THE ASIAN AGE

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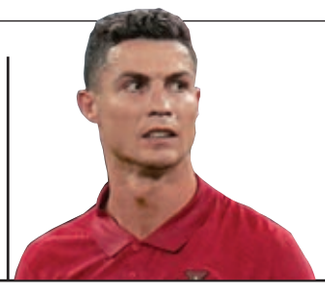
Mukesh Ambani to invest ₹75K cr in clean energy, unveils Google phone



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■ Govt wants polls after delimitation; J&K leaders say grant statehood first

PM to Kashmiris: Statehood soon, will remove *'Dilli ki doori'* and *'Dil ki doori'*

RAJNISH SHARMA with agency inputs
NEW DELHI, JUNE 24

In a major initiative, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday reached out to the people of Jammu and Kashmir, saying that he was committed to remove "*Dilli ki doori*" as well as "*Dil ki doori*", and also reiterated that he was committed to restoring full statehood to J&K at an "appropriate time".

Mr Modi expressed his views at a marathon meeting of over three hours with 14 top J&K leaders from eight different parties, which included four former CMs — Ghulam Nabi Azad, Mehbooba Mufti, Farooq Abdullah and Omar Abdullah. Home minister Amit Shah and national security adviser Ajit Doval were among those present.

This is the first time top political leaders from J&K held detailed talks with Prime Minister Modi and other Central leaders like Amit Shah since J&K's special status under Article 370 was abolished in August 2019 and the state was split up into two Union territories of J&K and Ladakh.

Talking to reporters after the meeting, former CM Omar Abdullah said both Mr Modi and Mr Shah pledged they were committed to restoring Jammu and Kashmir's statehood. "The takeaway from the meeting was that the Prime Minister said he wanted to remove '*Dil ki doori*' and '*Dilli ki doori*', but I as well as other leaders are sure that one meeting is not enough. However, a process has begun," Mr Abdullah said.

The Central leadership wants to hold Assembly polls immediately after the delimitation commission submits its report, but senior Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad

■ Turn to Page 4

Prime Minister Narendra Modi during an all-party meeting with various political leaders from Jammu and Kashmir in Delhi on Thursday. — *PTI*

> I told the leaders of J&K that it is the people, specially the youth who have to provide political leadership to J&K...
> —**Narendra Modi,** *Prime Minister*

> I conveyed to the PM that the statehood means reverting even the IAS and IPS cadres of J&K
> —**Farooq Abdullah,** *NC president*

> I have requested the PM that, if need be, we could talk to Pakistan once again for further boosting the peace process...
> —**Mehbooba Mufti,** *PDP chief*

NANDIGRAM CASE

Mamata cites BJP link, wants judge to recuse himself

Justice Chandra reserves order on Mamata's plea

Kolkata, June 24: The Kolkata high court on Thursday reserved its order on a plea by chief minister Mamata Banerjee that the judge assigned to hear her election petition against BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari recuse himself from the case as he was an "active member" of the BJP like her Nandigram rival.

Ms Banerjee, who appeared before the court of Justice Kaushik Chanda through teleconference, had moved the high court claiming she apprehended that she may not get justice from the judge due to his alleged BJP links.

The single bench of Justice Chanda, against whom the recusal petition has been filed, heard the matter and reserved his order. The judge did not specify the date for pronouncement of the verdict.

Ms Banerjee's counsel had earlier written to Acting Chief Justice of the high court Rajesh Bindal seeking reassignment of her election petition.

Ms Banerjee has claimed in her recusal petition that she has been made aware that Justice Chanda was an "active member" of the BJP and raised the "likelihood of bias" due to the associations the had with BJP during his days as a lawyer.

She said since the matter related to adjudication of an election petition where the election of a BJP candidate has been contested, it will have political ramifications. So, she prayed that the acting chief justice, who is the master of roster, assign the matter to another bench.

HIGHLIGHTING THE reasons for Mamata's apprehension of bias, Abhishek Manu Singhvi submitted that Justice Chanda has been 'closely associated with BJP', that he was earlier the head of BJP's legal cell and had appeared on its behalf in various cases

CM MAMATA has accused Suvendu Adhikari, who defeated her by 1,956 votes in the Assembly polls, of corrupt practices

During the course of the hearing on Thursday, a question was posed by Justice Chanda to senior advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi, appearing on behalf of Ms Banerjee, as to why the aspect of recusal wasn't raised before the Bench during the last hearing on June 18.

"This case was listed before me on the 18th. That day no one said that the petitioner has sought re-assignment apprehending bias? Is it not the duty of the counsel to point this out? You appear in courts across the country Dr Singhvi, what is the standard practice?" the judge asked.

Responding to this, Mr Singhvi replied that since a formal application was yet to be filed, there was no mention of recusal on the earlier date.

Stating that there was a "clear conflict of interest" in the matter, Mr Singhvi went ahead to submit that the judge may decide the application of recusal judicially and that the order will be subject to challenge either way.

— *Agencies*

Andhra cancels its Class 10, 12 exams after top court rap

AGE CORRESPONDENT with agency inputs
NEW DELHI/AMRAVATI, JUNE 24

The Andhra Pradesh government on Thursday evening announced the cancellation of its Class 10 and Class 12 board examinations after the Supreme Court earlier in the day took a serious view of the state government's indecisiveness. State education minister A. Suresh told reporters it had decided to cancel the exams as it was difficult to adhere to the July 31 deadline set by the Supreme Court to complete the process.

The minister said a high-powered committee would be set up to assess the marks to be awarded to the Class 12 students. The Supreme Court's scathing remarks about the Jagan Mohan Reddy government's determination to conduct the exams in the last week of July, while most states had already scrapped their state board exams, forced the state to cancel the exams, to the relief of lakhs of students and their parents.

Earlier, referring to the "Delta Plus strain Covid cases in Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh, the Supreme Court took to task the Andhra Pradesh government for exposing five lakh students and nearly one lakh teachers, invigilators and support staff to the pandemic over its insistence on holding physical Class 12 examinations that it said would require 34,634 rooms to seat 15 students each in a room.

"Nobody knows how the Delta Plus Covid strain will roll out", it said, as it made clear that unless it is convinced every safeguard in the holding of exams is in place, it will

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Decide on Class 12 evaluation within 10 days, SC tells states

New Delhi: The Supreme Court on Thursday said that all the state education boards will finalise their schemes for the evaluation and allocation of marks to be awarded to the students who were to appear in the cancelled Class 12 examination within in 10 days and the results will be positively declared by July 31. PAGE 3

At SCO meet, Doval proposes 'action plan' against Pak-based terror groups

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI
NEW DELHI, JUNE 24

National Security Advisor Ajit Doval has proposed an "action plan" against Pakistan-based terror groups Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed under the framework of eight-nation grouping SCO and called for expeditiously bringing the perpetrators of terror attacks to justice.

At an in-person meeting of top security officials of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe on Wednesday, he also called for the "full implementation of UN resolutions and targeted sanctions against UN-designated terrorist individuals and entities".

The predominantly-Central Asian eight-nation SCO comprises Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan besides India and Pakistan.

Sources said that Mr Doval also "emphasised adoption of international standards to counter terror financing, including an MoU between the SCO and (global anti-terror watchdog) Financial Action Task Force (FATF)". Incidentally, Pakistan which is also an SCO member continues to be on the FATF's "grey list" for its failure to adequately combat terror-financing on its soil.

Sources said Mr Doval also "strongly condemned terrorism in all forms and manifestations" and emphasised that "perpetrators of terrorism including cross-border terror attacks should be

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Ghaziabad assault case: Twitter India MD gets HC relief

Bengaluru/Ghaziabad, June 24: In a relief to Twitter India head Manish Maheshwari, the Karnataka high court on Thursday restrained the Ghaziabad police, which has summoned him in connection with a probe related to the assault of an elderly Muslim man there, from initiating coercive action against him.

The single bench of Justice G. Narender said the police can examine Mr Maheshwari through virtual mode. — *PTI*

■ More on Page 2

Afghan militiamen join Afghan defence and security forces during a gathering in Kabul on Wednesday. Afghanistan's defence ministry is working with warlords to mobilise local militias across the country to try to stem the tide of the latest Taliban gains. — *AP*

Covid cases rising again, fresh fear of a third wave

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, JUNE 24

After a steady decline for over a week, fresh Covid-19 cases have started picking up again, raising the fear that a fresh wave may be on its way. On Thursday, 54,069 new cases were detected in the past 24 hours, which is 6.3 per cent higher than the previous day. In the last 24 hours, 1,321 deaths were reported. However, the Union health ministry said the daily positivity rate was at 2.91 per cent in India at present.

Delhi and Mumbai, which showed a considerable decline in fresh cases, are also slowly showing rising numbers. Delhi reported 109 new cases while Mumbai had 789 fresh cases. Maharashtra CM Udhhav Thackeray has instructed the state health authorities to prepare for a possible third wave as the state is seeing a rise in new cases. Maharashtra also has the highest number of the "Delta Plus" variant of SARS-CoV2 being detected in Ratnagiri, Sindhudurg, Jalgaon, Thane and Mumbai. To increase the vaccination coverage, the Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation started inoculating homeless people and

■ Turn to Page 4

■ Found dead in jail hours after Spain court approved his extradition to US

Antivirus pioneer McAfee dead at 75

Madrid, June 24: John McAfee, the creator of McAfee antivirus software, was found dead in his jail cell near Barcelona in an apparent suicide Wednesday, hours after a Spanish court approved his extradition to the US to face tax charges punishable by decades in prison, authorities said.

The eccentric cryptocurrency promoter and tax opponent whose history of legal troubles spanned from Tennessee to Central America to the Caribbean was discovered at the Brians 2 penitentiary in northeastern Spain.

Security personnel tried to revive him, but the jail's medical team finally certified his death, a statement from the regional Catalan government said.

"A judicial delegation has arrived to probe the causes of death," it said, adding that everything points to death by suicide.

The statement didn't identify McAfee by name but said the dead man was a 75-year-old US citizen awaiting extradition to his country. A Catalan government official familiar with the case who was not authorised to be named in media reports confirmed that it was McAfee.

Spain's National Court on Monday ruled in favour of extraditing McAfee who had argued in a hearing earlier this month that the charges against him by prosecutors in Tennessee were politically motivated and that he would spend the rest of his life in prison if returned to the US.

The court's ruling was made public on Wednesday and was open for appeal, with any final extradition order also needing to get approval from the Spanish Cabinet.

McAfee was arrested last October at Barcelona's international airport and had been in jail since then.

After reports of McAfee's alleged death by suicide, his December 2019 tweet claiming that he will never die by suicide has gone viral. In his tweet McAfee claimed that if it were ever reported that he had died by suicide it meant that was actually "whacked". He had also alleged that the US government might be trying to kill him. — *Agencies*

TENNESSEE PROSECUTORS had argued that McAfee owed the US government $4,214,105 in taxes for undeclared income. The criminal charges carried a prison sentence of up to 30 years.

Sena slams Rahul, says he fights Modi only on Twitter

SONU SHRIVASTAVA
MUMBAI, JUNE 24

The Shiv Sena on Thursday took a jibe at Congress leader Rahul Gandhi claiming that he criticises Prime Minister Narendra Modi only virtually, on Twitter, and not on the ground. The Uddhav Thackeray-led party also praised the NCP chief Sharad Pawar's efforts for holding a meeting in Delhi to bring the Opposition together and said that the meeting should have been organised by Mr Gandhi.

The Rashtramanch meeting, hosted by Mr Pawar in the Capital at his residence on Tuesday, was attended by leaders of eight Opposition parties, including the Trinamul Congress (TMC), the Samajwadi Party, the Aam Aadmi Party, the Rashtriya Lok Dal and the Left amid heightened speculation about the possibility of a third front against the BJP.

The Sena in an editorial in its party mouthpiece *Saamana* on Thursday said that the Opposition parties should come together as it is the need of parliamentary democracy. But in the last seven years, the existence of Opposition at the national

■ Turn to Page 4

WINDOWS

Alpine's Spanish driver Fernando Alonso during a visit in Spielberg, Austria, on Thursday, before the F1 Styrian Grand Prix on June 27. — *AFP*

Top Maoist leader Hidma infected with Covid: Police

Bhopal: Commander of Maoists' battalion number one Hidma, who was allegedly involved in at least half-a-dozen major Naxal attacks on security forces in insurgency-hit Bastar in Chhattisgarh in the last one decade, was currently battling with his life after being infected with coronavirus, the police, quoting two Naxal couriers arrested recently, said on Thursday. Medicines used for treatment of Covid-19 along with masks and sanitisers were seized from the arrested members of the Maoists' supply network.
Full report on Page 4

4 students held over Israel embassy blast

New Delhi: The Delhi police has arrested four students from Ladakh in connection with the Israel embassy blast case, sources said on Thursday. The students were arrested from Kargil and taken to Delhi on transit remand, sources said. A minor IED blast took place outside the Israel embassy on January 29.
Full report on Page 2

Azmi: Liquor delivery platform cheated me

Mumbai: Veteran actor Shabana Azmi on Thursday accused an alcohol delivery platform of allegedly duping her. In a Twitter post, she claimed that she was conned by Living Liquidz after she placed an order but didn't receive it. — *PTI*
Full report on Page 3

COUNTERPOINT

Crisis is over... no threat to my government for the next 48 hours!

WEATHER

Max: 39°C
Min: 29°C
RH: 37%
Rain: Nil

Forecast: Mostly sunny

ASTROGUIDE

Plava: Uttarayana
Tithi: Jyeshta Bahula Padyami till 9.02 pm
Star: Moola till 6.40 am
Varjyam: 5.14 am to 6.40 am
Durmuhurtam: 8.24 am to 9.16 am; 12.45 pm to 1.37 pm
Rahukalam: 10.30 am to noon

SUNSET TODAY 7.22 PM
SUNRISE TOMORROW 5.24 AM
MOONRISE TOMORROW 8.16 PM
MOONSET TODAY 5.36 AM

IN BRIEF

1 held in Remdesivir black marketing case

Noida: The Noida Police on Thursday said it has arrested a Haryana resident who was allegedly involved in black marketing of remdesivir during the second wave of the Covid pandemic. The key accused in the case, identified as Rachit Ghai, has already been arrested by the police, which has requested the Uttar Pradesh government to grant his detention under the stringent National Security Act (NSA). After the remdesivir black marketing episode came into light, an FIR was lodged on April 21 at the Noida Sector 20 police station based on a complaint by drug inspector Vaibhav Babbar, police officials said. "In pursuance of the case, accused Ajay Panchal, who lives in Panchkula district of Haryana, has been arrested today (Thursday). He was held near the DPS school in Sector 30 here," a police spokesperson said. He is accused of illegally selling remdesivir vials at exorbitant rates to people who were in dire need of Covid treatment, the official said. — *PTI*

Man killed, 4 hurt in road accident

New Delhi: A man was killed and four others, including three police personnel, were injured in a road accident in north Delhi's Sarai Rohilla area on Thursday, police said. They said the incident took place around 9 pm at Kamal T-point. A bus first hit a traffic police booth and later rammed into a tree, leaving one dead and four others injured, a senior police officer said. The injured persons included three policemen and a civilian, he added. The driver of the bus left the vehicle and fled the spot, the officer said. A case has been registered under relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code at Sarai Rohilla police station, he said. Police said they are trying to nab the bus driver, adding investigation is underway.

Man snatches mobile from woman, held

Ghaziabad: A man who allegedly snatched a mobile phone from a woman in the Loni area here was arrested after an encounter on Thursday, police said. Two motorcycle-borne men snatched a mobile phone from a woman when she, along with her husband, was going to Mohan Nagar from Loni in an auto-rickshaw, they said. Upon getting information, police cordoned off the area and traced the robbers at a canal near Shakal Pura village. When policemen tried to apprehend them, they fired at them, Circle Officer, Loni, Atul Kumar Sonkar said. Police retaliated and one of the robbers sustained a bullet injury in his leg, he said. The other managed to escape from the spot, Sonkar added. — *PTI*

FARMERS AT DELHI BORDERS TO MARK 7 MONTHS OF STIR

New Delhi: A large number of farmers, including from Uttar Pradesh, is expected to join protesters at Delhi's border points on June 26 to mark seven months of their agitation against the three agri laws enacted last year, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) said on Thursday. Farmers at the Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur border points are gearing up for June 26 and they will observe it as 'Save Agriculture, Save Democracy Day', it said in a statement. "Preparations are underway for marking June 26 as 'Save Agriculture, Save Democracy Day' all over the country," said the umbrella body of 40 farmer unions which is spearheading the stir against the central laws enacted in September last year. Farmers have been camping at Delhi's borders since November demanding that the legislations be rolled back and a new law made to guarantee minimum support price for crops. "A large convoy of protestors has left Ganganagar in Rajasthan today for the Shahjahanpur border, led by Grameen Kisan Mazdoor Samiti (GKS). Similarly, farmers from Bagpat and Saharanpur are expected at Ghazipur border, led by BKU (Tikait)," the statement said. — *PTI*

All students from Kargil detained in connection with case that took place on Jan. 29

4 Ladakh students held in Israel embassy blast case

BHASKAR HARI SHARMA
NEW DELHI, JUNE 24

The special cell of the Delhi police has arrested four students from Ladakh Union Territory's Kargil area in connection with the Israel embassy blast case in the national capital.

The accused has been identified as Nazir Hussain (26), Zulfikar Ali Wazir (25), Aiaz Hussain (28), and Muzammil Hussain (25), all residents of Thang village in Kargil.

"In a joint operation with a Central intelligence agency and Kargil police, the special cell of the Delhi police has detained four persons from Kargil in connection with conspiracy to plan and execute terror activities in the national capital," said Chinmoy Biswal, the spokesperson of the Delhi police.

"They have been taken on remand and brought to Delhi for questioning," Mr Biswal added.

The students were detained in Kargil and brought to Delhi on Thursday for questioning.

(File photo) A crude bomb went off near the Embassy of Israel on A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Road in January, shattering windscreens of three cars on the road. — *PTI*

The Delhi police has arrested the students after obtaining a transit remand from a local court.

"The arrest was made under a separate FIR. They were questioned earlier and their questioning will continue. Their phones were switched off at the same time on the day of the blast," the police said.

While the case is being probed by the National Investigation Agency (NIA), the special cell in Delhi registered a case of "conspiracy" behind the blast and picked up the four.

Earlier, the NIA had announced a reward of ₹10 lakh each for the identification of two people captured on CCTV camera, allegedly planting explosive material outside the Israeli embassy.

After the special cell failed to get any breakthrough, the case was transferred to the NIA.

"The New Delhi range of special cell had lodged an FIR of criminal conspiracy and they were conducting their investigation alongside. The police has zeroed in on four local students of Kargil. The police is questioning them and trying to ascertain their role," it said.

The blast took place around 5.00 pm on APJ Abdul Kalam Road on January 29, damaging a few parked vehicles. Investigators had found clues pointing to an attempt at launching a coordinated international attack by a trans-national group with the aim of sending a message to Israel.

While there were no casualties during the incident, Israel had condemned the attack and said that it was working with the Indian authorities to probe the matter. The incident took place on the 29th anniversary of India-Israel relations.

Preliminary forensic examination of the site and the bomb has revealed that the explosive used in the bomb was PETN. A military grade explosive, PETN is not easily available and has been used by terror groups for making bombs.

Twitter India MD gets relief in Ghaziabad assault case

No coercive action against Maheshwari: HC directs UP police

Bengaluru/Ghaziabad, June 24: Twitter India's Head Manish Maheshwari, who was summoned by the Ghaziabad Police in connection with a probe related to the assault of an elderly Muslim man there recently, did not appear before them as the Karnataka High Court restrained police from initiating coercive action against him. In his interim order, the single bench of Justice G. Narender said, "If the police desire to examine the petitioner (Manish Maheshwari), they may do so by virtual mode. If the matter requires consideration, we list it on June 29. Meanwhile restraining the respondents from initiating any coercive action against the petitioner," the court maintained.

"It is case of petitioner that he has replied to notice under section 160 of CrPC to join through virtual mode.The respondent (Ghaziabad police) taking objection to the request has turned around and issued notice under section 41(A) virtually putting him in shoes of accused," it observed.

Manish Maheshwari

The Twitter India managing director, who lives in Bengaluru in Karnataka, was issued notice by the Ghaziabad Police on June 21 and asked to report at its Loni Border police station at 10.30 am on Thursday to get his statement recorded in the case, officials at Ghaziabad said.

"He (Maheshwari) is not coming today," Ghaziabad senior superintendent of police Amit Pathak told PTI.

Mr Pathak said the Ghaziabad Police has learnt that the Twitter India MD has given a representation in Karnataka High Court in connection with the case and a decision on that is pending.

The Karnataka High Court's interim orders came after 4 pm.

The Ghaziabad Police on June 15 booked Twitter Inc, Twitter Communications India, news website The Wire, journalists Mohammed Zubair and Rana Ayyub, besides Congress leaders Salman Nizami, Maskoor Usmani, Shama Mohamed and writer Saba Naqvi.

They were booked over the circulation of a video in which the elderly man, Abdul Shamad Saifi, claims he was allegedly thrashed by some young men who also asked him to chant "Jai Shri Ram" on June 5.

The police said the video was shared to cause communal unrest.

Appearing on behalf of Maheshwari, advocate C.V. Nagesh said someone had posted a video on the Twitter platform alleging that a Muslim was forced to chant "Jai Sri Ram" and "Vande Mataram".

When he refused, his beard was cut.

Subsequently a notice under section 161 of the CrPC was issued to Maheshwari by email and responding to it, he said he would be ready to appear virtually. — *PTI*

Noida: Just 1 Covid case, no death reported

Noida, June 24: Uttar Pradesh's Gautam Buddh Nagar, adjoining Delhi, recorded just a single new case of Covid on Thursday in the only second such instance since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020, official data showed.

The reduced count of new infections is "not because of low testing" as at least 5,000 antigen-based and over 2,700 RT-PCR tests are being conducted daily in the district, a senior official told PTI.

According to the Uttar Pradesh Health Department's bulletin for a 24-hour period, Gautam Buddh Nagar recorded one new Covid case while nine patients recovered during the period.

The number of active cases left in the district came down to 67, while overall recoveries surged to 62,484 and the death toll stood at 466, the data showed. — *PTI*

Dust storm hits Delhi, temp down to 38.2°C

New Delhi, June 24: A dust storm hit Delhi on Thursday afternoon, bringing the maximum temperature down to 38.2 degrees Celsius, one notch below the normal, the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) said. The minimum temperature in the morning was recorded at 28.3 degrees Celsius, normal for this time of the year, it said.

The relative humidity at 5.30 pm was recorded at 45 per cent, it said.

The weatherman has predicted thunderstorm accompanied by rain for Friday, with the minimum and maximum temperatures expected to hover around 28 and 38 degrees Celsius, respectively.

Delhi's air quality was in the 'moderate' category on Thursday evening. Data from the Central Pollution Control Board showed that the hourly air quality index (AQI) at 7.05 pm stood at 140. — *PTI*

Delhi reports 109 Covid cases, 8 deaths

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, JUNE 24

Delhi recorded eight deaths and 109 fresh cases of coronavirus infection on Thursday as the city's positivity rate dipped to 0.14 per cent, according to data shared by the Health department here.

The new fatalities have pushed the death toll due to the disease in the city to 24,948. On Wednesday, Delhi recorded 111 Covid cases and seven fatalities, while the positivity rate stood at 0.15 per cent.

On June 14, the city had registered 131 cases and 16 deaths, while on February 22, there were 128 cases of COVID-19, according to official figures. On Monday, Delhi had reported 89 coronavirus cases with a positivity rate of 0.16 per cent, both lowest this year so far, while 11 people died, according to the data. Aam Aadmi Party MLA Atishi on Thursday said 25 per cent of the national capital's youth population has received at least one dose of Covid vaccine. On Wednesday, 1,09,358 doses were administered and out of these, nearly 90,000 doses were given to those in the 18-44 years age group, she said while issuing the vaccination bulletin.

Delhi police personnel during the launch of Jan Sampark Vahan to create awareness on Covid appropriate behaviour, amid the ongoing pandemic in New Delhi on Thursday. — *PTI*

The total vaccine doses administered so far is 67,98,236 and more than 16 lakh people have received both doses.

The Delhi government is hopeful of vaccinating the entire youth population 'soon', if regular supply of vaccine is ensured, the AAP legislator said.

Now, a walk-in facility is available for all age groups at all government school vaccination centres, which are listed on the CoWin application, she said.

"Due to the clubbing of vaccine stocks for both age groups (18-44 group and 45 years and above group), there has been an increase in vaccine stock available for the youth and hence, the vaccination speed is increasing in Delhi," Atishi said.

Man commits suicide over non-payment of his salary

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, JUNE 24

A 46-year-old man allegedly committed suicide at his house in Outer Delhi's Mangolpuri area over non-payment of pending salary by a private school, the police said on Thursday.

The deceased, identified as Tanoop Johar, used to work as a Taekwondo coach in a school in Rohini but had been unemployed for over a year now, it added.

The police said that he was found hanging inside his house by his family members on Tuesday.

In a purported suicide note recovered, he mentioned two names of the school management and accused the authorities over non-payment of his pending salary. He also wrote that he was "disturbed" because the school had not given him salary and he had no work recently.

The police said Johar had also filed a case in the labour court against the school management last year over non-payment of salary.

One of his former colleagues said Johar was taking online classes since March last year during the lockdown but had to discontinue later over a dispute with the school management over non-payment of his pending salary.

TEMPORARY CANCELLATION / DIVERSION / PARTIAL CANCELLATION / RE-SCHEDULING / REGULATION / SKIPPING OF STOPPAGE OF TRAINS DUE TO TRAFFIC BLOCK

It is notified for the information of passengers that Ambala Division of Northern Railway will undertake the Non-Interlocking work of Sirhind Station for commissioning of Electronic Interlocking in connection with Pilkhani - Sanehwal Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridor (DFCCIL) work. To execute this work Ambala Division will take suitable traffic blocks of different durations upto 30.06.2021. During this period following trains will be cancelled/diverted/partially cancelled/re-scheduled/ regulated & stoppage of some trains at Sirhind station will be skipped on dates shown against each:-

CANCELLATION OF TRAINS

Train No.	Train Name	Date of Cancellation (from originating station)
05252	Jalandhar City - Darbhanga Jn. Special Express	on 27.06.2021
05251	Darbhanga Jn. - Jalandhar City Special Express	on 26.06.2021
02238	Jammu Tawi - Varanasi Jn Special Express	on 27, 28, 29 & 30.06.2021
02237	Varanasi Jn. - Jammu Tawi Special Express	on 26, 27, 28 & 29.06.2021
04132	Udhampur - Prayagraj Jn. Special Express	on 27 & 30.06.2021
04131	Prayagraj Jn. - Udhampur Special Express	on 26 & 29.06.2021
02054/53	Amritsar Jn. - Haridwar Jn. - Amritsar Jn Special Express	on 26, 27, 28, 29 & 30.06.2021
05212	Amritsar Jn. - Darbhanga Jn. Special Express	on 26, 28 & 30.06.2021
05211	Darbhanga Jn. - Amritsar Jn. Special Express	on 26 & 28.06.2021
02920	Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra - Dr Ambedkar Nagar Special Express	on 27 & 30.06.2021
02919	Dr Ambedkar Nagar - Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra Special Express	on 25 & 28.06.2021
04650	Amritsar Jn. - Jaynagar Jn. Saryu Yamuna Special Express	on 26, 28 & 30.06.2021
04649	Jaynagar Jn. - Amritsar Jn. Saryu Yamuna Special Express	on 25, 27 & 29.06.2021
04674	Amritsar Jn. - Jaynagar Jn. Shaheed Special Express	on 25, 27 & 29.06.2021
04673	Jaynagar Jn. - Amritsar Jn. Shaheed Special Express	on 26, 28 & 30.06.2021
02380	Amritsar Jn. - Sealdah Jaliawala Bagh Special Express	on 27.06.2021
02379	Sealdah - Amritsar Jn. Jaliawala Bagh Special Express	on 25.06.2021
02026	Amritsar Jn. - Nagpur Special Express	on 28.06.2021
02025	Nagpur - Amritsar Jn. Special Express	on 26.06.2021
04672	Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra - Bandra Terminus Swaraj Special Exp.	on 26, 29 & 30.06.2021
04671	Bandra Terminus - Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra Swaraj Special Exp.	on 25, 27 & 28.06.2021
04675	Gandhidham Jn. - Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra Special Express	on 26.06.2021
04678	Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra - Hapa Special Express	on 28.06.2021
04677	Hapa - Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra Special Express	on 29.06.2021
04679	Jamnagar - Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra Special Express	on 30.06.2021
04680	Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra - Jamnagar Special Express	on 27.06.2021
02356	Jammu Tawi - Patna Jn. Special Express	on 27 & 30.06.2021
02355	Patna Jn. - Jammu Tawi Special Express	on 26 & 29.06.2021
02422/21	Jammu Tawi - Ajmer Jn. - Jammu Tawi Special Express	on 26, 27, 28, 29 & 30.06.2021
04652	Amritsar Jn. - Jaynagar Jn. Special Express	on 25, 27 & 30.06.2021
04651	Jaynagar Jn. - Amritsar Jn. Special Express	on 25, 27, 29.06.2021 & 02.07.2021
04654	Amritsar Jn. - New Jalpaiguri Superfast Special Express	on 30.06.2021
04653	New Jalpaiguri - Amritsar Jn. Superfast Special Express	on 25.06.2021
02318	Amritsar Jn. - Kolkata Special Express	on 29.06.2021
02317	Kolkata - Amritsar Jn. Special Express	on 27.06.2021
02358	Amritsar Jn. - Kolkata Special Express	on 28.06.2021 & 01.07.2021
02357	Kolkata - Amritsar Jn. Special Express	on 26 & 29.06.2021
05098	Jammu Tawi - Bhagalpur Special Express	on 29.06.2021
04145	Kanpur Central - Amritsar Jn. Special Express	on 28.06.2021
04146	Amritsar Jn. - Kanpur Central Special Express	on 29.06.2021
04646	Jammu Tawi - Jaisalmer Special Express	on 26, 28 & 29.06.2021
04645	Jaisalmer - Jammu Tawi Special Express	on 26, 28, 30.06.2021 & 01.07.2021
04662	Jammu Tawi - Barmer Special Express	on 25 & 27.06.2021
04661	Barmer - Jammu Tawi Special Express	on 25, 27 & 29.06.2021
01078	Jammu Tawi - Pune Jn. Special Express	on 26, 27, 28 & 29.06.2021
01077	Pune Jn. - Jammu Tawi Special Express	on 25, 26, 27 & 28.06.2021
03006	Amritsar Jn. - Howrah Jn. Special Express	on 26, 27, 28, 29 & 30.06.2021
03005	Howrah Jn. - Amritsar Jn. Special Express	on 25, 26, 27, 28 & 29.06.2021
02332	Jammu Tawi - Howrah Jn. Special Express	on 27 & 28.06.2021
02331	Howrah Jn. - Jammu Tawi Special Express	on 25 & 26.06.2021
04553	Delhi Jn. - Daulatpur Chowk Special Express	25.06.2021 to 01.07.2021
04554	Daulatpur Chowk - Delhi Jn. Special Express	up to 30.06.2021
02445	New Delhi - Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra Special Express	25 to 29.06.2021
02446	Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra - New Delhi Special Express	26 to 30.06.2021
02588	Jammu Tawi - Gorakhpur Special Express	on 26.06.2021

DIVERSION OF TRAINS

Train No. & Train Name	Diverted Route	Date of passing (from originating station)
02426/02425 Jammu Tawi - New Delhi - Jammu Tawi Spl. Exp.	Via Gill-Dhuri Jn. - Jakhal Jn.	on 26, 27, 28, 29 & 30.06.2021
02408 Amritsar Jn. - New Jalpaiguri Special Express	Via Sanehwal - Chandigarh	on 25.06.2021
04652 Amritsar Jn. - Jaynagar Special Express	Via Gill-Dhuri Jn.-Rajpura Jn.	on 25.06.2021
02920 Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra - Dr. Ambedkar Nagar Special Express	Via Sanehwal - Chandigarh	on 25.06.2021
00464 Amritsar Jn. - Howrah Jn. Special Express	Via Gill-Dhuri Jn.-Rajpura Jn.	on 25.06.2021
02278 Jammu Tawi - Tirupati Special Express	Via Gill-Dhuri Jn.-Rajpura Jn.	on 25.06.2021
02326 Nangal Dam - Kolkata Special Express	Via Morinda-Chandigarh	on 26.06.2021
03151 Kolkata - Jammu Tawi Special Express	Via Gill-Dhuri Jn.-Rajpura Jn.	on 26 & 28.06.2021
03152 Jammu Tawi - Kolkata Special Express	Via Rajpura Jn.-Dhuri Jn.-Gill	
05655 Kamakhya - Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra Spl. Exp.	Via Gill-Dhuri Jn.-Rajpura Jn.	on 27.06.2021
05656 Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra - Kamakhya Spl. Exp.	Via Rajpura Jn.-Dhuri Jn.-Gill	on 30.06.2021
08103 Tatanagar Jn. - Amritsar Jn. Special Express	Via Chandigarh-Sanehwal	on 28.06.2021
08104 Amritsar Jn. - Tatanagar Jn. Special Express	Via Sanehwal - Chandigarh	on 25.06.2021
02587 Gorakhpur - Jammu Tawi Special Express	Via Chandigarh-Sanehwal	on 28.06.2021
04141 Prayagraj Jn. - Udhampur Special Express	Via Chandigarh-Sanehwal	on 28.06.2021
04142 Udhampur - Prayagraj Jn. Special Express	Via Sanehwal - Chandigarh	on 29.06.2021

PARTIAL CANCELLATION OF TRAINS

Train No. & Name	Short Terminate at/ Short Originate from	Partially Cancelled between Stations	Date of cancellation (from the Originating Station)
03308 Firozpur Cantt Jn. - Dhanbad Jn. Special Express	from Saharanpur	Firozpur Cantt Jn. - Saharanpur	on 26, 27, 28, 29 & 30.06.2021
03307 Dhanbad Jn. - Firozpur Cantt. Jn. Special Express	at Saharanpur	Saharanpur - Firozpur Cantt. Jn.	on 25, 26, 27 & 28.06.2021
08238 Amritsar Jn - Korba Special Express	from Hazrat Nizamuddin	Amritsar Jn. - Hazrat Nizamuddin	on 27.06.2021
08237 Korba - Amritsar Jn. Special Express	at Hazrat Nizamuddin	Hazrat Nizamuddin - Amritsar Jn.	on 25.06.2021
04502/04501 Una Himachal - Saharanpur - Una Himachal Special Express	from / at Ambala Cantt.	Una Himachal - Ambala Cantt. - Una Himachal	from 25.06.2021 to 30.06.2021
02904 Amritsar Jn. - Mumbai Central Special Express	from Ambala Cantt.	Amritsar Jn. - Ambala Cantt.	on 26, 27, 28, 29 & 30.06.2021
02903 Mumbai Central - Amritsar Jn. Special Express	at Ambala Cantt.	Ambala Cantt. - Amritsar Jn.	on 25, 26, 27 & 28.06.2021

RESCHEDULING OF TRAINS

Train No. & Train Name	Rescheduled Time
04502 Una Himachal - Saharanpur Special Express	Train will be Rescheduled to depart from Una Himachal at 15:00 hrs. instead of 13:30 hrs. (90 minutes late) on 25.06.2021

REGULATION OF TRAIN

Train No. & Train Name	Regulation of Trains
04672 Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra - Bandra Terminus Swaraj Special Express	Train will be Regulated for 45 minutes at Khanna Station on 25.06.2021

SKIPPING OF STOPPAGE AT SIRHIND STATION

Train No. & Train Name	Date(s)
08238 Amritsar Jn - Korba Special Express	on 25.06.2021
03308 Firozpur Cantt Jn - Dhanbad Jn Special Express	on 25.06.2021
04662 Jammu Tawi - Barmer Special Express	on 25.06.2021
01078 Jammu Tawi - Pune Jn Special Express	on 25.06.2021

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SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE

SHORT TAKES

BJP for CBI probe on Maha ministers

Mumbai: Maharashtra unit BJP has demanded a CBI probe against deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar and transport minister Anil Parab in connection with extortion charges levelled by dismissed police officer Sachin Waze. The BJP passed a resolution at a state party convention, which said, "Waze, in a letter to NIA court, has alleged that he was forced into extortion and named the deputy CM and transport minister Anil Parab. The CBI should investigate the charges against both." BJP's general secretary incharge for Maharashtra T. Ravi said, "Maha Vikas Aghadi is a government which loots the public." State BJP chief Chandrakant Patil said, "The BJP has passed a resolution to demand a CBI inquiry against DyCM Ajit Pawar and transport minister Anil Parab into their alleged involvement in cases related to Param Bir Singh and Waze."

BJP leader stabbed to death in B'luru

Bengaluru: A former woman BJP councillor in the Bruhat Bengaluru Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), the city corporation, was stabbed to death in front of her house in Cottonpet in the city on Thursday, police said. Rekha Kadiresh, 46, was rushed to the Kempe Gowda Institute of Medical Sciences (KIMS) but could not be saved, police said, adding that previous enmity was suspected to be the reason behind the murder. According to the additional commissioner of police S. Murughan, Rekha was distributing food kits when the two motorcycle-borne youths attacked her at around 10.30 am. Police sources said the two CCTV cameras installed in front of her house were found to be turned in the opposite direction in a manner that nothing happening on the street could be captured. — *PTI*

Alcohol delivery site conned me: Azmi

Mumbai: Veteran actor Shabana Azmi on Thursday accused an alcohol delivery platform of allegedly duping her. In a Twitter post, the 70-year-old actor claimed that she was conned by Living Liquidz after she placed an order at the platform but didn't receive it. "BEWARE I have been cheated by them. #Living Liquidz I paid upfront and when the ordered item didnt turn up they stopped picking up my calls," Azmi wrote, sharing details of her transaction with delivery platform. The actor, however, didn't mention the amount of the transaction and also whether she has filed a complaint in the matter. In the past, Bollywood celebrities including Akshaye Khanna, Nargis Fakhri and Karan Singh Grover fell prey to online scams. — *PTI*

MALAYALAM STAR COULD BE TEACHER IN BIHAR!

Patna: Bihar seems intent on having a Malayalam actress among one of its teachers in government schools, two years after Sunny Leonne had missed becoming a junior engineer by a whisker. Jehanabad-based aspirant Rishikesh Kumar, who qualified in the Secondary Teachers Eligibility Test, scoring 77 per cent, was left distraught when he found the photograph of Anupama Parameshwaran affixed to his test result which has been uploaded on the website of Bihar School Examination Board (BSEB). "This is not the first instance. Her photograph was put on my admit card. When I brought it to the notice of the authorities they said they will be able to rectify the mistake in the results and I was made to write my exams with the same admit card. But, as is evident in the results, nothing has been done so far", Rishikesh told journalists with dismay. Principal secretary, education, Sanjay Kumar, said an inquiry has been ordered. "It was the BSEB which conducted the examinations and hence it has been asked to look into the matter and take appropriate action at the earliest", he said. The comedy of errors, nonetheless, left Twitterati in splits. Opposition leader Tejashwi Yadav shared a screenshot of the goofed-up result. — *PTI*

BMC-run hospital says he was critical since day of admission

Man bitten by rat in hospital ICU dies

SHAHAB ANSARI
MUMBAI, JUNE 24

A 24-year-old patient, who was bitten by a rat near his eye at a civic hospital in Mumbai, died on Wednesday night. Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) officials said that the patient was suffering from alcohol-related liver disease and was in a very critical condition since the day of his admission in the hospital.

The incident of rat nibbling on a patient came to light when a relative of the patient on Tuesday alleged that a rat had bitten near his eye, when he was admitted to the ICU of the hospital.

This prompted Mumbai Mayor Kishori Pednekar to order a probe into the matter.

The hospital management had confirmed the rat bite incident, but said injuries were "superficial" and the patient's eye was not affected.

According to the officials, the patient — Shrinivas Nagesh Yallapa — was brought to the hospital in an unconscious state. He was admitted in the hospital on Sunday and was on ventilator support.

THE INCIDENT came to light when a relative of the patient on Tuesday alleged that a rat had bitten near his eye, when he was admitted to the ICU of the hospital

After the incident the hospital's Dean Dr Vidya Thakur had said they have taken some rodent repellent measures and will take utmost care to avoid such incidents.

According to the hospital officials, the patient was suffering from alcohol-related liver disease and was in a very critical condition since the day of his admission in the Rajawadi Hospital but he died on Wednesday.

In 2017 as well, rats had nibbled on two patients at Shatabdi Hospital in Kandivali.

Declare Class 12 results by July 31: SC to states

Says Board are free to formulate own evaluation method

PARMOD KUMAR
NEW DELHI, JUNE 24

The Supreme Court on Thursday directed all the state boards to declare results of internal assessment of Class 12 examination by July 31, making it clear that each board is free to formulate its own evaluation method for students and there can't be a "fit-all" scheme.

"We direct all the state boards to ensure that the schemes are formulated and notified at the earliest and not later than 10 days from today and also declare the results of internal assessment by 31.07.2021, which is the time-line specified for CBSE and ICSE Boards," said a top court bench comprising Justices A.M. Khanwilka and Dinesh Maheshwari.

While giving 10 days time for the finalisation of the scheme for the evaluation of marks for Class 12 students, the court clarified that each board is free to formulate its scheme for the allocation of marls as each board is an autonomous and independent body..

The top court was hearing a plea which has sought directions to the states not to hold board exams because of the pandemic.

"We make it clear that each Board may formulate its own Scheme." the court said in its order passed today.

However, the court further made it clear that it was not endorsing the "correctness and validity of the proposed Schemes, to be so formulated by the concerned Boards."

The correctness and validity of the schemes to be formulated by each board, the court said "will be considered on its own merits, if and when occasion arises."

The Supreme Court said this in response to a clarification sought by Haryana State Education Board seeking a declaration that respective Boards are free to formulate their own Schemes being autonomous and independent bodies.

We have no difficulty in acceding to this submission, the bench said, adding, In other words, we make it clear that each board may formulate its own scheme. However, we further make it clear that we are not endorsing the correctness and validity of the proposed schemes, to be so formulated by the concerned boards. That will be considered on its own merits, if and when occasion arises.

It noted that Assam has filed an affidavit saying that Class 10 and 12 examinations have been cancelled and the scheme is being formulated by the concerned boards for allocation of internal assessment marks.

It also noted that National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) has cancelled the board exams and is in the process of formulating the scheme for assessment.

A health worker administers a dose of Covid-19 vaccine during a mobile vaccination drive at Risala Bazar in Hyderabad on Thursday. — *PTI*

Sonia asks workers to work to address vaccine hesitancy

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, JUNE 24

Sonia Gandhi

Congress president Sonia Gandhi on Thursday said the party must play an active role in ensuring full Covid-19 vaccination coverage and address vaccine hesitancy wherever evident.

She also said that the country needs to prepare for the possible third wave and take proactive measures so that children are spared this calamity.

Addressing a meeting of party general secretaries and in-charges of AICC in various states, she told party leaders to address the vaccine hesitancy among people and to ensure that the Covid-19 vaccine wastage is minimised. The interim Congress chief said the party must play an active role in ensuring full vaccination coverage to wipe out the threat posed by the deadly coronavirus.

This comes after the Congress has been accused by the BJP of "promoting vaccine hesitancy". She said that the daily vaccination rate has to treble so that 75% of the population gets fully vaccinated by year-end.

"No doubt, this is dependent entirely on the adequacy of vaccine supply. We must continue to put pressure on the Union government which has, at our party's insistence, finally taken on the responsibility for this. At the same time, we have to ensure that registration takes place, that vaccine hesitancy wherever evident is overcome and vaccine wastage is minimised," she added.

Quoting experts, the Congress chief also warned about the third wave and remarked, "Experts are already talking of a possible third wave a few months from now. Some of them have been pointing to the vulnerability of children in the coming months. This, too, requires our urgent attention and we must take proactive measures so that they are spared this calamity. We have to take steps to be better prepared if and when this strikes." She also placed on record the appreciation of the work carried out by the Youth Congress during the pandemic.

Referring to the rise in fuel prices, she said it is causing an intolerable burden on people and agitations have been organised to highlight how it is hurting farmers and millions of families.

Cong maligns India's image to target BJP, Modi: Nadda

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY
BHOPAL, JUNE 24

BJP president J.P. Nadda on Thursday took a dig at Congress leaders for slighting the image of the country in their zeal to target BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Addressing a newly-constituted executive committee of the BJP's state unit online, Mr Nadda cited how Congress veteran and former chief minister Kamal Nath did not hesitate to tarnish the image of the country by saying that India has earned a bad name in the world for the worsening pandemic situation in the country.

Mr Nadda said the Congress leaders had overlooked the fact that in their zeal to attack BJP and Mr Modi, they were tarnishing the image of the country.

Referring to the erstwhile Nath-led Congress government in MP that collapsed in March 2020 after 15 months of rule, he said it came to power after three five-year terms of the BJP government in the state, and added that everybody had seen how it functioned. "Transfers, commission and corruption ruled the state under Nath. No projects were allowed to start unless people starting it paid donations at the chief minister's residence. The development works were stalled and the state was turned into a 'mission commission' instead of 'mission progress'. All sections of the society got nothing except cheating," he alleged.

The executive committee of state BJP met for the first time after three years. Mr Nadda said Congress leaders have disappeared from the scene during the corona period whereas BJP leaders and workers have extended their helping hands to the people at this hour of crisis risking their lives.

People are suffering due to inflation, hike in fuel rates: AICC

Cong to hold pan-India stir July 7-17

New Delhi, June 24: The Congress decided on Thursday to hold a countrywide agitational programme from July 7 to 17 against the rising inflation and the increase in the fuel prices.

This was decided at a meeting of the party general secretaries and various state in-charges convened by Congress president Sonia Gandhi.

All India Congress Committee (AICC) general secretary K.C. Venugopal, in a statement, said led by the party chief, the AICC team discussed and deliberated upon the important and urgent issues of high inflation, price rise, the skyrocketing rates of pulses, edible oil and other household products as also the unprecedented everyday hike in the petrol and diesel prices.

He said since May 2, the government has raised the fuel rates 29 times and the price of petrol has crossed ₹100 per litre in more than 150 cities. The BJP government has earned ₹22 lakh crore in the last seven years by imposing excise duty on petrol and diesel, Mr Venugopal claimed.

The prices of edible oils have also nearly doubled in the last six months and that of pulses have seen an unprecedented rise, he said, adding that the increase in the wholesale price index in May 2021 has been 12.94 per cent, which is the highest in 11 years. "Moved by the plight of the people

THE GOVT has earned ₹22 lakh crore in the last seven years by imposing excise duty on petrol and diesel, Venugopal said

already suffering on account of the corona pandemic, unemployment and salary cuts, the Congress party has decided to launch nationwide agitation programmes at the block, district and state levels," Venugopal said.

These programmes, he said, will be implemented by the state units of the party between July 7 and July 17 and shall comprise leaders and members of the party as well as the AICC's frontal organisations, including the Mahila Congress, aided by scores of ordinary party workers all over the country.

Giving details, Mr Venugopal said, the party would launch a countrywide agitation of women involving the Mahila Congress, the Youth Congress and other frontal organisations of the AICC at the block level, and Congress leaders and workers would also take out cycle rallies at the district level.

"Congress leaders and workers will take out marches and processions at the state level. A signature campaign will also be run at all petrol pumps across the country, demanding a reduction in the prices of petrol and diesel," the AICC general secretary said. — *PTI*

Army to buy 1,750 futuristic infantry combat vehicles

PAWAN BALI
NEW DELHI, JUNE 24

The Indian Army on Thursday issued the request for information (RFI) to finalise the specifications for acquiring 1,750 futuristic infantry combat vehicles (FICVs) which could destroy enemy tanks, helicopters and UAVs and is also capable of carrying troops even in biological and nuclear environments.

The FICVs to be manufactured under the "Make in India" initiative will replace the current 1980's vintage Soviet-designed BMP.

These will be employed for operations in plain and desert terrain in western borders with Pakistan and also in northern borders with China (Eastern Ladakh, Central and Sikkim Sectors). The vendors interested to participate in this big-ticket project have been asked to express their willingness within a week.

The FICV should be capable of destroying enemy tanks, armoured personnel carriers, combat vehicles, low flying helicopters and other ground-based weapon platforms and positions. It should provide fire support to dismounted troops. It should provide protected mobility to its crew and troops in the desert, high altitude areas and in CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear) environment including across water bodies. These will be equipped with a main gun along with a coaxial machine gun, and an anti-tank guided missile. The command and surveillance version will also have a mini-UAV system. The Mini-UAV System will be used for beyond line-of-sight intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.

A three-stage induction model has been proposed by the Army and the Indian vendors can collaborate with foreign original equipment manufacturers to supply FICV within two years of Contract with 75-100 vehicles per year.

India slams China for Ladakh row

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, JUNE 24

India on Thursday blamed China's actions of amassing a large number of troops close to the border and attempts to unilaterally alter the status quo along the line of actual control (LAC) last year for the continuing military standoff in eastern Ladakh, and asserted that these acts were in violation of Sino-India bilateral agreements.

Despite several rounds of talks at the military and diplomatic levels, Chinese troops steadfastly refused to completely disengage from various friction points.

MEA spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said, "It is well recognised that it has been the Chinese actions over the last year, including amassing of a large number of troops close to border areas in the Western Sector, and trying to unilaterally alter the status quo along the LAC, which have seriously disturbed peace and tranquility in the border areas."

'Role of Army in curbing terrorism in J&K falling'

YUSUF JAMEEL
SRINAGAR, JUNE 24

A senior Army commander on Thursday said that its role in curbing militancy in Jammu and Kashmir is diminishing as the separatist violence in the Union Territory has reduced by 50 per cent.

"About 20-25 years ago, possibly when there was a challenge here, the Army was required. But today, especially in the last two-three years, I have seen an exceptional reach out of the civil administration in which deputy commissioners, police and everybody is functioning as they should, and the role of the Army has started diminishing," said Lieutenant General Devendra Pratap Pandey, the commander of Srinagar-based Chinar (15) Corps, said.

He said that the Army was always in a "supporting role and slowly, our role has started diminishing". He claimed that there are around 200 militants active in the Kashmir Valley but "I am sure that by the end of the year, the figure will be further reduced."

While speaking to reporters on the sidelines of an event organised by the Army in the Handwara area of frontier Kupwara district, Lt. Gen. Pandey said that even as the militancy-related violence has receded considerably "criminal elements controlled from across the border and enemies within the country" continue to try to instil fear among people by killing unarmed persons.

He said, "If you ask me all the parameters of violence in Kashmir have come down by over 50 per cent and the situation is very good with stability across the Valley."

Asked about the recent killing of two police officials and a shopkeeper in summer capital Srinagar by gunmen, he said that such acts were criminal in nature.

PUJA HELD AT AMARNATH TO INVOKE LORD SHIVA'S BLESSINGS

AGE CORRESPONDENT
SRINAGAR, JUNE 24

Coinciding with Jyestha Purnima, celebrated during the full moon in the month of Jyeshtha as per the Hindu calendar, Pratham puja was performed at Amarnath cave-shrine on Thursday.

A spokesman of the Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board (SASB) said that the puja amid chanting of Vedic mantras to invoke the blessings of Lord Shiva was performed by Nitishwar Kumar, CEO of the board, with the priests at the revered place of Hindu worship. A havan was also performed on this auspicious occasion, he said.

The annual pilgrimage to Amarnath has been cancelled for the second year in a row amid COVID pandemic. Like last year, the pilgrimage will be only "symbolic" with all rituals to be performed quietly by a select number of priests and sadhus at the cave-shrine tucked away in lower-Himalayas in south Kashmir.

PM Modi asks people to be vocal for local toys

New Delhi, June 24: Calling on people to be "vocal for local toys", Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said about 80 per cent of the toys were being imported by India with crores of rupees going abroad and asserted that it was very important to change this situation.

Noting that India's share is only about $1.5 billion (over ₹11,000 crore) in the global toy market of approximately $100 billion (₹7.5 lakh crore), Mr Modi pitched for improving the country's standing in what he called "Toyconomy" or the economic aspects of the toys and gaming industry.

Prime Minister Modi made the remarks after interacting with participants of Toycathon-2021 via video conferencing.

Toycathon-2021 was jointly launched by the ministry of education, ministry of women and child development, ministry of micro, small & medium enterprises, department for promotion of industry and internal trade (DPIIT), textile ministry, information and broadcasting ministry and All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) on January 5, 2021 to crowd-

Narendra Modi

source innovative toys and games ideas.

"Today, we import around 80 per cent of our toys from abroad. Which means crores of rupees of the country are going abroad on them. It is very important to change this situation," Mr Modi said.

He underlined that beyond numbers, the toy sector has the capacity to bring progress and growth to the neediest segments of society.

Toy sector has its own small-scale industry, artisans comprising rural population, dalits, poor people and tribal population, he noted and also talked about the contribution of women in the sector. "In order to take the benefits to these segments, we need to be vocal for local toys," Mr Modi asserted.

In his remarks, the Prime Minister underlined the need to create interesting and interactive games that "engage, entertain and educate".

He also called for new models of innovation and financing to make Indian toys competitive at the global level.

There is a need for new ideas to be incubated, new start-ups promoted, taking new technology to traditional toy makers and creating new market demand, Modi said, adding that this is the inspiration behind events like Toycathon.

The PM referred to the cheap data and growth of Internet led rural connectivity and called for exploration of possibilities in virtual, digital and online gaming in India. — *PTI*

PROCLAMATION REQUIRING THE APPEARANCE OF ACCUSED PERSON

See Section 82 Cr.P.C.

Whereas complaint has been made before me that accused person **Prem Shankar S/o** Sh. Vijay **R/o** H.No. 341, Gali No. 11, Phase-09, Shiv Vihar, Karawal Nagar, Delhi has committed (or is suspected to have committed) the offence in case **FIR No. 566/19, U/s 279/304A IPC** has been registered at **P.S. Khajuri Khas, Delhi** and it has been returned to a warrant of arrest thereupon issued that the said **Prem Shankar** cannot be found and whereas it has been shown to my satisfaction that the said **Prem Shankar** has absconded (or is concealing himself to avoid the service of the said warrant).

Proclamation is hereby made that the said **Prem Shankar** accused of **FIR No. 566/19, U/s 279/304A IPC, P.S. Khajuri Khas, Delhi** is required to appear before this court to answer said complaint on or before **26.07.2021**.

By Order
Sh. Nitish Kumar Sharma, MM-03,
Room No. 22, Karkardooma Courts,
Shahdara, Delhi

DP/859/NE/2021-(Court Matter)

SHORT TAKES

Odisha man returns home after 12 yrs

Bhubaneswar: Residents of Gumi village in Odisha's Nayagarh district are happy that a fellow villager named Jana Nayak who went missing from home 12 years ago has returned home. However, they are also equally sad and shocked that the homecoming of the man, now 42, has not been completely fulfilling as his wife has got remarried and settled with another man after losing all hope of his return. "We are happy that Jana has returned home. Shockingly, his wife with her two children has moved out of his house. She has got re-settled by marrying another man after waiting for his return for a long time. Not only his wife, but we had presumed him dead as all our efforts to find him had ended in despair," said Jana's elder brother Pandari Nayak. When he left home in 2009, he was suffering from serious psychiatric disorders.

No devotees at Lord Jagannath's Snana

Puri: The Snana Yatra or bathing ceremony of Lord Jagannath at Puri in Odisha, which is normally witnessed by over five lakh devotees every year, was on Thursday performed without the presence of any outside worshippers other than the temple priests. This was for the second time in recent years when the famous temple ritual was solemnized without devotees to avert the possibility of mass coronavirus infection. In 2020, the Snana Yatra, also known as Deva Snana Purnima, was also performed without any devotees. As a part of the ritual, the deities were in the morning brought out from Ratna Bedi (inner sanctum of the Shree Jagannath temple) to the Snana Mandap or bathing pandal in a traditional procession called Pahandi. The Bada Pandas or chief priests performed Mangal Arati at the Snana Mandap.

150 cadre cleansed to erase 'BJP virus'

Suri, West Bengal: Nearly 150 BJP workers crossed over to the TMC on Thursday in Bengal's Birbhum district after local leaders of the ruling party sprayed sanitisers on them. A dais was erected in Ilambazar area, where the saffron camp workers were "sanitised", following which local leaders handed them the TMC flag, said Dulal Roy, a block- level member of the Mamata-led party. "Those working for the BJP were virus-infected... Before taking them back, we had to ensure they were sanitised as we aim to get rid of the virus," he added. District BJP chief Dhruba Saha, however, claimed workers of his party were "coerced" into joining TMC. "No one has willingly switched over to the TMC from the BJP," he maintained. — *PTI*

Sidda fumes as fissures in Cong in Karnataka widen

Don't project me as CM face, Siddaramaiah tells party MLAs

Bengaluru, June 24: Senior Congress leader Siddaramaiah on Thursday asked MLAs not to project him as the chief ministerial face for the 2023 Assembly polls, amid widening fissures within the party on the issue, that has triggered a game of one-upmanship between him and state unit president D.K. Shivakumar.

His statement came amid a growing list of MLAs who openly favoured him as CM face despite diktat from the party leadership, which has irked Shivakumar, who is also nursing Chief Ministerial ambitions.

"I don't know, I don't want to react to that... I have never said that I will become chief minister, but I will still request MLAs don't make statements (projecting me as) next chief minister," Mr Siddaramaiah said in response to a question on Shivakumar's statement asking him to rein in MLAs projecting him as next CM.

On returning from New Delhi after meeting party's national leaders, Shivakumar on Wednesday said Congress legislature party leader Siddaramaiah will look into open statements by some MLAs projecting him.

"...party high command has said what it has to, I have also seen statements by some MLAs in the media.

Legislature Party leader (Siddaramaiah) will look into it. If he does not, the party is there to look into it," he had said, adding

Siddaramaiah

that he was in no urgency to become the CM and bringing the party to power was his goal.

Mr Siddaramaiah, who is now the leader of opposition in the Assembly, however, playing down statements by some MLAs projecting him as the next CM and maintaining it as their personal views, on Wednesday said "I can't do anything about it...I'm not concerned about it."

Meanwhile, indicating that the CM position is not fixed to anyone, Shivakumar, responding to a question on Thursday, said "in our political history there are examples of people other than 224 elected members to the assembly, becoming the chief minister."

"Devraj Urs had not won the election, didn't he become the Chief Minister? Ramakrishna Hegde had not contested the assembly polls, didn't he become the chief minister....." he said.

On the other hand, former KPCC president G. Parameshwara, when questioned whether he was in the CM race, merely said, "let that situation come", and called on all MLAs and leaders to stop discussing the next CM and work towards building the party. — *PTI*

'Dreaded Bastar Maoist Hidma down with Covid'

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY
BHOPAL, JUNE 24

Commander of Maoists' battalion number one Hidma who was allegedly involved in at least half a dozen major Naxal attacks on security forces in insurgency-hit Bastar in Chhattisgarh in the last decade, was currently battling with his life after being infected with coronavirus, police quoting two Naxal couriers arrested recently, said Thursday.

A senior police officer posted in Bastar said two members of Maoists' supply network were arrested in the south Bastar district of Bijapur last week. Medicines used for treatment of Covid-19 along with masks and sanitisers were seized from them.

"The two Maoist couriers were going to deliver the medicines to Punem, another ultra, in the jungles of Pamed in Bijapur

HIDMA WAS allegedly involved in the attack on a CRPF party in south Bastar district in April 2010, killing 76 jawans and the deadly ambush on a Congress convoy in May 2013 that left 28 dead

for delivery to Hidma. Interrogation of the two arrested ultras led to disclosure that Hidma has been suffering from Covid-19 since the last few days and was in dire need of medicines for his treatment", a senior Bijapur district police officer told this newspaper requesting not to be quoted.

Bastar range IGP Sunderraj P. said, "We have received information that Hidma contracted Covid and is in a critical condition. We want him to surrender before the police to ensure his proper medical treatment".

Hidma, who carried a bounty of ₹25 lakhs on his head, was allegedly involved in the attack on a CRPF party at Tadmetla in south Bastar district of Sukma in April 2010, killing 76 jawans and the deadly ambush on a Congress convoy in May 2013 killing 28 Congress leaders, including Chhattisgarh PCC president Nand Kumar Patel.

In the latest major attack on security forces, he killed 22 jawans in Tekalgudem in Sukma district in April this year.

Mr Sunderraj also disclosed that several other senior Maoist leaders of Bastar like Sujata, Vinod, Sonu, Jaiman, and Nandu were said to have contracted the virus.

Meanwhile, Maoists have released a press note conceding that Telangana state committee secretary Haribhushan died of Covid on June 21. He was cremated at a village on the Chhattisgarh-Telangana border.

World knows what Pak has brought to Afghanistan: India

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI
NEW DELHI, JUNE 24

The "world knows what Pakistan has brought to Afghanistan", Indian on Thursday said in a terse response to Pakistan foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi's comments that its presence in the war-ravaged country is larger than it ought to be.

The obvious reference was to Pakistan's backing of the Taliban for over 25 years that has seen terror attacks in Afghanistan and brought bloodshed there besides the Taliban's barbaric five year-rule rule from 1996 to 2001 in the strife-torn nation.

India pointed out its own record in contrast of constructive development in Afghanistan through bringing in "electricity, dams, schools, health clinics, roads and community projects" there.

"We firmly believe that it is for the Afghan people to decide their partners and the size of that partnership. India has brought electricity, dams, schools, health clinics, roads and community projects to Afghanistan," external affairs ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said.

India also reiterated that it wants normal relations with all its neighbours, including Pakistan, but Islamabad

IT IS widely believed that the Pakistani security establishment has been supporting several terror groups active in Afghanistan.

must "work towards creating a conducive atmosphere including by taking credible, verifiable and irreversible actions to not allow any territory under its control to be used for cross-border terrorism against India in any manner".

Asked about media reports of India engaging a section of the Afghan Taliban that is not seen to be close to Pakistan, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) once again avoided a direct answer to the question by merely saying it was engaged with various stakeholders and some of the regional countries on the Afghan peace process.

In response to queries at his weekly briefing, Mr Bagchi said, "Regarding comments of India's role in Afghanistan by Pakistan's foreign minister, we have seen media reports on this. We firmly believe it is for the Afghan people to decide their partners and the size of the partners. India has brought electricity, dams, schools, health clinics, roads and community projects to Afghanistan. And the world knows what Pakistan has brought to Afghanistan."

J&K: 5 'cow vigilantes' arrested for murder

AGE CORRESPONDENT
SRINAGAR, JUNE 24

The Jammu and Kashmir police has arrested five alleged 'cow vigilantes' accused of murdering a 20-year-old in the Union Territory's frontier district of Rajouri early this week.

Victim Muhammad Afzal Dar, a resident of Rajdhani village of Thanamandi area of Rajouri, was attacked on Monday night when he was transporting a buffalo to his home.

The police said on Thursday that Dar was critically injured in the gruesome attack carried out by the accused at Muradpur en route to Rajdhani and he died soon thereafter.

"Following receiving a report about the incident, we registered an FIR at the concerned police station and took up the preliminary investigation," a police officer said.

Subsequently, police parties were fanned out in different directions and on June 23, four of the accused were arrested and the fifth on Thursday.

The murder of the youth has caused outrage in Rajouri.

Fight over name of Navi Mumbai airport begins

Hundreds of people, including the BJP workers, staged protests across Navi Mumbai on Thursday demanding the upcoming international airport be named after late activist D.B. Patil, who worked for project-affected persons. Maharashtra's ruling party Shiv Sena wants to name the airport after its founder Balasaheb Thackeray. — *PTI*

Over 1,100 drug peddlers arrested, 659 cases registered

Assam wages major war against drugs

MANOJ ANAND
GUWAHATI, JUNE 24

In a major drive launched at the behest of Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma against multi-crore rupees drugs racket, the Assam police has arrested more than 1100 drug peddlers and registered over 650 cases since the formation of a new government in May this year.

The Assam police, which is describing it as a "war against drugs", said that 1142 persons have been arrested and 659 cases were registered so far.

The chief minister has taken a stern stand against drug peddling and is adamant about making Assam free from illegal drugs that were destroying society as a whole.

The Assam police claimed that the drug network in the state has weakened with huge seizures being made and multiple arrests during the campaign.

According to the available data, the police has seized and destroyed 16.29 kg of Heroin, 6687.253 kg of Ganja, 642447 Yaba tablets among other drugs since May 10 across the state. In the ongoing drive, the police has also recovered Rs 79,91,060 in cash from peddlers.

Director-general of police Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta who has been leading the operations told reporters, "We have launched a massive operation against the drug trade in Assam. Our focus is on drug peddlers because we need to break the supply chain and they are at the lower levels... transporting drugs to the customers. Our fight will be long but we intend to continue it to bring an end to this illegal trade."

He said, "If we want to hit supply we have to go from the lower level. We have changed our strategy and are focusing on peddlers, not big smugglers. Insurgents groups in the northeast are also involved and patronising this trade."

PM to Kashmiris: Statehood soon

■ Continued from Page 1

urged the Prime Minister to restore full statehood before conducting the polls, Mr Abdullah said.

He said that his father, National Conference president Farooq Abdullah, said during the meeting that there was an urgent need to rebuild trust in J&K. "The trust deficit among the people of Jammu and Kashmir needs to be addressed to immediately by the Centre, and for that the process of restoration of complete statehood is necessary," he said.

On the delimitation commission, Mr Abdullah said the central leadership was told that the exercise in itself was defeating the very purpose with which the BJP-led government had carried out the exercise of abrogation of special status on August 5, 2019.

"On one hand the central leadership claimed the decision in August 2019 was taken for a complete merger of Jammu and Kashmir with the Union of India, and on the other Jammu and Kashmir is treated differently by bringing in separate delimitation commissions for Assam and us.

"If the delimitation commission for Assam was withheld and Assembly elections held there, then why not for Jammu and Kashmir? Isn't this defeating the very purpose of the central leadership?" he asked.

The former CM said even the Central leadership was of the view that the government could not be run by bureaucrats and a political government needed to take charge. Said Mr Abdullah: "Our party president has made it clear that as and when an invite for the (delimitation) commission meeting will come, we will take consider it."

Senior Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad told reporters he put forward various points on behalf of his party at the meeting, including restoration of complete statehood, followed by elections. "I have also asked for a rehabilitation process for Kashmir Pandits, release of political prisoners, and domicile rules whereby the Centre guarantees jobs for the people of Jammu and Kashmir," Mr Azad told reporters.

PDP president Mehbooba Mufti told reporters the meeting went off well and she complimented the Prime Minister for initiating back-channel talks with Pakistan that led to the ceasefire agreement at the Line of Control and decrease in infiltration levels.

"I have requested the Prime Minister that, if need be, we could talk to Pakistan once again for further boosting the peace process," she said.

On the abrogation of Article 370, Ms Mufti said her party would continue to fight for its restoration. "After all, the special status has not been given to us by Pakistan. It was given to us by late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar (Vallabhbhai) Patel. We will continue to fight for restoration of the special status through legal and constitutional means," she said.

While stressing on his commitment to granting full statehood once again to J&K PM Modi sought "co-operation and assistance" from the senior State leaders urging them to help in the delimitation process which will help in redrawing new Assembly constituencies to hold elections. Assembly elections in J&K will be held only after the delimitation exercise can be completed. Sources said most J&K leaders at the meeting expressed their willingness in assisting the Election Commission and local administration to help complete the delimitation process at the earliest.

Top government sources said most participants at the meeting agreed on the need to further strengthen the democratic process, and the holding of the District Development Council elections was just the beginning. "Our priority is to strengthen grassroots democracy in J&K. Delimitation has to happen at a quick pace so that polls can happen and J&K gets an elected government that gives strength to J&K's development trajectory," Mr Modi said in a tweet after the meeting.

Sources said the Centre also agreed to setting up a committee to review the cases of all political prisoners irrespective of whether they have been released or were still in detention. The committee is likely to be headed by lieutenant-governor Manoj Sinha.

After the meeting, home minister Amit Shah tweeted: "The future of Jammu and Kashmir was discussed, and the delimitation exercise and peaceful elections are important milestones in restoring statehood as promised in Parliament."

A senior home ministry official said: "Most participants gave very honest and frank opinions during the meeting. It was an open discussion which focused on all major issues related to J&K, whether it was on Article 370, Article 35A or delimitation. We feel in the coming months more such interactions will be held now that the ice has been broken between the Centre and the local J&K leadership."

Andhra cancels exams

■ Continued from Page 1

not allow them. Telling the state government it cannot escape responsibility for any fatalities, a bench of Justices A.M. Khanwilkar and Dinesh Maheshwari candidly said: "It is a question of safety and security of everybody. You have to see the practical and ground realities."

Posting the matter till Friday (June 25) for Andhra Pradesh to respond to its queries, Justice Khanwilkar said: "Unless we are sure that you are prepared to conduct exams without any uncertainty and fatality, we will not let you hold the exam. When others have cancelled you cannot hold it to show you are different."

In the absence of any ready response to its posers on the availability of 34,634 rooms for the conduct of the exam, Justice Khanwilkar asked "where is that file" in which the decision to conduct the exam was taken, indicating that the court may peruse it.

Telling counsel Mahfooz Ahsan Nazaki, appearing for Andhra Pradesh, that they were not "convinced of the commitments" made by the state government, Justice Maheshwari said all the details sought by the judges should have been there with the state government before any decision to go ahead with the physical conduct of the Class 12 exam was taken. "You take the responsibility of the safety and security of students and frontline workers", the court said, reminding the Andhra Pradesh government of the enormous risk, including loss of lives, that is involved in its decision to hold the Class 12 board exams.

The court's strong observations came as Mr Nazaki told the court every aspect being flagged by it was taken into account before arriving at the decision to go for physical conduct of exams. He said all those who will be involved in the conduct of exams, including invigilators, would be vaccinated and government buildings were identified for the required number of rooms for the conduct of examinations.

The court further asked what the "contingency plan" was if things don't go as planned. The judges also objected to the exams being "tentatively" conducted by the end of July. They asked if the exams were held in late July, when would the results be declared. It said that by the time you conduct exams and declare results, all seats in universities and colleges will be filled up by the students who appeared in the CBSE/ISC exams as their results will be declared by July 31, 2021.

As Mr Nazaki said Andhra Pradesh had a grading system in Class 11 and it wouldn't be possible to allocate marks based on this system, the court said it wasn't such an insurmountable problem and the state could consult experts in both the CBSE and the ISC boards as well as other in the academic field. "It's not a kind of problem for which no solution can be found", the Supreme Court said.

NSA Doval at SCO meeting

■ Continued from Page 1

expeditiously brought to justice". He also conveyed the "need to monitor new technologies used by terrorists, including drones for smuggling of weapons and misuse of dark web, artificial intelligence, blockchain and social media," sources said.

On Afghanistan, Mr Doval reiterated India's position on the "need to preserve gains made in the last two decades in Afghanistan and give top priority to the welfare of its people". He also conveyed that India fully supports SCO Contact Group on Afghanistan and said it "should be more active".

Sources said the NSA also pushed for "greater connectivity, including through initiatives like Chahbahar, INSTC, Ashgabat Agreement" which he said "always leads to economic gains and building trust" but added that "connectivity must respect sovereignty and territorial integrity".

Covid-19 cases rising again

■ Continued from Page 1

beggars. An ICMR study has shown only 9.99 per cent of fully vaccinated people needed hospital admission in Odisha.

The sample size was 361. Out of these, 274 samples with confirmed breakthrough infection, 35 (12.8%) individuals had received Covaxin and 239 (87.2%) had got Covishield. The study said around 9.9 per cent of the individuals were hospitalised with no significant difference between Covaxin and Covishield recipient groups, and only one individual (Covishield recipient) died post infection during the study period.

Shiv Sena hits out at Rahul

■ Continued from Page 1

level has not been seen at all. "Regional parties and their leaders in many major states have opposed the BJP or Modi-Shah with full strength and even defeated them in the Assembly elections," the editorial pointed out.

The Sena said that the Congress Party did not give importance to the Rashtramanch.

"Actually, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi should have organised such a meeting.

The popularity of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government is not the same as before, it has reduced. But the Opposition is weak to take advantage of it," the editorial added.

The editorial also said that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi should join hands with Mr Pawar to unite all Opposition parties.

THE ASIAN AGE

25 JUNE 2021

Lessons for Team India as Kiwis lead the world

The New Zealanders, thought of as eternal bridesmaids, served up object lessons in performing in a team game like cricket. It was their collective talent in a concerted effort that helped the Kiwis prevail in difficult conditions of a distractingly weather-hit Test championship final, the first ever in 144 years. The will to excel was demonstrated in clinical fashion as two most senior batsmen, Kane Williamson and Ross Taylor, absorbed the pressures of the sixth day like sponges to steer the team home.

The New Zealand Test cricketers, who come from a nation of just five million, were not the Davids who downed the Goliaths in this final played in a remote corner of England. In fact, they were the first to qualify and were the world's top rated Test team going into the contest. Team India, for all their vaunted qualities and stirring performances in Australia and at home bringing them to the summit, were the ones found wanting when it came to forcing at least a draw to take the podium as joint winners.

India's celebrated top order batsmen had started impressively enough on being asked to bat first in English conditions that are most alien to them with the Dukes ball eternally swinging and seaming. The collapse of Indian spirit was brought about by the 6 foot 8 inch fast bowler Kyle Jamieson who twice outfoxed Virat Kohli with length and steepling bounce. The Indians, with their hubris, had picked two spinners long before the toss was made on the second day and India's last four wickets mustered just 12 and 14 runs in the two innings. That was the sting in the tail which swung the balance.

Not an ICC trophy in eight years and none at all under Virat Kohli is illustrative of a need for fundamental changes that will uphold the primacy of sporting performances under pressure

Why blame the tail when the specialists of the top order, most of all Rishabh Pant, who batted as if a death wish had consumed them, that too on the sunniest day of six when batting was not as difficult as a total of 170 would suggest. What told in the end was lack of preparation against the Dukes ball, which does so much more than the Kookaburra and represents the stiffest test of technique and temperament in English conditions. In 50 years since the famous breakthrough victory in 1971, India has won only two Test series in the Old Blighty.

The lack of preparation for a Test championship final was revealing of the Indian cricket mindset, obsessed as it is with the commercial aspects of T20 amid a welter of pricey endorsements. The addition of levels of adulation that equal the Brazilians' passion for national team's football may have led to greater emphasis being placed on the charisma of star power over performance.

Not an ICC trophy in eight years and none at all under Virat Kohli is illustrative of a need for fundamental changes that will uphold the primacy of sporting performances under pressure.

Meanwhile, it should be back to the drawing board for a clinical dissection of Test batting skills that alone should guide the selection of those who can deliver when the chips are down. The biggest lesson from Williamson's band of players is that good guys can also finish first in competition. Much has to change then, beginning with Kohli's attitude, which could do with a sprinkling of modesty and gumption.

Cutting Kabul's Gordian knot

A senior official figure of Qatar, which hosts the political office of the Taliban, has recently observed that Indian officials have visited that country to talk to Taliban representatives. There is nothing particularly revealing about this statement since Indian officials have been in informal touch with the Taliban for a fairly long period of time.

After the ouster of the Taliban government in 2001 and the emergence of an elected government in Kabul, India has enjoyed considerable goodwill in Afghanistan on account of its strong contribution to development in that country and its strongly pro-democracy and anti-extremists stand. In this period it has been in regular touch with all non-extremist political constituencies in the country as a friend, and has consistently backed the elected government in Kabul. In this period it did not forge a relationship with the Taliban, a group that's widely seen in Afghanistan as a proxy for Pakistan.

With the Americans exiting Afghanistan under the February 2020 agreement with the Taliban, it is clear that the militant group is in focus. No country wishing to deal with Kabul persuasively after the US departs can hope to do so without establishing a working relationship with the Taliban. No matter its violent ways, the Taliban look to emerge as the most powerful and the most influential grouping in Afghanistan in the post-US phase. The question is on what terms are the Indians seeking to engage the Taliban.

This is the most significant issue to address. India has its record to show and can assure Taliban that its deep-going friendship with the people of Afghanistan is at no risk of being in jeopardy if the Taliban abandon its violent approach in matters of governance, and plays it neutral between its traditional patron and provider, Pakistan, and India. Discussion and negotiations on a theme of this nature and to reach working steps to achieve the objective cannot but test New Delhi. Equally, however, Islamabad will also be on test in remaining Taliban's friend in a wholly new setting. India's objective is peace in Afghanistan and no anti-India tilt by the next post-US government there. This cannot be ensured without a meaningful engagement with the Taliban. Only if that fails will New Delhi need to look at the Afghan question anew.

THE ASIAN AGE

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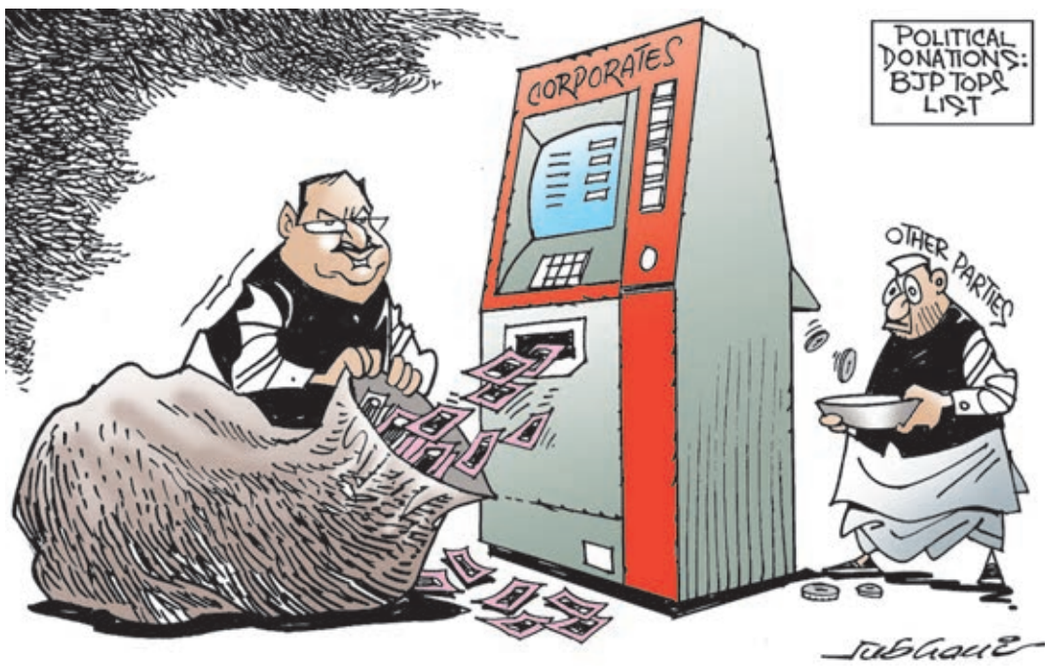

Mind the gap: Covishield's 2nd jab sets off controversy

Karan Thapar

As I See It

It would benefit us to better understand the controversy surrounding the length of the gap between two AstraZeneca injections — our Covishield. After all, there's no one over 18 who's not affected. So let me lay out the key facts and explain the complications inherent in them.

When the vaccinations started on January 16, the Covishield gap was set at four weeks, which is what the manufacturers recommended and what was followed in the incomplete bridging trials. However, earlier in December, Britain, on the basis of its own analysis of AstraZeneca's (AZ) trial results and additional information from the company, had unilaterally increased the gap to 8-12 weeks. Then, in February, WHO advised a similar gap. So, unsurprisingly, questions were asked in India. In response, the government first expanded the gap to 6-8 weeks in March and then to 12-16 weeks in May. Paradoxically, three days after India's May decision, and because of the threat of the Delta variant, the UK reduced the gap to eight weeks.

Now the Indian government's press release says the gap was extended to 16 weeks on the basis of "real-life evidence, particularly from the UK". This created the first controversy. The original UK policy limited the gap to 12 weeks. It doesn't have real world data to cover the additional four weeks. When I questioned Gagandeep Kang, a member of the Covid Working Group which had suggested the 12-16-week gap, she said the additional four weeks was based on AZ's trial results and modelling. Now there's nothing wrong with that except it's not "real-life evidence" from the UK.

Last week, Prof. Andrew Pollard, the chief investigator of AstraZeneca and director of the Oxford Vaccine Group, rationalised the 12-16-week gap differently. He said protection from one dose is extremely good till 12 weeks but doesn't fall off a cliff thereafter. It's reasonable to assume a longer extension and, therefore, extending the gap to 16 weeks is not problematic.

However, this is the lesser controversy. The bigger one has to do with studies suggesting that AZ does not provide adequate protection against the Delta variant. This is of particular concern because AZ constitutes 88 per cent of all vaccinations in India while Delta is the dominant variant. There are probably more cases in India than the rest of the world put together. So, the efficacy of AZ against Delta is critical.

First, Public Health England has said that AZ only provides 30 per cent protection against symptomatic illness caused by Delta. Then, France's Louis Pasteur Institute published a laboratory-based study stating that "a single dose of AstraZeneca will not display an optimal protection against B.1.617.2 (the Delta variant)". Finally, our own National Centre for Disease Control in association with the Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology published a study of the Delta variant concluding that "partial vaccination is an insufficient impediment to its spread".

Now, do these studies suggest that India's 12-16-week gap leaves people inadequately protected against Delta and we should reduce the gap to eight weeks, as Britain has done? Several experts say yes. They include Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India, and Arvinder Singh Soin, chairman of Medanta's Institute of Liver Transplantation and Regenerative Medicine. A few newspaper op-eds and editorials echoed this view.

However, this is where we need to pause and understand what precisely the studies are telling us. No doubt one dose of AstraZeneca provides inadequate protection against symptomatic infection, but it provides very credible protection against serious illness and hospitalisation. Public Health England has established — and, by the way, most of the good research on AZ and Delta comes from Britain, it's only just starting in India — one dose provides 71 per cent protection, going up to 92 per cent after the second. And that's what really counts.

To explain further, let me rely on what Prof. Pollard said last week. We should not be deterred or deflected by the fact that one dose of AZ gives only 30 per cent protection against symptomatic illness. That usually means nothing more than a cold, cough and fever, which most people can handle. What's important is protection against serious illness, hospitalisation and death.

His second point is more important. The preponderant majority of the Indian population is unvaccinated and, therefore, unprotected at a time when the Delta variant is spreading widely and increasing in threat. In these circumstances, a vaccination policy that covers the largest number, in the quickest possible time, with at least one dose makes sense. This means a gap up to 16 weeks is arguably the right response.

Prof. Pollard also warned against comparing vaccination policies in Britain and India. The circumstances in the two countries are very different. Britain reduced the gap after a substantial proportion of its population was vaccinated. India extended the gap to reach more people. Additionally, there's a shortage of vaccines. We need to make the most of the little we have. We're not in Britain's position of abundant supply.

The Delta variant is spreading widely. In these circumstances, a vaccination policy that covers the largest number, in the quickest possible time, with at least one dose makes sense.

So now you have the two poles of the debate. Which should we focus on? Inadequate protection conferred by a single dose of AZ against symptomatic illness or the 71 per cent protection against serious illness and hospitalisation? In the last week, the balance has tilted in favour of the government's strategy, which prioritises protection against serious illness and hospitalisation. No doubt, Prof. Pollard's endorsement has hugely helped, but so too has a recent study by the Christian Medical College in Vellore which shows 70 per cent protection against hospitalisation, 94 per cent against need for oxygen and 95 per cent against the need for intensive care after one dose.

Yet two issues remain and they're also unaddressed. Is it wise to leave the elderly and vulnerable inadequately protected for 16 weeks or should the gap be narrowed to eight weeks for them? Second, people who develop symptomatic illness are also carriers and can pass it on. A 12-16-week gap means there could be more such people than if it was just eight weeks.

To the best of my knowledge, this is where the controversy stands today. N.K. Arora, head of the Covid Working Group, has said that any change "will be taken scientifically … on the basis of merit". However, he also added that "if it turns out the current decision is fine, we will continue with it". I guess we'll have to wait and see what happens.

The writer is a television commentator and anchor

LETTERS

DEFINITION PROBLEM

A debate over Tamil nomenclature and federalism is ongoing in Tamil Nadu with the DMK government insisting on using the term "*ondriya arasu*" (Union) instead of "*mathiya arasu*" (Centre) to refer to the Union government. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin's assertion that his government would continue to use "Union" has revived the debate on state autonomy and federalism. However, important as it is to thrash out the semantics, the current difficulties arising between the two governments are the result of a power tussle and not merely a definition problem.

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

OLI'S INDIA BAITING

NEPAL'S CARETAKER Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli has become synonymous with irresponsible statements. He has claimed that the origin of yoga was in Nepal, not India. He has stated that when yoga was started there was no India. Earlier in an interview to Wion channel, Mr Oli had claimed that Lord Rama does not belong to India. He belongs to Thori village in Nepal, which is the Ayodhya of Nepal. But Lord Rama belongs to all who have faith and belief in Him. Mr Oli needs to explain why these thoughts are only now coming to his mind.

K.V. Seetharamaiah
Hassan, Karnataka

WELL-DESERVED WIN

NEW ZEALAND lived up to their numero uno ranking by proving to be more than a handful against India in the inaugural World Test Championship final in Southampton. Kane Williamson led brilliantly from the front by coming up with valuable contributions with the willow in both innings, and guiding his team home towards the end. His marshalling of resources and field placements were exemplary. India flattered to deceive and its famed batsmen were all at sea against the four-pronged Kiwi pace battery. The Kiwis deserved the crown and this success must taste sweeter after their 2019 World Cup heartbreak.

N.J. Ravi Chander
Bengaluru

Paul Wood

Taliban's time: How a disaster looms ahead in Afghanistan

There's an apocryphal story, told and retold by journalists many times over the course of America's longest war. A Taliban prisoner is sitting, relaxed, across the table from an American interrogator: "You may have all the watches," the prisoner says, "but we have all the time". Now, the Taliban's patience is finally paying off. President Joe Biden has promised that the last American soldier will be out of Afghanistan by the heavily freighted date of September 11, 2021. In fact, all the troops may be back on American soil by the even more symbolic date of July 4. Other Nato soldiers are hastily lowering their flags and scuttling out. They leave in their wake an unfolding disaster.

After 19 years, the Islamic Emirate — as the Taliban call themselves — are not waiting any longer. There is fighting across Afghanistan: not just in the south where the Taliban are traditionally strong, but in 28 out of 34 provinces. Only the ineffective Afghan security forces are left to stop the Taliban, who are surging forward everywhere. The United States lost some 2,300 people in almost two decades of the Afghan war. The Afghan Army loses that many every few months. The government tries to stop the true, terrible casualty figures from getting out, but the news agencies cobble together estimates. In the past week, some 200 Afghan police and troops were killed; the week before, 150 died in a single day.

The government and its supporters were dismayed by the death last week of a famous and charismatic special forces commander, Col. Sohrab Azimi, who was killed along with all his men. They were overrun by the Taliban while defending an isolated base in the far north of the country. According to one account, it took less than an hour. The Americans were no longer around to save them with aerial bombing; the Afghan government proved incapable of sending reinforcements, leaving them to their fate.

In some places, the Taliban are carrying out what one observer told me was a "burned earth policy": destroying infrastructure, using car bombs and suicide bombers, killing any high-ranking government loyalists they capture. The head of the national intelligence agency in one district of Takhar province in the north was executed last week, although, interestingly, more than 70 soldiers taken prisoner alongside him were allowed to leave. The Taliban have wisely decided to treat ordinary troops and police officers well if they give up without a fight. Many of the security forces have drawn the appropriate lesson and there are reports of whole units surrendering to the Taliban, passively handing over weapons and equipment.

Twitter is full of triumphant Taliban videos showing this. In one, Taliban fighters swarm around a column of abandoned armoured vehicles. "Thanks be to God", says one, grinning as he hops into a Humvee and gets behind the wheel. The Humvee was made in Indiana. He might also have said: "Thanks be to the American taxpayer". This is an echo of what happened in Iraq when ISIS terrified the Iraqi Army into literally throwing down their arms. The Afghan troops seem relieved to give themselves up to the Taliban, who feed them and give them money so they can go home.

That last fact gives a clue as to why an army of 260,000, which has cost the US taxpayer $89 billion to train and equip, is so useless. Ten years ago, I was at a sprawling base in southern Afghanistan shared by US forces and the Afghan Army. I asked the American troops hosting me if I could visit the Afghans. That was not a good idea, they said — they wouldn't even risk going near the Afghan tents. This, I was told, was because the Afghan soldiers were stoned on hash or opium half the time. That was certainly true — but when I did meet some of them, I found they were furious and desperate, because they hadn't been paid in months. This was Afghanistan's legendary corruption at work. Nothing has changed.

The Afghan security forces have been deeply demoralised for a long time. They were made more miserable by the US withdrawal deal with the Taliban. Many are losing the will to fight altogether as the Taliban advance. The Afghan government itself is showing signs of panic. Last weekend, President Ashraf Ghani, who will meet President Biden at the White House on June 25, hastily sacked both his interior and defence ministers and the Army chief. Troops have been seen digging in on the outskirts of Kabul.

But while a complete collapse is possible, it is not inevitable. Afghanistan's future might be an unending civil war, the government in the cities, the Taliban in the countryside. Even Al Qaeda is back, apparently once again under Taliban protection. As the Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, told me earlier this year: "The Americans have to accept that they have lost."

It's another way of saying that the US never had the Taliban's strategic patience. If the Taliban are on the point of victory, it is because they have simply outlasted the United States.

*By arrangement with the **Spectator***

Some H-1B seekers can resubmit form

USCIS will consider plea to have been filed on the original receipt date if properly resubmitted

Washington, June 24: Some foreign guest workers in the US will be able to re-submit their applications for the H1-B visa, the most sought-after non-immigrant visa among Indian IT professionals, if their petition was solely rejected because it was based on the initial registration period, according to a federal agency.

According to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), such resubmission of applications is for those whose applications have been rejected or administratively closed solely because the requested start date was after October 1, 2020.

The H-1B visa allows US companies to employ foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise. Technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China.

"If your FY 2021 petition was rejected or administratively closed solely because your petition was based on a registration submitted during the initial registration period, but you requested a start date after Oct. 1, 2020, you may re-submit that previously filed petition, with all applicable fees," USCIS said.

"Such petitions must be re-submitted before October 1, 2021. If properly resubmitted, we will consider the petition to have been filed on the original receipt date," the USCIS said. In 2020, USCIS implemented an electronic registration process for the H-1B cap.

Prospective petitioners seeking to file H-1B cap-subject petitions, including for beneficiaries eligible for the advanced degree exemption, must first electronically register and pay the $10 H-1B registration fee for each beneficiary.

PROSPECTIVE PETITIONERS seeking to file H-1B cap-subject petitions, including for beneficiaries eligible for the advanced degree exemption, must first electronically register and pay the $10 H-1B registration fee for each beneficiary.

"The electronic registration process has streamlined processing by reducing paperwork and data exchange and provided overall cost savings to employers seeking to file H-1B cap-subject petitions," it said. According to USCIS, for fiscal 2021, the number of petitions filed during the initial filing period was below the number projected as needed to reach the numerical allocations.

This discrepancy was likely related to multiple factors, including the economic, political, and public health uncertainty created by the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the fact that FY 2021 was the first year that we implemented the electronic registration process. "Therefore, in August 2020, we selected additional registrations that were held in reserve. The filing period for registrations selected in August ended on November 16, 2020," it said.

"Some petitioners indicated a start date after October 1, 2020. We rejected or administratively closed those petitions because they were based on registrations submitted during the initial registration period but indicated a start date after October 1, 2020. Upon reconsideration, we no longer believe that the regulations required us to reject or administratively close those petitions," the USCIS said.

The move comes days after the US Chambers of Commerce launched a campaign to address the acute shortage of skilled and professional workforce in America. — *PTI*

SHORT TAKES

NO CONFIDENCE: TRUDEAU SURVIVES VOTE

Ottawa, June 24: The minority government of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau survived a parliamentary vote of no confidence Wednesday in a face-off over the proposed budget, eliminating the possibility of early elections this summer.

The House of Commons voted 211 to 121 in favor of approving the budget, which was proposed in April and contains a plan to spend CAN$101.4 billion (69 billion euros) over three years. The conservative opposition voted together against Trudeau, who was able to hang on thanks to the support of three other smaller blocs in the lower chamber.

LANKA RELEASES 16 LTTE TERROR SUSPECTS

Colombo, June 24: Sri Lanka on Thursday released 93 prisoners, including 16 LTTE terror suspects held without charges, after they were pardoned by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

The prisoners were released on the presidential pardon on the occasion of Poson Poya, an annual festival celebrated by Sri Lanka's Buddhist majority to mark the arrival of Buddhism in the country. Prison spokesman Thushara Upuldeniya said the suspects belonging to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were among the 93 who had received the presidential pardon.

U.S. EXTENDS EVICTION MORATORIUM

Washington, June 24: The Biden administration has extended the nationwide ban on evictions for a month to help tenants who are unable to make rent payments during the Coronavirus pandemic, but it said this is expected to be the last time it does so.

Dr Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, extended the evictions moratorium until July 31. It had been scheduled to end June 30. The CDC said Thursday that "this is intended to be the final extension of the moratorium."

The White House had acknowledged Wednesday that the emergency pandemic protection will have to end at some point.

NAWAZ LOSES PLEAS AGAINST CONVICTION

Islamabad, June 24: A top Pakistani court on Thursday dismissed appeals by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif against his conviction in corruption cases by an accountability court.

A bench of the Islamabad High Court (IHC), in its nine-page judgement, said Sharif was a "fugitive from law hence has lost his right of audience before this court and we are left with no choice except to dismiss his appeal". The three-time former prime minister was convicted in two corruption cases — Avenfield properties and Al-Azizia Steel Mills — was declared a proclaimed offender in December 2019.

NEPAL LAWYERS QUESTION PREZ's IMPARTIALITY

Kathmandu, June 24: Questioning the impartiality of President Bidya Devi Bhandari in the May 22 dissolution of the House of Representatives, lawyers representing petitioners against the move have argued that her actions make it clear that she didn't want anybody except K.P. Sharma Oli as prime minister.

A five-member Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court led by Chief Justice Cholendra Shumsher Rana on Wednesday began the hearing process, starting with the writ jointly filed by 146 lawmakers backing Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba's claim to Prime Ministership. At the recommendation of Prime Minister Oli, President Bhandari dissolved the lower house for the second time in five months on May 22 and announced snap elections on November 12 and November 19.

Prime Minister Oli is currently heading a minority government after losing a trust vote in the 275-member House. "Bhandari's rejection of Deuba's claim makes it clear that she didn't want anybody except K.P. Sharma Oli as prime minister,"

The Kathmandu Post quoted advocate Govinda Bandi as saying while arguing on behalf of the petitioners against the House dissolution.

Thai democracy protesters rally against govt despite virus warnings

Bangkok, June 24: Hundreds of pro-democracy protesters rallied in Bangkok Thursday to call for the government's resignation, defying warnings from authorities about the kingdom's soaring Coronavirus cases.

The marches came on the 89th anniversary of the Siamese Revolution — the uprising that transformed Thailand from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy.

Bangkok was rocked by near-daily protests against Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha's government in the second half of 2020, but the pro-democracy movement has lost steam after virus outbreaks and the jailing of student leaders. Authorities have clamped down on public gatherings as the kingdom grapples with a third wave of infections, with its daily case toll hovering around the 3,000 mark.

Despite police warnings, hundreds gathered at Democracy Monument, a major intersection in Bangkok, and marched in the direction of Parliament House to protest against the rule of Prayut, the former military chief who came to power in a 2014 coup. Early-bird protesters gathered at the intersection before dawn for a candlelight ceremony.

Som, a 16-year-old student protester, said she wasn't worried about the Coronavirus risk. "We have never had any real democracy," Som said.

"The country is not going anywhere." Student leader Parit "Penguin" Chiwarak — who is facing royal defamation charges and was released on bail last month — marched to a drum beat wearing a plastic golden crown and carrying a flag.

One protester was dressed like the US Statue of Liberty and demonstrators burned a fake constitution — the same week the Thai parliament debated changes to the country's charter. "Our demands won't be lowered... The constitution must come from the people," Jatupat 'Pai' Boonpattararaksa said over a loudspeaker.

Some demonstrators carried signs that read "abolish 112," a reference to the kingdom's harsh royal defamation laws that carry a 15-year jail term for those convicted of insulting the monarchy. There are also demonstrations planned across the country, from the tourist city of Chiang Mai in the north to the southern province of Nakhon Si Thammarat. — *AFP*

A pro-democracy protester holds a large replica of the 1932 Siamese Revolution plaque as he walks with others in an anti-government march as they commemorate the anniversary of the revolution in Bangkok on Thursday. — *AFP*

One dead, many trapped as Miami condo collapses

Surfside (US), June 24: A wing of a 12-storey beachfront condo building collapsed with a roar in a town outside Miami early Thursday, killing at least one person and trapping residents in rubble and twisted metal.

Rescuers pulled dozens of survivors from the tower during the morning and continued to look for more. Surfside Mayor Charles Burkett warned that the death toll was likely to rise, saying the building manager told him the tower was quite full at the time of the collapse around 1:30 a.m., but the exact number of people present was unclear. "The building is literally pancaked," Burkett said.

"That is heartbreaking because it doesn't mean, to me, that we are going to be as successful as we wanted to be in finding people alive." Authorities did not say what may have caused the collapse. Work was being done on the building's roof, but Burkett said he did not see how that could have been the cause.

About half of the building's roughly 130 units were affected, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava told a news conference. Rescuers pulled at least 35 people from the wreckage by mid-morning, and heavy equipment was being brought in to help stabilize the structure to give them more access, Raide Jadallah of Miami-Dade Fire and Rescue said.

Sally Heyman, of the Miami-Dade Board of County Commissioners, said that 51 people who were thought to be in the building at the time of the collapse were unaccounted for by mid-morning — but there was a possibility that some weren't at home. The tower has a mix of seasonal and year-round residents, and while the building keeps a log of guests staying, it does not keep track of when owners are in residence, Burkett said.

Earlier, Burkett said two people were brought to the hospital, one of whom died. He added that 15 families walked out of the building on their own. Gov. Ron DeSantis said officials were "bracing for some bad news". — *AP*

Europe 'on thin ice', says Merkel

Berlin, June 24: German Chancellor Angela Merkel said Thursday that Europe is on thin ice in its battle against the Coronavirus, as the highly contagious Delta variant threatens to undo progress made in reducing infections.

In what may be her last government declaration to the German parliament, Merkel said the further response to the pandemic would be a main topic of discussion among European Union leaders at a meeting in Brussels on Thursday.

She noted that the number of Covid-19 cases in the 27-nation bloc continue to decline, while vaccination rates climb.

But even though there is reason to be hopeful, the pandemic isn't over, in particular in the world's poor countries, she said. But in Germany and Europe we're also still moving on thin ice.

We need to remain vigilant, Merkel added. In particular the newly arising variants, especially now the Delta variant, are a warning for us to continue to be careful.

EU health officials predicted Wednesday that the Delta variant will make up 90% of all cases across the bloc by the end of August. — *AP*

Infections, deaths surge in Russia

Moscow, June 24: Coronavirus infections continue to soar in Russia, with the authorities reporting 20,182 new cases on Thursday and 568 further deaths. Both tallies are the highest since late January.

A surge in infections that hit Russia earlier this month comes as the authorities struggle to overcome widespread vaccine hesitancy and immunise its 146 million people.

As of Wednesday, only 20.7 million — or just 14 per cent of the the population — have received at least one shot of the vaccine, while 16.7 million — 11 per cent — have been fully immunised. In response to the soaring contagions, authorities in 14 Russian regions have made vaccinations mandatory for certain groups of people, such as state officials, those employed in retail, healthcare, education, restaurants and other service-providing businesses.

In most of those regions, eligible companies are required to ensure vaccination of at least 60% of their staff in the coming months. Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova said Wednesday that over the past week, vaccinations rates have increased nearly two-fold. — *AP*

Apple Daily sells out final edition

Hong Kong, June 24: The final edition of Hong Kong's last remaining pro-democracy paper sold out in hours Thursday, as readers scooped up all one million copies of the *Apple Daily*, whose closure was yet another sign of China's tightening grip on the semi-autonomous city. Across the densely populated metropolis, people lined up early in the morning to buy the paper, which in recent years has become an increasingly outspoken critic of Chinese and Hong Kong authorities' efforts to limit the freedoms found here but not in mainland China.

The paper was gone from newsstands by 8:30 am. The newspaper said it was forced to cease operations after police froze $2.3 million of its assets, searched its office and arrested five top editors and executives last week, accusing them of foreign collusion to endanger national security.

"This is our last day, and last edition, does this reflect the reality that Hong Kong has started to lose its press freedom and freedom of speech?" an *Apple Daily* graphic designer, Dickson Ng, asked in comments to *The Associated Press*. "Why does it have to end up like this?" The paper printed one million copies for its last edition — up from the usual 80,000.

On the front page was splashed an image of an employee in the office waving at supporters surrounding the building, with the headline "Hong Kongers bid a painful farewell in the rain, We support *Apple Daily*.'"

While pro-democracy media outlets still exist online, it was the only print newspaper of its kind left in the city. The pressure on the paper reflects a broader crackdown on Hong Kong's civil liberties, ramped up after massive anti-government protests in 2019 unsettled authorities. In response, they imposed a sweeping national security law. — *AP*

Phone swab can detect Covid-19

London, June 24: Researchers have developed a non-invasive and low-cost method that can accurately and rapidly detect Covid-19 using samples taken from the screens of smartphones. The researchers from University College London (UCL) in the UK analysed swabs from mobile screens rather than directly from people using the method known as Phone Screen Testing (PoST).

They found that people who tested positive by the regular nasal swabbing PCR test were also positive when samples were taken from smartphone screens. The new method, described in the journal *eLife* on Tuesday, detected the Covid-19 virus on the phones of 81 to 100 per cent of contagious people with a high viral load, suggesting it is as accurate as antigen tests.

The researchers noted that globally active screening for Covid-19 is still a priority as new variants keep emerging and the vaccination rollout is not guaranteed in many countries. However, testing is expensive and can be physically unpleasant, both of which are significant hurdles on the road to an effective test and trace system, they said.

As PoST is an environmental test, rather than a clinical test, it is both non-invasive and less expensive than a traditional nasal swabbing PCR, according to the researchers.

This means not only is it suitable for rollout in lower-income countries, but it also removes the discomfort of current Covid-19 testing options, potentially increasing take-up of regular testing among the general population, they explained.

The team noted that PoST sampling takes less than a minute. — *PTI*

2 nabbed for blast near Saeed house

Lahore, June 24: Pakistani security agencies on Thursday arrested two suspects involved in the car bomb blast outside the house of the 2008 Mumbai terror attack mastermind and chief of the banned Jamat-ud-Dawa (JuD) Hafiz Saeed, an official said.

The Crime Investigation Department (CTD) has arrested two suspects, one of them a Christian, who had a connection with the sale and purchase of the car used for the blast, a CTD official said.

The official did not disclose the identity of the suspects. However, the *Associated Press* named one of the arrested as David Peter. Intelligence agencies have arrested a man from the Lahore airport on the suspicion of his involvement in the blast, *Geo News* reported.

Quoting police sources, the report said the man was asked to get off a Karachi-bound flight a few minutes before departure. He was taken to an undisclosed location for further investigation, the report said.

"We are getting a lead from the arrested persons to the main culprits," the CTD official said. — *PTI*

LUXURY | IN CLOUDS

Shanghai Tower is 2nd tallest after Dubai's Burj Khalifa

Shanghai opens world's highest hotel

Shanghai, June 24: The world's highest luxury hotel, boasting a restaurant on the 120th floor and 24-hour personal butler service, has opened in Shanghai to guests with deep pockets and a head for heights.

Elevators whizz guests up the intimidating spiral-like skyscraper at ear-popping speeds of 18 metres per second to the J Hotel's 165 opulent rooms.

The hotel occupies the top floors of the 632-metre (more than 2,000 feet) Shanghai Tower in the city's financial district, the second-tallest building in the world after Dubai's Burj Khalifa.

Its opening was delayed partly by the Coronavirus pandemic but the hotel has now started receiving well-heeled guests who can call on the services of a dedicated butler at any hour, day or night.

Patrons can also enjoy one of the hotel's seven restaurants, bars, spa, 84th-floor swimming pool, and all the other usual trappings of a top-notch hotel.

It does not come cheap. To celebrate its opening J Hotel is offering a "special experience rate" of 3,088 yuan ($450) a night, but prices for its 34 suites skyrocket. A night in a "J Suite", complete with crystal chandeliers and sauna, this Saturday costs over 67,000 yuan.

The hotel is part of Jin Jiang International Hotels, a major Chinese state-owned group, and officially opened on Saturday.

"On the day of our opening even the web page was overloaded with so many visitors with strong interest and they have such (a) strong will to come and experience our hotel," said Renee Wu, sales and marketing director.

"Of course this is very encouraging to all of us, but at the same time, we are committed to making sure that all our guests are well taken care of." — *AFP*

View of the J Hotel, the world's highest luxury hotel, boasting a restaurant on the 120th floor and 24-hour personal butler service, located in the Shanghai Tower, in Shanghai. — *AFP*

LIVE RICH
FINANCIAL Chronicle
FRIDAY | 25 JUNE 2021 | NEW DELHI

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	52,699.00	0.75
Nifty 50	15,790.50	0.66
S&P 500*	4,264.07	0.52
Dollar (₹)	73.87	0.28
Pound Sterling (₹)	103.18	0.31
Euro (₹)	88.36	0.19
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	46,283▾93	0.20
Brent crude ($/bbl)*	75.37	0.24
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.012	0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.480	0.007

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Officers asked to track prices of Covid essentials

Within a fortnight of GST rate cut on Covid-19 essentials, including medicines and oxygen, the National Anti-Profiteering Authority has urged field tax officers to collect evidence against suppliers who have not reduced prices. In an office memo, the NAA said the suppliers are required to commensurately reduce the prices of each of the supplies of goods made and services provided by them.

SBI launches Aarogyam business loan

To support the healthcare sector, State Bank of India has launched the Aarogyam healthcare business loan. Under this new product, the entire healthcare ecosystem such as hospitals, nursing homes, diagnostic centres, pathology labs, manufacturers, suppliers, importers, logistic firms engaged in critical healthcare supply can avail of loans up to Rs 100 crore (as per the geographic location) repayable in 10 years, SBI said.

States' revenues set to cross pre-Covid level

High tax buoyancy, led primarily by fuel taxes, and increase in grants from the Centre under the Finance Commission package, will help revenue growth of states cross the pre-pandemic level in the current fiscal, provided there is no third Covid wave, Crisil said. Given the higher prices of fuels, revenue from this segment is set to grow 50 to 30 per cent in the current financial year from 20 per cent last fiscal, it said.

Google India MD Sanjay Gupta is IAMAI chairman

Industry body IAMAI said Google India vice president and MD Sanjay Gupta has been elected as its chairman for the period 2021-23. He succeeds Amazon senior VP and India country manager Amit Agarwal. The Internet and Mobile Association of India has also named Facebook India VP and MD Ajit Mohan as vice chairman of the association, succeeding Yatra.com co-founder and CEO Dhruv Shringi.

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Saudi Aramco chairman to join board

RIL to invest ₹75K cr in clean energy projects

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, JUNE 24

Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) plans to invest Rs 75,000 crore, or over $10 billion, in clean energy over three years while it looks forward to conclude the $15-billion deal with Saudi Aramco this year. The company also unveiled the low-priced smartphone co-developed with Google, called JioPhone Next.

Unveiling the growth agenda for the company at its 44th annual general meeting in a virtual address, RIL chairman Mukesh Ambani said the conglomerate will create four "giga factories" in Gujarat, investing over Rs 60,000 crore and another Rs 15,000 crore in value chain and other partnership.

"Reliance will establish and enable at least 100GW of solar energy by 2030. A significant part of this will come from rooftop solar and decentralised solar installations in villages," Ambani said.

Ambani said Saudi Aramco chairman and head of the Kingdom's wealth fund Public Investment Fund, Yasir Othman Al-Rumayyan, 51, will join the board of RIL as an independent director. This is a precursor to a deal to sell a 20 per cent stake in the company's oil-to-chemical (O2C) unit--which houses the group's oil refineries, petrochemical plants and fuel retailing business--to Saudi Aramco.

In the exploration & production business, BP and Reliance are on course to bring the third deepwater field onstream in the last quarter of 2022, which will again make RIL one of the largest producers of gas in India, meeting 20 per cent of gas demand, he said.

Ambani also said the jointly developed Google-Jio smartphones, Jiophone Next, will be available from September 10.

Jiophone Next is a fully featured smartphone, supporting the entire suite of applications from both Google and Jio, as well as the Android Play Store through which users will have access to the entire universe of Android Apps.

Also Jio and Google Cloud will collaborate on 5G Technology.

Updating shareholders On 5G telecom services rollout, Ambani said, "the entire 5G Standalone Network has been installed in our data centres across the nation and also at our trial sites in Navi Mumbai. We are confident of being the first to launch full-fledged 5G services."

In retail business RIL aims to create jobs for over 10 lakh people in the next three years and expand retail footprint as the company created 65,000 jobs even during the pandemic with over 2 lakh employed in Reliance Retail.

RIL shares were volatile during the AGM and finally closed at Rs 2153.35 on BSE, down 2.35 per cent.

JIOPHONE NEXT TO BE MOST AFFORDABLE

Mumbai, June 24: RIL chairman Mukesh Ambani said JioPhone Next', jointly developed by Jio and Google, will be available from September 10. Ambani said JioPhone Next will be the most-affordable smartphone, not just in India but globally.

The companies have also expanded their partnership, wherein Jio and Google Cloud will collaborate on 5G technology.

Ambani said an ultra-affordable 4G smartphone is essential to make India '2G-mukt' (free of 2G). India still has nearly 300 million mobile users who are unable to escape from inefficient and exorbitant 2G services since most basic 4G smartphones remain unaffordable, he said.

"I am pleased to announce that Google and Jio teams have jointly developed a truly breakthrough smartphone that we are calling, JioPhone Next that has been jointly developed by Jio and Google especially for the Indian market," he said.

—FC Bureau

INDIA PRESSES OPEC FOR AFFORDABLE OIL PRICE

GRANT SMITH & SALMA EL WARDANY
JUNE 24

India has once again urged Opec and its allies to revive halted oil production as the world's third-biggest consumer expressed "deep concern" over spiralling energy prices.

"High crude prices are adding significant inflationary pressure on India," oil minister Dharmendra Pradhan told Opec's top official during a video-conference on Thursday, according to a statement on Twitter. He called for "affordable" supplies, with prices in a "reasonable band," and repeated a request for Opec+ to boost production.

International oil prices have soared to a two-year high above $75 a barrel as demand bounces back from the pandemic slump. Still, Saudi Arabia has signalled that the producer group will only cautiously restore shuttered output when it meets next week because the market remains fragile.

For India, the current pressures are particularly acute. As the local currency has depreciated steadily against the US dollar in recent years, the cost of oil is fast approaching Rs 5,550 per barrel -- just 10 per cent less than during the market frenzy of 2007-08.

It's not the first time this year that India has voiced concern over Opec's output policy. In January, there was a visible rift when Pradhan told Opec secretary-general Mohammad Barkindo at a public conference that the group's policy was "creating confusion for the consuming countries."

—Bloomberg

Bullion bank on anvil, as RBI lets jewellers pay back loan in gold

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, JUNE 24

Taking a step towards establishment of bullion banks, the Reserve Bank of India has allowed jewellers to pay back their gold metal loans in the form of physical gold sourced locally or through the Gold Monetisation Scheme (GMS). This move will also promote GMS while curbing gold imports.

"Banks shall provide an option to the borrower to repay a part of the GML in physical gold in lots of one kg or more, provided the GML has been extended out of locally sourced or GMS-linked gold," the RBI said in a notification on Wednesday.

Hitherto, jewellers who take gold metal loans from select banks that import gold or participate in GMS were allowed to repay the loan only in rupee. Now, it can be paid back in gold itself.

"This was a long standing recommendation of the jewellers. Jewellers had to borrow physical gold and repay in rupee till now. Borrowing in an asset class and repaying in another is never a perfect hedge. Jewellers tend to lose or gain due to gold tariff and duty changes as well as differences between over-the-counter market and RBI reference rates," said P. R. Somasundaram, managing director India, World Gold Council.

According to him, this is a step towards the establishment of full-fledged bullion banks in India. A bullion bank enables banking in precious metal values rather than in currency values. Bullion banks undertake transactions like clearing, hedging, trading and vaulting of gold and precious metals. Global banks which engage in bullion banking include JPMorgan Chase & Co and HSBC Holdings.

> **Jewellers had to borrow physical gold and repay in rupee till now. Borrowing in an asset class and repaying in another is never a perfect hedge**
>
> **— P. R. Somasundaram,** *MD India, World Gold Council*

The RBI has put forward a few other conditions as well. The repayment has to be made using locally sourced India Good Delivery Standard or LBMA's Good Delivery Standards gold. LBMA (earlier known as London Bullion Market Association) is the international trade association governing the global over-the-counter bullion market.

The RBI further said the gold will be delivered on behalf of the borrower to the bank directly by the refiner or a central agency, acceptable to the bank, without the borrower's involvement.

Further, the loan agreement will contain details of the option to be exercised by the borrower, acceptable standards and manner of delivery of gold for repayment.

"By allowing banks to source locally available recycled gold and gold procured through GMS, imports can be curbed while promoting the monetisation scheme. The government in principle had allowed BIS-accredited jewellers to act as collection centres for GMS. With the RBI allowing repayment of GML in the form of gold, banks may collaborate with jewellers for the scheme in the future," said Soma-sundaram.

Around 120 tonnes of recycled gold came into the market in 2019 and despite the pandemic 95 tonnes were collected in 2020.

INSURERS SETTLE OVER 80% COVID HEALTH CLAIMS

FC BANKING BUREAU
MUMBAI, JUNE 24

Non-life insurance companies have settled about 80 per cent of the health claims during the Covid 19 pandemic while life insurers have settled 88 per cent of the intimated claims, said a top Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (Irdai) official on Thursday.

"After the ferocious second wave of Covid-19 pandemic that swept India in April-May, insurance companies have settled about 80 per cent i.e., over 15.39 lakh health claims exceeding an amount of Rs 15,000 crore as on June 22," said T.L. Alamelu, member (non-life), Irdai while inaugurating an Assocham e-event.

"Over 19.11 lakh Covid health claims have been reported as on 22nd June as far as medical insurance or hospitalisation is concerned. While in terms of death claims, which is handled by the life insurers, about 55,276 claims have been intimated and nearly 88 per cent i.e., 48,484 claims amounting to Rs 3,593 crore have already been settled," said Alamelu.

She added that the repudiated claim for health is just about 4 per cent and in life it is just about 0.66 per cent, and said these numbers showcase the opportunity available for insurance companies.

"Now we are grappling with the problem that most of these people have spent a good amount of their savings, it has even taken down many below the poverty line, they have gone into debts, sold up their assets, pledged their jewellery and have been pushed back to the worst times," she said.

"The industry has tremendous responsibility especially for a nation like India to offer protection and just not assume that people will not take insurance. There has to be aggressive, probably more sort of forcefully sell insurance because it is no longer an option," she added.

Russia plans export tax on aluminium, nickel to curb prices

YULIYA FEDORINOVA
JUNE 24

Russia plans to impose temporary export taxes on steel, nickel, aluminium and copper as part of efforts to target domestic inflation after metal prices surged as part of a broad-based commodities rally.

The government is proposing that a duty of at least 15 per cent will be effective from August 1 and run through the end of the year, economy minister Maxim Reshetnikov said at a televised government meeting. Each metal will be taxed at a certain level above the base duty, he said.

The taxes could have far-reaching implications for global metals markets at a time of tight supply for products such as aluminum. United Company Rusal controls about 10 per cent of the global aluminum market while MMC Norilsk Nickel PJSC produces about 20 per cent of the world's nickel. Shares in both companies dropped on the news, although metals prices showed little reaction.

Russia's move is the latest in a series of steps by governments around the world to tackle surging prices for raw materials and other key goods. The country has already introduced export taxes on wheat, while China has rolled out a swathe of measures this year in a sweeping effort to stem inflation by cooling runaway commodities.

Russia expects to reap as much as 110 billion roubles ($1.5 billion) of duties from steelmakers and 50 billion roubles from base-metals producers, Reshetnikov said.

—Bloomberg

Microsoft launches Windows 11

STEPHEN NELLIS
JUNE 24

Microsoft Corp on Thursday showed Windows 11, which will hit markets toward the end of this year and is the first major revamp of its Windows operating system since 2015.

The software that turned Microsoft into a household name and dominated personal computers for years has been overtaken in popularity by devices using Apple and Google software, but it is still core to Microsoft's strength in the corporate market.

And the upgraded operating system may also appeal to individuals, who have helped drive sales of PCs sharply higher over the past year due to work-from-home practices adopted during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Microsoft said Windows 11 will include new features aimed a business users, specifically those who use it with an external monitor. One new feature, for example, will automatically adjust apps to a single screen when users undock a machine to take a call in a quieter room and then readjust them when the user redocks the machine. Other features include ways to show recent files even when they have been viewed on a different device such as a phone.

Microsoft may also give more details at Thursday's online launch event on its plans for a revamped Windows Store.

The company recently cut commissions on games sold through the store to 12 per cent, lower than the 15 per cenit takes on regular apps.

—Reuters

Tanishq to reopen stores in 216 towns

FC BUREAU
HYDERABAD, JUNE 24

Tanishq on Thursday said that it is reopening its vast retail network of 356 stores across 216 towns in a phased-wise manner in compliance with all the regulations as mandated by various state governments.

Reiterating its pledge of being the safest stores in town, Tanishq said it has taken up deep cleaning measures, deployed advanced technology air purifiers to filter out viruses and bacteria. It has also inoculated 100 per cent of its retail staff where the stores have been reopened. "A limited number of customers will be allowed at any given point in time depending on the store size and number of retail staff present in the store."

On the product front, the company said it has introduced antimicrobial jewellery in Chennai and Lucknow as a pilot project. It will soon be available in Kolkata, Hyderabad and other key markets.

The antimicrobial jewellery is present in certain categories like chains and rings which has a specially coated layer that self-disinfects the surface and further prevents any microbial growth.

"Customers also have an option to use a hybrid model to select their favourite jewellery either through appointment booking or video calling. They can select their jewellery either through Virtual Try-On or on Endless aisle, the company said in the statement.

Business NOTE

Majority of MSEs deprived of stimulus benefits

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, JUNE 24

Around 88 per cent of micro and small businesses as well as self-employed persons have not availed of benefits of any stimulus packages meant for the pandemic-affected, says a survey by the Consortium of Indian Associations, which represents 40 MSME associations.

The Centre had come out with three stimulus packages in the past 13 months for the micro, small and medium enterprises. The survey, which covered over 81,000 self-employed and micro and small businesses across India, found that 88 per cent respondents have not availed of any benefits of the stimulus packages so far. This could be due to ineligibility or inability to fulfill strict conditions.

According to industry insiders, mostly medium enterprises, which have been getting bank loans, are able to meet the eligibility criteria for the stimulus packages.

Around 80 per cent felt the central and state governments were not taking care of their interests.

Further, 80 per cent entrepreneurs are insecure about their future while 59 per cent MSEs have sacked or reduced their staff.

Meanwhile, the All-India Council of Association of MSMEs (Aica), an umbrella body of 170 MSME associations, sought immediate intervention of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on rising prices of raw materials such as steel, iron ore, aluminum, copper, plastics and paper.

While the profits of base metal manufacturers have gone up 10-20 times, MSMEs are on the verge of extinction, the Aica said.

SKY IS | NO LIMIT

No legal requirement for space tourists to have life cover

Bezos' space odyssey too risky for insurers

NOOR ZAINAB HUSSAIN & CAROLYN COHN
JUNE 24

Launching one of the richest individuals on earth into orbit has proved a leap too far for insurers, who are not ready to price the risk of losing Jeff Bezos or his fellow space travellers.

Amazon CEO Bezos, a lifelong space enthusiast, has been vying with Elon Musk and Richard Branson to become the first billionaire to fly beyond the earth's atmosphere.

And while insurers are well known for offering cover for even the most outlandish of risks, at a price, potential accidents in space are not yet among them.

"Space tourism involves significant risk, but is not an issue life insurers specifically ask about as yet because it is so rare for anyone to travel into space," Insurance Information Institute (III) spokes-person Michael Barry said.

There is a nearly $500 million market to insure satellites, rockets and unmanned space flight, but no legal requirement for an operator such as Blue Origin, which Bezos founded, to insure passengers for injury or death or for space tourists to have life cover, brokers and insurers said.

"We're not aware of a case where anybody is insured against passenger liability," Neil Stevens, senior vice president, aviation and space at Marsh, the world's biggest insurance broker, told Reuters.

Jeff Bezos

Assuming they lift-off as planned next month, Bezos and the other wannabe astronauts on Blue Origin's New Shepard spacecraft will not only spend several minutes 62 miles (100 km) above the earth in a truck-sized capsule, they also have to get back.

The only group that has regularly flown humans sub-orbitally since the 1960s is Branson's Virgin Galactic. All have been tests, with one failure in 2014 resulting in a death. Blue Origin has flown 15 unmanned sub-orbital flights with no failures, Seradata SpaceTrak data showed on June 10.

Bezos, Blue Origin and Virgin Galactic did not respond to requests for comment from Reuters on their insurance plans and flight records.

Being uninsured in space is nothing new.

NASA and the US, in general, do not buy liability cover, with government launches basically insured by taxpayers, Richard Parker of Assure Space, a unit of AmTrust Financial that provides space insurance, said.

Charles Wetton, underwriting manager for space policies at insurer Global Aerospace, said astronauts on government-funded missions are carefully selected for their knowledge, skills and fitness and train for several years before blast off.

"They and their families understand the risks of the work they do, Wetton said. But commercial space cadets may only get a few days of training for a sub-orbital flight.

—Reuters

SHORT TAKES

Atanu-Deepika enter mixed final

Paris: Star archery couple Atanu Das and Deepika Kumari assured India its first medal from the ongoing World Cup Stage 3 by entering the final of the mixed pair event with a comeback 5-3 win over Spain here on Thursday. Atanu and Deepika, who are India's best medal hope in the upcoming Tokyo Olympics, were at their best to make their first final together here they will face the Netherlands in the summit clash on Sunday. This will be their first mixed pair final together as they gear up for the Tokyo Olympics in less than a month's time. World number three Deepika is also in the hunt for a second medal, having advanced to the individual semi-final for the second successive time this year. — *PTI*

Shooter Pratap finishes 7th in WC

Osijek (Croatia): India's Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar finished seventh in the men's final, while the country's women shooters failed to get past the qualifying round in the 10m air rifle event of the ISSF World Cup here on Thursday. The 20-year-old Aishwary, who finished with a score of 628 in the qualification round, shot a total of 143.9 before being eliminated from the final of the men's 10m air rifle event. Deepak Kumar (626) and Divyansh Singh Panwar (624.7) failed to make the final ending 14th and 25th respectively in the qualifying round. In another disappointing show, the trio of Anjum Moudgil, Apurvi Chandela and Elavenil Valarivan failed to enter the finals of the women's 10m air rifle event. — *PTI*

RedBird acquires 15% stake in RR

New Delhi: Investment firm RedBird Capital Partners, which has invested in the parent company owning iconic football club Liverpool and baseball team Boston Red Sox, has acquired a 15 per cent stake in the IPL franchise Rajasthan Royals. However, the deal amount has not been disclosed. Manoj Badale-owned Emerging Media owns majority stake in the IPL team which won the inaugural edition in 2008. "Following the transaction, RedBird will hold 15 per cent stake in the Royals and Emerging Media will increase its ownership from 51 per cent to 65 per cent," a release on the Royals website stated. Badale said the deal is a testament to the global standing of the IPL. — *PTI*

Sania-Bethanie crash out of Viking

Eastbourne (UK): Indian tennis star Sania Mirza and her doubles partner Bethanie Mattek-Sands lost their first round match in straight sets at the Viking International Eastbourne here. The unseeded Indo-American pair lost 3-6 4-6 to the Christina Mchale and Sabrina Santamaria of USA in a match that lasted one hour 18 minutes late on Wednesday night. The 34-year-old winner of six Grand Slams in doubles will pair up with Mattek-Sands in the women's doubles event of Wimbledon, starting on June 28. — *PTI*

Dutee, Hima eye Olympic berth

Patiala: A host of top Indian track and field athletes, including the likes of star sprinters Dutee Chand and Hima Das, will make one last attempt to book their Olympic berths in the National Inter-State Championships beginning here on Friday. Graded as 'B' category event by World Athletics, the five-day event offers some of the top athletes the chance to either breach qualifying standards for an automatic Olympic berth or garner valuable ranking points to make it to the Games. — *PTI*

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Time for overhaul

Skipper Kohli hints at changes in India Test side

Southampton, June 24: India skipper Virat Kohli has indicated an overhaul of his Test team after the stunning loss to New Zealand in the World Test Championship final here, saying that "right people who have the right mindset to perform" will be brought in following a reassessment.

Senior batsman Cheteshwar Pujara managed 8 off 54 balls in the first innings and consumed 35 balls for his first run. He then scored just 15 runs off 80 balls in the second essay. In the end, New Zealand chased down a 139-run target without much trouble.

"We will continue to reassess and continue to have conversations around what are the things required to strengthen our side and not follow or fall prey to certain patterns," Kohli said.

It can be safely assumed that some of the seniors will be on borrowed time and only a stellar performance in the five-Test series against England in August can secure their futures.

"We will not wait for a year or so and have to plan ahead. If you see our white ball team now, we have great depth and guys are ready and confident. Same thing needs to be done with Test cricket.

"You have to reassess and replan and understand what dynamics work for the team and how we can be fearless. Bring in right people who have right mindset to perform," the skipper added.

For the current management, a 50 off 80 balls is of more value than a 15 off 80 which can put unnecessary pressure on batsmen coming after someone with an ultra-defensive mindset.

India captain Virat Kohli looks disappointed after losing to New Zealand in the World Test Championship final. — *AP*

KOHLI RUES LACK OF BUILD-UP GAMES

Kohli said his team wanted to play first-class games to build up for the five-Test series against England in August but their request was turned down for reasons not known to him.

The Indian team on Thursday will disperse for a three-week break from the bio-bubble and reassemble in Nottingham on July 14 for the preparations of the Test series starting August 4.

Asked if a few first-class games would have been better, the skipper said that it depended on people who created the itinerary.

"That doesn't depend on us," he said.

"We obviously wanted first-class games which I believe has not been given to us. I don't know what the reasons for that are," the straight-talking Indian captain said.

This would mean that there will be intra-squad simulation games once again but the Indian captain feels that three weeks of preparation will be good enough for the series.'

BETTER TEAM WON, SAYS SHASTRI

Big things don't come easy, said India coach Ravi Shastri on Thursday as he acknowledged that New Zealand were the better team in the World Test Championship final that his side lost after an especially poor batting performance.

"Better team won in the conditions. Deserved winners after the longest wait for a World Title. Classic example of Big things don't come easy. Well played, New Zealand. Respect," wrote Shastri on Twitter.

Prior to Wednesday, New Zealand's only ICC title came way back in 2000. — *PTI*

VIRAT WANTS BEST-OF-THREE FOR WTC FINAL

Southampton, June 24: Echoing the views of head coach Ravi Shastri, India skipper Virat Kohli has said that the best Test team in the world should be decided by a best-of-three final and not a one-off game like it was in the inaugural edition.

"Well, look, firstly, I'm not in absolute agreement of deciding the best Test side in the world over the course of one game, to be very honest," Kohli said in the post-match press conference.

"If it is a Test series, it has to be a test of character over three Tests, which team has the ability to come back into the series or totally blow away the other team.

"It can't just be a pressure applied over two days of good cricket and then you suddenly are not a good Test side anymore. I don't believe in that." — *PTI*

New Zealand skipper Kane Williamson poses with the WTC Mace at the historic Hambledon Cricket Club, also known as the cradle of cricket. — *ICC*

Kane salutes his affable Kiwi stars

Southampton, June 24: New Zealand captain Kane Williamson saluted the commitment of his star-shorn side as he savoured the "special feeling" of winning the inaugural World Test Championship mace by beating India, relying on "bits and pieces to stay in games and be competitive".

With the World Test Championships triumph, the "nice guys" of world cricket showed that they don't always finish last. The win over mighty India has also made up for the heartbreak of successive ODI World Cup final losses in 2015 and 2019.

Wiliamson termed their final win over India as the "pinnacle" but stopped short of calling it the country's biggest achievement in the game.

"I've been part of (New Zealand cricket) for a short while, it's a very special feeling, the first time in our history we've come away with a world title," Williamson said in post-match press conference on Wednesday.

"We've had 22 players over the last two years, and they've all played their part and the support staff and the guys who played this match, it's a special achievement to be savoured.

"I think for us, we know we don't always have the stars, and we use our bits and pieces to stay in games and be competitive," added the likeable captain in the post-match presentation.

He said it is nice to be finally end up on the right side of the result.

"Well, obviously it's the pinnacle, isn't it, really, being involved in the final. Like I said, a formidable side in India. 2019 was a great occasion and a brilliant game of cricket, as well. But obviously a slightly different feeling being on the right side of the result for us." — *PTI*

Hadlee hails Black Caps as 'best ever'

Wellington, June 24: Sir Richard Hadlee has hailed Kane Williamson's world Test champion side as the best in New Zealand's cricketing history, describing its performances in the past two years as simply "outstanding".

"This is a special day in the history of NZ cricket, a day to celebrate the magnificent achievement of winning the inaugural World Test Championship," Hadlee said in a statement.

"It was a thrilling Test match, with twists and turns throughout...it was a dominant BLACKCAPS performance over a very good Indian team. Over the years NZC have built a significant depth of players, which makes us one of the most competitive teams in world cricket.

"It's fair to say that this current group of players is the best in our history," he added.

(From left) Kiwi pacers Kyle Jamieson, Tim Southee, Trent Boult and Neil Wagner. — *Twitter*

BAZ FEARED TITLE WOULD ELUDE AGAIN

Watching the WTC Final with a nervous trepidation, former skipper Brendon McCullum feared that the Blackcaps may yet again come close but would not win a world title.

However, McCullum's joy knew no bounds when Kane Williamson and Ross Taylor took New Zealand past the finish line to be crowned the first ever World Test Champions.

"They've been on a pretty amazing journey for the last few years and they've been so close to tasting the ultimate success," McCullum told '*SEN Radio*'.

"To do it in the purist form of the game is just something quite magnificent. I'm not sure it's really sunk in just yet, to be honest.

"Overnight the game was on a bit of a knife's edge, but it almost had the feeling of the previous two World Cups that we'll get close but we won't quite get across the line," he added. — *PTI*

ASHWIN ENDS WTC AS LEADING WICKET-TAKER

Southampton, June 24: Premier India off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin finished the 2019-21 World Test Championship cycle as the leading wicket-taker with 71 scalps to his credit.

The 34-year-old Tamil Nadu off-spinner achieved the feat during the World Test Championship final against New Zealand, which was his 14th Test in this cycle of WTC. His 71st victim was New Zealand opener Devon Conway. Ashwin picked up two wickets each in the first (2/28) and second innings (2/17) in the final. The Kane Williamson-led New Zealand won the first WTC after defeating India. Ashwin ended up with four five-wicket hauls in the WTC with seven for 145 being his best in an innings. He also scored 324 runs with a century to boot. Australian pacer Pat Cummins with 70 wickets to his name from 14 Tests finished second on the list, while English speedster Stuart Broad finished third with 69 scalps from 17 Tests. — *PTI*

DRAWMATIC END

Ronaldo equals scoring record as Portugal hold France to advance

Budapest, June 24: Cristiano Ronaldo scored two penalties to equal the all-time international goalscoring record and help holders Portugal edge into the last 16 of Euro 2020 with a 2-2 draw against France in Budapest on Wednesday.

Portugal will face the world's top-ranked side Belgium in the first knockout round in Seville on Sunday.

Fernando Santos' men moved through as one of the four best third-placed sides, for the second straight Euro, from Group F behind France and Germany, who only just qualified after a dramatic 2-2 draw with Hungary in Munich.

"We did everything I wanted us to do (in the 4-2 defeat) against Germany," Portuguese coach Santos told *RTP*. "The result was clearly fair."

Ronaldo gave his side the lead just after the half-hour mark with his first spot-kick, before France hit back through Karim Benzema's two goals either side of half-time.

But, with Portugal heading out as it stood with Hungary leading Germany, Ronaldo helped win and then scored their second penalty with half an hour remaining.

The 36-year-old's fifth goal of the group stage extended his record tally of Euro goals to 14 and drew him level with former Iran striker Ali Daei, in his 178th international match.

Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo celebrates after scoring a goal against France in the Euro 2020 at Budapest on Wednesday. — *AP*

World champions France will next take on Switzerland in Bucharest on Monday.

"It was a fight, it wasn't easy," France coach Didier Deschamps told TF1. "We tried to win and at the end of the match, obviously, knowing the result of Germany, that allowed us to be first, which is the best place."

"I know very well that a new competition will be starting from the last 16."

The first real chance of the game fell to France forward Kylian Mbappe after quarter of an hour, but the 22-year-old's wait for a Euro goal was extended by Rui Patricio's parried save.

GOAL NO. 109 FOR RONALDO

Ronaldo scored his 109th goal for Portugal in Wednesday's Euro game against France to equal former Iran striker Ali Daei's all-time international record.

The 36-year-old Ronaldo, the leading scorer in European Championship history, is the first player to appear at five editions of the tournament and has scored five times in three Group F games.

The Juventus striker has now scored 14 European Championship goals, five more than French great Michel Platini, who netted nine times when he led France to glory in 1984. — *AFP*

EURO RESULTS

Portugal *(Cristiano Ronaldo (31-p, 60-p)*	**2**
France *K Benzema (45+2-p, 47)*	**2**
Germany *(Kai Havertz 66, Leon Goretzka 84)*	**2**
Hungary *(Adam Szalai 11, Andras Schafer 68)*	**2**
Spain *(Martin Dubravka 30-og, Aymeric Laporte 48, Pablo Sarabia 56, Ferran Torres 67, Juraj Kucka 71-og)*	**5**
Slovakia	**0**
Sweden *(Viktor Claesson 93, Emil Forsberg 2, 59)*	**3**
Poland *(R Lewandowski 61, 84)*	**2**

LEON-HEARTED GERMANY ROAR INTO LAST 16

Munich (Germany), June 24: Leon Goretzka came off the bench to rescue Germany's Euro 2020 campaign with a late equaliser as a nerve-shredding 2-2 draw against Hungary in Munich on Wednesday set up a last-16 high-octane showdown with giants England.

Adam Szalai gave Hungary a shock early lead and although Germany drew level through Kai Havertz in the second half, the Hungarians went back in front almost immediately through Andras Schaefer.

With six minutes left, Goretzka fired home a crucial equaliser to set up a blockbuster tie against England at Wembley on Tuesday, eliminating Hungary who finished bottom of Group F.

"I am absolutely delighted — we have no doubts now and are full of confidence," said Goretzka amid.

Germany only narrowly avoided a repeat of their shock group-stage exit, as defending champions, at the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

"We made mistakes but fought and showed superb morale," said Germany coach Joachim Loew, who was six minutes from ending his 15 years in charge with an embarassing defeat.

"Now it will a real highlight to play against England at Wembley." — *AFP*

EURO ROUND OF 16

June 26	Wales vs Denmark in Amsterdam	9.30 pm
June 27	Italy vs Austria in London	12.30 am
	Netherlands vs Czech Republic in Bucharest	9.30 pm
June 28	Belgium vs Portugal in Seville	12.30 am
	Croatia vs Spain in Copenhagen	9.30 pm
June 29	France vs Switzerland in Bucharest	12.30 am
	England vs Germany in London	9.30 pm
June 30	Sweden vs Ukraine in Glasgow	12.30 am

COPA | AMERICA

Referee's 'pass' gives Brazil win

Rio de Janeiro, June 24: Brazil continued their winning romp through the Copa America on Wednesday, eking out a controversial 2-1 victory against Colombia after struggling most of the match to answer a magnificent bicycle-kick goal by Luis Diaz.

The 11th-hour win gave the "Selecao" a perfect nine points from three matches in the South American championships, and extended their current winning streak to 11 matches.

However, the victory was steeped in controversy: Brazil's second-half equalizer, a Roberto Firmino header, was preceded by a Neymar pass that glanced off Argentine referee Nestor Pitana.

Colombia heatedly argued afterward that play should have been stopped, but Pitana ruled neither side was hindered and allowed the match to continue.

COPA RESULTS

Brazil *(Roberto Firmino 78, Casemiro 90+10)*	**2**
Colombia (Luis Diaz 10)	**1**
Ecuador *(Renato Tapia 23-og, Ayrton Preciado 48)*	**2**
Peru *(Gianluca Lapadula 49, Andre Carrillo 54)*	**2**

PERU HOLD ECUADOR

In the early match, Ecuador and Peru failed to settle who advances to the quarter-finals, drawing 2-2 in Goiania.

Ecuador took the early lead from an own goal, the ball going in off the foot of Peru's Renato Tapia in a jostle in front of the goal in the 23rd minute.

Ayrton Preciado scored in stoppage time to close the first half with Ecuador ahead of Peru 2-0. — *AFP*