





## IN BRIEF

**Civilian shot at in eatery in Srinagar**

**Srinagar:** An unidentified gunman shot and injured a civilian identified as Akash Mehra at an eatery in Srinagar's Durga Nag, Dalgate area. He was quickly evacuated to the hospital where doctors were operating upon him as reports last came in. The hospital sources said that the victim has received a bullet wound in the chest. The police termed it a "terror crime" and blamed separatist militants for it. A police statement said that gunmen opened fire at Krishna Daba, injuring civilian Akash Mehra, a resident of Janipora area of Jammu presently putting up at Dalgate Srinagar.

**EAM likely to visit Bangla next month**

**New Delhi:** External affairs minister S. Jaishankar is expected to travel to Bangladesh on March 4 to prepare the ground for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's upcoming visit to that country to further broadbase bilateral ties, people familiar with the development said. In Dhaka, Mr Jaishankar is scheduled to hold talks with his Bangladeshi counterpart A.K. Abdul Momen on a range of bilateral and regional issues, they said. Modi is likely to pay a two-day visit to Bangladesh beginning March 26 to participate in the 50th anniversary celebrations of the liberation of Bangladesh, the people said. Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen visited India last month during which both sides extensively deliberated on Mr Modi's visit to Dhaka. The two sides also reviewed progress in the bilateral relationship. — *PTI*

**BRIDE ELOPES WITH LOVER ON WEDDING DAY**

**AKHAYA KUMAR SAHOO**  
BHUBANESWAR, FEB. 17

A bride on Tuesday evening eloped with her lover before the wedding ceremony at Malpada village in Odisha's Kalahandi district. Shockingly, the family members of the bride got her minor sister married to the groom. However, the Jaipatna Child Development and Protection Officer and local Jaipatna police, on being informed about the incident, reached the groom's village Tentulikhunti and rescued the 15-year-old girl. Subsequently, the girl was handed over to her family members. "The girl can either stay at her house or at hostel if she wishes so. She will be allowed to stay with her husband at her in-laws' place after she attains 18 years of age," an official of Child Line, a statutory body for protecting children, said. "In some parts of Odisha, families still get their younger daughters married to grooms in situations like elopement of brides. They do this with a vague impression that the move will salvage the family's lost prestige. However, marrying younger daughters of the family after elopement of elder ones are clear cases of human rights abuse," an elected zilla parishad member said.

**Nursery admissions in Delhi start today, registration ends March 4**

*Respite for parents who have been waiting for notification for over 2 mnts*

**New Delhi, Feb. 17:** The process for nursery admissions in schools across the national capital will begin from Thursday and the application window will close on March 4.

The Directorate of Education (DoE) last week notified the admission schedule, bringing respite for anxious parents who have been waiting for the notification for over two months.

As per the notified schedule, the first list of selected children will be displayed on March 20, followed by second list on March 25 and subsequent list for admission, if any, on March 27. The entire admission process will conclude on March 31. Usually, nursery admis-

► **AS PER** the notified schedule, the first list of selected children will be displayed on March 20, followed by second list on March 25

sions in around 1,700 schools in the national capital begin in the last week of November. The DoE releases guidelines and schools are asked to furnish required information, following which the application process is rolled out in December. However, there has been no development on it in 2020.

The Delhi government officials had in December said that a proposal to scrap nursery admissions is being considered as the

schools have been closed for nine months due to Covid-19 and will remain closed till a vaccine is available. A whole year of online learning for small children seems unviable, they had said. But school principals had opposed this idea.

"Since schools are closed in view of the Covid-19 pandemic and physical class room learning is not going on for entry level classes at present, schools have been directed that no fee except prescribed registration fee, admission fee, caution fee (if school already charges) and tuition fee, shall be charged at the time of admission by the schools and thereafter only tuition

fee shall be charged from the students till further orders.

"No deviation from the notified schedule shall be permitted. Each school shall display the admission schedule on its notice board and website. Further each school shall ensure that application forms for admission are made available to all applicants till the last date of submission of admission's application form," a senior DoE official said.

Schools can only charge a non-refundable amount of ₹25 from the parents as admission registration fee and the purchase of prospectus of the school by the parents has been kept optional. — *PTI*

**No Covid deaths reported in 18 states, 11K new cases**

**AGE CORRESPONDENT**  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 17

As active cases of novel coronavirus continue to be on a decline, no deaths were reported in 18 States and Union territories in the last 24 hours. On the other hand, recoveries continue to be the rise and cumulative recoveries have now reached 1.06 crore.

In the last 24 hours 11,610 fresh cases and 100 deaths were reported. High number of cases continue to be reported from Kerala and Maharashtra.

Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray warned of imposing fresh lockdown measures if Covid appropriate behavior was not followed. He has directed local bodies to take punitive action

**India to 'gift' 2 lakh vaccine doses for UN Peacekeepers**

**AGE CORRESPONDENT**  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 17

India on Wednesday announced a "gift" of two lakh India-manufactured Covid vaccine doses for UN Peacekeepers, even as external affairs minister S. Jaishankar on Wednesday appealed to the international community through the UN to stop "vaccine nation-

alism" and rather "actively encourage internationalism". Stating that "hoarding superfluous doses will defeat our efforts towards attaining collective health security", he also pointed to the need to "stop disinformation campaigns taking advantage of this pandemic to advance their nefarious objectives and activities".

against people and establishments found violating Covid norms and standard operating procedures. "People have become

carefree. It is for the people to decide if they want a lockdown or want to continue living with the small restrictions like now," said Mr Thackeray.

**Man wielding 2 swords arrested in Red Fort case**

*Cops allege intent of accused was to 'motivate & energise' protesters*

**BHASKAR HARI SHARMA**  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 17

A man allegedly seen swinging swords near Red Fort during the tractor rally on Republic Day has been arrested. Police has alleged that he was swinging swords with the intent of "motivating" and "energising" protesters at Red Fort.

Maninder Singh, 30, who runs a sword training school near his home in Swaroop Nagar in northwest Delhi and works as a car AC mechanic, was arrested on Tuesday, police said. "Singh was seen in a video swinging two swords at Red Fort with the intent of motivating or radicalising and energising violent anti-national elements indulging in brutal assault and attacking police persons on duty," DCP (Special Cell) Pramod Singh Kushwah said.

"Singh was 'radicalised' by seeing provoking Facebook posts of various groups. He would frequently visit the Singhu border and was 'highly motivated' by speeches made by leaders there. He also 'motivated' six people from the neighbourhood who had accompanied the tractor parade that headed from Singhu border towards the Mukarba Chowk," said the DCP. "Two swords — 4.3-foot-long 'khandas' — used by Singh have been recovered from his house. According to the plan, Singh, five of his associates and other unknown armed men entered the Red Fort where he did a sword dance," said the DCP.

"That sword dance motivated violent protesters

**Inebriated man attacks SHO at Singhu, arrested**

**AGE CORRESPONDENT**  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 17

A man has been arrested for allegedly attacking an SHO of the Delhi police and fleeing with his car at the Singhu border, where farmers are protesting against three new agriculture laws, officials said on Wednesday.

The incident that resulted in minor injuries to the officer took place around 8 pm on Tuesday, they said. According to the police, the accused, who was in an inebriated state, snatched the car keys of one of the officers at the protest site and fled the spot.

Being chased by the police, the accused abandoned the vehicle, snatched a two-wheeler from another man and fled. The security personnel finally overpowered him near the Mukarba Chowk.

to cause more mayhem at Red Fort by indulging in all sorts of violence against public servants, including policemen on duty there, and causing damage to the Red Fort," said the DCP.

"The video of him swinging swords at the Red Fort was found in his mobile phone. Other photos of his presence at Singhu border are also there and an investigation was on," he said.

Over 120 people have been arrested so far in connection with the violence across Delhi on January 26, officials said.

**Opp. parties slam Centre, question claim of 'positive changes' in Valley Foreign envoys visit J&K to assess situation**

**YUSUF JAMEEL**  
SRINAGAR, FEB. 17

A 24-member delegation of New Delhi-based envoys on Wednesday met wide cross sections of society during its visits to Srinagar and neighbouring district of Budgam in their quest to understand the ground realities in Jammu and Kashmir in the backdrop of "positive changes" witnessed after scrapping of Article 370, the officials said.

The delegation would be

leaving for winter capital Jammu early Thursday for similar engagements during the second leg of its two-day tour of the Union territory (UT).

The visit, third since the Centre stripped former state of its special status and split it up into two UTs in August 2019, is being facilitated by ministry of external affairs (MEA) to showcase "successful" conduct of District Development Council (DDC) elections and "peaceful environment" in

J&K to the international community.

The delegation led by European Union ambassador to India and Bhutan, Ugo Astuto, and which includes diplomats from African, European, Latin American and some Asian countries drove to Magam township of Budgam straight from the Srinagar airport to interact with newly-elected DDC members, select political activists, traders, citizens and social activists.

On Wednesday, several

mainstream opposition parties questioned the government's claim of "positive changes" in J&K situation. They also reiterated that such guided tours of foreign diplomats during which they are allowed to meet only hand-picked favourites cannot hide the truth. Former chief minister and PDP president, Mehbooba Mufti, told reporters at Handwara in frontier Kupwara district, "Delegations come and go, but the fact remains that

the situation is not good in J&K". She added, "We're being caged in our own homes."

Some Opposition leaders also hold the opinion that inviting foreign diplomats to visit J&K frequently could weaken India's stand of the erstwhile state being an internal issue of the country.

Pakistan has termed the New Delhi-based diplomats visit to J&K "as part of India's efforts to mislead the world community".

**8 named in chargesheet in MP NIOS exam scam**

**AGE CORRESPONDENT**  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 17

The CBI has named eight persons in its supplementary charge sheet filed before a special court in Bhopal in connection with a case pertaining to the alleged irregularities during the secondary and senior secondary examinations conducted by the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) in Madhya Pradesh in 2017. The NIOS is the board of education under the Central government.

In its charge sheet filed before a special CBI court in Bhopal on Wednesday, the CBI has alleged that a "large number of students" who did not appear in the Classes 10 and 12 examinations in 2017 at examination centres in Sehore, Ratlam and Umaria of MP, were declared as passed by NIOS.

"It was alleged that the accused committed forgery and manipulations in the attendance sheets of the exam centers, answer sheets, etc., of the students," a CBI spokesperson said.



Femina Miss India 2020 Manasa Varanasi returns to her hometown in Hyderabad on Wednesday. — *PTI*

**Govt denies Chamoli disaster and Chardham project link**

**PARMOD KUMAR**  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 17

The centre on Wednesday denied any linkage between recent flash floods in Rishiganga and Dhauliganga rivers and the Chardham project linking four holy towns with all-weather motorable road — a project considered to be of strategic importance by the armed forces.

Attorney-general K.K. Venugopal said this to a bench comprising Justices R.F. Nariman, Hemant

Gupta and B.R. Gavai in response to a letter written to the top court by high-powered committee chairman Ravi Chopra linking disaster to the Chardham project.

Ravi Chopra is chairman of high powered committee set up by the top court in August 2019 to examine the ecological impact of the 900-km project connecting four holy towns — Gangotri, Yamunotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath.

Mr Chopra in his letter

addressed to the top court has said that he has been told by the local residents that but for the stay of 24 hydel projects, the flash flood disaster in Rishi Ganga and Dhaul Ganga rivers could have had devastating effect on the state.

Describing the letter by HPC chairman Chopra as "unwarranted", Mr Venugopal appearing for the ministry of defence, told the bench that the assertions imputing blame on the project for disaster are not correct.

**Ensure 50% attendance: Naidu to Parl panel chiefs**

**AGE CORRESPONDENT**  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 17

Urging chairmen and members of eight parliamentary standing committees of the Rajya Sabha to work towards ensuring attendance at over 50 per cent, Chairman M. Venkaiah Naidu has appreciated the substantial improvement in working hours of these committees.

The functioning of the eight committees of the Upper House has improved substantially with 15 per cent increase in attendance and more than 16 per cent improvement in the average duration of meetings since their reconstitution in September, 2019 over that of the previous two years. These committees are reconstituted in September every year by the Chairman. Attendance of 11 of the 31 members of each committee constitutes the quorum.

In a letter to chairmen of the committees, Mr Naidu has mentioned outcomes and detailed appraisals of the analysis of functioning of these committees since September 2017.

**BJP eyeing Puducherry?**

■ **Continued from Page 1**

and NR Congress, have started putting pressure on Tamilisai Soundararajan, the Telangana governor who has been given additional charge of Puducherry, even before she has taken charge as acting lieutenant-governor, to oust the government that has just a few months more in office.

Besides poaching the Congress MLAs, the BJP has also used its allies, the NR Congress and AIADMK, in its mission to storm the Congress citadel. The DMK, ostensibly an ally of the Congress, also has ideas of capturing the Union territory on its own for various reasons.

But it is the BJP that has seemingly bigger plans. Even the sudden removal of Ms Bedi appears to have been done to improve the image of the party among the people since the lieutenant-governor had become unpopular among several sections of people.

The chief minister, Mr Narayanasamy, had been campaigning against Ms Bedi — he and his party colleagues had even sat on a fast in front of Raj Nivas — accusing her of being a stumbling block in the

implementation of welfare schemes.

The BJP may have plans to bring in a new lieutenant-governor who would be able to win over the hearts of the people and also use its allies for the time being to capture power. It may project Mr Namassivayam, who is popular locally, as its chief ministerial candidate.

Mr Namassivayam, in any case, has a track record of party hopping.

He started with the DMK, then went to MDMK, then to the TMC started by P. Kannan and thus landed in the Congress as the TMC merged with it.

As a leader with chief ministerial aspirations, Mr Namassivayam was hopeful of realising his dream in 2016, but Mr Narayanasamy came out of the blue and took away his chances. The BJP might have assured him that it can help him to become the chief minister.

Mr Namassivayam and Mr Theepainthan, incidentally, joined the BJP by travelling all the way to New Delhi and meeting top saffron leaders like Amit Shah and J.P. Nadda.

**Shah takes poll battle to Didi nephew's stronghold**

■ **Continued from Page 1**

Halder's defection to the saffron party from the TMC recently and Joynagar TMC MP Pratima Mondal's absence at party rallies of Mr Banerjee have only come as a boost to the BJP in the district which also have a large Muslim population. To compete with Mr Shah, the TMC chief and her nephew will address a mega party workers' rally at Pailan in another part of the same district during Mr Shah's visit.

Hours before Mr Shah's proposed tour, a group of Bengali actors including Yash Dasgupta and Papiya Adhikari joined the BJP in presence of senior leaders like Kailash Vijayvargiya and Mukul Roy, widening the political divide further in Tollywood which was, till now, mainly controlled by the TMC.

**Past govts to blame: PM**

■ **Continued from Page 1**

diversify its sources to reduce risks.

The focus now is also towards using renewable sources of energy, which will by 2030 form 40 per cent of the energy generated in the country, he said. Also, the government is working towards raising the share of natural gas in the energy basket to 15 per cent from the current 6.3 per cent and is committed to bringing it under the Goods and Services Tax regime to eliminate cascading effect of multiple taxes, he added. — *PTI*

**Amid farmers' protest, Congress sweeps civic body polls in Punjab**

■ **Continued from Page 1**

BJP, SAD and AAP He rooted for renomination of Chief Minister Amarinder Singh when assembly elections are held early next year.

"I would like to launch a campaign, 'Captain for 2022'. Only he can steer the ship of the state through these turbulent times when Punjab is being discriminated against by the BJP-led Centre," he told reporters.

The CM tweeted, "Today's results in MC Elections are the victory of each Punjabi. It is very clear that people of Punjab want development & will not be fooled by politics of hatred & theatrics."

Celebrations erupted in the Congress camp with party workers distributing sweets at many places.

The party celebrated the victory in Bathinda, which is Shiromani Akali Dal MP Harsimrat Kaur Badal's constituency. The Congress won 43 wards there and the SAD

► **THE PARTY** celebrated the victory in Bathinda, which is Shiromani Akali Dal MP Harsimrat Kaur Badal's constituency. The Congress won 43 wards there and the SAD just seven.

just seven. Punjab Finance Minister Manpreet Singh Badal said Bathinda will now get its first Congress mayor in 53 years.

In Moga, the only corporation among the seven to not deliver a clear verdict, the Congress won 20 of the 50 municipal wards. The SAD got 15, the Aam Aadmi Party 4, the Bharatiya Janata Party 1 and independents 10.

Moga Congress MLA Harjot Kamal's wife was among the losers there.

Earlier, the municipal corporations of Moga, Hoshiarpur, Bathinda and Pathankot were run by the SAD-BJP combine, when the two parties were allies and in

power in the state.

The elections to municipal corporations of Abohar, Batala and Kapurthala were held for the first time.

The Punjab election campaign was marred by stray clashes between rival party workers with opposition leaders alleging at some places that their candidates were being stopped from filing nomination papers.

SAD chief Sukhbir Singh Badal thanked party workers who he said emerged as the "only challengers" to the corrupt and incompetent Congress.

Our workers battled unprecedented repression, money bags & govt machinery & yet emerged as a force to reckon with. Writing on the wall: 2022 elections on — Congress gone, he tweeted.

AAP leader Harpal Singh Cheema said his party contested the civic polls in the state for the first time and would analyse its perform-

ance. The Congress won most of the municipalities by a big margin.

The party won 49 wards in Abohar, leaving just one for the Akali Dal. It bagged 41 wards in Hoshiarpur, letting the BJP, the AAP and independents split the difference.

In Kapurthala, the Congress won 45 of the 50 wards and the Akalis got three. In Pathankot and Batala, it won 36 of the 50 wards in each corporation.

Altogether, 9,222 candidates contested the polls to the eight municipal corporations and 109 municipal councils.

The Congress fielded 2,037 candidates, the SAD 1,569, the BJP 1,003, the AAP 1,606 and the BSP 160.

As many as 2,832 were independents. The voter turnout was over 70 per cent.

The elections, originally scheduled last year, were postponed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. — *PTI*



## IN BRIEF

### RANBIR KAPOOR'S COUSIN QUIZZED BY ED IN PMLA CASE

SHAHAB ANSARI  
MUMBAI, FEB. 17

Bollywood actor Ranbir Kapoor's cousin Armaan Jain visited the ED office in Mumbai on Wednesday in connection with a money laundering case. Armaan is the son of Raj Kapoor's daughter Reema Jain. According to reports, the ED action was based on some chats shared between Armaan and Shiv Sena MLA Pratap Sarnaik's son, Vihang. The case is in connection with a complaint lodged in October last year against leading security services provider, Tops Grup of Mumbai, alleging that the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) had been siphoned off ₹175 crore. The ED had summoned Jain twice in an alleged money laundering case but the actor did not appear before the agency. The ED team had also carried out searches at his residence on the day his uncle, actor Rajiv Kapoor, passed away. The agency reportedly collected some case related documents too. After conducting the searches, the ED had allowed Reema and Armaan to attend the funeral. The Central agency wants to know if Jain has received any money, which is part of proceeds of the crime, from the accused or not.

### BUDGET SESSION OF ODISHA ASSEMBLY SET TO BEGIN TODAY

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
BHUBANESWAR, FEB. 17

The Budget Session of Odisha Legislative Assembly will begin from Thursday and continue till April 9. State finance minister Niranjan Pujari is scheduled to present the annual Budget for 2020-21 on February 18. Governor Ganeshi Lal will address the House on the first day of the session which will have 31 working days in two phases. The first session will be held from February 14 and 26, while the second one will commence from March 11 and run up to April 9. Several bills, including amendments to the Municipal and Municipal Corporation Acts are likely to be passed to pave the way for holding the municipal elections later this year. According to OLA Speaker, Dr S.N. Patro, from the governor's address to the budget presentation, questions and the proceedings of the Assembly will be through National e-Vidhan Appli-cation (NeVA), Mr Patro said. NeVA aims at bringing all the legislatures of the country on a single platform, creating a massive data depository. Paperless Assembly or e-Assembly is a concept involving the use of electronic devices to facilitate proceedings in the House. It enables automation of the entire law-making process, tracking of documents and sharing of information, said Dr Patro.

### C'GARH TO SELL SURPLUS PADDY IN OPEN MARKET

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY  
BHOPAL, FEB 17

The Baghel government has decided to sell the surplus paddy the state has procured from the farmers in Chhattisgarh, in the open market in the wake of the Centre's decision to limit procurement of paddy from the state to 24 lakh metric tons in the current kharif season. This was the first time the Chhattisgarh government has taken the initiative to sell the surplus paddy in the open market. Chhattisgarh agriculture Ravindra Choubey has said the surplus paddy to the tune of over 20 lakh tones would be sold in the open market through auction. Sources said the auction for the sale of the surplus paddy may be done on February 22. The base price for bidding may be fixed at ₹2,200 per quintal, sources added. Incidentally, the paddy is sold in the open market at ₹1000-1100. According to Mr Choubey, the state government was forced to take the decision to sell the surplus paddy in the open market following the Centre's lukewarm response to the state government's plea to increase the limit of procurement of paddy.

### PC QUESTIONS GOVT ON FARM LAWS AFTER WIN IN PUNJAB

New Delhi, Feb. 17: After the Congress' victory in Punjab municipal elections, senior party leader P. Chidambaram on Wednesday asked whether the Modi government still believed that farm laws are popular and only a small section of farmers of Punjab are protesting against them.

"The farmers are voters. So are migrant workers, MSMEs, the unemployed and the very poor families. When it is their turn, they will vote against the BJP like the Punjab voters.

"Does the Modi government still believe that the farm laws are popular and only a small 'section' of farmers of Punjab are protesting against them," he asked on Twitter.

"The MEA is fast losing credibility by becoming the Ministry of Extraordinary Apologists for the government's wrong domestic policies," he also said.

Congress chief spokesperson Randeep Surjewala also said that the anger brewing in Punjab has given a befitting reply to the BJP and PM Narendra Modi.

"The crop of anger and resentment brewing in the fields of Punjab has given a befitting reply to ruthlessness, sarcasm and confusion created by PM Modi and the BJP. Curse of Punjab... BJP's drop," he said in a tweet in Hindi on Punjab civil bodies polls.

Mr Surjewala also tweeted on the action of police on the "toolkit" issue, "Only a 'weak-kneed' government can shudder and shiver over a 'toolkit'. Only a 'lily-livered' ruler can heap 6,300 cases of 'Sedition' in 2 years..." —PTI

### Rajiv Gandhi's close aide Capt. Sharma dies

New Delhi, Feb. 17: Congress leader and former union minister Captain Satish Sharma died in Goa on Wednesday after a brief illness. He was 73.

Capt. Sharma was suffering from cancer and was ailing for some time.

"He died at 8.16 PM at Goa. His last rites would be done in Delhi on Friday, as the body is being brought from Goa," his son Samir told PTI.

A close aide of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, Capt. Sharma was Union minister of petroleum and natural gas from 1993 to 1996 in the Narasimha Rao government.

Born on October 11,



Police personnel detain NSUI activists staging a protest against the arrest of climate activist Disha Ravi in New Delhi on Wednesday.

## 'Toolkit' case: Nikita gets 3 weeks transit pre-arrest bail

SHAHAB ANSARI  
MUMBAI, FEB. 17

The Bombay high court on Wednesday granted transit bail to Nikita Jacob, a lawyer by profession and also an environmental activist, in connection with "Toolkit", case, also involving a Swedish teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg. The court has granted her interim relief from arrest for three weeks so that she could appear before concerned court in Delhi and seek regular anticipatory bail.

While granting transit bail to Jacob, Justice P.D. Naik observed that the applicant was a permanent resident of Mumbai and the police case was lodged in Delhi. Also, the

▶ WHILE GRANTING transit bail to Jacob, Justice P.D. Naik observed that the applicant was a permanent resident of Mumbai and the police case was lodged in Delhi. Also, the relief sought by her was only temporary. He also said that the applicant apprehends that she will be arrested at any point of time. She has to make arrangements to seek relief from a court in another state. Hence, this court is of the opinion that protection as sought by the applicant can be granted for a temporary period.

The HC had reserved its order on her plea on Tuesday for Wednesday after hearing arguments on the petition. The toolkit was meant to garner international support for the ongoing farmers' protest against three new Central farm laws. Jacob's lawyer on Tuesday had contended before the court that there was a Zoom meeting before Republic Day, which was attended by Poetic Justice Foundation founder M.O. Dhaliwal, and other fellow activists, including Ms Ravi, whom the police have already arrested from Bengaluru in connection with the formulation and dissemination of the "Toolkit" document.

The court was further informed that the "toolkit"

was prepared by Extinction Rebellion (XR) India volunteers for presenting the whole picture with a simple breakdown for an international audience.

The accused persons have been booked under Indian Penal Code Sections 124(a) for sedition, 153(a) for promoting enmity between different sections of the society and 120(b) for criminal conspiracy.

The Delhi police's allegations is that she, along with Bengaluru environmentalist Disha Ravi and Maharashtra engineer Shantanu Muluk, had created a toolkit meant to tarnish India's image. In the process, they were allegedly in direct touch with "pro-Khalistani elements

attracts provision of POCSO Act. Assam Police would take strong action against all such attempts under stringent provisions of POCSO Act," Mr Singh stated in a tweet from his official Twitter handle.

"Action shall be taken against all persons irrespective of their place of residence who use any of the social media platforms to maliciously use such platforms for furthering their conspiracy," he added.

The minister in his reaction said that he was surprised by the "conspiracies" to target him. "My wife has lodged a police case in this regard. I am surprised that people would stoop so low," Mr Sarma told reporters.

Rescue operations were still continuing to trace out some passengers who were feared drowned in the water-filled canal, reports reaching here last said.

Meanwhile, CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan visited the accident site on Wednesday and met the bereaved family members of the deceased.

Mr Chouhan said he deferred his plan to visit the site on Wednesday; a day after the tragedy took place, since his visit to the spot on Tuesday would have affected rescue operations.

Kin of the deceased however directed their anger towards him saying that the state government's action of placing a few transport officials under suspension in connection with the incident was not enough.

They demanded to dismiss these officers from the service.

## 2 scribes held for salacious article on Assam minister

MANOJ ANAND  
GUWAHATI, FEB. 17

Assam police on Wednesday arrested two journalists of a digital news channel on charges of spreading salacious rumour maligning the father-daughter relationship about senior Assam minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and his minor daughter.

Two others associated with two different digital platforms have also been detained by the police for sharing the photo with sensational comments and content. They are Puli Muchahary of Bodoland Digital and Nang Noyonmoni Gogoi of Spotlight Assam.

Police said that Taufiquddin Ahmad, editor-in-chief of Pratibimba Live news editor Iqbal were arrested by the Dispur police in Guwahati on Wednesday and are being questioned to probe if there was a conspiracy behind airing such news.

The ADGP (Law and Order) GP Singh in a social media post said that the case has been lodged under section 509 of IPC for insulting modesty of a woman as well as Sections 14 to 21 of the POCSO Act for spreading "salacious news article about an honourable minister of government of Assam and attempts to malign familial bond".

"People are strongly advised not to give air to such attempts since posting such pictures with malicious intention

Incidents of crime and violence against women are happening in a country where epics such as Mahabharata and Ramayana were written around the theme of respect for women.

In Mahabharata, the court said, Drupadi questioned the legality of being dragged by Dushasana into the dice hall and appealed for justice to the men who were witnessing her abuse.

In "Valmiki Ramayan", Mr Pandey said, when Laxman was asked to describe Sita, he said that "he remembers only her feet as he had never looked beyond that". Referring to the "Aranaya Kand of Ramcharitmanas", the judgment spoke of the Indian tradition of "protecting, respecting and promoting the dignity of women" and mentioned "Jatayu" (a mythical bird), who upon witnessing the abduction of Sita, came swiftly to protect her, losing his life in the process.

Senior advocate Rebecca John, who fought Ms Ramani's case, arrived at the court after the verdict was delivered and was greeted by loud, emotional clapping. "It was a challenging case," she said.

"It was very, very difficult. You saw how difficult it was inside court to get your word across... I think, when you fight powerful people and you have only truth on your side, the journey becomes relevant to you personally. So I think this is probably the most important case of my career," Ms John said.

## 'Toolkit': Police to also probe role of UK-based woman

BHASKAR HARI SHARMA  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 17

Marine Patterson, who is a member of the UK chapter of Extinction Rebellion (XR), role will be investigated by the Delhi police after the ongoing probe revealed that she allegedly along with Nikita and Shantanu drafted content for a tweet storm on February 4 and 5. Police said that along with Nikita and Shantanu drafted content between February 1 and 2 for next tweet storm planned for February 4 and 5.

The senior police officials said that while examining the WhatsApp chats, another name Thilaka, also a member of XR, emerged and during investigation, police found that Thilaka also helped them in drafting the document and was in contact with Nikita and Disha, which is being investigated by the police teams.

According to a senior police official, Marina Patterson made a package and added to the document through hyperlink.

"The toolkit was accidentally published when she was simultaneously editing it. She wrote that police are attacking protesters... many injured, many disappearing and many individuals are already reported dead. This was created to mislead in future. They wrote it before the actual thing happened," he said.

Meanwhile, police giving details about the sequence said that there was a connection established between Nikita, Shantanu and Disha during 2019-2020 and Puneet, a Canada based woman

▶ ACCORDING TO a senior police official, Marina Patterson made a package and added to the document through hyperlink

and member of Poetic Justice Foundation (PJF), connected with Nikita and Shantanu on Instagram in the first week of December.

On December 6, Disha, Nikita, Shantanu and Disha started a WhatsApp group and Shantanu created an email id scrapfarmacts@gmail.com on December 11. PJF started its work on January 26 protest on January 3. On January 9, PJF announced Global day of Action on January 26, police said.

Zoom meeting was held on January 11 between all collaborators, including PJF founder Mo Dhaliwal, its co-founder Anita Lal along with Nikita, Shantanu and others, police said.

PJF and other organisations added several hyperlinks to the toolkit document. One of these is genocidewatch.com, they said. Nikita, Shantanu and Disha and others collaborated with others to finalise the toolkit content between January 11-12. On January 18, AskIndiaWhy.com site was launched by PJF, police said.

On January 20, the draft toolkit Google doc was shared between Nikita, Shantanu and Disha for final vetting. Shantanu was here in the national capital from January 21 to 27 at protest site, police said.

## MP bus accident: Toll mounts to 51

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY  
BHOPAL, FEB. 17:

The death toll in Tuesday's bus mishap in Madhya Pradesh's Sidhi district has mounted to 51 with recovery of 5 more bodies, officials said on Wednesday.

While body of a man was fished out of water in the canal where the bus fell down after skidding off the bridge, late on Tuesday night, 4 more bodies including those of a 6-month-old girl and her mother were recovered on Wednesday, Sidhi district collector Ravindra Kumar Choudhury said.

Three bodies were swept away and found downstream of the canal in the neighbouring district of Rewa, while the other body was recovered nearly 6 km from the accident site.

Rescue operations were

## Court throws out MJ defamation case

■ Continued from Page 1

women who have ever spoken out against sexual harassment at work place... It was me, the victim, who had to stand up in the court as an accused. I thank everyone who stood by me, especially my witnesses Ghazala Wahab and Niloufer Venkatraman who came to the court and testified on my behalf. I thank the court for the verdict and I thank my lawyer Rebecca John and the amazing team who believed in me and the wider cause. They put their heart and soul in the case," she said.

Mr Akbar, a former editor and Union minister, was present in court with a battery of lawyers and police escort. He left soon after the verdict was read out. He gave no reaction to the verdict. The court asked Ms Ramani to furnish a bail bond of ₹10,000 in case an appeal is preferred against the order.

Earlier, when the parties had assembled in court at 2 pm, the judge said, "Please wait outside. There are some corrections in the judgment. It will take half an hour." The presence of women cops in the court led to some anxiety about the order that was reserved on February 10 due to late submissions.

In the wake of the #MeToo movement in 2018, Ms Ramani had written about how, in 1993, Mr Akbar had sexually harassed her when he called her for a job interview to his "bedroom" in Oberoi Hotel at 7 pm.

Mr Akbar filed a criminal defamation case against Ms Ramani on October 15, 2018, and

resigned as Union minister on October 17.

Though several women, all of them his former employees, had already come forward to chronicle Mr Akbar's serial sexual abuse with harrowing personal accounts of sexual harassment and even rape, Mr Akbar chose only to go after Ms Ramani. He also denied all allegations of sexual abuse, in public and under oath in court. His wife, a leading psychoanalyst, too came forward in support of her husband while acknowledging that her husband, then a 43-year-old editor, was having an "affair" with a 23-year-old employee.

Mr Akbar had, in his complaint, contended that Ms Ramani's allegations were false, malicious and made out of vested interest to malign his reputation. He, however, gave no proof or plausible explanation about how Ms Ramani stood to benefit from talking about the sexual harassment she had suffered. Ms Ramani has maintained throughout that she was only speaking her truth. She told the court during the trial that saw three judges that her decision to share what had happened in that hotel room in 1993 was in good faith for public good and, while referring to the stories of several women, she contended that Mr Akbar was not a man of "stellar reputation" and that his serial abuse of women who worked for him was an open secret.

Reading out the judgment, Mr Pandey said it is shameful that

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REVISED TIMINGS OF SPECIAL TRAINS

Spl. Train No.	Station From	Dep. Time	Station to	Arr. Time	Revised Timings Effective From
02284	Hazrat Nizamuddin	21:40	Ernakulam Jn.	14:30	20.02.2021
02283	Ernakulam Jn.	23:25	Hazrat Nizamuddin	17:20	23.02.2021
02402	Dehradun	22:50	Kota	10:35	16.02.2021
02401	Kota	17:55	Dehradun	05:40	16.02.2021
02416	New Delhi	21:50	Indore Jn.	10:05	16.02.2021
02415	Indore Jn.	17:20	New Delhi	06:20	16.02.2021
02494	Hazrat Nizamuddin	21:40	Pune	18:25	19.02.2021
02493	Pune	11:10	Hazrat Nizamuddin	06:45	21.02.2021
02264	Hazrat Nizamuddin	06:16	Pune	02:10	18.02.2021
02263	Pune	11:10	Hazrat Nizamuddin	06:45	19.02.2021

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quick BITES

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Sensex	51,703.83	-0.77
Nifty 50	15,208.90	-0.68
S&P 500*	3,904.91	-0.70
Dollar (₹)	72.75	-0.06
Pound Sterling (₹)	101.22	0.04
Euro (₹)	88.10	0.28
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	46,102*717	1.55
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	63.60	0.39
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.030	0.13
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.285	-0.014

\* As of 8:30 PM IST

SAT stays Sebi order banning Kishore Biyani

The Securities Appellate Tribunal (SAT) has stayed the Sebi order that banned Future Retail chairman Kishore Biyani and some other promoters from the securities market for one year. The SAT has listed the matter for final disposal on April 12 and said the effect and operation of the impugned order shall remain stayed till then. On Feb. 3, the Sebi had barred Biyani and others for one year for indulging in insider trading.

Startups told to build institutions, not just valuations



Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged India's startup founders to think how to create institutions and not focus on valuations alone. Addressing a Nasscom event, Modi said that startups should not restrict themselves only to valuations on exit strategies. They should think of creating an institution that can outlive this century by creating world-class products that will set the global benchmark of excellence.

DRL launches cancer treatment drug in US

Dr Reddy's Laboratories said it has launched cancer treatment drug capecitabine in the US market. The drug is a therapeutic equivalent generic version of Xeloda (capecitabine) tablets approved by the US FDA. Quoting IQVIA Health data, DRL said the Xeloda brand and generic had US sales of about \$90 million for the most recent 12 months ending in October 2020. The tablets are available in 150 and 500 mg strengths.

Ashok Leyland lifts clean energy sourcing to 60%

Hinduja Group flagship Ashok Leyland said it has increased the sourcing of clean energy to 60 per cent for its countrywide operations. Now 75 per cent of the firm's energy consumption in Tamil Nadu and 60 per cent all-India is procured through the solar rooftop, solar ground mount, and wind-based renewable energy. Hinduja Renewables is focused on building sustainable and clean energy plants in India.

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■ CECPA covers financial services as well Mauritius trade pact, telecom PLI cleared

New Delhi, Feb. 17: The Union Cabinet on Wednesday approved a comprehensive economic cooperation and partnership agreement (CECPA) with Mauritius and a Rs 12,195-crore production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme for telecom gear manufacturing.

The CECPA, a kind of a free trade pact, to be signed between India and Mauritius at a later date is aimed at liberalising norms to boost two-way commerce. The agreement, cleared by the Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, would cover 310 export items for India, including foodstuff & beverages, agricultural products, textile & textile articles, base metals, electricals & electronic items, plastics & chemicals, and wood & its articles. Mauritius would benefit from preferential market access into India for 615 products, including frozen fish, speciality sugar, biscuits, fresh fruit, juices, mineral water, beer, alcoholic drinks, soaps, bags, medical & surgical equipment and apparel, according to a government statement.

In such an agreement, two trading partners cut or eliminate duties on a host of products besides liberalising norms to promote services trade.

The pact would cover trade in goods, rules of origin, trade in services, Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT), Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures, dispute settlement,



movement of natural persons, telecom, financial services, customs procedures and cooperation in other areas.

The bilateral trade between the countries dipped to \$690 million in 2019-20 from \$1.2 billion in 2018-19. While India's exports in 2019-20 aggregated at \$662 million, imports stood at \$27.89 million.

The over Rs 12,000-crore production-linked incentive scheme is expected to encourage production of telecom equipment worth Rs 2.44 lakh crore and create direct and indirect employment for about 40,000 people, Union minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said after the Cabinet meeting. The PLI scheme for telecom will be operational from April 1, 2021.

"In the coming five years we hope to have incremental production of Rs 2,44,200 crore, export worth Rs 1,95,360 crore, direct and indirect employment to 40,000 people and tax revenue of approximately Rs

17,000 crore to the country," Prasad said.

According to an official statement, the scheme is expected to bring investment of over Rs 3,000 crore and generate huge direct and indirect employment and taxes both.

Separately, the Union food processing industries ministry said it has cleared 20 projects worth Rs 363.4 crore under two central government schemes. The government will provide a grant-in-aid of Rs 102.91 crore for these projects, which together are expected to generate 12,000 jobs and benefit 42,800 farmers, it said in a statement.

The projects have been cleared under the Scheme for Creation of Infra-structure for Agro-Processing Cluster (APC) and the scheme for Creation/Expansion of Food Processing and Preservation Capacities (CEFP-PC) under Pradhan Mantri Kisan Sampada Yojana (PMKSY) approved in May 2017.

—Agencies

DIGITAL PUSH: BHARTI TO BUY BACK WARBURG PINCUS STAKE

Bengaluru, Feb. 17: Telecom operator Bharti Airtel Ltd said on Wednesday it will buy US private equity firm Warburg Pincus' 20 per cent stake in its direct-to-home television arm for Rs 3,126 crore (\$429.31 million).

Bharti Airtel, which is looking to consolidate the shareholding of its consumer facing businesses, said it will issue about 36.5 million shares to a Warburg Pincus affiliate at Rs 600 per share, and pay up to Rs 1,038 crore in cash.

Lion Meadow Investment, a Warburg Pincus affiliate, had bought the stake in Bharti Telemedia in 2017.

Bharti Airtel said on Wednesday it has set up a special committee to evaluate options for reorganising its businesses and shareholding structure, as the company sharpens focus on its digital and non-telecom businesses.

Airtel's core telecom business in India has come under pressure since Reliance Jio entered the space with cut-price tariffs, pushing players like Airtel to focus on digital services.

Last August, Airtel tied up with Amazon Web Services to develop its own cloud business, allowing the telecom operator to offer a wider range of products to its enterprise clients.

India's wireless market tariffs are among the cheapest while airwaves are among the most expensive.

—Reuters

Job prospects look up for freshers: Survey

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, FEB. 17

Job prospects of freshers have started brightening up. Around 15 per cent companies, especially those in the technology space, have indicated plans to hire freshers, which is up from 6 per cent and 9 per cent during the pandemic.

During the lock-down and unlock phases the intent to hire freshers among companies had dipped to the lows of 6 per cent and 9 per cent respectively. This, however, has improved to 15 per cent for February-April 2021. This, however, is nowhere near the pre-pandemic levels when 38 per cent companies had the intent to hire, finds a report by Teamlease Services.

Bengaluru has the highest proportion of employers—41 per cent—



who have an intent to hire, followed by Mumbai at 29 per cent and Delhi 24 per cent. The report analyses insights gathered from 815 employers, across 18 sectors and 14 cities in India.

Information technology, telecommunications, e-commerce and technology start-ups seem to be the leaders in terms of hiring intent. Some of the jobs which need fresh hands include business development—sales pro-

fessionals, graphic designers, digital marketing associates, content writers and web developers. For these jobs, employers expect freshers to possess domain skills like spreadsheet skills, product/service marketing, data analytics, web development and mobile app development.

Hence, most popular courses freshers can take up to improve their employability are of auto-mation, software development and graphics design.

"For the period February-April, 2021, freshers hiring intent has improved by 2.5 times from the lockdown period...what stood out was the growing focus on specialised skills that employers expect from fresh job entrants," said Shantanu Rooj, founder and CEO, TeamLease EdTech.

PSU banks' rally gets stronger

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, FEB. 17

Equity shares of PSU banks registered massive gains for the second consecutive session on privatisation buzz, third quarter earnings upgrade and improving outlook on becoming NPA light and budget boost.

A report quoting Anurag Singh Thakur, minister of state for finance, hinted at privatisation of stronger PSU banks rather than sick ones, which will not

attract investors. This led to heavy buying in all PSU banks on Wednesday.

"Giving any sick bank will not help any company to come forward and buy a bank," the minister said as per the report.

All four PSU banks (Bank of Maharashtra, Bank of India, Indian Overseas Bank and Bank of India) that had gained close to 20 per cent on Tuesday, once again hit the upper circuit on Wednesday, closing 20 per cent higher.

These four banks were

not amalgamated with the bigger banks in the earlier exercise that reduced total PSU banks in the country from 27 to 12.

Stronger PSU banks, including SBI, also gained heavily on Wednesday while the private banks saw profit taking.

The Nifty PSU Bank Index rose 5.86 per cent.

Apart from the four, the other big gainers on the NSE included Union Bank (10.55 per cent), Indian Bank (9.97 per cent) and Uco Bank (7.98 per cent).

Apollo to set up 3D printing labs

New Delhi, Feb. 17: Healthcare major Apollo Hospitals Group and Anatomiz3D Medtech Pvt Ltd on Wednesday said they will establish 3D-printing labs in various Apollo Hospitals in India, starting from Apollo Health City in Hyderabad.

The hospital's 3D-printing labs would provide medical 3D printing services for better healthcare, through the creation of anatomical models for pre-surgical planning and education, patient-specific cutting and drilling guides, and customised implants and implant moulds, the partners said.

In a virtual press conference, Apollo Hospitals Group chairman Prathap C. Reddy said India will become a global healthcare destination, with its doctor's expertise, support services, the process protocols and most importantly the support it has from the industry and the automation and the 3D printing.

"We are proud to once again be the pioneers in bringing the latest in medical technology to benefit our patients. It would not be wrong to say that with the Hospital 3D-printing labs, the future of healthcare is here", he added.

As healthcare evolves,



PRIVATE VACCINE MARKET SOON

CHRIS KAY FEB. 17

Apollo Hospitals Enterprises expects a private market for Covid-19 vaccines to open up across India within weeks, a move that may boost the government efforts to inoculate 300 million people by August.

Apollo is working with the government to provide vaccines for front line workers at 27 centres as part of the nationwide vaccination drive. The operator has trained



Suneeta Reddy

6,000 people and designated 3,500 sites for an expansion of the inoculation campaign, according to managing director Suneeta Reddy. "Our expectation is maybe March," she said in an interview on Wednesday on Bloomberg TV. "We have the advantage of so much of the manufacturing happening in India, so there will be vaccinations available unlike in a lot of other countries."

—Bloomberg

the in-house 3D-printing labs at the hospitals will enable better patient care and treatment planning.

"Advances in 3D printing technology today produces customised, lighter, safer and higher performing products."

—PTI

Hotel occupancies up in Q4

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, FEB. 17

With people resuming domestic travel, hotel occupancies have improved from 26 per cent in the September quarter to 40 per cent in the December quarter. Revenues per room too have moved up.

Average national level hotel occupancy in the December quarter was around 37 to 40 per cent, which was higher than 23 to 26 per cent in September quarter. However, this was still lesser than 68-71 per cent occupancies witnessed in the same quarter of 2019, as per the data from HVS-Anarock.

The year 2020 saw hotels having 33-36 per cent occupancy. In 2019, it stood around 65-68 per cent.

Similarly, the hospitality industry witnessed a decline of 54.9 per cent in revenue per available room (RevPar) in 2020 as compared to 2019, as per JLL's Hotel Momentum India data.

RevPar for 2020 was within a range of Rs 1,500-1,800, while it was Rs 3,800-4,100 in 2019, finds HVS-Anarock.

However, even RevPar has seen some improvement on a quarter-on-quarter basis. RevPar in Q3 was around Rs 700-1,000 and this has moved up Rs 1,500-1,800 in Q4. In Q4 of 2019, it was much higher at Rs 4,400-4,700.

Hospitality data provider STR finds that on a country-wide level, occupancy saw a decline of 28.7 percentage points in

Q4 2020 compared to Q4 2019. In the same period RevPar declined by 60.6 per cent.

Goa continues to be the RevPar leader in absolute terms despite a decline of 33.3 per cent in Q4 2020 compared to Q4 2019 and Bengaluru saw the sharpest decline of 77 per cent. Demand for domestic leisure travel amidst international travel restrictions has made Goa the fastest recovering market in absolute terms.

"We are already seeing signs of domestic business travel pick up in the new year. We expect that occupancies in business hotels will ramp up from March/April onwards," said Jaideep Dang, MD, hotels and hospitality group, South Asia, JLL.

—Bloomberg

FORD MOTOR GOING ELECTRIC BY END OF DECADE IN EUROPE

CRAIG TRUDELL FEB. 17

Ford Motor Co will drastically overhaul its business in Europe, where it didn't sell a single fully electric vehicle last year, vowing to go almost entirely electric by the end of the decade.

One of the first steps in the transformation announced on Wednesday will

be to plow \$1 billion into a German assembly plant that will start making an all-electric model in two years. By mid-2026, all passenger cars Ford sells will be plug-in hybrids or fully electric.

By 2030, Ford's passenger-vehicle range will be completely all-electric, one of the more demanding road maps among Europe's

major incumbent carmakers. Only its smaller but strategically important commercial-vehicle business will sell some vans and trucks that lack a plug by then.

"Consumers increasingly want us to go electric," Ford Europe president Stuart Rowley said in an interview.

—Bloomberg

TAKING | COUNT

Migrant & domestic workers estimate to be made in all-India survey

Software for 5 labour surveys ready

New Delhi, Feb. 17: Labour minister Santosh Gangwar will launch software applications for five all-India surveys, including on migrant and domestic workers on February 18, the labour ministry said on Wednesday.

Gangwar will also release instruction manuals with questionnaire for five All-India Surveys being conducted by the Labour Bureau, the ministry said.

These five surveys being undertaken by Labour Bureau are All-India Survey on Migrant workers, All-India Survey on

Domestic Workers, All-India Survey on Employment Generated by Professionals, All-India Survey on Employment Generated in Transport Sector, and All-India Quarterly Establishment-based Employment Survey.

The objective of the All India Survey on Domestic Workers (DW) would be to estimate the proportion of DW in the workforce by major states and all-India and percentage distribution of these DWs / households that employ them by important socio-demographic key characteristics.



Santosh Gangwar

The survey on migrant workers is aimed at finding the estimated number of migrant workers in India and also collecting information on their living conditions, working conditions and other socio-economic conditions.

The objectives of all-India survey on employment generated by professionals are essentially two-fold, firstly to estimate the total number of active professionals in the country and secondly to capture the employment generated by these professionals.

The survey on employment generated in Transport Sector would assess the employment generated in Transport Sector in India.

The main objective of the All-India Quarterly Establishment based Employment Survey is to measure relative change

in employment situation over successive quarters in sizeable segment of non-farm economy covering eight important sectors of the Indian economy.

The results of these surveys will be declared within seven to eight months, including six months field work.

Labour Bureau, an attached office of Ministry of Labour & Employment has been at the forefront in fulfilling the data needs of various stakeholders in the field of labour & employment since 1920.

—PTI

the in-house 3D-printing labs at the hospitals will enable better patient care and treatment planning.

"Advances in 3D printing technology today produces customised, lighter, safer and higher performing products."

Almheiri, who became a minister in 2017, is pushing ahead with improving the UAE's food security through technology, innovation and diversifying sources of imports. The nation is encouraging local food production and investing in controlled-environment agriculture such as greenhouses, aquaculture and vertical farming, she said.

"We're being flooded with requests to start growing food in the desert," Almheiri said. "We're now growing blueberries in the UAE, we're growing quinoa, we're growing salmon."

The country aims to become a major centre for food and agricultural technology, she said. It's "very open" to lab-grown, or cell-based, meats and is assessing what regulations are required to allow for the sale of such products. It also wants to cut food loss and waste by 15 per cent by the year-end.

—Bloomberg



# THE ASIAN AGE

18 FEBRUARY 2021

## Kiran Bedi pawn in BJP power games in Pondy

The removal of Kiran Bedi as lieutenant governor of Puducherry is only a subplot in a long political drama in the Union territory. The larger plot is the use of the political toolkit named “Operation Kamal (Lotus)” to destabilise the Congress government of V. Narayanasamy by engineering the defection or resignation of MLAs. That it happened with finality at a time when the polls are probably just a couple of months away is incidental to a pattern of inducements from the national ruling party succeeding in bringing down an elected non-BJP government. With the resignation of four MLAs, the government is in a minority in the 30-member Assembly and the chief minister would be expected to put in his papers and assume the role of a caretaker till the polls or face a trust vote, which he would lose.

Moving Kiran Bedi out is like manoeuvring a piece on the chessboard. She was far more powerful than a pawn in playing her role as the trusted lieutenant who did not allow an elected government to function smoothly in carrying out even welfare programmes. So obstructive was she of administration and policy execution leading to courtroom battles and awkward power tussles in the public domain that those defecting to the BJP may have also complained that her presence could be a negative factor in the election campaign. As a career-long stickler for the letter of the law, Ms Bedi had mastered the art of obstruction and may have been guilty of trying to run a parallel power centre in the Raj Nivas, which is possible in the set-up of a Union territory even if it has a government elected by the people.

The shifting of the lieutenant governor and placing a seasoned political figure like the Telangana governor Tamilisai Soundararajan temporarily in charge may smoothen the run-up to the polls but the people would be deciding who will rule Puducherry for the next five years. With heavy anti-incumbency said to be weighing against the Congress, its staunch southern ally, DMK, has been increasingly chary of continuing with the arrangement. The current scene only increases the desirability of aligning with the NR Congress of former CM Rangasamy, who becomes a major player in the Tamil-speaking former French colony that goes to the polls along with Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Assam and West Bengal this summer.

Having lost Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh after the last general elections and Goa without even getting to re-establish its rule there, the Congress is proving somewhat inept at keeping its flock together in the face of the allure of defections. The coincidental visit of Rahul Gandhi at a time of trouble for the Puducherry government may not have done much to enhance the prospects of keeping the alliance together. Facing a poll after a tumultuous four-and-a-half years spent bickering over the differences between the CM and the lieutenant governor may just mean that a weakened Congress would be facing a big challenge. Of great interest would be who the voters would choose in this scenario.

## Bangla verdict is welcome

The death sentence handed out by a Bangladesh trial court to five Islamist extremists for the murder of blogger Avijit Roy in 2015 points to the seriousness with which that country deals with the murderous spin some people gave to their religion. The Bangladesh government’s hot pursuit of Islamist militants who wanted to destroy voices other than theirs has resulted in the sentencing. The six convicted militants — one of them got life sentence — belong to domestic militant group Ansar Ullah Bangla, which the police says is inspired by the al Qaeda. The group is suspected to be behind the murders of more than a dozen secular activists and bloggers in the country.

Bangladesh saw violent incidents involving religious extremists between 2013 and 2017, and the mass murder of 22 people in a café in upmarket Dhaka in 2016 was the worst of them. The mindless attack jolted the civil society and forced the government to relentlessly pursue the cases. The latest verdict must bolster the country’s determination to deal with religious obscurantism with an iron hand.

Bangladesh has passed through instances of turmoil that few nations would have. It’s the child of a war, and was orphaned while being a toddler. Its democratic system was upset several times; extremists managed to have a say in the matters of a state, albeit for a brief while. Its original liberal constitution underwent massive changes in-between. Despite all this, the inherent values the people of Bangladesh held dear to their hearts got the nation back on the inclusive, secular, liberal track.

Every society benefits by being inclusive; it gives every member a chance to rise to her full potential to the benefit of all. Militant groups, whether they are inspired by religious or political thoughts, kill this possibility and drive people into manmade ghettos where they languish. This verdict is a pointer to the fact that Bangladesh has no plans to allow such a thing to happen to itself.

### THE ASIAN AGE

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Chandrajit Banerjee



## Budget 2021 puts green recovery at the centre of policy framework

The Union Budget 2021-22 presents a structured approach geared to put our country on the path of green recovery post the Covid-19 pandemic. The Budget has a long-term vision for this decade on environmental sustainability. It is marked by wisely planned investments in the control of air pollution, providing potable water, deep-sea biodiversity conservation and promoting renewable energy. Environment forms an integral part of Budget’s six pillars.

The pillar on “Health and Wellness” has integrated air pollution management, waste and control of pollution, and investment in providing a potable water supply with a five-year plan. This includes the adoption of the “One Health” approach by linking the health of humans, and biodiversity and ecosystem services. Air pollution in urban cities is becoming an extremely critical issue and, according to the Global Burden of Disease study, 1.67 million deaths were attributable to air pollution in India. The high burden of death and disease caused by

air pollution and its accompanying adverse economic impact from loss of output could hamper India’s ambition to become a US \$5 trillion economy by 2024. The gravity of the situation has been taken into account and the finance minister has done well by prioritising 42 urban centres with a million-plus population for acting on air pollution control with ₹2,217 crores. This can help create the infrastructure to build science-based evidence, which can feed into the action plans for these urban centres under the National Clean Air Programme.

India’s urban population is expected to grow to 814 million by 2050, stressing our cities. There will be a need to boost the environmental infrastructure to mitigate the impacts of urbanisation. Issues of air quality, water availability, waste disposal and energy consumption must be addressed. Great forethought and meticulous planning have been put into increasing the depth and width of the Urban Swachh Bharat Mission 2.0 in five years with a substantial allocation of ₹1,41,678 crores. The

mission will integrate waste management, reduce single-use plastic, make for effective waste management from construction and demolition activities and implement bioremediation of all legacy dump sites. Investment in increasing public transport of about ₹18,000 crores will further help in controlling air pollution.

Moving towards use of renewable energy to meet India’s energy requirements is one of the priorities of this Budget. It has planned an investment of ₹2,500 crores in solar and renewable energy sources. The government has also announced a national hydrogen mission, to be launched in 2021-22, for generating hydrogen from green power sources. India can take become a pioneer in green power sources with its continued investments in non-fossil based fuels. This builds a good momentum towards meeting India’s commitments in the Paris Agreement.

The government will launch a Deep Ocean Mission with a budget of ₹4,000 crores for the next five years. This mission will refine our understanding of ocean depths, through

mapping biodiversity and climate change issues and enabling technological research for ocean exploration along with implementing measures to conserve biodiversity. This should facilitate the adoption and implementation of nature-based solutions and build climate resilience.

It is encouraging to note that the Budget has also integrated substantial investments over the next five years in science and technology areas to encourage research on health and technology innovation. The proposed fund of ₹50,000 crores over five years will address the national priority thrust areas of enhancing security and promoting well being.

India aspires to be self-reliant and a global manufacturing champion and, to meet this objective, substantial investment is required with respect to technology research. Moving in the right direction, an investment of ₹1.97 lakh crores, over five years starting FY 2021-22 has been prioritised in 13 sectors.

The major challenges of this decade are climate change, air pollution, bio-

diversity loss and availability of fresh water required for the health and wellness of humankind. Rebuilding the ecological infrastructure is critical. The actions planned under this Budget will enable India to address these issues. The planned investments will enable conservation of resources whose scarcity affects the poorest. CII recommends that the government enable multi-level collaboration with industry, civil society, academia and institutions, among other stakeholders. The government also needs to ensure delivery of these actions through awareness creation at the sub-national level, supporting scientific data collection, technological innovation and uniform policy frameworks.

The government has taken bold steps towards integrating environment and climate change in the first Budget of the decade and CII is confident that this will enable inclusive and sustainable growth.

*The writer is the director-general of the Confederation of Indian Industry*

Subhani



## ‘Vaccine passports’: Key to safe travels is flawed



Sunanda K. Datta-Ray

Reflections

Stranded in London because of the Covid-19 pandemic-related travel restrictions, I cannot but welcome any innovation that might facilitate my return to India. But having grown up in Kolkata, I am also acutely aware of the self-defeating flaw from which the proposal for what are called “vaccine passports” suffers.

Even in the 1960s an Indian going abroad had to be armed with a little booklet certifying that he or she had been vaccinated against yellow fever and (I think) the plague. No traveller from Kolkata that I knew of ever suffered the needle — a small payment, perhaps ten or fifteen rupees, to the travel agent produced the booklet with a convincing array of official-looking seals.

Kolkata cannot have been unique among Indian cities. In fact, an American diplomat once told me that no matter what ingenious devices were introduced by the state department in US visas, Indian forgers were always a step ahead. No one recommends illegal travel, but as the floods of refugees from West Asia and across the Mediterranean confirm, travel is often essential for survival. Nor was Mark Twain’s observation that “travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness” only for the rich.

The summer holidays are a sacred ritual for most British people, and the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, is under intense pressure to allow his fellow citizens to go abroad later this year. The assertion by Matt Hancock, his Cabinet colleague who is responsible for health, that the government has

no plans to issue “vaccine passports” because “going on holiday is illegal in this lockdown” has not gone down very well.

People are piqued by the mounting evidence that the sleight of hand that was once practised by Indians is common among others too. Under universal lockdown rules, all travellers need to have proof of that they have tested negative for Covid-19 within three days of departure. If, for instance, Air India had not suspended its direct London to Kolkata flight, I would have to take the test in London and the result would be emailed, printed or sent as a text message both to the airline and to the authorities in Kolkata.

This is where things are said to be going wrong, with thousands of passengers entering Britain every week with fake negative Covid-19 test certificates. “We’re catching up to 1,000 passengers every day with a fake certificate” says Lucy Moreton of the British immigration service. “But that’s just the tip of the iceberg. There is no international standard.” Certificates are not standardised. “Each country — and within that, each company — produces something different,” Ms Moreton adds. “There is no way to know which are real and which are not.”

What makes matters worse is that over 40 per cent of British voters accuse the government of lying about the pandemic. They think it is a coverup and a conspiracy involving politicians, scientists and journalists, and certainly not sufficient reason for forbidding foreign travel.

Nadhim Zahawi, Mr Johnson’s Iraqi-born vaccines minister, admits that an interna-

tional certificate is currently being discussed, but insists that any such document will not be called a “vaccine passport”. Whatever the name, it has always been clear that the vaccinated will be given documentary proof of immunisation. The leaflet asking me to report for my first jab had pictures of the Covid-19 vaccination card with instructions to “keep [it] safe”.

Newspapers recently carried pictures of President Nicos Anastasiades of Cyprus with his vaccination certificate. Another enthusiast, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, signed a deal with Israel on February 8 for the mutual recognition of vaccination certificates to facilitate travel between the two countries. Spain, Kosovo, Iceland, Denmark and Portugal are among the other favourably inclined countries. A Europe-wide vaccination card is being considered, although Brussels has not committed itself so far.

Ideally, people who have been immunised against coronavirus should carry an official card or digital certification, possibly on an app, which would enable governments around the world which want to open up travel again to do so without too much risk of infection. Two British developers, MVine and IProov, are reportedly working on an immunity and vaccination passport which is being tested by the National Health Service. It would enable a person’s test results or vac-

cination status to be registered and proved without extensive new infrastructure.

The proposal has received support from many quarters. Saga, the British travel company for passengers aged over 50, has announced that people who register for its holidays or cruises in 2021 must be fully vaccinated. The Australian airline Qantas says it will eventually require proof of a coronavirus vaccine to board its flights. Etihad Airways and Emirates will also use a digital travel pass so that passengers can prove they have been vaccinated or tested for Covid-19. The International Air Transport Association is developing such a pass to be shown at border control or to airlines at the time of check-in.

Such a requirement would not be altogether new. I have mentioned Indian travel in the 1960s. Britain still requires visa applicants from certain countries to produce a certificate proving they have had a recent TB test. Many governments also require a vaccine certificate for diseases such as yellow fever and polio.

The main objection seems to be that vaccine passports will prevent travel by people from countries that will not get vaccines for months, or even years. Human rights groups call this a form of discrimination in favour of the wealthy. There is also the ethical question of those who for one reason or another refuse to be vaccinated.

On balance, however, it’s the greater good that must prevail, and that means setting aside individual or group demands to ensure that all passengers have valid genuine proof of immunisation. Fake documents must be stamped out. But that won’t solve my problem, which is not of a Covid-19 vaccination certificate, but of an airline to accept it.

*The writer is a senior journalist, columnist and author*

### LETTERS

#### WHAT FRANCE CAN

France’s National Assembly on Tuesday approved legislation designed mainly to counter a rise in Islamism in towns and cities which, the government says, threatens national unity. The legislation did not single out any particular religion, but cracked down on practices such as forced marriage and virginity tests. The legislation represented a “powerful offensive” by the secular State. Will India follow suit?

**Sankar Paul**  
Chakdaha, West Bengal

### PRICING SECRETS

**PETROL, DIESEL AND** cooking gas prices are sky high. The irony is that even when crude oil prices plummet their trajectory is upwards. In Covid times commuters are relying on personal vehicles. However the government is in extortionist mode. Though as claimed by all governments the administered price mechanism has been dismantled the cartel of oil marketing companies is rampant. Disinvestment of oil major BPCL is proving to be an uphill task and perhaps the government is gleefully making up for the delay in sales proceeds by marking up prices.

**Deepak Singhal**  
Noida

### FIRST BACKLASH

**GLAD TO READ** that the Congress has won a major victory making a clean sweep of seven municipal corporations in Punjab’s local body elections. Bathinda’s result was the most important for the party as it was after 53 years that the party managed to win the city. The urban Assembly seat is represented by Congress MLA and Punjab’s finance minister, Manpreet Singh Badal, who is also a cousin of Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) chief Sukhbir Singh Badal. The elections are a “semi-final” for the Amarinder Singh-led Congress government that is hoping to repeat its victory in 2022 against the backdrop of the farm laws that have generated a wave of anger against the BJP.

**Bhagwan Thadani**  
Mumbai

Every Monday the best letter of the week wins ₹500. Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com.



## SHORT TAKES

PRINCE PHILIP  
ADMITTED TO  
HOSPITAL

**London, Feb. 17:** Britain's 99-year-old Prince Philip has been admitted to a London hospital after feeling unwell, Buckingham Palace said Wednesday. The palace said the husband of Queen Elizabeth II was admitted to the private King Edward VII Hospital on Tuesday evening.

It said the admission is "a precautionary measure" on the advice of Philip's doctor and that the senior royal is expected to remain in hospital for a few days of "observation and rest." Philip, also known as the Duke of Edinburgh, retired from public duties in 2017 and rarely appears in public. During England's current coronavirus lockdown, he has been staying at Windsor Castle, west of London, with the queen.

EX-GIRLFRIEND OF  
EPSTEIN CRIES  
ABUSE BY GUARD

**New York, Feb. 17:** Jeffrey Epstein's former girlfriend claimed through her lawyer Tuesday that a guard physically abused her at a federal lock-up in Brooklyn, and then she was punished for complaining about it.

Attorney Bobbi Sternheim wrote in a letter to a Manhattan federal judge that the abuse occurred recently at the Metropolitan Detention Center as Ghislaine Maxwell was undergoing a pat down search in her isolation cell. The lawyer said the British socialite asked that a camera be used to capture what was occurring, but a guard "replied no." "When Ms. Maxwell recoiled in pain and when she said she would report the mistreatment, she was threatened with disciplinary action," Sternheim said. Days later, Maxwell was retaliated against for reporting the abuse when a guard ordered her into a shower to clean, sanitize, and scrub the walls with a broom.

SHRINGLA HOLDS  
TALKS WITH  
RUSSIAN DY FM

**Moscow, Feb. 17:** Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla had "excellent discussion" with Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov on Wednesday on bilateral issues, cooperation in multilateral organisations as well as regional and global issues of mutual interest. Shringla, who arrived here on his first foreign visit this year, and Morgulov also reviewed preparatory work for the forthcoming high-level meetings, including Annual Bilateral Summit. During the meeting, Foreign Secretary Shringla and Deputy Foreign Minister Morgulov had "excellent discussion on bilateral issues, cooperation in multilateral organisations as well as regional and global issues of mutual interest," the Indian Embassy in Moscow said in a tweet.

"Strong ties between #India & #Russia were further strengthened during the Foreign Office Consultations where all aspects of the multi-faceted relationship were discussed, along with other areas of mutual interest," the Indian Embassy tweeted. He will also meet Russian FM Sergey Lavrov.

FIRE KILLS 100  
ANIMALS AT  
PET STORE

**Indianapolis, Feb. 17:** An estimated 100 animals died when an overnight fire filled an Indianapolis pet store with thick smoke and deadly gases, fire officials said.

It took firefighters about an hour to extinguish the blaze at Uncle Bills Pet Center on Monday night because they had difficulty accessing the fire in the building's back roof area, the Indianapolis Fire Department said. After dousing flames that had filled the building with thick, black smoke, crews discovered "what can only be described as a horrible tragedy" inside, with about 40 dogs, 25 parakeets, rabbits and other animals dead from smoke inhalation, Battalion Chief Rita Reith said in a news release.

"The animals were still in their respective cages and simply succumbed to the deadly gases produced by the smoke," Reith wrote. Multiple reptiles, fish, an office cat and "a resilient guinea pig" that survived the fire were removed from the building and were being evaluated by pet store staff. The cause of the fire remains under investigation.

## Libyan revolution anniv



Libyans wave national flags as they gather to mark the 10th anniversary of the 2011 revolution, in the eastern city of Benghazi, on Wednesday. The uprising toppled longtime ruler Moamer Kadhafi, ending a long-lived dictatorship but throwing the country into a decade of violent lawlessness. — AFP

UN N-watchdog chief to visit  
Iran to discuss inspections

**Berlin, Feb. 17:** The head of the UN nuclear watchdog will travel to Iran this weekend in an effort to find a "mutually agreeable solution" that allows it to continue its inspections in the country, the organisation said Wednesday. The International Atomic Energy Agency said that Director General Rafael Grossi will visit Tehran on Saturday for discussions with senior Iranian officials, whom it did not identify. It said the aim is "to find a mutually agreeable solution for the IAEA to continue essential verification activities in the country."

Grossi's trip comes amid diplomatic efforts to keep alive the 2015 deal between Iran and world powers, which has been fraying since the US under then-President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the deal in 2018.

Tehran has been using its violations of the deal to put pressure on the remaining signatories — France, Germany, Britain, Russia and China — to provide more incentives to Iran to offset crippling American sanctions reimposed after the US pull-out. The ultimate goal of the deal is to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear bomb, something it insists it does not want to do.

President Joe Biden has

Alarm as jailed  
protester critical

**Paris, Feb. 17:** Activists on Wednesday expressed alarm that an Iranian "prisoner of conscience" jailed over a 2018 protest by a religious sect had been hospitalised in a critical condition, alleging that his health had been weakened by torture.

Behnam Mahjoubi, a member of the Gonabadi Dervishes, Iran's largest Sufi order, was convicted after taking part in a demonstration they held in February 2018, and began serving his two-year sentence last June.

But according to Amnesty International, he suffers from a serious panic disorder and had been injected with chemical substances against his will while in custody.

"The events leading to the critical condition of prisoner of conscience Behnam Mahjoubi in hospital must be criminally investigated," Amnesty International said.

"He suffered months of torture including wilful denial of medical care. All officials and prison doctors responsible for these cruel acts must face justice," it added. Campaigners have been urging Iran for months to release Mahjoubi because of his medical condition. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said Mahjoubi was "critically ill" and added it was "gravely concerned by the lack of transparency" after he went into a coma on February 12.

It also expressed concern about his condition after violations including "ill-treatment and torture" as well as "forced transfer to a psychiatric hospital." — AFP

He said Iran would cease to adhere to the so-called Additional Protocol, an arrangement that provides the IAEA broad access and information regarding Iran's nuclear program, including both declared and undeclared facilities. Following the killing of a prominent Iranian nuclear scientist last fall, Iran's parliament passed a law that vowed to restrict access of UN watchdog inspectors if the sanctions imposed on its oil and banking sectors are not lifted.

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Myanmar: Major  
violence, fears UN

## Junta brings in troops to Yangon, elsewhere

**Yangon, Feb. 17:** Demonstrators in Myanmar gathered Wednesday in their largest numbers so far to protest the military's seizure of power, as a UN human rights expert warned that troops being brought to Yangon and elsewhere could signal the prospect of further violence.

UN rapporteur Tom Andrews said he was alarmed by reports of soldiers being transported into Yangon, the biggest city. "In the past, such troop movements preceded killings, disappearances, and detentions on a mass scale," he said in a statement issued late Tuesday by the UN Human Rights office in Geneva. "I am terrified that given the confluence of these two developments — planned mass protests and troops converging — we could be on the precipice of the military committing even greater crimes against the people of Myanmar."

Fresh protests roiled Yangon, the second-largest city of Mandalay and the capital Naypyitaw, in defiance of an order banning gatherings of five or more people. "Let's march en masse. Let's show our force against the coup government that has destroyed the future of youth and our country," Kyi Toe, a spokesman for the National League for Democracy party of ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi, wrote on his Facebook page. Wednesday's turnout in

Yangon appeared to be one of the biggest so far in the city. Protesters have adopted a tactic of blocking off streets from security forces by parking vehicles in groups with their hoods up and the excuse of having engine trouble.

In Naypyitaw, thousands including private bank employees and engineers marched down its wide boulevards, chanting for the release of Suu Kyi and President Win Myint. Protesters also poured into the streets of Mandalay, where on Monday security forces pointed guns at a group of 1,000 demonstrators and attacked them with slingshots and sticks. Local media reported that police also fired rubber bullets into a crowd and that a few people were injured.

The marches have been organised as part of a civil disobedience movement, spearheaded by medical workers and supported by many civil servants. The Feb. 1 coup has brought an

abrupt halt to Myanmar's fragile progress toward democracy, as Suu Kyi's party was about to begin a second five-year term after winning a landslide in November's election. The military justified its takeover with allegations of widespread voting irregularities, though the election commission found no evidence of significant fraud.

The junta says it will hold power for a year before holding new elections. Police filed a new charge against Suu Kyi, her lawyer said Tuesday, a move likely to keep her under house arrest and further fuel public anger. Suu Kyi already faced a charge of illegally possessing walkie-talkies. The new charge concerns a law that has been used to prosecute people who have violated coronavirus restrictions, lawyer Khin Maung Zaw told reporters after meeting with a judge. It carries a maximum punishment of three years in prison.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson issued a strong denunciation of the legal manoeuvre against Suu Kyi. "New charges against Aung San Suu Kyi fabricated by the Myanmar military are a clear violation of her human rights," he tweeted. "We stand with the people of Myanmar and will ensure those responsible for this coup are held to account."

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## SHORT TAKES

NZ, OZ QUARREL  
OVER ISLAMIC  
STATE SUSPECT

**Wellington, Feb. 17:** The leaders of New Zealand and Australia were engaged in a bitter fight on Tuesday over which country will inherit an alleged Islamic State militant who at one point held citizenship in both nations.

The 26-year-old woman and two children were detained when they tried to illegally cross from Syria into Turkey, Turkey's Defence Ministry said on Monday.

The woman was identified only by her initials, SA. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has been arguing with Australian counterpart Scott Morrison over which country should take responsibility for the woman if she's deported from Turkey. The two were due to speak again on the matter Tuesday evening.

OZ NEWS MEDIA  
FIRMS DISCUSS  
GOOGLE DEALS

**Canberra, Feb. 17:** Google was quickly negotiating generous deals with big and small Australian media companies to pay for news as the Parliament considers forcing digital giants into such agreements, a minister said on Wednesday.

Seven West Media on Monday became the largest Australian news media business to strike a deal with Google to pay for journalism and its rival Nine Entertainment was reportedly close to announcing its own agreement. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg confirmed that state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corp. was also in negotiations and plans to spend any Google revenue on regional journalism. "There are negotiations going on with all the major players and the minor players at the moment," Frydenberg told reporters.

NO-CONFIDENCE  
DEBATE BEGINS IN  
THAI PARLIAMENT

**Bangkok, Feb. 17:** Opposition parties in Thailand on Tuesday began debating a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and nine members of his Cabinet who face accusations of mismanaging the economy, bungling the provision of Covid-19 vaccines, abusing human rights and corruption. It is the second no-confidence debate that Prayuth's government has faced since taking office in July 2019.

In February last year, Prayuth and five Cabinet ministers easily turned back a no-confidence vote in the lower house. All 10 being grilled this year are expected to coast through again with the backing of the governing coalition. The current debate is scheduled over four days, with voting to take place Saturday. On the first day, the opposition parties concentrated on Prayuth, accusing him of responsibility for the government's alleged failures. "I'm not afraid of anything," Prayuth said in defending himself. "This is a good opportunity for both sides to do something together for our country and people. And I am ready to clarify every allegation."

TWO BOOKED ON  
BLASPHEMY  
CHARGES IN PAK

**Lahore, Feb. 17:** Two Christian youths have been booked on blasphemy charges in Pakistan's Punjab province, police said on Wednesday. "Model Town Police (in Lahore) have registered an FIR against two Christian youths under sections 295-A, 295-B and 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC)," Superintendent of Police Asim Iftikhar told reporters here.

"We are raiding the whereabouts of the suspects and soon arrest them," he said, adding that the law and order situation in the area has been under control. According to the FIR, complaint Haroon Ahmed, a student, alleged that both accused had made blasphemous remarks during a discussion on religion.

Section 295-C carries death penalty while section 295-B carries a life sentence and section 295-A has imprisonment up to 10 years. Pakistan's blasphemy laws and their prescribed punishments are considered extremely severe. The people accused of blasphemy are usually deprived of the right to a counsel of their choice as most lawyers refuse to take up such sensitive cases.

## Record storm hits US, 20 killed

Biden vowed to provide additional emergency resources for those affected by the storm

**Washington, Feb. 17:** Millions were left without power as a winter storm gripped the southern and central United States on Tuesday with record-low temperatures in ill-prepared areas, and a tornado claiming three lives.

More than 20 storm-related deaths have been registered so far, including in traffic accidents in Texas, Kentucky and Missouri, according to local media.

In hardest-hit Texas — where freezing conditions prompted utility companies to implement rotating blackouts — a woman and girl died from carbon monoxide poisoning after using a car to generate heat, according to *NBC News*.

In Houston on Monday, a homeless man was killed "possibly from exposure," according to the Harris County Sheriff's Department, and the city's police chief said another man had been found dead after potential exposure to low temperatures.

A man in Louisiana died when he hit his head after slipping on ice, and a 10-year-old Tennessee boy died after he and his six-year-old sister fell through the ice into a pond Sunday.

President Joe Biden on Tuesday vowed to provide additional emergency resources for those affected by the "historic storm." He also thanked "road workers, highway patrol officers, and first responders who are taking swift action in horrific conditions to save lives," according to a White House statement.

The winter storm spawned at least four tornadoes, according to Atlanta-based weather.com, including one in coastal North Carolina late Monday that killed at least three people and injured 10 more.

"It is estimated that at least 50 homes were affected in the incident and several power lines were damaged, causing power outages," Brunswick County Emergency Services said in a statement.

Photos and video broadcast by US media showed downed trees, flattened homes and smashed cars.

According to the Poweroutage.us tracking site, more than three million residential, commercial and industrial customers were without electricity in Texas as of Tuesday evening.

In the state capital Austin, the temperature dropped to 10 degrees Fahrenheit (-12 degrees Celsius) — well below February's average low of 45F. By contrast, thermometers in Anchorage, Alaska read 20F. — *AFP*



A man and a boy clear snow from a car after heavy snowfall in Dionysos suburb, northern Athens, Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021. Greece has called in the armed forces to help cope with the damage caused heavy snowfall that has left parts of greater Athens without power and water for up to three days. — *AP*

Heavy snowfall  
hits Syria, Israel

**Beirut, Feb. 17:** Snow blanketed parts of Syria, Lebanon and Israel on Wednesday, blocking roads, disrupting traffic and postponing exams at some universities.

Large parts of Syria were covered, including the capital Damascus which is witnessing this winter's first snowfall. Snow was as high as 15 cm (6 inches) in the mountains of Sweida province, according to the official state news agency SANA.

Roads in some provinces were blocked. In the central province of Hama, bulldozers shoveled snow to open roads while vehicles skidded on ice, further causing traffic disruption.

The University of

Damascus called off mid-term exams scheduled for Wednesday and Thursday in all its branches around Syria because of the extreme weather conditions. The country's ports remained open.

In the opposition-held northwestern Syria, civil defense teams have been building dirt mounds since Tuesday around displaced persons' camps to prevent the rain from flooding the crowded areas.

Nearly 3 million displaced people live in northwestern Syria, mostly in tents and temporary shelters. Heavy rainfall last month damaged over 190 displacement sites, destroying and damaging over 10,000 tents. — *AP*



Icicles hang from the base of a tree on 37th Street on Tuesday, in Odessa, Texas. Many residents and businesses were left without power following a weekend of below freezing temperatures in Midland and Odessa. — *AP*

## Mexico suffers another day of blackout

**Mexico City, Feb. 17:** Mexican authorities announced on Tuesday that rolling blackouts would hit 12 states covering more than one-third of the country, extending the power cuts from northern Mexico into the central part of the nation as hundreds of factories were forced to shut down.

The announcement by the National Energy Control office marked the third day that winter storms in Texas cut the supply of imported natural gas on

which northern Mexico depends for generating much of its electricity.

The export-oriented National Council of the Maquiladora Industry said hundreds of plants perhaps as many as 1,600 were shutting down due to the lack of power, throwing hundreds of thousands out of work.

The council complained that authorities were announcing the blackouts over Twitter with no warning or coordination. Council president Luis

Hernandez called for organising the blackouts, perhaps as predictable time blocks so industries could at least plan shut-downs.

You can't just be telling people, 'Look on Twitter,' he said. Rosalinda Torres, head of the maquiladora council in the border city of Matamoros, said all the factories there were closed.

The losses are going to run into the millions, she said. Much of the north remains without reliable

power, and the rolling blackouts Tuesday were also hitting millions in Mexico's central industrial heartland and states as far south as Guerrero.

Starting late Sunday, freezing weather in Texas led to a chain of events that left almost 5 million households and businesses in northern Mexico without power.

Mexico's government-owned utility, the Federal Electricity Commission, said its operations were left short as the winter

storm in Texas froze natural gas pipelines. Private plants supply about 80% of power in northern Mexico, and most of those are gas-fired.

Overall, Mexico uses gas to generate about 60% of its power, compared to about 40% in the United States. Mexico built pipelines to take advantage of cheap natural gas from the US, often obtained by fracking in Texas, but Mexico does not allow fracking in its own territory. — *AP*

PENTAGON  
RETHINKS OVER  
MILITARY FOCUS  
ON CHINA

**Washington, Feb. 17:** The Biden administration faces a conundrum as it rethinks the positioning of military forces around the world: How to focus more on China and Russia without retreating from longstanding Mideast threats — and to make this shift with potentially leaner Pentagon budgets.

One answer may be to think small. Military commanders are putting more stock in deploying forces in smaller groups, to less obvious places, and on less predictable cycles to keep China, Russia and other potential adversaries off balance. This trend is developing as Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin orders a months-long "global posture" review. — *AP*

NATO CHIEF URGES  
JOINT SPENDING  
AS BUDGET  
DEBATE ROLLS ON

**Brussels, Feb. 17:** Donald Trump is no longer around as president to berate US allies in Europe and Canada for failing to spend enough on their defence budgets. But the debate about military spending appears likely to continue to rage at NATO, even under President Joe Biden.

So, in an effort to improve "burden sharing" — the way the 30 member countries contribute cash, military hardware and troops to operations run by the world's biggest security organisation — Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg is proposing that allies jointly fund more of NATO's work.

Stoltenberg said he will urge defence ministers, at a two-day video-conference starting from Wednesday, "to increase NATO's funding for our core deterrence and defence activities." It's new US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin's first NATO meeting. — *AP*

STUDY: WILDLIFE  
TRADE DRIVES  
DECLINES OF  
OVER 60 PC

**London, Feb. 17:** International wildlife trade is causing declines of over 60 per cent in the abundance of species on the planet, say scientists who call for more research on the impacts of this severe threat across the world.

The scientists, including those from the University of Sheffield in the UK found that wildlife trade is causing declines of around 62 per cent in the abundance of species, with endangered species suffering losses of over 80 per cent.

Although there are policies managing trade, the study, published in the journal *Nature Ecology and Evolution*, warned that without enough research on the effects of wildlife trade these policies cannot claim to safeguard species. According to the researchers, at least 100 million plants and animals are internationally trafficked each year. — *PTI*

## POET'S MESSAGE

Event held amidst freezing temperatures via virtual concert with music and recitation

## Centenary celebration for Tagore's '21 Houston visit

**Houston, Feb. 17:** The centenary celebration of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore's visit here in February 1921 was held amidst freezing temperatures at the Tagore Grove memorial in Ray Miller Park on Saturday, followed by a virtual concert the next day with presentations of the poet's music and recitation.

The two-day event, organised by the Tagore Society of Houston (TSH), was attended by Consul General of Houston Aseem Mahajan, a few

invited guests and TSH members, keeping in mind the pandemic restrictions.

The Tagore Grove Memorial has a life size bronze statue of Tagore unveiled in 2013 at Ray Miller Park located in the Energy Corridor. This is the sixth full figure statue of the poet erected outside his birth place, Kolkata, India, and first in the US.

Led by its President Gopendu Chakrabarti, the TSH welcomed the guests and highlighted Tagore's message of universalism and world peace, so very

appropriate for a diverse city like Houston.

Speaking at the event, Consul General of Houston, Aseem Mahajan elaborated on the relevance of Tagore's travels, writings and visions of international brotherhood in the world of today and of the city of Houston in particular being a melting pot of different cultures.

"It's great to celebrate the momentous occasion of Tagore's visit to Houston a century ago, to deliver a lecture at Rice University as part of his second

transcontinental lecture tour in America. And this evoked considerable interest in his literary and

other works across the United States," he said.

"The Consulate is looking forward to working together to deepen the cultural ties and people-to-people contacts between India and the US," Mahajan said, highlighting Tagore's message of a borderless world. The Tagore Grove is dedicated to all the communities in the City, as a symbol of universal peace and love. The grove will be open to the public and TSH welcomes all to visit the site and pay tribute to a cultur-

al genius and a global icon. A long-time TSH supporter and adviser, Pradeep Anand, provided the details of Tagore's visit to Houston and how his literary genius was embraced by the Texans and how 15 per cent of the total US funds came from Houston.

Surajit Dasgupta introduced the plans for Tagore Memorial Wall around the statue by the end of the year so it is open to all communities. The online presentation with Tagore's music and recitation on

Sunday was headlined by renowned Tagore exponent Shreya Guhathakurta and elocutionist Bratati Bandyopadhyay who performed a fabulous duet, spellbinding the audience from around the world. Guhathakurta presented a Tagore song accompanied by English recitation by Partha Sen. Past TSH President, Debleena Banerji, recited the famous poem "Where the mind is without fear". Elocutionist Bratati Bandyopadhyay also performed a fabulous duet. — *PTI*



## SHORT TAKES

## Du Plessis retires from Test cricket

**Johannesburg:** Faf du Plessis, the last survivor of South African cricket's golden age in Test cricket, announced on Wednesday that he had retired from Test matches with immediate effect.

Du Plessis, 36, said in a statement on his Instagram account that he would continue to be available for one-day and Twenty20 internationals.

"The next two years are ICC T20 World Cup years. Because of this, my focus is shifting to this format and I want to play as much of it as possible around the world so that I can be the best player I can possibly be," he said.

Du Plessis went on to score 4,163 runs in Test matches at an average of 40.02.

He hit ten centuries and made his highest score of 199 against Sri Lanka on his home ground at Centurion Park last December. — *AFP*

## Lazio's swearing Lazzari banned

**Rome:** Lazio winger Manuel Lazzari has joined Roma's Bryan Cristante in being banned for a game for making blasphemous comments during a match, Serie 'A' announced on Tuesday.

Lazzari's remarks, which came during the second-half of Sunday's loss at Inter Milan at an almost empty San Siro, were picked up on television. Cristante was handed the same suspension in December after reacting to scoring an own goal. Juventus' Gianluigi Buffon was the subject of an investigation for the same reason in the same month but has yet to be sanctioned for remarks caught on an audio recording. Two further probes from the Italian football federation are underway after the use of the technology. — *AFP*

## Oly minister Seiko likely Tokyo chief

**Tokyo:** Japan's Olympic Minister Seiko Hashimoto has been chosen as the top candidate to replace Tokyo 2020 chief Yoshiro Mori after he resigned over a sexism row, reports said Wednesday. The panel charged with selecting Mori's replacement met for a second day, with multiple major Japanese media outlets reporting its members had settled on Hashimoto as best suited to the job. Hashimoto is a seven-time Olympian who competed at both winter and summer Games, and is currently one of just two women in Japan's cabinet. Public broadcaster NHK, citing unnamed sources, said the selection committee had "narrowed down the candidates to Hashimoto" after meeting behind closed doors. The panel is now preparing to ask Hashimoto to take up the position, NHK said. — *AFP*

## Harden heroics scorch Sun

**Los Angeles:** James Harden spearheaded the biggest half-time comeback in franchise history, scoring 38 points and the short-handed Brooklyn Nets rallied to stun the Phoenix Suns 128-124 on Tuesday. Harden caught fire late as the Nets stormed back from a 21-point halftime deficit to snap the Suns' season-best win streak at six NBA games. The Nets trailed by as much as 24 points.

Harden added 11 assists, Joe Harris scored 22 points and Jeff Green scored 18 points off for the Nets, who won their fourth consecutive game despite playing without Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving. — *AFP*

## Live on TV

## TENNIS

**Australian Open:** Women's semifinals from 8.30 am; Men's semifinal from 2 pm on on Sony Six, Sony Ten 2, HD

## CRICKET

**IPL Player Auction:** From 3 pm on Star Sports 1, Star Sports 1 HD

## FOOTBALL

**Indian Super League:** Chennaiyin vs North East United from 7.20 pm on Star Sports 2, 3

**English Premier League:** Burnley vs Fulham from 11.30 pm; Everton vs Manchester City 1.45 am (Thursday) on Star Sports Select 1, HD

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## AUCTION IN ACTION

## Uncapped Azharuddeen and Shahrukh up for grabs

C. SANTHOSH KUMAR  
CHENNAI, FEB. 17

As the second Test between India and England was over as a contest by lunch on day four, England allrounder Moeen Ali used the opportunity to send out a strong message. Moeen smoked a few lusty blows and smashed India's Axar Patel for a hat-trick of sixes before England were bowled out. A left-handed batsman who also bowls off-spin, Moeen is one of the overseas players to watch out for in Thursday's 'mini' IPL auction where franchises will be looking to pick up a few pieces to solve the jigsaw puzzle ahead of season 14.

After picking eight wickets on a turning Chepauk track, Moeen, who was released by Royal Challengers Bangalore, couldn't have chosen a better place to showcase his big-hitting skills. Chennai Super Kings are looking for a foreign player and also an off-spinner to replace Harbhajan Singh and Australia's Shane Watson. Moeen fits the bill.

CSK would also be weighing other options such as the reliable Steve Smith (released by Rajasthan Royals), the swashbuckling Glenn Maxwell (released by Punjab) and No.1 T20 batsman Dawid Malan (who



Australia's Glen Maxwell in this file photo.

played for Hobart Hurricanes in the Big Bash League).

CSK CEO K.S. Viswanathan said their requirement is a foreign batsman. CSK have ₹19.9 crore to spend for six slots, including an overseas player. "There are a few choices available in the pool. It can even be a rookie," he said, keeping his cards close to his chest.

After the Covid-19 lockdown forced the 2020 IPL to go overseas, the next edition is expected to be back in India. A state, most likely Maharashtra, with multiple venues will be chosen to host the cash-rich league.

"If it's going to be in India, pitches are likely to assist the spinners. Our core team which remains intact was built looking at our home venue. So, it (venue) plays a key role in the auction dynamics," said Viswanathan.

After removing 'XI' from their name, the rebranded Punjab Kings will splurge at the auction table on Wednesday. They have the highest remaining purse at ₹53.2 crore. They have nine slots to fill and five of them are for foreigners. Rajasthan Royals and Royal Challengers Bangalore have ₹37.85 crore and ₹35.40 crore in their pockets to pick nine and 11 players, respective-

ly. Having released an array of fast bowlers — Lasith Malinga, Mitch McClenaghan, James Pattinson, Nathan Coulter-Nile — Mumbai Indians' primary target would be getting a couple of seamers.

As Delhi Capitals' assistant coach Mohammed Kaif pointed out, flexibility is the key in any auction. "One can have all the plans, but things can change on the auction table. We have to make spontaneous decisions. Our main players have been playing continuously and there are no fitness issues as well. So, we'll be looking to acquire some back-up players," said

Kaif. Australia's limited-overs skipper Aaron Finch, explosive England opener Jason Roy, the big-hitting Evin Lewis and Bangladesh allrounder Shakib Al Hasan are some of the other prominent foreign players in the fray. It will be interesting to see if Harbhajan, Kedar Jadhav, Piyush Chawla (all released by CSK), Hanuma Vihari and Cheteshwar Pujara find takers.

Among the uncapped Indians, Kerala's Mohammed Azharuddeen, Tamil Nadu's Shahrukh Khan and Baroda's Lukman Meriwala fancy their chances. Azharuddeen became a sensation when he scored a 37-ball hundred in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, while Shahrukh impressed with his finishing skills while inspiring Tamil Nadu to the domestic T20 title. Left-arm pacer Meriwala with 15 wickets in eight matches impressed the IPL scouts during the Syed Mushtaq Ali.

All eyes will be on Sachin Tendulkar's son, Arjun, who has listed himself as an allrounder with a base price of ₹20 lakh. Arjun warmed up for the auction with an allround show in a local tournament in Mumbai recently. Mumbai Indians are expected to pick the youngster.

## NUMBERS GAME

292

Number of cricketers set to go under the hammer. As many as 1,114 cricketers had initially registered for auction. The final list was then pruned after the eight franchises submitted their shortlist of players.

164

Number of Indian players in the fray.

128

Number of overseas players including three from Associate Nations will be up for grabs.

## LIST OF CAPPED PLAYERS

₹2 crore

The highest reserve price. Two Indian players — Harbhajan Singh and Kedar Jadhav — and eight overseas players — Glenn Maxwell, Steve Smith, Shakib Al Hasan, Moeen Ali, Sam Billings, Liam Plunkett, Jason Roy & Mark Wood have chosen to be slotted in the highest bracket.



Mohammed Azharuddeen



Arjun Tendulkar



Shahrukh Khan

	Base price	Total players	Indians	Overseas
₹2 crore	₹2 crore	10	2	8
₹1.5 crore	₹1.5 crore	12	—	12
₹1 crore	₹1 crore	11	2	9
₹75 lakh	₹75 lakh	15	—	15
₹50 lakh	₹50 lakh	65	13	52

25

Max squad size

8

Max overseas players

₹85 cr

Salary cap per team

Franchise	Purse left	Available slots	Overseas
Punjab	53.20	9	5
Rajasthan	37.85	9	3
Bangalore	35.40	11	3
Chennai	19.90	6	1
Mumbai	15.35	7	4
Delhi	13.40	8	3
Kolkata	10.75	8	2
Hyderabad	10.75	3	1

(All amounts in crore)

If it's going to be in India, pitches are likely to assist the spinners. Our core team which remains intact was built looking at our home venue. So, it (venue) plays a key role in the auction dynamics.

— **K. S. VISWANATHAN**  
CEO of Chennai Super Kings

## KINGS XI ARE NOW PLAIN PUNJAB KINGS

**New Delhi, Feb. 17:** Kings XI Punjab were on Wednesday renamed as Punjab Kings ahead of the 2021 IPL auction on Thursday in Chennai.

A new logo was also unveiled on Wednesday. Speaking about the new brand identity, team CEO Satish Menon said: "Punjab Kings is a more evolved brand name, and we understand it was a right time for us to move focus on the core brand itself."

"The change in brand identity is not about changing our brand ethos but celebrating our oneness as we stand in unit like a family. The new logo honors the liveliness and vibrancy of the brand and provides modern elements, while we stand out from rest of the teams," Menon further added. — *PTI*

## Ashwin leaps to 5th spot in Test allrounder ranks

**Dubai, Feb. 17:** India's Ravichandran Ashwin jumped to fifth spot among allrounders in the latest ICC Test Player Rankings following his brilliant show with the bat and the ball against England in the second match while his captain Virat Kohli remained at fifth among batsmen.

Ashwin hit an excellent 106 in India's second innings and took eight wickets with his off-spin in the second Test against England in Chennai, which the hosts won by 317 runs on Tuesday.

He has logged 336 points in a list headed by West Indian Jason Holder (407 points). Ravindra Jadeja remained at second with 403 points, followed by Ben Stokes (397) of

## UMESH IN FOR TESTS 3 AND 4 vs ENGLAND

**New Delhi, Feb. 17:** India on Wednesday brought in fast bowler Umesh Yadav for the last two Tests against England to be played at the world's biggest cricket stadium in the western city of Ahmedabad.

Yadav, 33, will undergo a fitness assessment before joining the squad led by Virat Kohli, the Board of Control for Cricket in India said in a news release. The paceman is making a comeback after recovering from a calf injury he picked up during the Boxing Day Test against Australia.

He replaces Shardul Thakur who has been released to play for Mumbai in the domestic 50-over Vijay Hazare Trophy. — *PTI*

England and Shakib Al Hasan (352) of Bangladesh.

Ashwin remained static at seventh among Test bowlers with 804 points

while pacer Jasprit Bumrah also retained his eighth spot with 761 points with Pat Cummins (908) topping the chart. — *PTI*

## NZC MAY ALLOW ITS PLAYERS TO TURN UP IN IPL

**Auckland, Feb. 17:** New Zealand Cricket has indicated that it may not block its players from fully participating in the upcoming IPL if the knock-out phase matches of the lucrative league clash with the Test series opener in England beginning on June 2, according to a report.

It has been reported by *stuff.co.nz* that the IPL-bound New Zealand players may miss the matches of the limited overs tour of Bangladesh.

Kane Williamson, Trent Boult, Lockie Ferguson, Mitchell Santner and Tim Seifert are bound for IPL and they could be joined by several teammates among 20 New Zealanders entered in Thursday's player auction.

Kyle Jamieson could also snare a first-time deal. — *PTI*

## Tsitsipas upsets Nadal, in semis

**Melbourne, Feb. 17:** Stefanos Tsitsipas ended Rafael Nadal's Grand Slam record bid in five gripping sets on Wednesday in the Australian Open quarter-finals.

Greece's Tsitsipas looked down and out after losing the first two sets but after edging the third he was a different player, taking the upper hand over a subdued Nadal to win 3-6, 2-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-4, 7-5.

Tsitsipas, 22, stunned Roger Federer in the 2019 last 16 before being halted by Nadal in the semis, but he turned the tables to set up a last-four meeting with Russia's Daniil Medvedev.

Underlining the scale of the upset, it was only the second time Nadal has lost a Grand Slam five-setter from two sets to love after his defeat to Fabio Fognini at the 2015 US Open.

"I don't know what happened after the third set — I fly like a little bird, everything was working for me," the fifth seed said.

## MEDVEDEV'S MAGIC MAULS RUBLEV

Daniil Medvedev came out on top of a brutal all-Russian clash Thursday against Andrey Rublev to move into his first Australian Open semifinal and inch closer to a maiden Grand Slam title.

The fourth seed had more firepower than his younger, eighth-seeded rival in scorching conditions on Rod Laver Arena, grinding him down 7-5, 6-3, 6-2 to extend his win-streak to 19 matches.

His reward is a last-four clash with the fifth-seeded Greek Stefanos Tsitsipas.

"I would say the three last

points when I was getting ready for the serve I could not really move my left leg," he said, with both players cramping in the "super-tough" conditions.

## MUCHOVA SPOILS ASHLEIGH'S PARTY

Top seed and home hope Ashleigh Barty's Australian Open came to a juddering halt in the quarter-finals on Wednesday, just as fans were cleared to return after an eerie, five-day Coronavirus lockdown.

Barty had raised expectations of ending Australia's 43-year wait for a home winner but her campaign was ended by Czech surprise package Karolina Muchova, who stunned the top seed 1-6, 6-3, 6-2.

Muchova will face Jennifer Brady in the last four after the 22nd seed beat her fellow American and close friend Jessica Pegula 4-6, 6-2, 6-1.

## BRADY CRUISES INTO SEMIFINALS

After Barty's departure, Brady also staged a comeback to beat Pegula, whose father is the billionaire owner of the Buffalo Bills NFL franchise, 4-6, 6-2, 6-1.

Brady's achievement is notable, as she is the last woman standing among those who served a hard 14-day quarantine after arriving in Australia — unlike other players, who were allowed out of their hotels for five hours a day to train.

"I felt the pressure from her. She's such an aggressive player," said Brady, who also reached the semis at last year's US Open.

— *AFP*

## THE RESULTS

**Men's singles quarterfinals:** Stefanos Tsitsipas (GRE x5) bt Rafael Nadal (ESP x2) 3-6, 2-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-4, 7-5; Daniil Medvedev (RUS x4) bt Andrey Rublev (RUS x7) 7-5, 6-3, 6-2.

**Women's singles quarterfinals:** Karolina Muchova (CZE x25) bt Ashleigh Barty (AUS x1) 1-6, 6-3, 6-2; Jennifer Brady (USA x22) bt Jessica Pegula (USA) 4-6, 6-2, 6-1.



Kylian Mbappe (centre) of PSG is marked by two of Barcelona's players during their Champions League Round of 16 first leg match at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona on Tuesday. PSG won 4-1. — *AP*

## Salah, Mane pack off Leipzig in CL

**Budapest, Feb. 17:** Liverpool rediscovered lost form and seized the initiative against RB Leipzig in the first leg of their Champions League last-16 clash by cruising to a 2-0 win in a chilly Budapest on Tuesday.

Clinical early second-half strikes from Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mane, both courtesy of dreadful defensive errors, proved decisive and leave the German side facing a formidable task in the return leg on March 10.

The win moves Jurgen Klopp's men to the brink of the Champions League quarterfinals and also ends a run of three straight defeats that has left the English champions 13 points behind leaders Manchester City in the Premier League.

"It was a game we wanted it was a game we needed tonight," Klopp told *BT Sport* afterwards.

The first leg was moved from Leipzig to the Hungarian capital due to Germany's strict Covid-19 travel restrictions. Liverpool were left to cruise to victory, keeping alive their hopes of silverware via Champions League glory this season despite their domestic woes.

"We were for two years really good and then this year we had some problems," said Klopp. — *AFP*

## MBAPPE NETS HAT-TRICK TO STUN BARCA

**Barcelona, Feb. 17:** Kylian Mbappe ripped Barcelona apart on Tuesday by scoring a stunning hat-trick in a 4-1 rout to put Paris Saint-Germain on the brink of the Champions League quarter-finals.

Mbappe underlined his status as the rising superstar of world football with a ruthless display of finishing at Camp Nou that will go down as one this competition's most devastating individual performances.

He eclipsed Barca's Lionel Messi, whose opening goal from the penalty spot had been reduced to nothing more than a footnote by the final whistle.

Moise Kean also headed in midway through the second half, carelessly left unmarked from a free-kick as PSG pulled away to win this first leg, and perhaps the tie.

Barcelona will no doubt draw upon the spirit of their astonishing 'Remontada' in 2017, when they won the second leg 6-1 to overturn a 4-0 deficit from the opening game in Paris. — *AFP*