is okay as long as it brings efficiency to how the government works; making it a condition to enjoy a fundamental right is not.

The Union government must rework its vaccination policy for the youth. Anything less than a universal vaccination programme for them is akin to discounting their right to life, and is unacceptable. Technology can be a tool for people to access it but it cannot be the sole determinant. Illiterate people have an equal right to the jab, and it is the government's job to ensure it. The financial burden must be borne by the Union government that has sought, and been granted, funds by Parliament for the purpose. Anything less will amount to undermining the survival of the future of the nation. The government can decide.

Stop politics over oxygen

In the dire emergency caused by the coronavirus pandemic liquid medical oxygen has become a crucial national resource. The order to open Vedanta's Sterlite Copper smelter plant on the southern coast of Tamil Nadu and produce oxygen for medical use is a logical step to augment availability. When production is scaled up to around 1,000 MT a day, it can add about 10 per cent to national capacity. To facilitate such production is a national task and all politicians of Tamil Nadu, including the head honchos of the government of the day who opposed the oxygen operations in court, should climb off their hobby horse and cooperate in using that oxygen to help people sickened by the virus to breathe.

An oxygen crisis exists not in terms of production but in transportation as the nation has an inadequate number of tankers. It is a logistical nightmare to be able to rush lifesaving LMO to every nook and corner of the country and oxygen will soon be required everywhere in the face of the bewildering scale and speed of the spread of the disease. To undertake supply on a war footing is the executive's job but it should not be hampered by the play of politics in deciding how much oxygen will go to which state and when. The people are fed up already with political leaders playing havoc with a fair and equitable distribution of oxygen, life-saving drugs, ventilators, hospital and ICU beds, besides vaccines.

The First World has responded to India's crisis by sending oxygen concentrators, non-invasive ventilators and various other medical equipment that can help in the crisis. Political leaders and the executive give directions to must ensure fair distribution so that patients can be helped in time and the mortality rate kept down. Having lost the battle against a second wave we must first ensure that the gravely ill receive treatment in time. The politics over who is right or wrong can wait and it's time to rein in ill-conceived comments about arresting those who criticise governments or spread rumours about the Covid-19 catastrophe.

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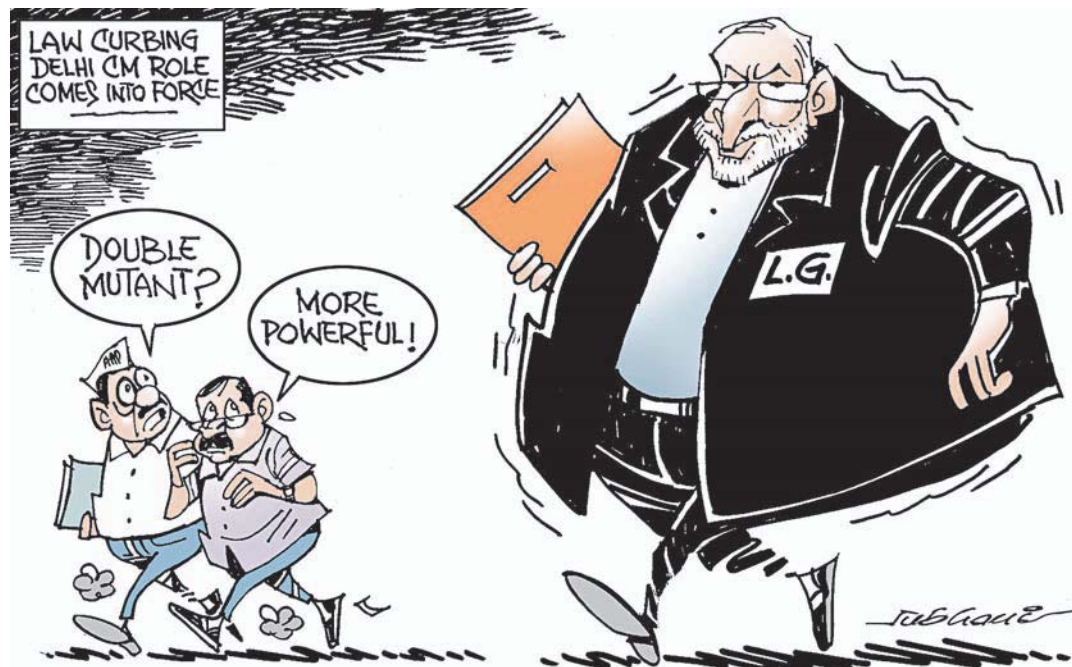
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Subhani



India's grim reality out in the open as myths busted



Karan Thapar

As I See It

It wasn't so long ago that we convinced ourselves we are a superpower or, at least, one that's definitely in the making. We believed the evidence was long and compelling — the world's largest democracy, a 1.38 billion-strong domestic market, excellence in IT and the West's back office, an unbeatable cricket team, the home of Bollywood, one of the most successful diasporas and, of course, a Prime Minister on first name terms with all the world's top leaders. The RSS was convinced this was because we are a Hindu majority nation. The BJP was more specific. It was because of Narendra Modi.

Well, an invisible virus has punctured the bubble of our pretensions. As Covid-19 increases by nearly 400,000 cases a day — mathematically projected to possibly reach a million a day in two weeks' time — our friends have shut their doors on us. From Paris to Hong Kong, Canberra to Dubai, flights from India have been barred. Meanwhile, our "enemies" are reaching out. China has offered assistance. Charities in Pakistan were the first to write to our PM. Days later Imran Khan tweeted his offer to help. This is, of course, kindness but it's likely to rattle the government.

So what went wrong? There are many answers but the one that concerns me is the argument which suggests that we brought this on ourselves. I'm referring both to our earlier belief that we're something special and have conquered the virus and also our irresponsible refusal to plan and prepare for the

worst. In other words, our judgment. And before I go into detail, let me add it's judgment, more than size and power, that one expects of a superpower. That's where we have failed.

First, after the number of new infections started to remarkably, though inexplicably, shrink from September onwards, we claimed victory. Just as Europe and America were experiencing second or even third waves, far worse than the first, we convinced ourselves that our fate would be different. In January, Prime Minister Modi told the World Economic Forum that India has "defeated" Covid. Three weeks later, on February 21, the BJP passed the following resolution: "It can be said with pride that India not only defeated Covid under the able, sensitive, committed and visionary leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, but also infused in all its citizens the confidence to build an "Atma Nirbhar Bharat". The party unequivocally hails its leadership for introducing India to the world as a proud and victorious nation in the fight against Covid." In March, the health minister, who is himself a doctor, added his personal touch. He claimed to the Delhi Medical Association that "we are in the endgame of the Covid-19 pandemic in India".

This misplaced, unscientific, irrational and downright foolish conviction that we are special is the cause of the crisis we face today. As a result, we did not plan for a second wave. In fact, we shut down the special facilities created to handle the first. Empowered committees that recommended

enhancing oxygen production in April 2020 were ignored. Even when it was decided to do so, the tenders were not placed for eight months. Time, we felt certain, was on our side. So, of the 162 plants sanctioned by the health ministry, only 33 have been installed. Consequently, today, we're forced to shut down virtually all industrial use of oxygen while we are desperately trying to import 50,000 tonnes from any country willing to sell it quickly.

I'll touch on only one more example of our irresponsible incompetence. We boast of being the vaccine manufacturer of the world. Yet with our eyes wide open, we failed to ensure we can produce enough to vaccinate ourselves. Once again, the explanation is we either didn't bother to plan or weren't capable of doing it intelligently.

Consider this — as far back as May or June last year we knew that if 75 per cent of our people were to be given a two-dose vaccine, we would need two billion jabs. That was elementary maths. We also knew that our existing vaccine production capacity could not produce anywhere near this number in the time-frame that we required. So, what did we do? A superpower would have immediately increased its capacity. Doubled or tripled it, if necessary. We did nothing. We blithely carried on as if there was no looming problem. Now we have a crisis. And, once again, the world we are so eager to impress simply cannot understand how we let this happen.

The picture which the world sees of India is not that of a potential superpower but an inept and flailing Third World country struggling but unable to handle a crisis it has inflicted on itself

Consequently, the picture which the world sees of India is not that of a potential superpower but an inept and flailing Third World country struggling but unable to handle a crisis it has inflicted on itself. Hospitals are paralysed by the lack of beds and oxygen, patients are dying in ambulances and, sometimes, on the streets, pavements and open fields have been converted into crematoria, and everywhere we have helpless, crying, forsaken citizens, with no one to turn to.

This is the grim image the Western press now has of our country. But as far as our government is concerned, it's even worse. Because all of this is compounded by the dawning realisation that the leader they once thought was strong and decisive now appears to have been unconcerned by the challenge he faced or incapable of responding to it. Indeed, his own behaviour suggests he was either ignorant of how bad things could become or unwilling to believe it.

So, today, the world is horrified by what they see of India and deeply dismayed. The bragadocio has been stripped aside. The exposed reality is ugly and impossible to hide.

Finally, there's also how we view ourselves. Our confidence in being special seems to have disappeared. This is not the exclusiveness that we sought. Television and the social media have brought home a different truth. We've been reduced to a nation that's more than frightened, we're in panic. The dream of achieving India's inevitable and irresistible destiny has metamorphosed into a nightmare where we know our own incompetence and irresponsibility is what haunts us. We long to wake up to a bright and beautiful morning. But when will this sleep of torment end?

The writer is a television commentator and anchor

LETTERS

DON'T HOLD EXAMS

The decision to hold exams may prove to be devastating for AP in general and backward districts like Srikakulam in particular. Covid-19 is at its peak and we are daily witnessing heavy rise in fatalities from Covid hospitals. Government's mere contention of gaining admissions in premier colleges based on marks of Class X and inter is beyond comprehension when lives of thousands of students are at stake.

Paidi Visweswar Rao
Visakhapatnam

At a time when the state is registering an alarming surge in Covid-19 cases, the decision to hold SSC and Intermediate exams is unwise. The reasons given by the authorities for holding the exams are sound and unfeigned. However, students are going through extraordinary circumstances due to the resurgence of Coronavirus. Therefore, it is better to put off the exams.

Dr C. Ghanshyam
Visakhapatnam

TRACKING COVID

The ugliest side of human beings is on full display as thousands of Covid patients go untraced not only in Tirupati but all over the state. Perhaps other states are also not an exception to this behaviour. It is disgusting and shameful to note that those infected are giving incorrect contact information. Such people should be jailed.

Govardhana Myneedu
Vijayawada

50 YEARS AGO IN DECCAN Chronicle

China supplying arms to Pak

RAWALPINDI, APRIL 29 Western diplomats said they believe Communist China is supplying military equipment to Pakistan and has agreed to outfit new units in the Western province to replace troops sent to suppress the Awami League in Bangla Desh.

They, however did not have details on the amount or type of military equipment to be supplied.

They said the agreement followed an unannounced visit to Peking earlier this month by Pakistan's Foreign Secretary, Sultan Khan, former Ambassador to China.

Mahir Ali



How far is Biden ready to go on guns, minimum wage, healthcare?

It is somewhat disconcerting to find myself almost in agreement with US Senator Lindsey Graham, a particularly odious representative of the Republican leadership that propped up the Trump presidency for four years, and seems determined to perpetuate its sordid legacy.

But he was on the ball when he told *Fox News Sunday*: "AOC said his first 100 days exceeded her expectations. That's all you need to know."

Of course, what he meant by "That's all you need to know" is vastly different from the way many others would interpret New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's statement last Friday that the Biden administration has "definitely exceeded the expectations that progressives had".

When AOC entered the US Congress in 2018, contrary to the primary desires of the Democratic Party establishment — alongside Squad-mates Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and Ayannah Pressley — she came across as a breath of fresh air: a legislator determined to challenge not just the egregious excesses of the Trump

administration but also the unsavoury realities of her own party's inclinations.

She had already done her bit by then for the unsuccessful Bernie Sanders campaign in 2016, and she did it again four years later. Last year's Sanders campaign, although hobbled again by the Democratic establishment, was more successful. At least in the sense that Biden advisers collaborated with Sanders associates in drawing up the election agenda.

Nonetheless, in the run-up to last November's election, it was logical to assume that, if elected, Joe Biden would go his own way — striving for bipartisanship, as was his wont during three decades in the Senate, and quite possibly achieving very little.

However, Mr Biden has managed to go reasonably far in his first 100 days — admittedly an arbitrary criterion that has been in vogue since the initial phase of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1933 inauguration. FDR assumed power during the depths of the 1930s depression, and tried to reboot the US economy through an unprecedented injection of govern-

ment resources.

It was a partial success — it actually took a world war to resurrect the US economy. Biden's efforts in the wake of Covid-19 have been compared with FDR's New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, thwarted in large part by Johnson's Vietnam woes.

For all his flaws, Johnson did manage to legislate some of the most substantial provisions against racial discrimination since Lincoln's Emancipation Act 100 years earlier. Ever since, though, there have been efforts to claw back the advances, and Republican-guided voter suppression reached a new level of sorts in Georgia recently, after the state's voters gave Biden a tentative majority in the US Senate.

The President, meanwhile, has gone further in his stimulus packages than some of his detractors on the left expected, and has facilitated a considerably more substantial role in the Senate for Sanders than anyone might have anticipated. A partial consequence has been that, unlike in 2009 when the advent of Barack

Obama was followed by far too much of the "rescue package" being restricted to the economic culprits on Wall Street, the latest stimulus has sustained poorer households.

These are temporary measures, though. There is the prospect of a massive infrastructure package that would also seek to redress, in some measure, America's reliance on fossil fuels. Mr Biden recently presided over a virtual global summit ostensibly aimed at reducing carbon dioxide emissions more sharply than spelt out in the Paris agreement of 2015, but it has been pointed out that whereas the current administration is willing to pursue its goal through concrete measures, it has no objection to the rest of the world chasing the task through market mechanisms, which have hitherto proved grossly inadequate.

The Biden administration is also struggling with border immigration measures, and with foreign policy more generally: ties with China and Russia, in particular, remain dismal. The proposed withdrawal from Afghanistan, welcome at many lev-

els, is likely to effectively entail handing back power to the Taliban — without any official recognition of why the invasion 20 years ago was a grievous error.

But let's put foreign policy aside, even though US neocolonialism is an intrinsic part of America's postwar identity, not least in its Latin American "backyard". However even domestically, there's little hope of instituting a minimum wage of only \$15, let alone the kind of universal healthcare that is routine in comparable nations, or the kind of gun control that might reduce the regular mass shootings.

These three straightforward objectives are not even on Biden's agenda. And some of the items on his wish list face resistance not just from mindless Republicans but also from Democratic senators such as Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema.

Yes, Joe Biden has exceeded expectations in his first 100 days, but where he will — or can — go from here remains an open question.

By arrangement with Dawn

SHORT TAKES

GERMAN WOMAN
IN CUSTODY
OVER KILLINGS

Potsdam, Germany: An employee at a clinic for disabled people outside Berlin was arrested Thursday on suspicion of killing four people at the centre and wounding a fifth, police said, with the motive still unclear.

The slain victims, two women and two men, were stabbed with a knife late Wednesday at the facility in the city of Potsdam, the daily Bild reported.

Those killed are believed to be patients at the care clinic, local newspaper *Potsdamer Neueste Nachrichten* reported. Police said earlier the dead were subjected to “intense, extreme violence”, but did not give any details around the circumstances of the killings.

CYPRUS TALKS
FOR SETTLEMENT
AT UN COLLAPSE

Geneva: Talks with rival Cypriot leaders failed to find common ground that could pave the way towards resolving the decades-old division of Cyprus, the UN chief concluded Thursday (April 29).

The United Nations is trying to mediate a deal for the eastern Mediterranean island, nearly six decades since it first deployed peacekeepers.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres travelled from New York to Geneva to oversee the three days of informal talks in various formats, but said they had not managed to overcome the differences between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot positions.

“The truth is that in the end of our efforts, we have not yet found enough common ground to allow for the resumption of formal negotiations in relation to the settlement of the Cyprus problem,” Guterres told a press conference. “But I do not give up,” he said.

AMAZON TO RAISE
PAY FOR OVER
5 LAKH WORKERS

New York: Amazon said Wednesday that it plans to give more than 5,00,000 of its workers a raise as it seeks to attract new workers.

The online shopping giant, which already pays new hires at least \$15 an hour, said it will start increasing pay between 50 cents an hour to \$3 an hour starting next month.

Those getting raises include warehouse workers, who pack and ship orders, as well as those who work in Amazon’s package sorting centers and other facilities.

Amazon said the pay raise is part of its push to hire more workers. The company has needed more people to get orders to shoppers during the pandemic as Americans increasingly shop online.

It hired 5,00,000 people in 2020 alone, bringing its total workforce to nearly 1.3 million people worldwide.

The pay announcement also comes after a failed union push at an Alabama warehouse, which put a national spotlight on working conditions at Amazon.

POPULATION
GREW IN 2020
SAYS CHINA

Beijing: China’s population grew last year, the government said on Thursday, following a report that a census might have found a surprise decline, possibly adding to downward pressure on economic growth.

The National Bureau of Statistics gave no details in its one-sentence statement and said the population figure would be reported later. But the unusual decision to respond to the report by *The Financial Times* reflected the issue’s political sensitivity.

The *Financial Times* said people familiar with China’s 2020 census expect it to show the population, which edged above 1.4 billion in 2019, declined for the first time since famine in 1959-61 killed millions of people.

The ruling Communist Party has enforced birth limits to restrain population growth since 1980, but an outright fall would reduce the flow of workers into the economy when it is trying to shore up growth and reduce poverty.

“According to our understanding, in 2020, China’s population continued to grow,” the NBS said on its website.

China’s population has long been expected to peak and decline in line with trends.



US vice-president Kamala Harris (left) applauds as Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (right) and US President Joe Biden (Centre) bump elbows after he addressed a joint session of Congress in the House chamber of the US Capitol in Washington. — AFP

Prez Biden calls white
supremacy ‘terrorism’

Says global terror networks have largely moved beyond US

Washington, April 29: In his first joint address to the US Congress, President Joe Biden identified white supremacy as a domestic terror threat that America must remain vigilant against.

While discussing his decision to withdraw American troops from war-torn Afghanistan, Biden noted global terror networks have largely moved beyond the country and that white supremacists posed a bigger threat than foreign actors.

“We won’t ignore what our intelligence agencies have determined to be the most lethal terrorist threat to our homeland today: White supremacy is terrorism,” Biden said in the House chamber, which just three months ago was attacked by the supporters of former president Donald Trump in an effort to overthrow the outcome of the 2020 presidential election.

“White supremacy is terrorism, and we’re not going to ignore that either. My fellow Americans, look, we have to come together to heal the soul of this nation, the president said.

In remarks, Biden acknowledged the January 6 attempted insurrection at the Capitol, saying it was an existential crisis that tested democracy.

“As we gather here tonight, the images of a violent mob assaulting this Capitol desecrating our democracy remain vivid in all our minds. Lives were put at risk many of your lives. Lives were lost. Extraordinary courage was summoned. The insurrection was an existential crisis a test of whether our democracy could survive. It did,” Biden said.

But he underscored that “the struggle is far from over” and that “the question of whether our democracy will long endure is both ancient and urgent.” — PTI

US on the move
again, says Biden

Washington, April 29: President Joe Biden triumphantly declared that the United States is “on the move again” in a rousing speech to Congress on Wednesday, calling for trillions of dollars to rebuild the post-pandemic US middle class and give new life to “forgotten” workers.

Lauding the success of mass vaccination against Covid-19, Biden told Congress and the nation on *primetime* television that “in America, we always get up.”

“America is ready for takeoff,” he said. “We are working again, dreaming again, discovering again, leading the world again.”

Biden, who was celebrating the eve of his 100th day in office, called the vaccine rollout one of “the greatest logistical achievements” in US history.

But Biden quickly pivoted to insisting that this

national effort must now focus on rebuilding the economy and fighting inequality with “the largest jobs plan since World War II.”

In a line that could have come from his populist Republican predecessor Donald Trump, Biden said working-class Americans had been ignored, while the top one percent got richer, and that his plans would give them a chance.

“You feel left behind and forgotten in an economy that’s rapidly changing. Let me speak directly to you,” Biden said, before going on to promise Americans “good-paying jobs that can’t be outsourced.”

In every aspect of the primetime television speech, Biden echoed his mantra that “America is back” — both in recovering from the Coronavirus disaster and in putting the turbulence of the Trump era behind. — AFP

U.S. TO MAINTAIN
STRONG MILITARY
IN INDO-PACIFIC

Washington, April 29: Declaring that “America is rising anew” under his leadership, President Joe Biden has told China that the US will maintain a “strong” military presence in the Indo-Pacific “not to start conflict, but to prevent one” as Beijing became more assertive in the strategically vital region. Using his maiden address to the joint session of Congress on the eve of his 100th day in office to make a strong case for huge new investments and tax reforms to overhaul the US economy and rebuild the middle class, Biden said, “we have acted to restore the people’s faith in our democracy to deliver.”

In his 65-minute address, Biden spent the majority of his time to discuss his economic and infrastructure plans for the nation, his foreign policy vision for America’s role in the world and the Coronavirus pandemic. — PTI

Harris, Pelosi make history
at first address to Congress

Washington, April 29: Vice President Kamala Harris and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi have made history as they shared the stage during President Joe Biden’s first joint session to Congress, marking the first time that two women sat behind a US president during an address to Congress.

Harris, 56, who is also the first Indian-American and also the first woman of colour woman to become America’s Vice President, sat behind on

the president’s right side as he delivered his first speech to a joint session of Congress on Wednesday night.

Pelosi, 81, who became the first woman in her role in 2007, sat behind on the President’s left.

Harris entered the House chamber on Wednesday night to a round of applause for Biden’s address to Congress.

When asked about the significance of two women sitting behind the President for the address,

Harris replied, “Normal,” to reporters in the Capitol as she led the Senate delegation to the House chamber.

Asked her view on the historic moment, Pelosi said, “It’s about time.” “It’s pretty exciting. And it’s wonderful to make history. It’s about time,” Pelosi said hours before the speech. Pelosi already knows what it feels like to sit on the rostrum in the House chamber and introduce a president for speeches. — PTI

US advises its citizens to
leave India as cases spike

Washington, April 29: The US has advised its citizens not to travel to India or to leave as soon as it is safe to do so and authorised the voluntary departure of family members of its employees in the Indian missions, saying the access to all types of medical care is becoming severely limited in the country amid a massive surge in Covid-19 cases.

The US has put India on Level 4 Travel Advisory, the highest level issued by the Department of State.

The current Level 4 Travel Advisory asks US citizens not to travel to India or to leave as soon as it is safe to do so due to the current health situation in the country.

The Department of State also authorised the voluntary departure of family members of US government employees in Mission India.

US Embassy New Delhi and Consulates General Chennai, Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Mumbai will remain open and continue to provide emergency consular services.

“#India: Access to medical care is severely limited due to Covid-19 cases. US citizens wishing to depart should use available commercial options now. Daily direct flights to the US and flights via Paris and Frankfurt are available,” the State Department tweeted.

In a health alert, the US Embassy in New Delhi said: “Access to all types of medical care is becoming severely limited in India due to the surge in Covid-19 cases.”

“We urge US citizens to enrol in STEP (Smart Traveler Enrollment Programme) at step.state.gov in order to receive critical information from the Embassy related to health and safety in India,” it said.

It asked American citizens to visit the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare website for the latest information on travel restrictions. “New cases and deaths

EU inches closer
to Covid certificate

Brussels, April 29: The European Parliament on Thursday agreed its position on how a Covid certificate should work, bringing the EU closer to launching a document to open up travel within the bloc.

Europe intends to have a certificate showing the bearer’s vaccination status, Covid test results and/or evidence of having survived the disease up and running in June, in time for the continent’s summer vacation period.

While technical work has been ongoing to ensure the certificate is recognised across all 27 EU member states, final details have to be worked out involving capitals, the European Commission and the parliament.

The first change MEPs have called for to the commission proposal is the

name. Instead of a “digital green certificate” they want to call it an “EU Covid-19 certificate” — to avoid any implication of it becoming a “vaccine passport”.

They said the document should “neither serve as travel document nor become a precondition to exercise the right to free movement” and should only be in use for 12 months.

Stressing that the certificate should not result in discrimination, parliament demanded that Covid-19 tests for travel should be free of charge. The commission has said that this issue should be left up to member states.

The parliament’s negotiation position was announced on Thursday following a vote late Wednesday, with 540 MEPs in favour, 119 against, and 31 abstentions. — AFP

from Covid-19 have risen sharply throughout India to record levels. Covid-19 testing infrastructure is reportedly constrained in many locations,” the mission said in a statement.

A record single-day rise of 3,79,257 Covid-19 infections, 3,645 fatalities on Thursday pushed India’s tally of cases to 1,83,76,524, death toll to 2,04,832.

“Hospitals are reporting shortages of supplies, oxygen, and beds for both Covid-19 and non-Covid-19 related patients. US citizens are reporting being denied admittance to hospitals in some cities due to a lack of space. Some states have enacted curfews and other restrictions that limit movement and the operation of non-essential businesses,” it said. — PTI

Moderna eyes 3 bn
vax shots in 2022

Paris, April 29: US pharmaceutical firm Moderna said on Thursday it expects to increase global production of its cutting-edge Covid vaccine to up to three billion doses in 2022.

The company said in a statement that it would make new funding commitments to increase supply at its manufacturing facilities in Europe and the United States.

The investments will double the manufacturing of drug substance at its Swiss partner Lonza and more than double output by Rovi in Spain. Production at Moderna’s US facilities would increase by 50 percent. Reaching the three billion mark will depend on the mix of its mRNA vaccine and potentially lower doses of Moderna’s pediatric vaccine and variant booster shots, the company said.

The company also raised its supply forecast for this year to between 800 million and one bil-

lion doses. ● **THE COMPANY** said in a statement that it would make new funding commitments to increase supply at its manufacturing facilities in Europe and the United States.

The announcement comes as the spread of virus variants in countries like India have raised concerns about the world’s ability to overcome the Coronavirus pandemic.

“As we follow the rapid spread of SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern, we believe that there will continue to be significant need for our mRNA Covid-19 vaccine and our variant booster candidates into 2022 and 2023,” chief executive Stephane Bancel said in the statement.

The messenger mRNA vaccines hack into human cells and effectively turns them into vaccine-making factories. — AFP

INDIA TELLS UN IT
WAS DIFFICULT
BUT DID VAX JOB

United Nations, April 29: India, despite severe constraints and within its own limited resources, has tried to “walk the talk” on vaccine equity and shared Covid-19 vaccines with more than 80 countries, the country told the United Nations.

The UN Department of Global Communications (DGC), which spreads awareness around the world about the work the UN does, has actively encouraged further sharing of vaccine doses from all countries, Counsellor in India’s Permanent Mission to the United Nations A. Amarnath said in the General Assembly’s 43rd Session of Committee on Information.

India urged the Department to also “suitably highlight the efforts of Member States, international organisations, and vaccine producers, who have already done so, especially with those who need it most.” — PTI

Air pollutants in
India sees a rise

Birmingham, April 29: Levels of air pollutants in cities in India are on the rise, according to scientists using observations from instruments on satellites that scan the global skies every day.

Researchers used a long record of data gathered by space-based instruments to estimate trends in a range of air pollutants for 2005 to 2018, timed to coincide with well-established air quality policies in the UK and rapid development in India.

The study was led by the University of Birmingham and UCL and included an international team of contributors from Belgium, India,

Jamaica and the UK. The researchers published their findings in the journal *Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics*, noting that fine particles (PM2.5) and nitrogen dioxide (NO2), both hazardous to health, are increasing in Kanpur and Delhi.

Delhi is a fast-growing megacity and Kanpur was ranked by the WHO in 2018 as the most polluted city in the world.

This contrasts with trends in the UK cities London and Birmingham, which show modest but ongoing declines in PM2.5 and NOx, reflecting the success of policies targeting sources that emit these pollutants. — PTI

NUCLEAR | DEAL

Concessions beyond nuclear-specific sanctions may be halted

US may rollback Iran sanctions

Washington, April 29: The Biden administration is considering a near wholesale rollback of some of the most stringent Trump-era sanctions imposed on Iran in a bid to get the Islamic Republic to return to compliance with a landmark 2015 nuclear accord, according to current and former US officials and others familiar with the matter.

As indirect talks continue this week in Vienna to explore the possibility of reviving the nuclear deal, American officials have become increasingly expansive about what they might be prepared to offer Iran, which has been driving a hard line on sanctions relief, demanding that all US penalties be

removed, according to these people.

American officials have refused to discuss which sanctions are being considered for removal. But they have said they are open to lifting any sanctions that are inconsistent with the nuclear deal or that deny Iran the relief it would be entitled to should it return to compliance with the accord.

Because of the complex nature of the sanctions architecture, that could include non-nuclear sanctions, such as those tied to terrorism, missile development and human rights. Biden administration officials say this is necessary because of what they describe as a deliberate attempt by the Trump

administration to stymie any return to the deal. Under the 2015 agreement, the United States was required to lift sanctions tied to Iran’s nuclear program, but not non-nuclear sanctions.

Administration officials deny they will remove all non-nuclear sanctions, but have declined to identify those which they believe Trump improperly imposed on terrorism and other grounds.

“Any return to the JCPOA would require sanctions relief, but we are considering removing only those sanctions that are inconsistent with the JCPOA,” said State Department spokesman Ned Price. “Even if we rejoin the JCPOA — which

remains a hypothetical — we would retain and continue to implement sanctions on Iran for activities not covered by the JCPOA, including Iran’s missile proliferation, support for terrorism, and human rights abuses.”

When President Donald Trump re-imposed sanctions after withdrawing from the deal in 2018, he not only put the nuclear sanctions back in but also added layers of terrorism and other sanctions on many of the same entities. In addition, the Trump administration imposed an array of new sanctions on previously unsanctioned entities.

This has put the current administration in an awkward position: Iran is

demanding the removal of all sanctions.

If the US doesn’t lift at least some of them, Iran says it won’t agree to halt its nuclear activities barred by the deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA.

But if the Biden administration makes concessions that go beyond the nuclear-specific sanctions, Republican critics and others, including Israel and Gulf Arab states, are likely to seize on them as proof that the administration is caving to Iran. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has led the charge among Trump alumni to denounce any easing of sanctions. — AP

SHORT TAKES

Umpire, referee pull out of IPL

New Delhi: India's top umpire Nitin Menon has pulled out of the ongoing IPL after his family was struck by a couple of Covid-19 cases, while his Australian counterpart Paul Reiffel's attempts at leaving hit a dead end because of his country's suspension of air travel with India. It is learnt that Menon, a resident of Indore, has left the IPL bio-bubble after his wife and mother tested positive for Covid-19. Match referee Manu Nayyar too has left the bio-bubble in Ahmedabad following the death of his mother on Wednesday night. In Reiffel's case, the Australian government's imposition of a travel ban on flights to and from India in the wake of the rising COVID-19 cases here led to him being unable to leave the bubble after initial information suggested that he has made the move. — *PTI*

RR, DC, Sachin in Covid relief cash

New Delhi: IPL franchise Rajasthan Royals on Thursday said it has raised ₹7.5 crore to provide immediate support to people affected by the Covid-19 pandemic through its foundation. Delhi Capitals also on Thursday pledged ₹1.5 crore in support of the national capital's fight against the pandemic. "Players along with the team owners and team management have come forward to raise funds and have been working along with the Rajasthan Royals' philanthropic arm Royal Rajasthan Foundation (RRF) in partnership with the British Asian Trust (BAT)," a release issued by the franchise said. Meanwhile, Sachin Tendulkar donated ₹1 crore to procure oxygen concentrators for Covid-19 patients. The healthcare system is crumbling due to the crisis with hospitals struggling to provide oxygen and crucial medicines to the patients. — *PTI*

Hasan, Shaheen skittle Zim for 176

Harare: Pakistan pace pair Hasan Ali and Shaheen Shah Afridi shared eight wickets between them to dismiss Zimbabwe for 176 on the opening day of the first Test in Harare on Thursday. Hasan rocked the top order with figures of 4/53 while Afridi polished off the tail with 4/43 as the home batsmen struggled to cope with the pace generated on a slow pitch at Harare Sports Club. Debutant Roy Kaia stood firm in the post-lunch session, top-scoring with 48 before falling leg-before to Hasan while Donald Tiripano chipped in with 28 and Milton Shumba, also playing in his first Test, scored 27. In the first session Hasan struck twice to give Pakistan an excellent start. — *AFP*

Brief scores: Zimbabwe 176 in 59.1 overs (R. Kaia 48; Shaheen Shah Afridi 4/43, Hasan Ali 4/53) vs Pakistan.

Five up for India women coach job

New Delhi: Former chief selector Hemlata Kala is among five female candidates who have applied to become the Indian women's team's head coach, a position that has been held by men since 2017. Mamatha Maben, Jaya Sharma, Suman Sharma and Nooshin Al Khadeer are the others who have presented their candidature for the job. Among the men, incumbent W.V. Raman has reapplied after his term ended with the home series loss to South Africa in March. — *PTI*

Live on

TV

CRICKET

IPL: Punjab Kings vs Royal Challengers Bangalore from 7.30 pm on Star Sports 1, HD

FORMULA ONE

Portuguese Grand Prix: Practice 1 from 3.55 pm, Practice 2 from 7.25 pm on Star Sports Select 2, HD

FOOTBALL

English Premier League: Southampton vs Leicester City from 12.30 am (Saturday) on Star Sports Select 2, HD

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QUINTESSENCE

Sublime De Kock's unbeaten 70 brings Mumbai back to winning ways

New Delhi, April 29: Opener Quinton de Kock roared back to form with a blistering 50-ball 70 as Mumbai Indians beat Rajasthan Royals by seven wickets in their IPL game here on Thursday.

Put in to bat, Rajasthan rode on 42 by skipper Sanju Samson and Jos Buttler's 41 to post a competitive 171 for four but their efforts was overshadowed by de Kock, who struck six fours and two maximums to complete the task in 18.3 overs at the Arun Jaitley Stadium.

Krunal Pandya also played a useful cameo, smashing 39 off 26 balls with the help of two fours and as many sixes.

Mumbai openers Rohit Sharma (14) and de Kock put up 49 for the first wicket. The South African fetched his first boundary, a cover drive, and then launched into left-arm pacer Mustafizur Rahman (1/37) for a four and a maximum. While Rohit played his trademark pull-shot to get a six in the fifth over.

De Kock hammered Chris Morris (2/33) for another maximum but Rohit perished in the sixth over, giving a dolly to Chetan Sakariya at mid-on.

Leg-spinner Rahul Tewatia (0/30) conceded three boundaries in the seventh over, two by Suryakumar Yadav (16; 3x4) and one by de Kock, as Mumbai got 14 runs.

However, Morris brought back Rajasthan by removing Surya, as Mumbai slipped to 83/2.

Krunal joined de Kock, who completed his half-century in 35 balls and then got a life. De Kock and Krunal added 63 runs for the third wicket and brought the side closer to a win. — *PTI*



Quinton de Kock of Mumbai Indians plays a shot against Rajasthan Royals in an IPL match at the Arun Jaitley Stadium in New Delhi on Thursday. — *IPL*

PUNJAB HAVE TASK CUT OUT AGAINST RCB

Ahmedabad, April 29: Punjab Kings will have to play out of their skins to get their stuttering campaign back on track when they face a high-flying Royal Challengers Bangalore in the Indian Premier League here on Friday.

Smarting from a five-wicket defeat at the hands of Kolkata Knight Riders, it will not be an easy task for a struggling Punjab side to stand up to the challenge thrown by a RCB team, which has been firing on all cylinders.

Following four losses and two wins, Punjab are currently placed sixth in the league table with four points, whereas RCB are second with 10 points from five wins, only behind Chennai Super Kings on net run rate.

Apart from the sole loss against CSK, RCB have emerged as strong contenders for a maiden IPL title, with many of their players striking form as the tournament progresses. In their six games, the K.L. Rahul-led side have gone on to make the three low totals batting first — 106, 120 and 123. — *PTI*

SCORECARD

Rajasthan Royals: Jos Buttler st de Kock b Rahul Chahar 41, Yashasvi Jaiswal c and b Rahul Chahar 32, Sanju Samson b Boult 42, Shivam Dube c and b Bumrah 35, David Miller not out 7, Riyan Parag not out 8. Extras (lb-2, w-3, nb-1) 6. **Total (for 4 wks, in 20 overs) 171.** **FoW:** 66-1, 91-2, 148-3, 158-4.

Bowler: Trent Boult 4-0-37-1, Jasprit Bumrah 4-0-15-1, Jayant Yadav 3-0-37-0, Nathan Coulter-Nile 4-0-35-0, Rahul Chahar 4-0-33-2, Krunal Pandya 1-0-12-0.

Mumbai Indians: Rohit Sharma c Chetan Sakariya b Chris Morris 14, Quinton de Kock not out 70, Suryakumar Yadav c Jos Buttler b Chris Morris 16, Krunal

Pandya b Mustafizur 39, Kieron Pollard not out 16. Extras (lb-15, w-2) 17. **Total: (for 3 wks, in 18.3 overs) 172.** **FoW:** 49-1, 83-2, 146-3.

Bowler: Chetan Sakariya 3-0-18-0, Jaydev Unadkat 4-0-33-0, Mustafizur Rahman 3-3-0-37-1, Chris Morris 4-0-33-2, Rahul Tewatia 3-0-30-0, Shivam Dube 1-0-6-0.

VALLADOLID HOLD BILBAO TO STAY SAFE

Madrid, April 29: Valladolid twice came from behind to draw 2-2 with Athletic Bilbao and climb out of the Spanish league's relegation zone.

Shon Weissman scored an 85th-minute equaliser to give the visitors the point that lifted them to 17th place with five rounds left.

Valladolid are tied on 30 points with 18th-place Elche but are ahead on goal difference.

Athletic took the lead through Jon Morcillo in the 14th before Fabián Orellana levelled the match in the 70th and Raúl García put the hosts ahead again in the 76th.

The draw extended Valladolid's winless streak in the league to seven matches.

Athletic were looking to keep the momentum from a win over leaders Atlético Madrid on Sunday. They sit in ninth place and still have an outside chance of qualifying for the Europa League.

The match was originally scheduled to be played two weeks ago. It was postponed because of Athletic's participation in the Copa del Rey final.

Barcelona can take over the league lead for the first time on Thursday with a win against Granada. — *AP*

Mahrez magic lifts Man City past PSG

Paris, April 29: Manchester City are in pole position to reach the Champions League final after coming from behind to beat Paris Saint-Germain 2-1 away in the first leg of their blockbuster semi-final on Wednesday, with Riyad Mahrez curling in the winner from a free-kick.

Marquinhos had powered in a header to give PSG an early lead and the deserved advantage at half-time at the Parc des Princes.

However, City skipper Kevin De Bruyne's cross dropped in to pull City level just after the hour and Mahrez beat Keylor Navas from a 71st-minute free-kick to complete the turnaround, giving Pep Guardiola's side the advantage going into next Tuesday's return in Manchester.

"The last 10 minutes of the first half was good and the second half was excellent in every department. We scored two goals away which is so important, but we have a hard job to do in six days," Guardiola told BT Sport.

"In general, so satisfied for the performance but it is halfway. We still have 90 more minutes to beat them and PSG is a team where anything can happen."

After starting so well, PSG lost their way after half-time and had Idrissa Gana Gueye sent off in the 77th minute as a



Manchester City's Riyad Mahrez (left) celebrates after scoring against Paris Saint-Germain during their Champions League first leg semi-final in Paris on Wednesday. — *AFP*

shocking tackle on Ilkay Gundogan earned the midfielder a straight red card.

Having already failed to win at home to Manchester United, Barcelona and Bayern in this season's Champions League, the Parisians face an uphill struggle in England if they are to reach the final for the sec-

ond year running. It is, then, first blood to Emirati-backed City against Qatar-owned PSG in a tie that is also a battle of competing Gulf nations. "We conceded two stupid goals," Marquinhos admitted to broadcaster RMC Sport.

Of the return leg, he added: "There is no point in us going there if we

don't believe we can turn it around."

After all the money pumped in by their owners from Abu Dhabi, City are eyeing a first ever Champions League final, and this was their first appearance in the semi-finals since 2016, when they defeated PSG in the last eight.

However, PSG can still

be optimistic about their prospects after sensational away performances against Barcelona and Bayern in the last two rounds. PSG coach Mauricio Pochettino is hoping to once again get the better of Guardiola, just as he did when his Tottenham side beat City in the quarter-finals in 2019. — *AFP*

IPL POINTS TABLE						
Teams	P	W	L	N/R	Points	Net RR
CSK	6	5	1	0	10	+1.475
DC	7	5	2	0	10	+0.466
RCB	6	5	1	0	10	+0.089
MI	6	3	3	0	6	+0.071
KKR	7	2	5	0	4	-0.494
PBKS	6	2	4	0	4	-0.608
RR	6	2	4	0	4	-0.69
SRH	6	1	5	0	2	-0.264

ORANGE CAP		
Shikhar Dhawan, DC	311	
Faf du Plessis, CSK	270	
Prithvi Shaw, DC	269	

PURPLE CAP		
Harshal Patel, RCB	17	
Avesh Khan, DC	13	
Rahul Chahar, MI	11	

Sharp Shaw cuts KKR down to size

Ahmedabad, April 29: Prithvi Shaw's quickfire 82 off just 41 balls helped Delhi Capitals eased past Kolkata Knight Riders by seven wickets in their Indian Premier League match here on Thursday. DC chased down the target in 16.3 overs.

The 21-year-old Shaw smashed 11 fours and three sixes during his blazing knock. He was well-supported by experienced Shikhar Dhawan (46 off 47 balls) and shared 142 run for the first wicket.

Pat Cummins was pick of the bowler for the losing side as he took 3/24.

Asked to bat first, Kolkata Knight Riders made 154 for six against the in-form team from Delhi.

Opener Shubman Gill regained some form with a 38-ball 43 but Knight Riders slipped to 82 for five before Andrew Russell smashed 45 off 27 balls to take them past the 150-mark at the Narendra Modi Stadium here.

Among Delhi Capitals bowlers, the spin duo of Axar Patel (2/32) and Lalit

SCORECARD

Kolkata Knight Riders: Nitish Rana st Pant b Axar 15, Shubman Gill c Steven Smith b Avesh Khan 43, Rahul Tripathi c Lalit Yadav b Stoinis 19, Eoin Morgan c Steven Smith b Lalit Yadav 0, Sunil Narine b Lalit Yadav 0, Andre Russell not out 45, Dinesh Karthik lbw b Axar 14, Pat Cummins not out 11. Extras (lb-6, w-1) 7. **Total (for 6 wks, in 20 overs) 154.** **FoW:** 25-1, 69-2, 74-3, 75-4, 82-5, 109-6.

Bowling: Ishant Sharma 4-0-34-0, Kagiso Rabada 4-0-31-0, Axar Patel 4-0-32-2, Avesh Khan 4-0-31-1, Lalit Yadav 3-0-13-2, Marcus Stoinis 1-0-7-1.

Delhi Capitals: Prithvi Shaw c Rana b Cummins 82, Shikhar Dhawan lbw b Cummins 46, Rishabh Pant c Mavi b Cummins 16, Marcus Stoinis not out 6, Shimron Hetmyer not out 0. Extras (b-1, nb-1, w-4) 6. **Total (for 3 wks, in 16.3 overs) 156.** **FoW:** 1-132, 2-146, 3-150.

Bowling: Shivam Mavi 1-0-25-0, Varun Chakravathy 4-0-34-0, Prashidh Krishna 3-3-0-36-0, Sunil Narine 4-0-36-0, Pat Cummins 4-0-24-3.

Yadav (2/13) snared two wickets each, while Avesh Khan (1/31) captured one. — *PTI*

COVID | EFFECT

FC GOA COACH, FOREIGN STAFF LEAVE INDIA

Margao, April 29: Indian Super League side FC Goa on Thursday allowed their foreign staffers, including Spanish head coach Juan Ferrando and some footballers, to leave the country ahead of their last AFC Champions League match in view of the restrictions imposed on flights from India.

As India grapples with the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, several countries, including Australia, Italy and Germany, have imposed travel bans on India.

The club said that it was a "pre-emptive measure in view of recent policies being taken by European and other countries in regards to travellers from India".

"FC Goa would like to inform that the club's foreign contingent including the Head Coach and foreign staff have been advised to travel back home immediately," a club statement read.

"This comes as a pre-emptive measure in view of recent policies being taken by European and other countries in regards to travellers from India as the nation battles the second wave of Covid-19 which has engulfed the country," it added. — *PTI*

S. KOREA INOCULATES TOKYO-BOUND ATHLETES

Seoul, April 29: South Korea began administering fast-track Covid-19 vaccines on Thursday to athletes, coaches and others expected to attend the Tokyo Olympics.

The Korean Sport and Olympic Committee said the first group of about 100 people received the first doses at a state-run hospital in Seoul at the start of the country's prioritized vaccination program for its Olympic delegation. They will be given second shots in the coming weeks.

A total of 930 athletes, coaches, officials and other support staff will be vaccinated ahead of the Tokyo Games, which is set to open on July 23. Athletes can receive the vaccines if they have already qualified for the Olympics or are in qualifying tournaments, so some may get vaccinated but not attend the games. — *AP*

Stage set in Portugal for Lewis vs Max Act III

Portimao (Portugal), April 29: The third instalment of what is shaping up to be one of Formula One's finest title duels in years moves to Portugal's sun-blessed Algarve this weekend with Lewis Hamilton leading Max Verstappen by a single point.

That the seven-time champion tops the nascent drivers' standings is for once a surprise with Red Bull enjoying a rare speed superiority over the Mercedes.

But a Verstappen error contributed to Hamilton's

opening win in Bahrain and a timely safety car intervention played kindly into Hamilton's hands after an uncharacteristic mistake at Imola.

A probable pointless finish after planting his car in a gravel pit was almost magically transformed into second behind the Dutch driver, with a fastest lap giving him the slimmest of leads.

For Mercedes team chief Toto Wolff, Red Bull were guilty of failing to exploit their cars' evident speed advantage.

"To come away leading

● **For Mercedes team chief Toto Wolff, Red Bull were guilty of failing to exploit their cars' evident speed advantage.**

both championships almost felt like a get out of jail free card, because our rivals didn't maximise the opportunity we gave them," he told the German team's website.

"And it just proves what a challenging season we have ahead of us and how

quickly things can turn around in Formula One."

The Algarve International Circuit holds a special place in Hamilton's heart as it was here six months ago that he notched up his 92nd Grand Prix win to surpass Michael Schumacher as the most successful F1 driver of all time.

And the Portimao track can play a part in another personal milestone. If Hamilton heads the timesheets after Saturday's qualifying it will be his 100th pole.

History beckons for

Verstappen too — with victory lifting him into the championship lead for the first time in his career.

Last time out's Emilia Romagna Grand Prix was a chaotic classic which saw Lando Norris boasting a sparkling third for McLaren but left Valtteri Bottas feeling bitter after a crash with the Williams of George Russell led to an angry exchange between the pair.

Another leaving Imola frustrated was Verstappen's new teammate Sergio Perez. — *AFP*