

IN BRIEF

Petrol crosses ₹90 mark in Delhi

New Delhi: Petrol price on Friday crossed the ₹90-per-litre mark in the national capital, and diesel soared to ₹80.60 after rates were increased for the 11th consecutive day in a row. Petrol price on Friday was hiked by 31 paise per litre and diesel by 33 paise, according to a price notification of state-owned fuel retailers. This pushed the petrol price to ₹90.19 a litre in Delhi and to ₹96.62 in Mumbai. Diesel now comes for ₹80.60 a litre in the national capital and for ₹87.62 in Mumbai. The increase follows a spurt in prices of oil in the international market, on which India is 85 per cent dependent to meet its needs. Brent oil crossed \$65 a barrel on Thursday as a worsening US energy crisis took out almost 40 per cent of the nation's crude production. — *PTI*

CISF jawan saves life of metro commuter

New Delhi: A CISF jawan saved the life of a 45-year-old man, who fell unconscious at a Delhi metro station, by performing the CPR medical procedure on him, an official said on Friday. The incident took place at the Indraprastha station around 7:40 pm on Thursday. The man fell unconscious at the platform just after getting off a train (plying between Dwarka-Noida) and CISF constable Anil Gunja noticed this as he was on CCTV feed-monitoring duty. Gunja immediately performed the cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) medical procedure on the passenger, following which he regained consciousness. The man, a resident of Uttam Nagar East in the city, was rushed to a nearby hospital and the doctors later said his condition was stable, the official said. — *PTI*

Air stays 'very poor' in Ghaziabad, Noida

Noida: The average air quality in Ghaziabad, Noida, Greater Noida and Gurgaon was recorded "very poor", while it was "poor" in Faridabad, according to data issued by a government agency on Friday. Pollutants PM2.5 and PM10 also remained in the air of the five immediate neighbours of Delhi, according to the air quality index (AQI) maintained by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). According to the index, an AQI between zero and 50 is considered 'good', 51 and 100 'satisfactory', 101 and 200 'moderate', 201 and 300 'poor', 301 and 400 'very poor', and 401 and 500 'severe'. The average 24-hour AQI at 4 pm on Friday was 352 in Ghaziabad, 324 in Noida, 304 in Greater Noida, 288 in Faridabad and 338 in Gurgaon, according to CPCB's Sameer app. The AQI for Ghaziabad, Noida and Greater Noida was recorded "very poor" for a fifth day in a row, it showed. On Thursday the AQI was 325 in Ghaziabad, 315 in Noida, 336 in Greater Noida, 307 in Faridabad and 296 in Gurgaon. On Wednesday it was 328 in Ghaziabad, 322 in Noida, 337 in Greater Noida, 307 in Faridabad and 316 in Gurgaon. — *PTI*

R-DAY CLASH NOT AN INTELLIGENCE FAILURE: TOP COP

New Delhi: Delhi Police commissioner S.N. Shrivastava on Friday said the violence that broke out on Republic day was not due to intelligence failure and alleged that the farmers protesting the three agri laws had betrayed their trust by not following pre-decided routes during the tractor parade. He said there were apprehensions which is why barricades were placed and the farmers were stopped. He said 152 people have been arrested so far in connection with the violence that took place in the national capital on Republic day. Thousands of farmers protesting the Centre's new agriculture laws had clashed with the police during their tractor parade on January 26. Many of the protesters, driving tractors, reached the Red Fort and entered the monument. Some protesters even hoisted religious flags on its domes and a flagstaff at the ramparts, where the national flag is unfurled on Independence Day.

■ Urges youth to draw inspiration from Bose's dedication to nation

Efforts made so Netaji is forgotten, says Shah

Kolkata, Feb. 19: Union home minister Amit Shah Friday said efforts were made to ensure Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose is forgotten but his legacy of courage, patriotism and selfless service to the nation will endure till eternity and continue to inspire future generations.

Mr Shah, while inaugurating the "Shauryanjali Programme" - a tribute to the Bengali revolutionaries, urged the youth of the nation to draw inspiration from the life and struggles of the freedom fighters.

"Efforts were made to ensure Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose is forgotten but failed. His legacy of courage, patriotism, sacrifice and selfless service to the nation will continue to inspire generations to come," he told a gathering at the National Library.

Recalling how Bose, as a brilliant student, cracked the ICS, Shah said, the legendary freedom fighter left the job and plunged into the freedom struggle just to drive home the message that the nation was more important to



Amit Shah

► Mr Shah, while inaugurating the 'Shauryanjali Programme' - a tribute to the Bengali revolutionaries, urged the youth of the nation to draw inspiration from the life and struggles of the freedom fighters

him than a comfortable life under the British yoke.

Mr Shah said Bose's popularity was evident when he twice became president of the Congress, once after defeating the candidate of Mahatma Gandhi.

"Netaji is still loved and respected by people like he was many, many years

ago. His indomitable spirit still inspires people," he said.

The home minister asked the youth of the country to read about the life of Bose and his struggles.

"Only a young generation that knows history can build a strong nation," he said.

He also inaugurated the 'Biplabi Bangla' exhibition on the life of freedom fighters from Bengal like Khudiram Bose and Rash Behari Bose, and flagged off a cycle rally.

Divided into three teams named after Netaji, Khudiram Bose and Rash Behari Bose, the cyclists will collectively traverse 900 km to spread the message of the illustrious freedom fighters. — *PTI*

Docus from DigiLocker to be accepted for passport: MEA

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

Citizens can now submit various documents required for passport services through the government's DigiLocker app system in a paperless mode and are therefore not required to carry the original documents, the ministry of external affairs (MEA) announced on Friday.

In a move that will also provide great relief to those who have lost their passports and aid them in re-issuing of the document, the MEA also announced it was "working on the idea of passport to be included as one of the documents in DigiLocker" to "help citizens to retrieve passport whenever it is required" and which will also help them in the process of re-issuing in case of passport loss.

● MEA ALSO announced it was 'working on the idea of passport to be included as one of the documents in DigiLocker' to 'help citizens to retrieve passport whenever it is required'

The MEA also said it was "working towards rolling out of ePassport for citizens that are designed to increase security making it more difficult to tamper with data recorded on a passport, thereby limiting the chances of fraud" and that "in the coming years, biometric passports would help improve immigration processes at airports which are equipped with automatic e-Passport gates."

All this was announced by minister of state (MoS) for external affairs V. Muraleedharan on Friday

at an event to "inaugurate 'DigiLocker for Passport Seva,'" who also stated that "in the upcoming Passport Seva Programme V2.0, the use of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, chat-bot, analytics, and robotic process automation (RPA) will further ease the citizens' experience and expeditious service delivery."

The DigiLocker is a flagship initiative of the ministry of electronics and IT and aims to provide access to authentic digital documents stored in a citizen's digital document wallet. As per rules, these digital documents are at par with the original physical documents and can therefore be accessed by citizens anytime and anywhere whenever they need it without having to physically carry these.

158 new Covid cases in Delhi, total at 6,37,445

New Delhi, Feb 19: Delhi recorded 158 fresh Covid cases and one fatality on Friday, even as the positivity rate stood at 0.26 per cent, authorities said.

With this, the death toll from coronavirus infection in the capital went up to 10,897.

On Thursday, 130 cases and two deaths were registered. The infection tally in the city rose to 6,37,445. No death due to Covid was recorded in Delhi on Wednesday, the third time single-day fatality count stood nil in February.

On February 9 too, no fatality from coronavirus infection was registered in the national capital, first time this month, and after a gap of nearly nine months. No death from Covid was recorded on Saturday as well.

— *PTI*

Media coverage against Disha 'sensational': HC

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

The Delhi high court, on Friday, said certain media coverage of investigation in the FIR against climate activist Disha Ravi for her alleged involvement in sharing a toolkit backing farmers' protest indicates "sensationalism and prejudicial reporting," but declined to order removal of any such content at this stage. Justice Prathiba M. Singh said the interim plea for removal of such news content and tweets by the Delhi police would be considered at a later stage.

The court, however, asked media houses to ensure that no leaked investigation material is broadcast as it could affect the probe and directed the Delhi police to abide by its stand on affidavit that it has not leaked nor intends to leak any probe details to the press.

The court was hearing Ms Ravi's plea to restrain the police from leaking to the media any probe material in relation to the FIR lodged against her.

The police, represented by additional solicitor general (ASG) S.V. Raju, placed an affidavit before the court categorically denying leaking of any information to the media.



Disha Ravi

The ASG, during the hearing, said that the possibility of leakage by some officer of the agency cannot be ruled out entirely.

The court, however, directed that the police has to abide by its affidavit. The media houses, one of them represented by advocate Mrinal Bharti, told the court that the source of information in the present case was the Delhi police and its tweets.

ASG Chetan Sharma and Central government standing counsel Ajay Diggaul, appearing for the ministry of information and broadcasting, told the court that the petition was not maintainable as no complaint was first made to it for taking action against any TV channel or media house for any alleged incorrect reporting of the case.

The News Broadcasting Standards Authority (NBSA) told the court that it can take any action only if a complaint is made to it regarding the media houses named in the plea.



Security men near barbed wires and barricades at Ghazipur border during farmers ongoing protest in New Delhi on Friday. — *PTI*

As Jagan reigns supreme, Naidu's hubris meets its comeuppance

SRIRAM KARRI
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

A long spell of a confrontational stalemate in Andhra Pradesh, featuring the YSR Congress party government led by chief minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy and the State Election Commission led by commissioner Nimmagadda Ramesh Kumar and invariably ending in court, has finally found a thaw.

The people of Andhra Pradesh, taking an unforgiving view of Chandrababu Naidu's shenanigans, tired of his obstructionism and backroom manoeuvring, have all but wiped out the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) from the map of

political relevance in the state.

Even in Mr Naidu's stronghold and fortress of Kuppam, a bastion he could hold even against the onslaught of late Dr Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, has crumbled after over 30 years. More than four out of five panchayats in Kuppam also now fly the flag of YSRC, a feat unparalleled in the state's history.

Mr Reddy, the petulant young chief minister, has trumped over the machinations of his snollygoster senior. TDP's rout is so complete, its burial by people into dust is so undoubted that it is easy to say that Mr Naidu's hubris and perpetual opportunism has all but killed the party he stole

● CHANDRABABU NAIDU—who in his delusional calculations wanted to simultaneously trounce the trio of enemies Narendra Modi, K. Chandrashekar Rao, and Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy—is now left with dust for breakfast, lunch, and dinner

from his father-in-law and founder late N.T. Rama Rao.

If the TDP looks like it is still alive, and hardly it is, it is because nature abhors a vacuum and the YSRC needs some semblance of an opposition, however moribund. Mr Naidu—who in his delusional calculations wanted to simultaneously

trounce the trio of enemies Narendra Modi, K. Chandrashekar Rao, and Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy—is now left with dust for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Led by wrong strategies conceived by himself, carved by his personal insecurities, and inability to smell the coffee, Mr Naidu, who like Gandhari from Mahabharata voluntarily blinded himself to everything except caste and unfair gains, blindfolded by mammonism, lust for power and money, and an inability to resist the lure to bequeath the throne to his undeserving son, Nara Lokesh, who has never won an election involving common people, is still alone in vain glory today of a legacy he

could never create.

The BJP, which is watching with the appetite of a piranha, will move in swiftly like it has in neighbouring Telangana. It does not have to worry because it will hardly be fighting with the YSRC in this term. Instead, it will only have to devour the flesh off the bones of a dead carcass that the TDP has now become.

For Mr Naidu, a vainglorious man used to boasting that he will spin the wheel of politics, to be left with a bicycle without a wheel is hardly the fate he would have imagined even three years ago. The decline will now be swift.

Mr Jagan's welfare politics has created for the young chief minister a public goodwill of astro-

nomical proportions. Even if he completely fails on the development front, creating jobs or inveigling investments—and most likely he will—he is going to retain the pole position in bagging another term in power.

Mr Chandrababu Naidu, who already looks desolate and lonely, will find the last of his lieutenants deserting him and his party hardly keen to remain on a yellow Titanic. The BJP's recruitment will continue, even as Mr Reddy will watch the traffic jam on the one-sided street with sangfroid disdain and characteristic nonchalance.

None, except the most die-hard supporters or the woolly-eyed of Mr

Naidu's supporters or members at the core of his cabal, will fancy his chances in an election over eight years from now, or believe Nara Lokesh can do a Jagan on AP politics.

Mr Naidu may rue his fate in his solitude, or cutting his losses pragmatically merge the TDP into the BJP, make peace with Narendra Modi and Amit Shah with humility of repentance, and save his people and give himself a chance to be part of a battle against his Telugu rivals—Chandrashekar Rao in Telangana and Jagan Reddy in AP on the winning side.

In either case, NTR will be smiling in his grave. All debts will be paid soon.

Andhra denies intrusion in Odisha territory

■ Continued from Page 1
misconceived and is not maintainable at all in view of the fact that no contempt, whatsoever, has been committed by the state of Andhra Pradesh".

Stating that it has not taken any step in violation of any direction of the top court, Andhra Pradesh in its reply filed by Mude Hari Jawaharlal, district collector of Vizianagaram district, said that it has been "duly administering its own territories and has not infringed upon the territory of the petitioner."

As senior counsel Vikas Singh appearing for Odisha wanted to file a rejoinder to Mr Jawaharlal's affidavit, the court gave it (Odisha) four weeks time to do so.

The Odisha government, in its contempt petition, has alleged that Andhra Pradesh has notified panchayat polls in three of its villages of Kotiya gram panchayat in Koraput district.

The Odisha government has also contended that Andhra Pradesh has willfully and deliberately violated the top court's December 2, 1968, and March 30, 2006, orders by venturing into its territory and notifying elections in three of its villages.

India vaccinates 1 cr in 34 days: 2nd fastest in the world after US

■ Continued from Page 1
Going by the speed at which the vaccination drive is going on, it will take two more years to get 30 per cent of the population inoculated in India. Experts have suggested private healthcare bodies should also be involved to ramp up the vaccination process.

Meanwhile, a total of 13,193 new Covid-19 cases were detected in a span of 24 hours. The death toll rose to 1,56,111 with 97 new fatalities in the last 24 hours. The fatalities count was reported to be between one and five in 15 states and Union territories, while it was between six and 10 in three states

and Union territories.

Of the new cases, the highest number was from Maharashtra (5,427), followed by Kerala (4,584) and Tamil Nadu (457). Of the 97 more deaths, the maximum number was again from Maharashtra (38), followed by Kerala (14) and Punjab (10).

With the state leading in cases and deaths, Maharashtra's deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar said Friday he had told the district administrations to take strict action against those found without masks in public. He said the district officials had been authorised to impose limited lockdowns from 6 am to 6 pm

if the situation so warrants. "I am going to chair a meeting on February 21 in Pune to discuss measures to contain the viral spread," the deputy CM added.

The Union health ministry's data showed 16 states/UTs did not report any Covid-19 death in a span of 24 hours. These are Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Goa, Jharkhand, Meghalaya, Puducherry, Chandigarh, Manipur, Mizoram, Lakshadweep, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Tripura, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Daman and Diu and Dadra and Nagar Haveli.

Mosquitoes disturb Shivraj

■ Continued from Page 1
officers concerned and pulled them up for the mosquito menace. Later, mosquito repel-

lent was sprayed in his room. An hour later, he woke up to the sound of water overflowing from

the tank in the circuit house. He had to move out of the room to switch off the motor pump.

Pheran-clad shooter kills 2 cops in Srinagar market

■ Continued from Page 1

on militants. However, after the initial exchange of fire the militants managed to break the security dragnet and escape.

IGP Mr Kumar said that the escaping militant or militants' "blood trace" has been followed to another village some two kilometres away from the encounter site. The area has been cordoned off and a search operation launched, he added.

In another clash, three militants were killed in southern Shopian district overnight, the police said, adding that the slain were associated with Al-Badr outfit. They have been identified as Suhail Sheikh alias Azeem, Shahid Ahmad Dar alias Furqaan and Muddasir Ahmad Wagay, all local Kashmiris.

Officials said that the operation against the militants in Shopian's Badigam village was launched jointly by J&K Police's counterinsurgency Special Operations Group (SOG), the Army's 44 Rashtriya Rifles and 178th

Battalion of the CRPF on Thursday evening and that, after the presence of militants was ascertained, repeated announcements were made asking them to lay down their weapons and surrender. "Instead of accepting the offer, the hiding terrorists fired indiscriminately and also managed to keep some of the inmates as hostages. Due to darkness the operation was suspended for the night. However, the cordoned remained intact throughout the night. With the first light today, the joint party was tactfully able to evacuate the hostages. Repeated announcements were again made to the terrorists to surrender, but they fired indiscriminately on security forces which retaliated, resulting in elimination of all the three," a police statement said.

It added arms and ammunition including two AK rifles with five magazines and 96 rounds of ammunition, one pistol and other incriminating materials were recovered from the site of encounter.

SHORT TAKES

READY TO CONTEST ELECTIONS: AHMED PATEL'S SON

Ahmedabad, Feb. 19: Faisal Patel, the son of late Congress leader Ahmed Patel, has said he is ready to join politics and will contest assembly polls if the party wishes. Only last month he had announced on Twitter that he would not join politics and rather focus on his late father's social initiatives.

"Just like my father, I will continue doing social work. We have two hospitals and a public school in Bharuch. That is my real work," he told reporters on Thursday night.

"I will enter electoral politics if the (Congress) party high command asks," 40-year-old Faisal Patel said.

"If the high command wishes, I will also fight elections. Preferably from Bharuch, because that is my area," said Mr Patel when asked if he would contest the 2022 Gujarat Assembly polls.

He was in Khadia area of the city to canvas for Congress candidates ahead of elections to the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. Elections to Ahmedabad and five other municipal corporations will be held on February 21. He was invited by local Congress MLAs Gyasuddin Shaikh and Imran Khedawala to support party candidates, Mr Patel said.

Ahmed Patel, a Congress veteran who hailed from Bharuch, died on November 25 last year due to Covid-19-related complications.

Faisal, an alumnus of Harvard Business School, had announced on January 30 that he will not join politics. — PTI

TWO ARRESTED OVER DEATH OF UNNAO TEENS

Unnao, Feb. 19: The Uttar Pradesh Police on Friday held two people in connection with the deaths of two teenage girls at an Unnao village, accusing them of murder over a one-sided love affair.

The third victim in the case is battling for life at a hospital. One of the accused held in the case is a teenager, according to police.

Vinay Kumar, alias Lambu, and a teenager have been held in connection with the case. The matter is a fallout of a one-sided love affair. The accused gave some pesticide with water to the three girls," Lucknow Range IG Laxmi Singh told reporters here.

Both accused are residents of Pathakpur village in the Ashoha area and were held on a tip-off, the IG said.

During interrogation, Vinay told police that he was involved in agriculture and owned a piece of land at Baburaha village, near the spot where girls were found on Wednesday night.

According to police, Vinay told them that the girls used to go to the fields for fodder and they became friends during the Coronavirus lockdown. He had a one-sided love affair with one of the girls.

We used to play and eat together in the field. I had a one-sided love affair with her. When I proposed her, she rejected. When I asked her this month to give me her phone number, she did not give due to which I was angry and decided to kill her," Vinay told police.

"On Wednesday, I mixed pesticide in a water bottle and asked my friend to bring snacks. The three had it and when they asked for water, I gave them the water bottle in which pesticide was mixed and they drank it. I had left their bodies in the field," the IG said quoting Vinay's confession. — PTI

Farmers' stir: NIA to file case over 'foreign funds'

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

Following specific inputs from central intelligence agencies, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) will soon register a case regarding "funding from unknown foreign sources" into farmers agitation. NIA has already issued notices and even questioned some people who have been associated with the farmers agitation. Though that questioning has happened in a different case related to a banned outfit Sikhs For Justice.

NIA sources confirmed that they had received some inputs from intelligence agencies on funding of farmers agitation through some suspicious sources from abroad. Before a formal case is registered by

Snow festival



A monastery made of snow during the Snow Festival at Hansa Village in Lahual-Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh on Friday.

— PTI

Political climate heats up ahead of Assembly elections in Kerala

Polls might be held in second week of April or first week of May

GILVESTER ASSARAY
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM,
FEB. 19

With Kerala currently witnessing the 'ceremonial' yatras of political parties crisscrossing 140 Assembly segments in the state, rival Fronts have started vying with each other to woo the voters besides galvanising their cadre for the forthcoming elections.

After the recent two day visit of the Election Commission team to Kerala, there are speculations that the Assembly polls might be held in the second week of April or first week of May. Quite understandably then, the political parties are leaving no chance to prepare for the crucial electoral battle.

The ruling CPM-led LDF has launched two yatras — Vikasana Munnetta Yatra (Development yatra), one from Kasargod to cover the northern districts and another from Kochi to cover the southern districts. The Congress-led UDF's Aishwarya Kerala Yatra led by opposition leader Ramesh Chennithala is almost on its last leg covering southern districts.

The BJP's yatra is set to be flagged off by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on February 23 in Kasargod. Prime Minister Narendra Modi who was in Kochi on Sunday to launch projects worth ₹1,600 crore took time to attend the BJP state unit's core committee meeting in which he asked the leadership to attract all sections of people in Kerala.

So what are the stakes for different political fronts? For the CPM-led LDF, it's prestigious battle to safeguard its last bastion in the country. With no signs of immedi-

Open for chief ministership if BJP wins, says Sreedharan

New Delhi, Feb. 19: Set to enter the political fray by joining the BJP next week, technocrat E. Sreedharan on Friday said his main aim is to help the party come to power in Kerala and that he will be open to chief ministership. He also said that the focus will be on developing infrastructure in a big way and bring the state out of the debt trap if the BJP wins the assembly polls that are likely to be held in April-May this year.

Known as 'Metroman' for the efficiency in completing big infrastructure projects, Sreedharan said that he will contest the Assembly elections if the party wants and will also be open to chief ministership if the party asks.

The 88-year-old technocrat also made it clear that he will not be interested in governorship, saying that it is purely a "constitutional position and no powers at all" and that he won't be able to make any positive contribution to the state in such a position.

"My main idea is to bring BJP to power in Kerala. If BJP comes to power in Kerala, there will be three to four major areas we want to focus. One is infrastructure development in a big way and another is to bring industry to the

ate revival of party in West Bengal and Tripura too going out of hand, the Left has to keep its flag flying in Kerala. Moreover, the Left is desperate to retain power for what it says — to present

state," he said.

Speaking over phone from Ponnani in Kerala where he is based now, Sreedharan said that a finance commission could also be formed for the purpose of improving the finances of the state, which is in a "debt trap today".

"The state is in a debt trap today, so much of borrowings. And debt burden on each Malayalee is ₹1.2 lakh today... That means we are heading for bankruptcy and the government still continues to borrow. The state finances need to be propped up and for that, we need to find a solution," he said.

His entry into the BJP is being seen as a major boost for the party in election-bound Kerala. The state is being ruled by the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) alternately for the past many years.

"If BJP wants, I will contest (the Assembly elections)," he said during an interview.

Sreedharan said that he is "certainly" ready to be the chief minister if the party wants him to be after coming to power.

When asked about whether he will be open to chief ministership, he

said, "If they (BJP) want, certainly. To tell you very frankly, unless I am the chief minister these (priorities) cannot be achieved." He is likely to formally join the BJP on February 25 and said that he was entering the "political fray".

On the reasons for deciding to join the BJP which is in power at the Centre, Sreedharan said that he wanted to do things for the benefit of Kerala as the UDF and the LDF have not been able to bring any tangible progress to the state.

"Why I chose BJP is for a different reason. The two others in Kerala — UDF and LDF — have been ruling Kerala alternately... They have not been able to bring any tangible progress to the state, not even one industry has come to the state in the last 20 years..."

"They were having tussles with the (central) government all the time. The two governments are not able to see eye to eye on many matters. The development of the state is suffering. If the BJP comes to power here, they will have a good rapport with the Government of India," he said.

He was referring to apparent differences between the Centre and the ruling LDF in Kerala.

— PTI

an alternative development model to the country.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, 75, has led from the front during the past five years. While the LDF government has a series

of schemes like the 'Life Mission' to provide land and house to landless and homeless people, social welfare pensions to the poor, development projects and the helping hand provided during Covid

and back to back floods, it also has its share of controversies like the gold smuggling case involving the Chief Minister's office. The Left leaders claim that they will create history by winning back to back term in office. But considering the Kerala voters penchant for change after every five years, it's a tough call.

Many who had started writing off Congress in Kerala, got a shock in 2019 Lok Sabha polls when the UDF won 19 of the 20 seats. While the credit for the stupendous victory went largely to Rahul Gandhi who contested and won from Wayanad, the win did boost the sagging morale of the Congress cadres. It emerged strongly as a winning party in the political landscape of Kerala.

The BJP which did quite well in the 2016 Assembly polls with the help of BDJS an outfit floated by the office bearers of SNDP which represents the dominant backward class Ezhava community. Since the Ezhava community is one of the main support bases of the Left parties in Kerala, many predicted a threat for the CPM and CPI.

However, more than the LDF the BDJS-BJP alliance cut into the votes of Congress. The CPM too did lose a good number of votes in many constituencies.

The BJP-led NDA secured close to 15 per cent votes registering nearly 9 per cent increase in vote share compared to previous poll in 2011.

With the BDJS no longer the force that it used to be in 2016 and the BJP too having developed cold feet over the alliance, it is unlikely to cut much ice in the forthcoming polls.

PM: 'Education, knowledge and skill not static'

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 19

The Prime Minister said on Friday that many people spreading terror across the world are "highly educated and skilled", while at the same time there are people who are risking their lives while working at hospitals to save people from the coronavirus pandemic. He said this while addressing the convocation ceremony of Viswa Bharati University virtually.

"It's not about ideology but mindset," Mr Modi said.

Highlighting the importance of knowledge, Mr Modi said, "you will always have to remember that 'knowledge, education and skill' are not static, it is a continuous process. And there will always be scope for 'course correction'. But knowledge and power both come with responsibility".

He urged the students to decide whether they want to be part of the problem or the solution. Mr Modi added if they put the nation first then their every decision will move towards some solution.

He advised the students not to be afraid of taking a decision. Mr Modi further said that as long as the youth of the country have the passion to innovate, take risks and move forward, then there is no worry about the future of the country. He assured the Government's support for the youth in this endeavour.

The Prime Minister while addressing the convocation quoted the poem of Gurudev Ravindra Nath Tagore on Veer Shivaji which inspired him and called for unity of India. He stressed that the students and the faculty were not just a part of a university, but also bearers of a vibrant tradition.

He said Gurudev named the University as Visva Bharati meaning Global University since he expected that anyone who comes to learn in Visva Bharati will see the whole world

Modi inaugurates key power, infra projects in Kerala

AGE CORRESPONDENT
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM,
FEB. 19

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday inaugurated and laid the foundation stone of key projects of power and urban sector in Kerala, including country's first High Voltage Direct Current (HVDC) project featuring state of the art technology.

The projects inaugurated by the prime minister video conferencing, included 320 KV Pugalur (Tamil Nadu) — Thrissur (Kerala) Thrissur. The Voltage Source Converter based HVDC project will facilitate transfer of 2,000 MW power from western region and help various sectors, including industrial and commercial units. The project has been implemented at a cost of ₹5070 crore.

The PM dedicated to the nation the 50 MW Kasargod Solar Power Project developed by the National Solar Energy Mission. The project has come up in an area of 250 acres of land in three villages of Kasargod district at a cost of ₹280 crore.

Besides, Mr Modi also inaugurated 75 MLD water treatment plant at Aruvikkara in Thiruvananthapuram district up under the AMRUT Mission. The project will scale up the distribution of drinking water to people of Thiruvananthapuram.

Chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan who attended the inauguration via video conferencing thanked the PM and said that the Centre state cooperation was important for development in a federal structure.

from the point of view of India and India-mness. So he made Visva Bharati such a place to learn, which can be seen in the rich heritage.

SEARCH FOR MISSING PERSON



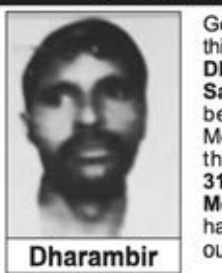
General public is hereby informed that this person namely Bhoop Singh S/o Ram Singh R/o H.No. 5480, Gali No. 05, Raghupurapur-II, Gandhi Nagar, Delhi Age : 62 years, Height : 162.5 Cm., Complexion : Sallow, Build : Thin, Face : Long, wearing white colour shirt, green colour sweater, blue colour jacket, dark navy colour pajama and rubber shoes

in feet, has been missing since 11.02.2021 at about 07:00 A.M. from his house. In this regard a DD No. 87-A Dated 11.02.2021 P.S. Gandhi Nagar, Delhi has been lodged.

Any person having information or clue about this missing person may kindly inform to the following:-

E-mail: cic@cbl.gov.in
Website: <http://cbl.nic.in> SHO - P.S. Gandhi Nagar, Delhi,
Fax: 24368639, Tel. No. 011-22082235,
Tel.: 24368638/24368641 22072761

SEARCH FOR MISSING



General public is here by informed that this person (depicted in the photo) namely: Dharamraj S/o Sunny R/o S-72, A/5 Saidulajab, Indira Camp, Delhi has been missing/kidnapped from PS Mehrauli, New Delhi since 24.01.2021. In this regard DD No. 62-A dated 31.01.2021 has been registered at PS. Mehrauli, New Delhi. Sincere efforts have been made by local police to trace out the person but no clue has come to light so far.

His physical description is as under:-
Sex: Male, Age: 42 years, Height: 5'7" ft., Complexion: Wheatish, Face: Long, Built: Thin, Wearing: Red Colour Jacket, Black Lower and White Shoes.

Any person is having information or clue about this missing/kidnapped person may kindly inform to the following:-

SHO
Website: <http://cbl.nic.in> P.S. Mehrauli, New Delhi
E-mail: cic@cbl.gov.in Ph. No.: 011-26643200
Tel. No.: 011-24368638/24368641 Mob. No: 8750870824
Fax No.: 011-24368639 DP/419/SD/2021

India's next Mars mission likely to be an orbiter: Isro

New Delhi, Feb. 19: As Nasa's Perseverance rover landed on Mars in the early hours of Friday to look for signs of past life, Isro's next mission to the Red Planet is likely to be an orbiter.

Perseverance, the biggest and the most advanced rover ever sent by Nasa, made its landing at Jezero Crater.

After its successful Mars Orbiter Mission, the Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) called for "Announcement of Opportunities" on Mars Orbiter Mission-2.

"It is now planned to have the next orbiter mission around Mars for

a future launch opportunity," according to the Announcement of Opportunities.

But there are other major projects that are lined up. After the Mars Orbiter Mission's success, Isro also decided to explore Venus.

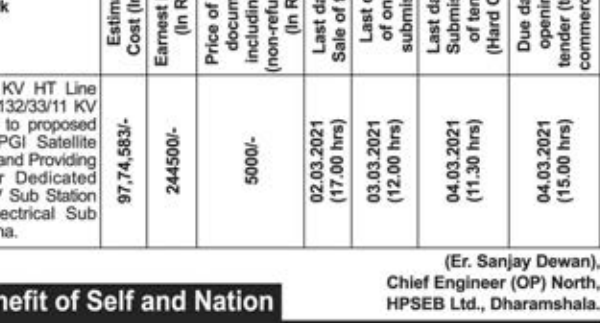
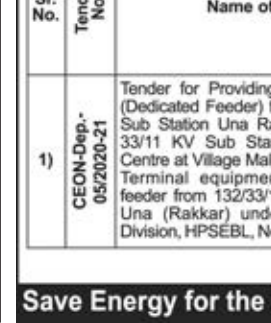
However, the immediate priorities of Isro remain to be Chandrayaan-3 and Gaganyaan — both projects have been delayed due to the coronavirus-induced lockdown.

Under Chandrayaan-3, Isro will once again try to land a rover on the Moon. The mission was to be launched late last year.

Chandrayaan-2 did not yield expected results as the lander hard-landed, dashing India's hopes to successfully land on the Moon. Isro plans to send three humans to space by 2022 under the Gaganyaan (human space) mission.

The India France Joint Vision for Space Cooperation also mentions about the possible collaboration to explore Mars.

"CNES and Isro, with the support of Laboratoire de meteorologic dynamique (LMD, CNRS), will jointly work on the modelling of Mars and Venus atmospheres," the vision statement said. — PTI



quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	50,889.76	-0.85
Nifty 50	14,981.80	-0.91
S&P 500*	3,926.25	0.31
Dollar (₹)	72.64	0.16
Pound Sterling (₹)	100.98	0.02
Euro (₹)	87.67	0.15
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	45,568.239	0.52
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	63.41	-0.81
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.132	0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.321	0.034

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Urban consumer confidence up in February

Consumer confidence among urban Indians has moved up slightly, by 0.9 percentage point, in February, according to a monthly Refinitiv-Ipsos Primary Consumer Sentiment Index (PCSI) survey. The PCSI is driven by four weighted sub-indices. Its Jobs sub-index moved up 1.5 percentage points, Current Conditions, by 2.8 pps and Investment by 2.1 pps. But Economic Expectations was down by 1.3 ppt.

Govt to appeal against Cairn Energy tax award



The government is likely to file an appeal against the \$1.4 billion international arbitration award won by Cairn Energy in a tax dispute, sources said. Soon after the second round of meeting between Cairn CEO Simon Thomson and finance secretary Ajay Bhushan Pandey ended on Friday, the source said the government intends to defend its sovereign right in taxation and will file an appeal against the tribunal award.

Automation to pave way for hybrid HR

Manufacturing, especially the hazardous kinds, will be completely automated in the future, which will lead to "hybrid human resources departments in companies. The hybrid HR department will evolve strategies for human beings to work together with robots on shop floors to complete a given task, Shiv Shivakumar, Aditya Birla Group's president for corporate strategy and business development, said.

UTI AMC launches Nifty 200 Index-based fund

UTI AMC has launched the country's first momentum-based passively managed fund, based on the Nifty 200 Index. UTI, which manages seven equity ETF funds with an AUM of around Rs 44,000 crore, said the new fund will be based on the 30 best performing stocks from the Nifty 200. Sharwan Kumar Goyal, fund manager, said the UTI Nifty200 Momentum 30 Index Fund, opened for subscription on Thursday, will close on March 4.

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Platinum up 120% on auto demand Gold down ₹10K from Aug. rally

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, FEB. 19

Gold prices have corrected 18 per cent and lost more than Rs 10,000 since August while platinum prices have gained more than 120 per cent since April. Despite the current weakness in gold, both the metals are expected to see further rally in 2021.

Gold prices have dropped to Rs 45,950 per 10 gm in the Multi Commodity Exchange from the highs of Rs 56,590 in August—losing more than Rs 10,000 per 10 gm. In the international market, the yellow metal had touched a record high of \$2,075 an ounce in August as the favourable macro-economic factors got a boost from the pandemic uncertainty. Since then prices have been receding and have fallen to \$1,760 levels, losing more than \$300 per ounce.

"Gold prices have slipped below the crucial Rs 46,000/10gm level, to hit an eight-month low. The rise in the US Treasury yields and stronger dollar, optimism of a larger economic stimulus package, and the vaccination drive have led to downside pressure on gold prices," said Nish Bhatt, founder and CEO, Millwood Kane International.

"Gold has seen considerable weakness as investors started profit-booking ever since the vaccine news started coming. Easy money started flowing into riskier assets like equities and Bitcoin and the indus-



trial recovery saw the base metal prices more than doubling. Most of the equity markets are trading at their life-time high levels and Bitcoin has shot up from Rs 4,000 in March to Rs 52,800," said Ajay Kedia, MD, Kedia Commodities.

Another precious metal, platinum, too saw a rally with the recovery in the automotive sector. Prices are at a six-year high and have moved up from \$560 an ounce in April to \$1273—up by more than 120 per cent.

"Tougher pollution regulations requiring vehicle makers to use more platinum in catalytic converters are supporting prices. China is implementing Phase 6 standard for both gasoline and diesel vehicles from January 2021. As other economies follow the same, the demand will further go up. Moreover, platinum may see a third consecutive annual production deficit in 2021 amid supply concerns from South Africa," said Kedia.

Despite the divergent movement seen in both the metals in the second half of last year and the initial months of this year, analysts say the metals will rally in 2021.

"Gold rally never ends in a year. It goes on for six to eight years. Despite the current weakness, there are several factors that still support gold. A possible weakness in the US dollar, low interest rates, overvalued equities, ETF inflows and recessionary trends in major economies will continue to support gold," said Kedia.

In a report published in November, CitiGroup found gold prices pushing to \$2,000 an ounce in the medium term with a target of \$2,500 for 2021. Similarly, platinum also may move towards \$1,500 with tougher pollution norms in the automotive sector increasing demand. Platinum ETFs too have been seeing significant inflows in the recent months.

18 mn Indians to find new occupation by 2030: Report

Mumbai, Feb. 19: Covid-19 will have a lasting impact on labour markets, and as much as 18 million Indian workers will be forced to switch to a newer occupation by 2030 because of the pandemic, a report said on Friday.

The impact will be "disproportionately" felt on low-wage workers in retail, food services, hospitality, and office administration, the report by McKinsey Global Institute, said.

The pandemic has disrupted labour markets because companies have been forced to respond to a new dimension of work-physical proximity. The report identifies the lasting impact of Covid-19 on labour demand in eight countries.

Three broad changes in consumer behaviour and business models will persist to varying degrees, which include the rise of remote work, the increased embrace of e-commerce and virtual interactions, and the more rapid deployment of automation and artificial intelligence.

This will lead to a reshuffling of jobs in the economy over a decade, and over 100 million workers will have to find a new job, it said, adding 18 million of those will be in India itself.

The impact on India has been minimised because 35-55 per cent of the country's workforce depends on the outdoor production and maintenance arena. —PTI

₹25,000-cr fund for stalled realty projects bearing fruit

DHWANI PANDYA FEB. 19

A 25,000-crore (\$3.5 billion) fund set up by the government to complete stalled housing projects is set to deliver its first finished apartments in 2021, offering a template for a problem that has washed out savings of thousands of home buyers and bank-ruptured developers.

The fund will hand over 16 projects, or more than 4,000 homes, in the financial year starting April 1, said Irfan A. Kazi, chief investment officer at SBI-CAP Ventures Ltd, the government-appointed manager of the alternative investment fund. The 'Special Window for Completion of Construction of Affordable and Mid-Income Housing Projects' (Swahim) fund was announced in November 2019.

At the time, India had an estimated \$63 billion of such stalled projects as an economic slowdown and a credit crisis cascaded through the sector. Builders were unable to service their loans, forcing banks to write off the debts and worsen what was already one of the world's biggest bad-loan piles. The government created the fund as a measure to unclog the financing pipes.

Kazi spoke in a phone interview Feb. 12. Edited excerpts:

How much money has been disbursed?

We have given approvals to around 159 projects involving investment of about Rs 14,500 crore, which will complete around 100,000 homes. Of this, about 47 projects (Rs 5,000 crore) have received final approval.



Irfan A. Kazi

val but 112 are early-stage approvals, where due diligence is pending. We don't disclose disbursement amount as we give funding only against project progress; two projects will complete construction by April.

What kind of returns do you expect?

We take first charge on assets and cash flows, so when projects get completed we are the first one to get our money back. Existing lenders have to agree to take second charge. We invest via zero-coupon non-convertible debentures. All our investments are done at 12 per cent internal rate of return across projects.

Was there any pushback?

There was a significant degree of resistance from lenders about our first charge on repayment but, as our deal track record shows, that hurdle is being gradually scaled. We now allow sharing of the security with lenders and sharing of cash flow to some extent. We keep having internal discussions and also with the finance ministry on what criteria can be relaxed.

Who are your investors?

We have 14 investors, the government has 50 per cent

in the fund, Life Insurance Corporation and State Bank of India each have 10 per cent and the rest are other public and private sector players. Global funds have not shown a large interest for a couple of reasons: they prefer rent-yielding office and warehousing assets over residential. They also expect returns of more than 20 per cent to account for risks, including asset class and exchange rate, at which level our projects will be loss-making. We have raised Rs 10,000 crore so far (of the Rs 25,000 crore fund size) but the government has assured us that more will be made available when required.

What kind of challenge has the fund faced?

In many cases we are dealing with the bottom rung of companies, which have lost manpower and some even no longer have a finance team, so due diligence can be hard. A no-objection certificate from existing lenders has come only in some cases and takes an exceedingly long period of time. Then there are also pending court cases or home buyers demanding compensation.

How and where does the fund operate?

Before setting up the fund, we did a market study which established that about 40 per cent of the stressed projects were in the National Capital Region, about 25 per cent in the Mumbai Metro-politan Region and the top seven cities accounted for about 85 per cent of all the stalled projects. However, we are a pan-India fund. —Bloomberg

Southern states, UP among losers of divisible pool share

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, FEB. 19

Changes in criteria made by the 15th Finance Commission will see the share of 10 states in the divisible pool of gross tax revenues declining during the period FY 2022-26 from FY 2016-20.

Among the 10 states, Karnataka will be the biggest loser, followed by Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Assam and Odisha. Tamil Nadu, too, is there in the losers' list.

The loss has been due to the changes in computation of the income distance and tax effort criteria, says rating agency Icra. For the award period FY2022-26, income distance and tax effort have been calculated based on data for FY2017-19, as compared to FY2016-18 for FY2021.

"The Finance Commission had addressed one of the concerns of the south Indian states and a few others regarding the weight given to 'popula-

SHRINKING SHARE

► Karnataka will be the biggest loser, followed by Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Assam and Odisha

► The loss has been due to the changes made by the Finance Commission in computation of the income distance and tax effort criteria

tion' by introducing the criterion 'demographic performance'. We had hoped that our share in the divisible pool would go up because of this. However, it has come down and this is because of the criterion 'income distance', Thomas Issac, finance minister of Kerala, told Financial Chronicle.

The 15th Finance Commission was required to use population as per the 2011 Census. This would have put some of the states that have worked on their fertility rate at a disadvantage. However, the Finance Commission also used demographic performance with a weight of 12.5 per cent to

reward those states that have performed well on demographic management.

Tax Effort also was a new criterion introduced by the 15th FC. It is measurable by the ratio of three-year average of per capita own tax revenues and per capita gross state domestic production (GSDP). This criterion has 2.5 per cent weight.

Maharashtra, meanwhile, is the biggest gainer in terms of share in divisible pool of taxes during FY2022-26, relative to FY2016-20. The other states which have increased their share include Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan.

V-Guard promoter sells shares worth ₹90 cr for social causes

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, FEB. 19

Kochouseph Chittilappilly, the promoter of V-Guard Industries who donated his kidney to a stranger a decade ago, has raised Rs 90 crore by selling 40 lakh shares of the company for social causes. Earlier in 2019 also he had raised Rs 110 crore by selling shares.

"The sale of 40 lakh shares of V-Guard Industries executed on February 17, 2021 was to raise funds for two initiatives I have undertaken as part of my commitment to social causes," Chittilappilly said in a regulatory filing.

K. Chittilappilly Foundation (KCF), formed to undertake charitable and philanthropic activities will use the proceeds of the sale to execute "Chittilappilly Square" envisioned as the hub for social activities with a vast public park with garden, walking and jogging tracks, sports and games areas, yoga and health club, amphitheatres, auditorium and multiple halls for social gatherings, a heritage and cultural



Kochouseph Chittilappilly

museum, exhibition centre, library and reading room, model organic farm, etc.

KCF also has been assisting entrepreneurs who face shortage of funds to scale up their businesses, by providing credit funds at reasonable rates and terms. A company named K. Chittilappilly Capital has been incorporated and it has applied for Certificate of Registration as a NBFC from the RBI.

Part of the proceeds of the stake sale will also be utilised for funding the initiative.

Chittilappilly had raised Rs 110 crore in 2019 by selling 51.20 lakh shares in the open market, mainly for buying land for Chittilappilly Square. According to Mithun Chittilappilly, managing director of V-Guard Industries, the promoter group holding in the Kochi-based electrical appliances manufacturer has come down from 64 per cent four years back to 60 per cent now. It was 70 per cent during the IPO in 2008 and had gone up to 74 per cent after the buy-back of shares two-three years later.

Kochouseph Chittilappilly is likely to sell part of his shares in the company in the future also for his social causes, said Mithun. This will see the promoter group holdings coming further down.

Earlier in 2011, after turning 60 years, Kochouseph Chittilappilly had donated one of his kidneys to a truck driver—a total stranger in need. He has also promised to donate one-third of his fortune in his lifetime for various philanthropic activities.

TRAI SECY FAULTS RESIDENTIAL BODIES CHARGING TELECOM FIRMS FOR ACCESS



New Delhi, Feb. 19: Minimum standards need to be developed for provision of telecom services within buildings and residential complexes and the "wrong" mindset that telcos should pay to get access for laying down infrastructure in housing complexes must change, a senior Trai official said.

The growth of telecommunications, the underlying critical infrastructure, is closely linked to growth of every sector and the economy as a whole, Telecom Regulatory Authority of India secretary S.K. Gupta said.

"Different types of builders, their associations and RWAs resident welfare associations have to be taught about the importance of telecom and (need to be) convinced that they have to change their mindset of penalising telecom service providers by asking money from them to provide the services—in fact it is you (building residents) who requires the services, not telecom service providers," Gupta said.

He was speaking at an interactive workshop of industry body Broadband India Forum (BIF).

The pandemic and work-from-home culture has driven the need for seamless connectivity inside residential buildings and multiple data users within a family—from children taking online classes to professionals working remotely from home—have underlined the importance of good coverage in every nook and corner of the house, he noted.

He emphasised that unless the quality of services is good, next generation 5G will not serve its purpose. "...if you talk about the economy, you have to talk about the health of telecommunications. —PTI

TECH TO THE FRONT Firm aims to electrify two-thirds of global car sales by 2030

Honda appoints R&D chief as new CEO

RIVER DAVIS FEB. 19

Honda Motor Co is promoting its current head of research and development (R&D) Toshihiro Mibe to chief executive, the latest in a number of bold moves the automaker is taking to step beyond its more than half-a-century-long reliance on selling gasoline-powered cars.

Mibe, 59, will assume the president role effective April 1, the company said in a statement on Friday. Honda's current CEO Takahiro Hachigo, who helmed the firm for six years, will become a director and then retire from the company at its general meeting in June. Honda's new chief is



Toshihiro Mibe

► In recent months, Honda has taken a number of steps to reallocate resources into next-generation technologies

taking the top job as the Japanese carmaker pushes to stay abreast of the two great shifts hitting the auto industry: automation and electrification. Since joining Honda in 1987, Mibe has occupied various roles, including as the chief of Honda's R&D subsidiary, where he was central to driving the company's

electric vehicle technologies and autonomous driving strategies.

Honda, like most legacy automakers, is struggling to find ways to fund next-generation electric and driverless car technologies while keeping its gas-powered car sales afloat. Hachigo, who took office in 2015, sought to move away from past initiatives

prioritising scale to focus on costs. Under his leadership, Honda trimmed a number of factories in Japan and abroad.

In recent months, Honda has taken a number of steps to reallocate resources into next-generation technologies. In September, it formed an alliance with General Motors Co to cooperate in areas such as research and connected-car services. The next month, Honda announced it will no longer participate in Formula One racing, seeking to reallocate resources to its development of EV and fuel-cell technologies.

Honda, which aims to electrify two-thirds of its global car sales by 2030,

has weathered a tough 2020, a period when vehicle sales were crushed by pandemic-related disruptions. It's targeting an operating profit of 520 billion yen (\$5 billion) for the 12 months through March, down about 18% from the previous year.

The automaker is also grappling with a chip shortage that's forcing automakers worldwide to pare their output just as car demand begins to recover. The semiconductor shortage is estimated to knock 500,000 units off the Japanese carmakers' output largely in the first half. Within Japan, it's estimated Honda will shoulder the bulk of those losses. —Bloomberg

THE ASIAN AGE

20 FEBRUARY 2021

Cong's Punjab lesson: Set store by the local stalwarts

The spectacular sweep by the Congress in the civic polls in all three regions of Punjab earlier this week presents an object lesson to the Narendra Modi government as well as the Congress Party itself. The poll results have pushed the otherwise powerful Akali Dal, which derives its authority from Sikh religious forums, and the BJP into a narrow corner.

The lesson for India's oldest party, which now appears to be in a semi-solent state in many parts of the country — is that the road to revival is not closed. But there is a proviso: in the states the party must be led by local stalwarts who have come up the political ladder in the normal course of elections and manoeuvring, and not by lightweight flunkies accidentally selected by the central leadership and its nominated committees on a whim or to bestow personal favours.

In Punjab, chief minister Captain Amarinder Singh, in spite of his advanced years, proved his mettle. He gave mature political leadership. He could instinctively pick issues to highlight that matter. He also dealt with upstarts favoured by the Centre in a manner that did not raise any dust and he did not throw tantrums, although he is a maharaja. Attempts by his opponents to throw barbs of a personal nature at him cut no ice.

No doubt, the farmers' agitation helped the Congress greatly. Former party chief Rahul Gandhi's initiative in the Lok Sabha in holding two minutes silence — by treading into the Speaker's domain — in memory of the farmers who have died in the agitation could hardly have gone unnoticed in Punjab or anywhere else.

But these meaningful acts of symbolism may not have gone far enough and been translated into votes, were it not for the astute leadership of the state by Captain Amarinder and the tending of the state party organisation by PCC chief Sunil Jakhar in a sober manner. The Congress high command, such as it is, will doubtless realise that the party could have swept the Assembly election in neighbouring Haryana if only it had handed over charge of the party to Bhupinder Hooda early enough.

The Modi government and the ruling BJP cannot but have noticed that the day after the Punjab civic poll results came out, Rakesh Tikait, who has by now emerged as a famous farmers' leader from western Uttar Pradesh, called on the community of farmers to intensify their agitation and not return home until the controversial farm laws are rolled back. It is not unlikely that the farmers will show up in poll-bound West Bengal to queer the pitch for the BJP, which is trying hard to challenge CM Mamata Banerjee.

The Punjab results also point to the fact that the dissatisfaction with the Centre's policies that have fuelled unemployment, shutting down of micro, small and medium industries, and the relentless climb in diesel and petrol prices, are hurting the urban voter badly. The government leadership and the ruling party leadership need to look sharp and make wise choices.

Prince's ransom for cricketers

A couple of IPL teams seem to have gone overboard in splashing crores on cricketers who are looking to rediscover their mojo after very poor outings in the last edition of the league played in the UAE. Considering that 130 countries around the globe are yet to lay their hands on vaccine supply in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, such splurging seems a tad extravagant. But then chasing sporting success is an expensive but far from scientific pursuit. Perhaps, the extravagance has to be seen as part of a larger sport bubble that comes more as an entertainment package and is not to be equated with normal pay for work rewards in common men's lives and livelihoods. The 2020 records of Chris Morris of South Africa, who at ₹16.25 crores has become the cash-rich league's most expensive player at an auction and Glenn Maxwell of Australia who gets close to US \$2 million (the approximate procurement cost of 5.7 lakh vaccines) bear no relation to the prince's ransom being paid as salaries.

The teams seemed so overenthusiastic about foreign T20 all-rounders that they could not show the same largesse to homegrown talent. The riches showered on some youngsters in this annual auction like K. Gowtham, bought by Chennai Super Kings for US \$9.25 crores and M.Shahrukh Khan, picked up by the renamed Punjab Kings for ₹1.2 crores, may have been heartwarming as their potential to shine in the T20 format is being recognised. The champions Mumbai Indians, who were parsimonious compared to the likes of Royal Challengers, Bangalore who broke their bank at the auction on a couple of expensive buys, also chose to take on the cricketer with the famous surname — Arjun Tendulkar — at the modest starting price of ₹20 lakhs. In cricketing terms, the hunt for impact players who can be expected to swing games with bat and/or ball seemed logical enough. The timing of the commitment of millions seems a bit awkward when the world is vaccinating against the existential crisis posed by the virus.

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Farrukh Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings



"There is time always, Bachchoo, To talk of many things As the Walrus did expound On cabbages and kings

And yet this global fear Clips conversation's wings The only news we hear Is of Covid's mutatings!"

— From **O For a Sip of Bepsi Kohla** by Bachchoo

Why it's crucial to stand up for views you may not agree with...

Without freedom of speech and opinion, there is no democracy. The system of counting votes and giving the majority the privilege of governing in fairness to the minority — is only the first requirement. The rule of unoppressive, uncoercive law, freedom of association and assembly, freedom of speech — yes, even on Twitter — are some of the rest.

Twitter has now banned Donald Trump's outpourings, not because they're left-wing or supportive of some mythical religious bias, but because very many of them amount to hate speech and incitement to break the law.

In Britain, there are laws against hate speech. Though difficult to define, the law trusts judges and

juries to identify speech which calls for any sort of attack on the minorities — or even a majority of the population. It's a law that upholds decency, but "hate crime" shouldn't stretch to expressing a questioning or dissenting opinion about, say, a religion. I am free to publicly proclaim that I don't believe in virgin births, or that God engraves, by lightning, laws on stone tablets or indeed dictates books to prophets. I won't have, I hope, crossed the line between a theological or scientific belief and incitement to attack any religious group or the buildings they pray in.

The definition of hate crime in any democracy should not deteriorate or ever be interpreted as "Disagree Crime". Dictatorships and fascist regimes, some, as in Turkey, based on religion and others on a mafiocracy, are universally known for their intolerance of dissent. Turkey locks up its journalists and Russia arrests and imprisons 11,000 of the protesters who took to the streets in favour of the release of a dissident politician. Other nations disgracefully encourage and allow curtailment of the freedom of speech or even fiction, on the grounds of dubious interpretations of religious sanctity.

In recent years, American and British universities have entertained insidious attacks on the principle of freedom of speech. Cambridge University, for instance, backpedalled in recent months on an edict they issued to "respect" all opinions. Several senior and junior members of the university interpreted this injunction as a "shut-up" call to all dissidence. They wanted the diktat to be modified to "tolerate" all opinions, while reserving the right to contradict and oppose them. The dissidents won.

Several prominent writers and academics, among them J.K. Rowling of the Harry Potter books, Germaine Greer, widely recognised as a pioneer of contemporary feminism and, most recently, Prof. Selina Todd of Oxford University, have been variously "no-platformed" by university student organisations because they've argued, in the media or through social media outlets, that transgender women were not really women and shouldn't be afforded the reserved rights and spaces that belonged to the gender. They had rational and scientific arguments on their side and each one, and others on the side of these three, strongly aver that they are not denying social or political rights to

transgender people, but insist on their own freedom, without censure and abuse from trolls, to hold scientific and biological arguments which deny that humans or animals can change gender because they want to.

In a recent case, brought by a young woman who was, when she was underage, subject to what she called pressure and "mind control" at the Tavistock Institute, the court ruled that influencing or indulging minors to change their gender and undergo medicinal, surgical and psychological therapy to do so, was unlawful.

This censorship, the denial of platforms to people whose opinions, politics or stances on any issues which the banning and debarring bodies disagree with, has been confined to supporters of what has come to be known as the "woke" agenda. People with doubts or dissenting opinions on race, gender, sexual orientation — and politicians who have acted in favour of right-wing policies — have been the targets of this denial of appearance on university platforms, sometimes being informed of the banning only hours before they were invited to appear.

The phenomenon has been taken up by right-wing commentators, who argue that this is an anti-demo-

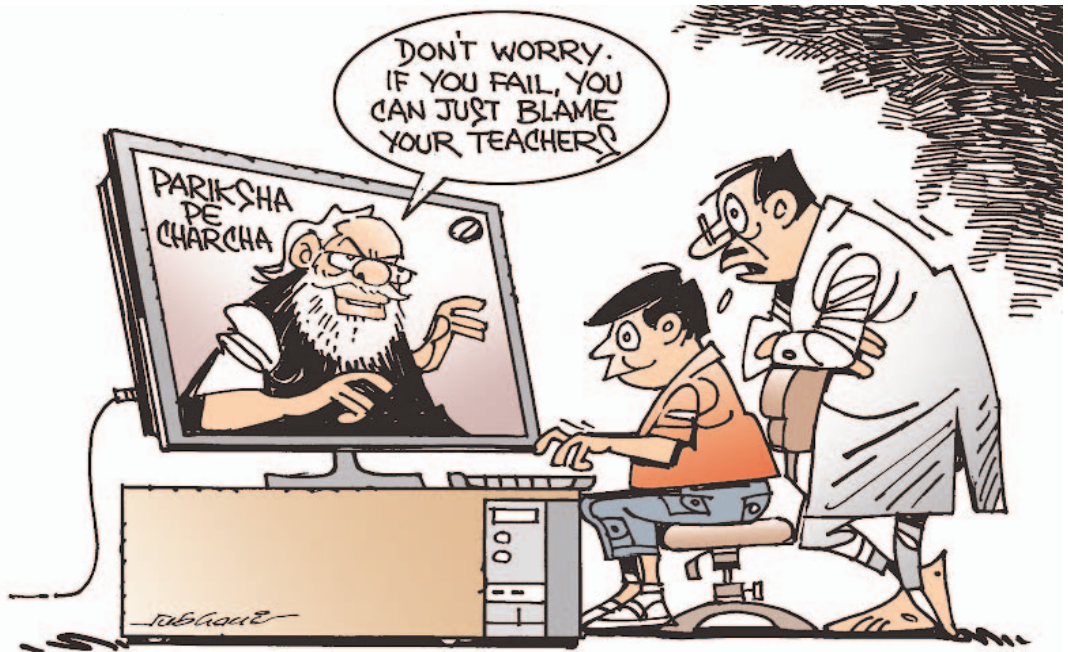
cratic assault on free speech in the very institutions, the universities, where opposing arguments should be debated. Britain's Conservative government, with an ear wide open to these commentators, has now resolved to legislate for "free speech" and appoint a sort of supreme to see that this law is enforced.

Prof. Todd has expressed her support for such a law. She says it's necessary as the atmosphere on campus, perpetrated by self-appointed activists and attitude-enforcers, inhibits the expression of dissenting opinions — about history, science, politics, sociology and even literature.

The National Union of Students' representatives argue that there is no need for such a law and that it has constantly been vigilant about absolute freedom of speech in universities. A good cellar of salt should flavour this assertion.

Time will tell if this law and its enforcement have any effect. Perhaps every country with a claim to being democratic should pass such a law and appoint a manifestly independent "neyta" with powers to dismiss frivolous and outrageous attacks on the freedom of opinion and creativity from politicians and charlatans.

Subhani



Women walk taller... But what if Ramani had lost?



Shobhaa De

The temptation to gloat at this very moment is pretty darn overwhelming. I'm sure millions of women across India (and possibly the world) are viewing journalist Priya Ramani's acquittal by a Delhi court in a criminal defamation case filed by former Union minister/journalist/author M.J. Akbar as a personal victory. It was a goose-bumps-inducing historic few minutes for those present at Delhi's Rouse Avenue courts on Wednesday as Ravindra Dubey, additional chief metropolitan magistrate, pointed out what should have been obvious to everybody all along — that even a person of high social standing can be a sexual harasser and a woman cannot be punished for raising instances of abuse decades later. The irony of that significant observation is not lost on anyone, given that Priya Ramani was the accused in this case, and had to fight valiantly for her truth to be established in court! And yes — as in most such cases, it is men (and more infrequently, women) "of high social standing" who are guilty of misusing this very "social standing", secure and complacent in the belief that nothing and no one can touch them because of it.

Well, a plucky woman, Priya Ramani, and her equally plucky lawyer, Rebecca John, just threw that smug self-assurance into the dustbin. Good on you, ladies! What I appreciated the most was the sobriety and restraint displayed by both women as soon as the verdict was delivered (M.J. Akbar was surrounded by dozens of policemen, while Priya had all the

to bully and browbeat women — no questions asked.

Often it is the unalloyed arrogance of men in power (I refuse to call them "powerful men" — they are anything but!) that makes them believe in their own invincibility. Here's my theory for what it's worth: M.J. Akbar overplayed his card. Plus, he was badly advised by his mighty legal team. He probably thought he could turn the tables on Priya Ramani and crush her with formidable money power and political clout. Who was she, after all? That's the way mediocre minds function. One expected M.J. Akbar to be a shrewder strategist. Like some of his contemporaries, who ducked under the radar, and waited for the #MeToo storm to blow over. Today, hardly anybody remembers who they were — and nobody cares! The momentum is long over. People have moved on. And those very same men are carrying on with their lives like nothing ever happened. A few are still lying low, perhaps hoping their accusers have "forgotten", preferably "forgiven". Dream on! No Sir... Women do not forget. Never! Some are unable to fight back, others too emotionally drained to rage on. But no woman forgets the face of her abuser or his despicable abuse, till her last breath.

The court in this remarkable verdict has emphasised that there is no time bar for speaking out. A woman is entitled to do so decades later, if she so chooses. In no way

Priya and Rebecca must know what this victory and acquittal signifies for women — it is like the biggest validation of all times! It shows one thing unequivocally — women matter. Their voices matter.

does that diminish her truth.

"A woman cannot be punished for raising her voice," the court said. But she is! Often, with extreme punishment — rape and murder. Then comes the question of her "rights" — what rights? Those are enshrined in our Constitution — but does anybody bother with these rights when women across the board face the worst form of torment? Priya Ramani spoke for working women everywhere when she outed M.J. Akbar — her boss in the 1990s. I wrote four impassioned columns at the time, and was asked to "calm down", mostly by men of his generation, some of whom had faced similar charges in the media and had denied them. Most of the Bollywood men accused during the height of the #MeToo movement are back in the studios, chastened for now, but certainly not sensitised. It's just that they don't want to be caught with their pants down — not that they see anything wrong with sexual harassment per se. It's the same power trip as the one M.J. Akbar imagined would insulate him when he tried to put Priya Ramani on the back foot by suing her for defamation. The point is: A man's reputation has to be impeccable to have the guts to sue a woman for tarnishing it. That's really rich, in this case, considering the court accepted advocate Rebecca Jacob's argument that M.J. Akbar's reputation was far from "stellar". Bravo!

"Right of reputation can't be protected at the cost of life and dignity of the woman..." Yessssss! So ... all the "powerful" men cowering at the moment at the thought of the repercussions of this verdict — cower away. It's your turn next! "... But what if Priya Ramani had lost?"

Readers can send feedback to www.shobhaade.blogspot.com

LETTERS

MODI'S FAILURE

The defence of the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, over the fuel price rises was very disappointing and does no credit to him.

To blame the previous regime even after being in power for over six years is a sign of his complete helplessness on the issue. His government was the beneficiary of soft crude oil prices for a very long period. He should have either provided a buffer for future shocks or passed on the benefits to the consumers. This government seems to be clueless on how an economy should be run. With the crude oil rates expected to go higher, it seems like Indian citizens are in for a lot of grief.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

LONG LIVE TEST CRICKET

IT MUST APPEAR weird to the hoi polloi of cricket that a little-known Shahrukh Khan playing for Chennai should be offered ₹5.25 crores. His bid started at ₹50 lakhs, and that for the much-crowned Cheteshwar Pujara at a meagre ₹50 lakhs in the IPL auctions. A Test match is like a row of steady lamps on house fronts in Diwali, subdued and enduring while T20 is the fireworks display in the evening that counts for acclaim from spectators. But the sparklers, mini-bombs and rockets need to be lit by a steady lamp. The IPL is no more than a short and brilliant display on a Diwali evening. The two genres complement each other.

R. Narayanan
Navi Mumbai

RIP BIZANJO

FEBRUARY IS THE month during which the much-loved Baloch singer, Ustad Noor Khan Bizanjo, was born. He had a masters in history and started his career in 1988 under the supervision of Ustad Abdul Sattar. He collaborated with Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and became a household name in Pakistan, Oman, Bahrain, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. However, he died at the young age of 33. Rest in peace, legend.

Waseem Ahmed
New Delhi

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

SHORT TAKES

31 DEAD IN DR CONGO PLAGUE OUTBREAK

Bunia, Dr Congo, Feb. 19: Thirty-one people have died in an outbreak of plague that erupted in northeastern DR Congo three months ago, health officials and experts said on Friday.

"We have more than 520 cases... of which more than 31 have been fatal," Patrick Karamura, health minister in Ituri province, where plague is endemic, said.

The cases are the bubonic form of the disease, except for five cases of pneumonic plague and two of septicemic plague, he said.

Anne Laudisoit, an epidemiologist with a New York-based NGO called Ecohealth Alliance, said the cases had surfaced between November 15 and December 13 in Biringi, in Ituri's Aru Territory.

The average age of patients was 13, but this varied between three months and 73 years, she said.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) issued an alert in July of a plague outbreak in Rethy, also in Ituri.

Plague has persisted in the province since it was first confirmed there in 1926.

A long-feared disease with biblical connotations, but treatable today with antibiotics, the plague is caused by a bacterium called *Yersinia pestis*.

U.S. SCIENTIST ACCUSED OF CAVIAR RACKET

Washington, Feb. 19: The fish eggs were supposed to be for research, not for eating—but a US biologist reportedly known as Wisconsin's "sturgeon general" was hatching another plan.

An alleged caviar racket, in which sturgeon eggs meant for a research study were being sold and processed as food, has landed Wisconsin's top sturgeon biologist, Ryan Koenigs, in hot water.

The scientist allegedly accepted at least \$20,000 in kickbacks in the form of jars of caviar from a processor in exchange for eggs intended for research, according to the *New York Times*, citing a Winnebago County filing.

Catching sturgeon, a freshwater fish whose eggs are turned into caviar, is allowed during the month of February on frozen Lake Winnebago, in the northern state of Wisconsin.

According to the Times, eggs must be either returned to the person who speared the sturgeon or thrown away under state law, while local news station *Fox 11* reported that it is illegal to barter processing for a portion of the product.

Wardens employed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources had been instructed to collect sturgeon eggs that fishers did not want to keep, for use in a research programme, *Fox 11* reported.

OZ, FB IN TALKS OVER SWEEPING BAN OVER NEWS

Sydney, Feb. 19: Australia and Facebook held high-stakes talks on Friday after the social media giant sparked global outrage by blacking out news for its Australian users, as Canberra insisted it wouldn't back down on a new law that would force the tech firm to pay for journalistic content.

From Thursday, Facebook has blanked out the pages of media outlets for Australian users and blocked them from sharing any news content, rather than submit to the proposed legislation.

Treasurer Josh Frydenberg said he had spoken with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg on Friday to find a way out of the showdown, and that negotiations would continue over the weekend.

"We talked through their remaining issues and agreed our respective teams would work through them immediately," Frydenberg said.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison also urged Facebook to "move quickly past" what he called threatening behaviour and "come back to the table".

He said his government's world-first legislation to force Facebook and Google to pay Australian media for news content published on their platforms was garnering interest from leaders around the world.

"People are looking at what Australia is doing," he said, noting that he had already discussed the situation with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Canada's Justin Trudeau.

Nasa's rover touches down on Mars

After 7 months in space, overcomes tense landing phase called 'seven minutes of terror'

Washington, Feb. 19: After seven months in space, Nasa's Perseverance rover overcame a tense landing phase with a series of perfectly executed maneuvers to gently float down to the Martian soil on Thursday and embark on its mission to search for signs of past life.

"Touchdown confirmed," said operations lead Swati Mohan at 3:55 pm Eastern Time (2055 GMT), as mission control at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena erupted in cheers.

The autonomously guided procedure was in fact completed more than 11 minutes earlier, the length of time it took for radio signals to return to Earth.

Shortly after landing, the rover sent back its first black-and-white images, revealing a rocky field at the landing site in the Jezero Crater, just north of the Red Planet's equator.

More images, video of the descent and perhaps the first sounds of Mars ever recorded by microphones are expected in the coming hours as the rover relays data to overhead satellites.

US President Joe Biden hailed the "historic" event.

"Today proved once again that with the power of science and American ingenuity, nothing is beyond the realm of possibility," he tweeted.

Perseverance's prime mission will last just over two years but it is likely to remain operational well beyond that, with its predecessor Curiosity still functioning eight years after landing on the planet, said Nasa acting administrator Steve Jurczyk.

"It'll be on Mars for its entire life," he said, adding "these robots tend to be really reliable." Over the coming years,

● **AS THE** world witnessed the historic landing of Nasa's Perseverance rover on the Martian surface, it was Indian-American scientist, Swati Mohan, who led the guidance, navigation, and control operations of the Mars 2020 mission.

● **MOHAN ALSO** confirmed that the rover had survived a particularly tricky plunge through the Martian atmosphere.

Perseverance will attempt to collect 30 rock and soil samples in sealed tubes, to be eventually sent back to Earth sometime in the 2030s for lab analysis.

About the size of an SUV, the craft weighs a ton, is equipped with a seven foot- (two meter-) long robotic arm, has 19 cameras, two microphones and a suite of cutting-edge instruments to assist in its scientific goals.

Before it could set out on its lofty quest, it first had to overcome the dreaded "seven minutes of terror"—the risky entry, descent and landing phase that has scuppered nearly half of all missions to Mars.

The spacecraft carrying Perseverance careened into the Martian atmosphere at 12,500 miles (20,000 kilometers) per hour, protected by its heat shield, then deployed a supersonic parachute the size of a Little League field, before firing up an eight-engined jetpack.

Finally, it lowered the rover carefully to the ground on a set of cables.

Allen Chen, lead engineer for the landing stage, said a new guidance system called "Terrain Relative Navigation," which uses a special camera to identify surface features



This Nasa photo shows the first images from Nasa's Perseverance rover as it landed on the surface of Mars. Nasa said that the Perseverance rover has touched down on the surface of Mars after successfully overcoming a risky landing phase known as the 'seven minutes of terror.'

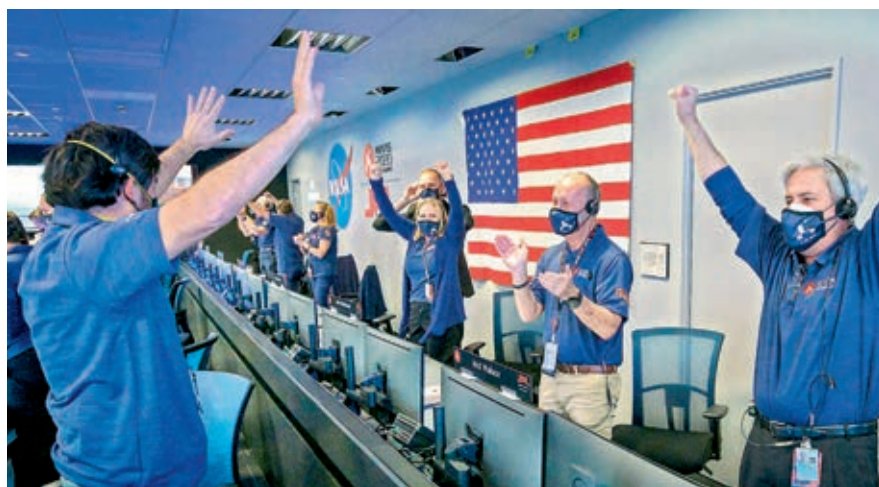
— AFP

and compare them to an onboard map, was key to landing in a rugged region of scientific interest.

"We are in a nice flat spot, the vehicle is only tilted by about 1.2 degrees," he said. "We did successfully find that parking lot, and have a safe rover on the ground." Scientists believe that around 3.5 billion years ago the crater was home to a river that flowed into a deep lake, depositing sediment in a fan-shaped delta.

Perseverance ended up landing about two kilometers (a mile) southeast of the delta, NASA scientist Ken Farley said, in a geologically significant area.

— AFP



This Nasa photo shows members of Nasa's Perseverance rover team as they react in mission control after receiving confirmation the spacecraft successfully touched down on Mars at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California.

— AFP

Biden admin introduces Citizenship Act

Bill to create an earned roadmap to 11 million undocumented immigrants

Washington, Feb. 19: A bicameral US Citizenship Act of 2021 proposing a pathway to citizenship to 11 million undocumented workers, elimination of per country quota for employment-based green cards and work authorisation for dependents of H-1B foreign workers, was introduced in the Congress.

The bill, if passed by both the chambers of the Congress — House of Representatives and the Senate — and signed into law by President Joe Biden would bring citizenship to millions of foreign nationals, including undocumented and those who came to the country legally.

The legislation would also benefit hundreds and thousands of Indian IT professionals and their families. Authors of the bill — Senator Bob Menendez and Congresswoman Linda Sánchez — told reporters that the US Citizenship Act of 2021 establishes a moral and economic imperative and a vision of immigration reform that is expansive and inclusive.

It grows the economy by making changes to the employment-based immigration system, eliminating per-country caps, making it easier for STEM advanced degree holders

US ends Trump policy, lets in refugees stuck in Mexico

San Diego, Feb. 19: After waiting months and some-

times years in Mexico, people seeking asylum in the United States are being allowed into the country starting from Friday as they wait for courts to decide on their cases, unwinding one of the Trump administration's signature immigration policies that President Joe Biden vowed to end.

The number of asylum-seekers coming in initially will be very limited, beginning on Friday at a border crossing in San Diego and expanding to Brownsville, Texas, on Monday and El Paso,

Texas, next Friday.

US officials are warning people not to come to the US-Mexico border, saying an estimated 25,000 people with active cases in the "Remain in Mexico" program and several hundred who are appealing decisions should register on a website that the UN High Commissioner for Refugees is launching early next week.

The International Organisation for Migration, the UN migration agency, plans to test asylum-seekers for Covid-19 and will quarantine anyone who tests positive for 10 days before they enter the

United States.

Friday marks a key milestone in unraveling one of former President Donald Trump's cornerstone policies to deter people from seeking protection from persecution and returns the US asylum system to the way it worked for decades.

But there are unanswered questions, including how Central Americans who returned home will get back to the US-Mexico border. It's also unclear how long it will take to work through more than 25,000 active Remain in Mexico cases, with the oldest going first.

— AP

from US universities to stay, improving access to green cards for workers in lower-wage industries, giving dependents of H-1B holders work authorisation, and preventing children of H-1B holders from aging out of the system.

"I am the daughter of immigrant parents from Mexico. I have dedicated my career to building an immigration system that

lets people live without fear, and a system that gives immigrants — like my parents — who sought a better life and contribute to our nation a fair opportunity to thrive," Sanchez said.

"Immigrants contribute greatly to our country and society. They own businesses, pay taxes and teach our children. They are our coworkers, neigh-

bors and friends," said Menendez. "We have a historic opportunity to finally enact bold immigration reform that leaves no one behind, addresses root causes of migration, and safeguards our country's national security. We have a moral and economic imperative to get this done once and for all," he said.

The ruling Democrats have a majority in both

the House and Senate. However, in the upper chamber, they need support of 10 Republicans to get the legislation through the Congress before it can be signed into law.

The Democratic leadership and the White House hope that they will get the necessary support in the interest of millions of non-citizens living in the country. Supported by the White House, the bill creates an earned roadmap to citizenship for all 11 million undocumented immigrants, with an expedited three-year path to citizenship, and giving all other undocumented immigrants who pass background checks and pay taxes with an eight-year path to citizenship without fear of deportation.

It reforms family-based immigration system to keep families together by recapturing visas from previous years to clear backlogs, including spouses and children of green card holders as immediate family members. It also eliminates discrimination facing LGBTQ+ families, provides protection for orphans, widows and children, allows immigrants with approved family-sponsorship petitions to join family in the US on a temporary basis while they wait for green cards to become available.

— PTI

ROYALTY | STRIPPED

Harry still 6th in line to the throne, with no change in the line of succession

Prince Harry to lose all honorary titles

London, Feb. 19: Britain's Prince Harry will relinquish his honorary military appointments and patronages after confirming to Queen Elizabeth II that he and his wife Meghan Markle will not return as working royals, Buckingham Palace announced on Friday.

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex, as they are officially known, rocked the British monarchy when they quit frontline royal duties a year ago and relocated to the United States, where they have embarked on several commercial ventures.

Under the terms of their

departure, thrashed out at an emergency summit with the queen in early 2020, Harry agreed the couple would stop using the "Royal Highness" title and no longer carry out duties on behalf of the monarch, but vowed to review the moves a year on.

"The Duke and Duchess of Sussex have confirmed to Her Majesty The Queen that they will not be returning as working members of The Royal Family," Buckingham Palace said.

"The Queen has written confirming that in stepping away from the work



Britain's Prince Harry and Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex attend the 91st Field of Remembrance at Westminster Abbey in London.

— AP FILE PHOTO

of The Royal Family it is not possible to continue with the responsibilities and duties that come with a life of public service.

"The honorary military appointments and Royal patronages held by The Duke and Duchess will therefore be returned to

● **THE QUEEN** has written confirming that in stepping away from the work of The Royal Family it is not possible to continue with the responsibilities and duties that come with a life of public service.

Her Majesty, before being redistributed among working members of The Royal Family." The palace statement added: "While all are saddened by their decision,

The Duke and Duchess remain much loved members of the family." However, it appears they

BREACH FUELS CALLS FOR U.S. ACTION ON CYBERSECURITY

Washington, Feb. 19: Jolted by a sweeping hack that may have revealed government and corporate secrets to Russia, US officials are scrambling to reinforce the nation's cyber defenses and recognising that an agency created two years ago to protect America's networks and infrastructure lacks the money, tools and authority to counter such sophisticated threats.

The breach, which hijacked widely used software from Texas-based SolarWinds Inc., has exposed the profound vulnerability of civilian government networks and the limitations of efforts to detect threats.

It's also likely to unleash a wave of spending on technology modernisation and cybersecurity. "It's really highlighted the investments we need to make in cybersecurity to have the visibility to block these attacks in the future," Anne Neuberger, the newly appointed deputy national security adviser for cyber and emergency technology said Wednesday at a White House briefing.

The reaction reflects the severity of a hack that was disclosed only in December. The hackers, as yet unidentified but described by officials as "likely Russian," had unfettered access to the data and email of at least nine US government agencies and about 100 private companies, with the full extent of the compromise still unknown.

— AP

MYANMAR'S ANTI-COUP MOVEMENT SEES FIRST DEATH

Yangon, Feb. 19: A young protester died on Friday, more than a week after being shot in anti-coup demonstrations in Myanmar, offering a fresh source of anger inside the country as international pressure grows on the generals who seized power.

Much of the country has been in open revolt since troops deposed civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi on February 1, with disparate strands of Myanmar society uniting to protest against a return to military rule.

Security forces have steadily stepped up the show — and use — of force, by deploying troops against peaceful protesters, and firing tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets.

A rally on February 9 in Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw turned violent when police fired rubber bullets at demonstrators, though doctors at the hospital later said that at least two people had been critically wounded by live rounds.

Mya Thwate Thwate Khaing, who turned 20 last Thursday as she lay unconscious in a hospital bed, was shot in the head. A doctor confirmed her death Friday, adding that her body will be examined as it is a "case of injustice".

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

INDONESIAN
VOLCANO SPEWS
RED HOT LAVA

Jakarta, Feb. 19: Indonesia's Mount Merapi, one of the world's most active volcanoes, erupted on Friday, belching out fiery red lava.

The volcano, close to Indonesia's cultural capital Yogyakarta on Java island, had already spewed lava almost two dozen times over the two last days and caused hundreds of minor volcanic quakes, according to a report by Indonesia's geological agency.

"This morning, lava avalanches were observed seven times," the agency said, with the lava travelling up to 700 metres to the southwest.

However, an official warning over the status of the volcano was unchanged at its second highest level, where it has remained since November last year.

Nearby residents were told to avoid the area within a five-kilometre radius of the crater and were warned about the lava as well as airborne volcanic material.

Last month, the volcano spewed huge clouds of smoke and ash that billowed down its sides.

Mount Merapi's last major eruption in 2010 killed more than 300 people and forced the evacuation of around 280,000 residents from surrounding areas.

That was its most powerful eruption since 1930, when around 1,300 people were killed, while another explosion in 1994 took about 60 lives.

MOSCOW AIMS
TO GO GREEN
BY 2030

Moscow, Feb. 19: Moscow plans to nearly quadruple the number of electric buses it operates in coming years and replace all petrol or diesel-powered public transport vehicles with greener alternatives by 2030, a senior city transport official has said.

Mosgortrans, which runs Moscow's vast bus and tram network, said its fleet of around 600 electric buses would be expanded by 400 vehicles by the year-end, by another 420 the following year, and then by 855, bringing the fleet to more than 2,000 e-buses.

"Every year the plan will be to replace all wheeled public transport vehicles with electric buses," said Artyom Burlakov, deputy head of the innovative projects department at Mosgortrans.

Environmental activists have welcomed the initiative.

"They are also buying new, more power-efficient trams, which is a good thing," said Mikhail Babenko, head of the green economy programme at World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Russia.

Babenko said there was still a long way to go, however, when it came to Muscovites changing their own behaviour and turning their backs on cars in favour of greener alternatives. — *Reuters*

MESSY
BUSINESS OF
SAND MINING

United Nations, Feb. 19: From Shanghai to Seattle, the world's cities are built on massive amounts of sand.

It's in the cement and concrete that make up the bulk of buildings. The glass in the windows of those buildings is made with sand, too, as is the tarmac on the roads around them.

Sand is the planet's most mined material, with some 50 billion tons extracted from lakes, riverbeds, coastlines and deltas each year, according to the United Nations Environment Programme.

Demand for sand is only expected to grow, as the global population continues to climb, cities expand and countries further develop. But in much of the world, sand mining faces little to no government scrutiny.

This means that it is being extracted far quicker than it is naturally replaced, causing environmental damage and, in some cases, jeopardising livelihoods.

Damage from sand extraction can be seen clearly in satellite images, with coastlines eroded, ecosystems destroyed, and even small islands in Southeast Asia entirely wiped off the map.

Rivers have faced major environmental disruption, including the erosion of riverbanks to the point where they collapse, and the destruction of breeding habitats for riverine animals including birds and crocodiles. — *Reuters*

US back in Paris
climate accord

Washington, Feb. 19: The United States is back in the Paris climate accord, just 107 days after it left. While Friday's return is heavily symbolic, world leaders say they expect America to prove its seriousness after four years of being pretty much absent.

They are especially anticipating an announcement from the US in coming months on its goal of cutting emissions of heat-trapping gases by 2030. The US return to the Paris agreement became official Friday, almost a month after President Joe Biden told the United Nations that America wants back in.

"A cry for survival comes from the planet itself," Biden said in his inaugural address. "A cry that can't be any more desperate or any more clear now." Biden signed an executive order on his first day in office reversing the pullout ordered by his predecessor, President Donald Trump. The Trump administration had announced its withdrawal from the Paris accord in 2019 but it didn't become effective until Nov. 4, 2020, the day after the election, because of provisions in the agreement.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said Thursday that the official American re-entry "is itself very important," as is Biden's announcement that the US will return to providing climate aid to

● **UNITED NATIONS** Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said Thursday that the official American re-entry "is itself very important," as is Biden's announcement that the US will return to providing climate aid to poorer nations, as promised in 2009.

poorer nations, as promised in 2009. "It's the political message that's being sent," said Christiana Figueres, the former United Nations climate chief.

She was one of the leading forces in hammering out the 2015 mostly voluntary agreement where nations set their own goals to reduce greenhouse gases.

One fear was that other nations would follow America in abandoning the climate fight, but none did, Figueres said. She said the real issue was four years of climate inaction by the Trump administration. American cities, states and businesses still worked to reduce heat-trapping carbon dioxide, but without the federal government.

"From a political symbolism perspective, whether it's 100 days or four years, it's basically the same thing," Figueres said. "It's not about how many days. It's the political symbolism that the largest economy refuses to see the opportunity of addressing climate change." — *AP*

Biden vows action
on climate, Covid

London, Feb. 19: G7 powers opened a summit on Friday facing demands to broaden their Coronavirus vaccine roll-outs to the world's poor, as US President Joe Biden and the rest of the elite club looked to move on from the psychodramas of the Trump era.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, this year's chair of the G7, vowed to free up any surplus UK vaccines for poorer countries at a future date, and underlined the need for collective action to recover from the pandemic.

"We've got to make sure the whole world is vaccinated because this is a global pandemic and it's no use one country being far ahead of another, we've got to move together," he said in opening the virtual summit, the G7's first of the year.

"One of the things that I know that colleagues will be wanting to do is to ensure that we distribute vaccines at cost around the world — make sure everybody gets the vaccines that they need so that the whole world can come through this pandemic together."

White House officials said Biden would pledge \$4 billion (4.6 billion euros) in US aid to the UN's Covax programme to buy vaccines for global distribution. The European Union said it was doubling its own Covax funding to one billion euros.

But French President Emmanuel Macron demanded richer nations go further by transferring 3-5 percent of their existing stock to Africa.

"It's an unprecedented

● **WHITE HOUSE** officials said Biden would pledge \$4 billion (4.6 billion euros) in US aid to the UN's Covax programme to buy vaccines for global distribution. The European Union said it was doubling its own Covax funding to one billion euros.

acceleration of global inequality and it's politically unsustainable too because it's paving the way for a war of influence over vaccines," he told the *Financial Times*, as Russia and China step up free or low-cost distribution of their own jabs.

Following the summit, Biden, Johnson and EU leaders in the G7 will join another gathering online, the annual Munich Security Conference, to discuss "renewing transatlantic cooperation".

Biden will become the first US president to address the Munich meeting, underlining a decisive shift after cooperation was all but broken under his go-it-alone predecessor Donald Trump.

Since taking office last month, the Democrat has re-committed the United States to action on global warming and to the World Health Organization (WHO). Friday marked its formal re-entry to the Paris climate accord.

Biden's participation in both the G7 and Munich meetings heralds "a broad-ranging, confident, clarion call to have the transatlantic alliance and partnership stand up together", a senior Biden administration official said. — *AFP*

GREEN | STEP Social media giant accused of being lax on moderation of problematic content

FB to expand climate hub against myths

Washington, Feb. 19: Facebook said that it would expand its climate information hub and direct its users to experts to debunk myths and hoaxes in a ramped-up effort to fight misinformation.

The social media giant said it has added a section to its climate hub that features "facts that debunk common climate myths." Users might find, for example, information about the relationship between global warming and the loss of polar bears or an explainer on the

cost of renewable energies.

"Along with expanding the center, we're improving it. We added a section that features facts that debunk common climate myths," Facebook said.

That includes fighting against climate change skepticism, which has accelerated thanks in part to its spread by prominent people.

They include former president Donald Trump, who in January 2019 posted on Twitter about record-low temperatures in the American Midwest.

Deadly storm blankets US in
snow, disrupts vaccine drive

Snow fell steadily across New York City, forcing cancellation of 200 flights

New York, Feb. 19: A deadly winter weather system that brought record-busting cold to the southern and central United States, knocking out power for millions in oil-rich Texas, blanketed the East Coast in snow on Thursday, disrupting coronavirus vaccinations.

The historic frigid blast has over the past week seen Arctic cold envelope much of the US sun belt unfamiliar with such extremes, leaving dozens of dead in its wake and several million Texans told to boil water before consuming it.

On Thursday, a major winter storm impacted an area stretching from Virginia up to the Northeast, bringing icy buildups and treacherous travel conditions, according to the National Weather Service.

Snow fell steadily across New York City throughout the day, forcing the cancellation of about 200 flights and delaying the opening of two Covid-19 vaccination sites after the storm disrupted dosage delivery.

By 4:50 pm (2150 GMT), meteorologists had recorded more than four inches (ten centimeters) of snow in lower Manhattan.

The Big Apple has already been blanketed by the white stuff twice this winter during two separate storms. "The occasional snowstorm is always good but as we're getting closer to March it gets a little tiring. I'm ready for it to start being warm again," said 18-year-old student Kara Dickson.

A weather warning was in effect in New Jersey, where Governor Phil Murphy announced the temporary closure of several vaccination sites.

Across Texas, which has been hardest hit by the cold snap, utility companies were gradually restoring power though



Palestinians dressed as characters from the tv show '*Casa de Papel*', play in the snow in the Israeli-occupied West-Bank town of Hebron. — *AFP*

more than 2,500,000 homes and businesses remained without electricity late Thursday, according to PowerOutage.us.

Even as the lights came back on, some Texas residents were dealing with the misery of water pipes that had burst in the frigid temperatures.

"It was like a waterfall was coming down and it was starting to come out of the bathroom and to the other rooms," said Birgit Kamps of Houston.

"We grabbed buckets and towels, tried to mop it up before it started flooding the house," she said, adding that a neighbor helped switch off the water at the break, leaving her without running water. — *AFP*

Dozens of stranded whales die
on Indonesian beach, 3 rescued

Jakarta, Feb. 19: Forty-six small whales stranded on a beach in Indonesia have died, after rescue efforts succeeded in saving three others, local officials said on Friday.

Starting from Thursday, at least 49 short-finned pilot whales arrived at a beach on Madura Island in northern Java, authorities said in a statement.

Large crowds gathered as a rescue operation was launched, with volunteers using tarpaulins or just their bare hands to try to push the pod back out to sea.

Curious onlookers took pictures and touched the whales, while others tried to splash water on them.

In the end, only three of the animals survived.

"The live whales had to be released together as they live in a group," said East Java governor Khofifah Indar Parawansa in the statement.

Parawansa said that officials had taken samples of the carcasses for further investigation into the cause of death.

He added that the corpses, which measure from three to five metres



People try to save short-finned pilot whales beached in Bangkalan, Madura island on Friday, as some 49 pilot whales have died after a mass stranding on the coast of Indonesia's main island of Java that sparked a major rescue operation. — *AFP*

each, would be buried on the beach at low tide.

Offshore cross-currents in the area pose a danger to whales, as they can get caught between reefs close to land.

Pollution, abandoned nets and floating plastic waste are also dangers for marine animals.

In July last year, 10 pilot whales were found dead

near Kupang, a town in East Nusa Tenggara province.

In 2018, a sperm whale was found dead in Indonesia with more than 100 plastic cups and 25 plastic bags in its stomach, raising concerns about the Southeast Asian archipelago's massive marine rubbish problem. — *AFP*

"It's a very sad event," Halfon said of the whale's death and appearance in the Nitzanim Reserve. Aviad Scheinin of the Morris Kahn Marine Research Station said a team will take samples from the animal to try to determine a cause of death. A similar whale washed up dead in the area in 2016. — *AP*

The social giant insisted it would not position itself as an arbiter of truth -- before gradually changing its tune in the face of growing outcry from watchdogs and elected officials. — *AFP*

Facebook has been accused for years of being too lax on the moderation of problematic content, including false rumors and conspiracy theories, while on the other hand quickly stamping out content frowned upon by advertisers, such as pornography.

The social giant insisted it would not position itself as an arbiter of truth -- before gradually changing its tune in the face of growing outcry from watchdogs and elected officials. — *AFP*

least 56 people, with a growing toll of those who perished trying to keep warm.

In the Houston area, a family died from carbon monoxide as their car idled in their garage. A woman and her three grandchildren were killed in a fire that authorities said might have been caused by a fireplace they were using. Utilities from Minnesota to Texas used rolling blackouts to ease strained power grids. — *AP*

limited rolling blackouts were still possible. The storms also left more than 4,500,000 from West Virginia to Louisiana without power and 1,00,000 in Oregon were still enduring a weeklong outage following a massive ice and snow storm.

The snow and ice moved into the Appalachians, northern Maryland and southern Pennsylvania, and later the Northeast as the extreme weather was blamed for the deaths of at

BABY WHALE
FOUND DEAD IN
ISRAEL'S TEL AVIV

Te Aviv, Feb. 19: Israeli officials have said that a dead whale has washed up on a beach south of Tel Aviv.

David Halfon of the Nature and Parks Authority said on Thursday that the animal was a fin whale calf about half the size of an adult, which can grow to more than 20 meters (about 66 feet) long. He and other officials said it wasn't clear what caused the death, but they said the water nearby is polluted, including with tar.

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Brussels has set legal limits on particulate matter since 2005, resulting in a series of legal actions against countries flouting the rules.

The commission on Thursday took Slovakia to court for breaching EU particulate matter limits in every year from 2005-2019, except for 2016, in Banskobystricky kraj, a mountainous region in central Slovakia. The eastern city of Kosice breached the limits each year from 2005-2019, except for 2015 and 2016, the commission said.

Slovakia's efforts to fix the problem have failed to reduce pollution in line with legal limits or minimise the length of breaches, it said.

Slovakian Environment Minister Jan Budaj said the national and local governments would mobilise support to address air pollution.

"We need a new political and social acceptance to clean the air of Slovakia and I am convinced that we will achieve that," he said. f found guilty, Slovakia would join a list of nine EU states that the bloc's top court has found guilty of illegal air pollution, including Romania, Italy and Sweden. — *Reuters*

EU SUES MORE
COUNTRIES OVER
AIR POLLUTION,
NATURE, WATER

Brussels, Feb. 19: The European Commission said on Thursday it was suing Slovakia for years-long breaches of legal limits on air pollution and started legal action against Germany and Slovenia for falling short on nature conservation and water treatment.

Air pollution in Europe has eased in the last decade, but remains the continent's biggest environmental health risk.

Fine particulate pollution caused 379,000 premature deaths in the EU in 2018, according to the European Environment Agency.

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SHORT TAKES

Pugilists Chanu, Vinka make semis

New Delhi: Asian youth gold medalists Babyrojisana Chanu (51kg) and Vinka (60kg) advanced to the semifinals of the 30th Adriatic Pearl tournament in Budva, Montenegro, assuring themselves of at least a bronze medal each with dominating first-round wins. Manipur's Chanu, who trains at MC Mary Kom's academy, did not put a foot wrong and dominated her opponent Georgieva Blagovesta of Bulgaria from the word go and as a result, the referee had to stop the contest in the first round itself. She will face Uzbekistan's Feruza Kazakova in the semifinals. Vinka, who was up against Uzbekistan's Sevara Ashurova in a quarterfinal bout, produced a flawless display of her attacking prowess. She will face Suvi Tujula in the semifinals. — *PTI*

BWF extends Oly qualifying time

New Delhi: The Tokyo Olympics badminton qualification period was on Friday extended by nearly two months to June 15 after the postponement of three important tournaments due to Covid-19 related restrictions. The qualification period was earlier to end on April 25. "The Olympic Qualifying period for the Race to Tokyo will now close on 15 June 2021, with the last tournament counting for qualification being the Singapore Open 2021," the BWF said in a statement. "BWF is working with the IOC to update the Tokyo 2020 qualification system whereby the final updated regulation will be shared once ready following formal approval by IOC," it added. — *PTI*

Star high jumper Vlasic retires

Zagreb: Croatia's two-time world champion and double Olympic medalist Blanka Vlasic announced on Friday she was retiring after struggling with injuries for years. Vlasic, 37, said in an open letter that since winning a bronze medal at the 2016 Rio Olympics, "I have been trying to cure my injury, four years full of hope that I will once again stand in front of the bar and challenge myself. The following years brought countless rehabilitation treatments, hope and disappointment," she added. Vlasic has long suffered from injuries to her Achilles tendon and heel and had to undergo frequent operations. She said she let the decision to end her career "come naturally". — *AFP*

Harden digs deep to lay Lakers low

Los Angeles: James Harden scored 23 points as the Brooklyn Nets blew away a depleted Los Angeles Lakers in a one-sided showdown between the Eastern and Western Conference heavyweights on Thursday. With Kevin Durant sidelined with a hamstring strain, Harden shouldered the offensive burden as the Nets extended their winning streak to five games with a 109-98 victory at the Staples Center. Harden added 11 assists and five rebounds while power forward Joe Harris added 21 points after making six of seven three-point attempts. — *AFP*

Live on TV

TENNIS

Australian Open: Women's singles final from 1.30 pm, followed by mixed doubles final on Sony Six, Sony Ten 2, HD

CRICKET

PSL: Karachi Kings vs Quetta Gladiators from 7.30 pm on Sony Six, HD

South Africa T20 League: Lions vs Warriors from 1.30 pm; Knights vs Dolphins from 5.55 pm on Star Sports Select 2, HD

FOOTBALL

English Premier League: Southampton vs Chelsea from 6 pm; Burnley vs West Brom from 8.30 pm; Liverpool vs Everton from 11 pm; Fulham vs Sheffield United from 1.30 am (Sunday) on Star Sports Select 1, HD

Indian Super League: Jamshedpur vs Mumbai City from 7.20 pm on Star Sports 2, 3

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Money, Money, Money

Jamieson didn't know how much ₹15 crore was

Christchurch, Feb. 19: Waking up at around midnight in New Zealand, Kyle Jamieson wondered how much ₹15 crore would be in his country's currency, after having watched an intense three-way bid for him in the IPL auction. The 6'8" pacer eventually ended up with Royal Challengers Bangalore for \$2 million approximately, making him the highest paid New Zealander and fourth highest in the IPL's 14-year history.

"I woke up around midnight and decided to check the phone. Rather than trying to avoid the situation, (I thought) I'll sit back and enjoy it. It was certainly a weird hour and a half waiting for my name to be called up," Jamieson was quoted as saying by *stuff.co.nz*.

"I had a message from Shane Bond (former New Zealand pacer and Mumbai Indians bowling coach) as it was going and he said, 'How good is this'." "I didn't actually know what the amount of money, how that translated to New Zealand dollars. It was quite cool to share that moment with him and ride that two or three minutes with him," he added.

Also showing interest in him were Delhi Capitals and the Punjab Kings in the auction on Thursday.

Former Black Caps coach Mike Hesson, RCB's director of cricket operations, led the charge to win the three-way bidding for Jamieson, who made his Test debut against India at home last year.

His retainer fee for the Black Caps, according to the report, is between \$100,000 to \$150,000, which makes RCB's winning bid amount 20 times more.

It completed a rapid rise for Jamieson, who is known for extracting awkward bounce. The right-arm quick, playing in the 2019 Super Smash, picked up 6 for 7 in four overs, a New Zealand T20 record.

He has so far played in six Tests, two ODIs and four T20Is. He took two five-wicket hauls in his first four Tests and has also shown a lot of competence with the bat as well.

Asked what would he buy if his New Zealand teammates asked for a treat, Jamieson said, "Probably a few coffees I would have thought."

"I don't know. It's only been a few hours. My bank account hasn't changed overnight, but there'll be a bit of stick given and a few coffees and a few beers I'm sure," the New Zealand speedster further added.

Jamieson will join a star-studded RCB team who scooped ₹14.5 crore in the auction. — *PTI*



New Zealand bowler Kyle Jamieson in this file photo.

₹9.25 crore IPL contract is nerve-wracking: Gowtham

Ahmedabad, Feb. 19: A net bowler with the Indian team right now, uncapped Karnataka all-rounder Krishnappa Gowtham is still trying to get a grip on his emotions after fetching a mind-boggling ₹9.25 crore deal with Chennai Super Kings which left his parents and wife overwhelmed by tears of joy.

After a bidding war at the IPL auction in Chennai on Thursday, Gowtham was bought by CSK, his price surpassing that of Krunal Pandya's then record of ₹8.8 crore by the Mumbai Indians in 2018 for an uncapped player.

"It was nerve-wracking, I was very anxious, watching on TV," Gowtham, who is currently with the Indian Test team here as a net bowler for the series against England, told *ESPNewsInfo*.

"We'd just landed in Ahmedabad and I'd just switched on TV and my name came up. Emotions were changing every minute. Then, Rohit Sharma and Hardik Pandya knocked on my door and gave me a big hug and they asked for a big treat," he added.

His base price was ₹20 lakh, and he was quickly the focus of a fierce bidding war between the Kolkata Knight Riders and the Sunrisers Hyderabad, before CSK swooped in with a late bid. Krishnappa has modest



It was nerve-wracking, I was very anxious, watching on TV. My parents had tears, happy tears. They were all so happy for me.

— **KRISHNAPPA GOWTHAM** after fetching a mind-boggling deal with Chennai Super Kings

IPL statistics. He has played just 24 matches in three seasons since 2018 and has scored 186 runs and taken 13 wickets.

He was a part of RR for two seasons — 2018 and 2019 playing 15 and 7 matches respectively — and was with Kings XI Punjab (now Punjab Kings) in 2020 where he featured in just two games before being released.

Gowtham's parents and wife in Bengaluru were in tears when they came to know of the good news.

"My parents had tears, happy tears. They were all

so happy for me," Gowtham said.

"It's hard to describe that feeling. It's all just sinking in. Obviously this isn't the first time I've been part of the auction but every time your name comes up, the kind of butterflies in your tummy is unimaginable," he added.

Gowtham will be playing under M. S. Dhoni and he remembers queuing up with a few other uncapped players to get his bat signed by the legendary wicketkeeper batsman after an IPL game three years ago. — *PTI*

ARJUN CAN'T WAIT TO WEAR MI'S JERSEY

New Delhi, Feb. 19: Pacer Arjun Tendulkar cannot wait for his maiden IPL stint to start with Mumbai Indians and thanked the coaches for having faith in him after being picked by the five-time champions at the players' auction.

The 21-year-old, son of iconic former captain Sachin Tendulkar, got a major fillip on Thursday when he was bought by Mumbai Indians at his base price of ₹20 lakh.

His celebrated father hasn't just played for the franchise but is also the mentor of the side, which is the most successful team in the IPL.

"Since childhood I have always been a die hard fan of Mumbai Indians. I would like to thank the coaches and support staff who showed faith in me."

"I am excited to join the MI Paltan and can't wait to wear the blue and gold," Arjun said in a video message posted on MI's Twitter handle.

Arjun has been a net bowler for the franchise for the past two-three seasons. He recently made his senior Mumbai team debut when he played in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, the national T20 championship, against Haryana. — *PTI*

MORRIS ROLE IS TO SUPPORT ARCHER: SANGA

Mumbai, Feb. 19: Rajasthan Royals' director of cricket Kumar Sangakkara on Friday said that allrounder Chris Morris, who was brought by the franchise for ₹16.25 crore in the IPL auction, will have a "very specific role of supporting" pace spearhead Jofra Archer.

Morris became the most expensive buy in IPL history when he was picked by RR following an intense bidding war at the auction on Thursday.

"Morris was significantly high in terms of auction price. Morris has a very specific role for us to play in supporting (Jofra) Archer. It gives us a lot more flexibility in the way we use Archer," Sangakkara said.

"Also, Morris' numbers, when he is (has) been fit and strong, has been some of the best in all IPLs," Sangakkara added. — *PTI*



Belgium's Elise Mertens (left) and partner Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus leap with their winner's trophy after defeating Czech Republic's Barbora Krejickova and Katerina Siniakova 6-2, 6-3 in the women's doubles final at the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne on Friday. — *AFP*

Medvedev mauls Tsitsipas, in final

Melbourne, Feb. 19: Russia's Daniil Medvedev overpowered Stefanos Tsitsipas to make his first Australian Open final Friday, where he will bid to stop world number one Novak Djokovic from clinching an unprecedented ninth title.

The fourth seed proved far too strong for Greece's Tsitsipas, crushing him 6-4, 6-2, 7-5 in front of more than 7,000 noisy fans at Rod Laver Arena to extend his win streak to 20.

The 25-year-old, ultra-confident on the back of his unbeaten run, which includes three titles, has been knocking on the door of Grand Slam success for some time, but has yet to win a title.

To finally get over the line he must on Sunday beat top seed Djokovic, who has won all eight finals he has played at Melbourne Park.

But nobody on tour has more momentum than Medvedev, whose tricky game has stymied all opponents since November, and he has won three of his last four against the 17-time Grand Slam-winning Serb. "It definitely wasn't easy," said Medvedev, only the third Russian after Yevgeny Kafelnikov and Marat Safin to reach the Australian Open final.

"I got a little bit scared and tight (in the third set) because it's a semifinal of

THE RESULTS

Men's singles semifinal: Daniil Medvedev (RUS x4) bt Stefanos Tsitsipas (GRE x5) 6-4, 6-2, 7-5.

Women's doubles final: Elise Mertens (BEL)/ Aryna Sabalenka (BLR x2) bt Barbora Krejickova (CZE)/ Katerina Siniakova (CZE x3) 6-2, 6-3.

a Slam... but happy I was able to turn my game on, especially in some tight moments on my serve."

ELISE-SABALENKA DUO CLINCHES DOUBLES TITLE

Elise Mertens and Aryna Sabalenka won the Australian Open women's doubles final Friday to collect their second Grand Slam trophy as a team.

It is likely to be their last for a while.

The 22-year-old from Belarus was the dominant player on court as she and Mertens, the U.S. Open doubles champions in 2019, combined for a 6-2, 6-3 win over third-seeded Barbora Krejickova and Katerina Siniakova of the Czech Republic.

Second-seeded Sabalenka and Mertens wasted three championship points in an eight-minute last game. Sabalenka earned a fourth championship point with an ace and clinched the title when Siniakova sent a backhand wide.

— *Agencies*

INDIA'S ANKITA DAZZLES, WINS MAIDEN WTA TITLE

Melbourne, Feb. 19: India's Ankita Raina on Friday claimed her maiden WTA title by lifting the Phillip Island Trophy along with Russian partner Kamilla Rakhimova, a feat which catapulted her into the top-100 in the doubles for the first time in her career.

Ankita and Kamilla erased a one-set deficit to beat the Russian combination of Anna Blinkova and Anastasia Potapova 2-6, 6-4, 10-7 in the summit clash here.

The 28-year-old Indian shared the \$800 prize money with her partner and earned 280 ranking points, which will take her to 94 from the current 115 when the WTA doubles chart is updated next week.

Ankita will become only the second player to crack the doubles top-100 since Sania Mirza, who is a six-time Grand Slam champion.

The past two weeks have been extremely memorable for the gritty Indian, who made her Grand Slam debut at the Australian Open in the doubles, and also won a round in the main draw of a WTA singles tournament.

"It's been a great week. Kamilla and I played together for the first time. We signed up just 20 minutes before the draw because there was a lot of confusion with the entry list," Ankita said. — *PTI*

Bruno nets brace in Man U victory

Paris, Feb. 19: Bruno Fernandes scored twice as Manchester United romped to a 4-0 victory over Real Sociedad in their Europa League last-32 first leg on Thursday, while Gareth Bale impressed for Tottenham in a 4-1 thrashing of Austrian side Wolfsberg.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's United are all but into the last 16, with four 'away' goals to take into the return game in a week's time, after the first leg was played in Turin due to Coronavirus travel restrictions.

The Premier League outfit grabbed the lead in the 27th minute when Fernandes pounced on a defensive mix-up to slot in from Marcus Rashford's clipped pass.

Solskjaer's men doubled their advantage 12 minutes into the second period as Fernandes stroked home his 21st goal of the season.

United continued to play at a pace Sociedad could not deal with and Rashford finally got his goal in the 65th minute.

The tie was surely put to bed in the final minute of normal time as Daniel James raced clear and fired into the bottom corner.

Meanwhile, Gareth Bale notched his first Tottenham assist since April 2013 to tee up Son Heung-min for the opening goal in Budapest against Wolfsberg, before drilling in the second before the half-hour mark.

A wonderful individual strike from Lucas Moura extended Spurs' first-half lead, and although Michael Liendl pulled one back for the Austrians with a second-half penalty, the English club have one foot in the next round after Carlos Vinicius' 88th-minute goal.

— *AFP*



Australian speedster Jhye Richardson in this file photo.

I almost got blanked: Jhye

Christchurch, Feb. 19: Promising Australia fast bowler Jhye Richardson was left "excited as well as exhausted" after he earned a "life-changing" bid of ₹14 crore from Punjab Kings at the IPL auction.

Richardson was in quarantine in a Christchurch hotel room for the upcoming T20 International series against New Zealand when he tuned into the broadcast of the IPL auction in Chennai.

"My name came up and I got this wave of (nausea) just not knowing what to expect. For the first, what to me felt like about 20 minutes, no one put their paddle up and it's one of those things where you're just like, 'Oh no'. You have no idea what's going to happen," Richardson was quoted by *cricket.com.au*.

"Then the first paddle went up, which was probably (only) like 10 seconds or five seconds (later), but it felt like a

lifetime. I feel like I played a game yesterday. I mentally exhausted myself of feeling all these emotions, of feeling sick and excited."

"I almost blanked. I was watching it, but I felt like I wasn't actually watching it. After everything happened you're obviously really, really excited but then you just hit this massive wall," he said.

He said emotions took over and he felt as if he had hit a "massive wall". — *PTI*

Captain Virat opens up on depression

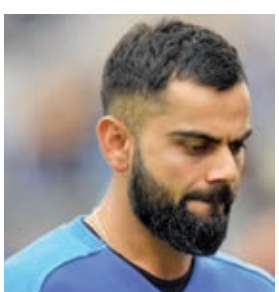
New Delhi, Feb. 19: India captain Virat Kohli has revealed that he battled depression during a harrowing tour of England in 2014 where he felt like the "loneliest guy in the world" after a string of failures with the bat. In a conversation with former England player Mark Nicholas on his 'Not Just Cricket' podcast, Kohli conceded that went through a tough phase during the particularly difficult tour.

"Yes, I did," was his response when asked whether he had suffered from depression at the time.

"...it's not a great feeling to wake up knowing that you won't be able to score runs and I think all batsmen have felt that at some stage that you are not in control of anything at all," he recalled.

Kohli had a disastrous tour of England in 2014, registering scores of 1, 8, 25, 0, 39, 28, 0, 7, 6 and 20 in five Tests, averaging 13.50 in his 10 innings. He roared back to form in the tour of Australia after that, accumulating 692 runs in the Test series.

"You just don't understand how to get over it. That was a phase when I literally couldn't do any-



Virat Kohli

thing to overturn things...I felt like I was the loneliest guy in the world," he said of the England tour.

Kohli remembered feeling alone despite the fact

that there were supportive people in his life. He said professional help was what he needed.

"Personally, for me that was a revelation that you could feel that lonely even though you a part of a big group. I won't say I didn't have people who I could speak to but not having a professional to speak to who could understand what I am going through completely, I think is a huge factor. I think I would like to see it change," Virat added.

Virat believes mental health issues cannot be overlooked as they can destroy a person's career.

