

SHORT TAKES

'Lukoskin' developer gets 'Scientist of the Year' award

New Delhi: Senior scientist Hemant Kumar Pandey has been honoured with DRDO's "Scientist of the Year Award" for his contri-

bution in developing several herbal medicines, including the popular drug Lukoskin, meant for treatment of leucoderma. A recipient of several prestigious awards for his contribution in the field of herbal medicine, Pandey has been undertaking research at the Defence Research and Development Organisation's lab Defence Institute of Bio-Energy Research (DIBER) at Pithoragarh in Uttarakhand for the past 25 years.

Defence minister Rajnath Singh had recently facilitated the scientist at an event here with the prestigious award that comprises a certificate and cash prize of ₹2 lakh. Though the scientist has developed six herbal drugs so far, Lukoskin used for treating leucoderma or Vitiligo, a condition in which white patches get developed on the skin, has been most widely appreciated and found huge acceptance in the market. A formulation of around eight herbs, found in Himalayan region, Lukoskin helps in treating white patches and is marketed by Delhi-based Aimal Pharmaceuticals.

Leucoderma is an autoimmune disorder and over 5 crore people are under its grip in India. It is neither contagious nor life-threatening. The incidence of leucoderma is 1-2 per cent of the population worldwide. Apart from Lukoskin, Pandey has developed drugs for treatment of eczema and toothache as well as an anti-radiation cream, most of which are already being sold in the market following transfer of technology (ToT).

— PTI

SDMC opens 1st toy bank in Dwarka

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 26

In a unique initiative, the South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) has opened the first khilona (toy) bank at its Community Centre Dwarka in Najafgarh Zone. The SDMC has aimed to distribute toys collected at this bank among needy children living in this area. SDMC mayor Anamika said that the bank has been opened keeping in view of Swachh Survekshan-2021 where people can donate old and useless toys. "This is a great initiative which brings smiles on the faces of innocent children. At the same time it reduces the generation of waste in the form of old and unused toys which otherwise get discarded as garbage and waste," Ms Anamika added.



Hemant Pandey

India, Vietnam hold joint Navy exercise in South China Sea

US Navy has also started patrolling to challenge China's hegemony

PAWAN BALI
NEW DELHI, DEC. 26

India and Vietnam Navies, on Saturday, started exercise in the South China Sea, something which will be closely watched by China.

"The Indian Navy conducted Passage Exercise today with the Vietnam People's Navy in the South China Sea," said a senior official.

India and Vietnam are conducting exercise even when China is becoming increasingly assertive in the South China Sea and has been conducting aggressive military manoeuvres in the region to warn other nations.

The relations between India and China has dete-

► **INDIA AND** Vietnam are conducting exercise even when China is becoming increasingly assertive in South China Sea and has been conducting aggressive military manoeuvres in the region to warn other nations

riorated this year after the Chinese army violated the line of actual control in Eastern Ladakh and the military stand-off between the two armies in the sector has continued from the last eight months.

India is now putting pressure on China at many fronts.

China was already furious over the India-

Vietnam Virtual Summit this week where India had stressed that negotiations for a code of conduct (CoC) in the disputed South China Sea (SCS) waters should not undermine the interests of other countries or third parties in the region.

Reacting to the summit, China's state mouthpiece, Global Times, had said that "this is not the first time (nor will it be the last) that India has poked its nose in the South China Sea."

Earlier this week, defence minister Rajnath Singh and his Japanese counterpart Nobuo Kishi had also discussed the regional situation in the South China Sea. Both had asserted to oppose any

activities that escalate tension.

The US Navy has also started patrolling the South China Sea to challenge China's hegemony. In the past few months, US aircraft carriers USS Ronald and USS Nimitz along with their escorting cruisers and destroyers have conducted exercises in the South China Sea.

After the clash between Indian Army and PLA in the Galwan valley in June, India too had sent its frontline warship in the South China Sea much to the displeasure of the Chinese government which raised objections over the move during diplomatic talks between the two countries.



Fully-equipped model beat booth at India Gate in New Delhi was inaugurated on Saturday.

— G.N. JHA

Solar energy-enabled police beat booth set up at India Gate

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 26

The Delhi Police on Saturday set up a solar energy-enabled "modern beat booth", which is also water, fire and vandalism proof, at the iconic India Gate here, officials said.

Inaugurated by Special Commissioner of Police (Law and Order), South Zone, Satish Golchha, the booth is dust proof too, they said.

The booth is solar energy-enabled with a storage capacity of 10 hours. It is remote wifi-enabled for digital display of informative or awareness messages on LED panels installed on top of it and

has a public announcement system, said Anil Mittal, Additional PRO (Delhi Police).

"The cabin is equipped with extreme weather regulator, movable wardrobe, first-aid facility and a public facilitation desk. This model beat booth will not only enhance the people-friendly image of the Delhi Police, but will also provide a comfortable environment even in extreme weather conditions to police personnel manning it," he said.

Similar police booths with solar-powered LED panels will also be set up at other prominent places in Delhi, the officials said.

Woman falls from DDA building, dies

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 26

A 32-year-old woman died after she allegedly fell from the third floor of a DDA building in west Delhi's Janakpuri area on Saturday afternoon, police said. The woman, identified as Sneheep Kaur, a resident of Virender Nagar in Janakpuri, was working on part-time basis at a private school, they said.

The body has been shifted to the mortuary at Deen Dayal Upadhyay hospital for autopsy.

EAM Jaishankar on 2-day visit to Qatar from today

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 26

External affairs minister S. Jaishankar will undertake an important two-day official visit to the oil-rich Gulf nation of Qatar from Sunday during which he will meet Qatari deputy prime minister and foreign minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani and also call on other important Qatari dignitaries.

It may be recalled that just earlier this month, India and Qatar had decided to "create a special Task-Force to further facilitate investments by Qatar Investment Authority into India", and had also "resolved to explore Qatari investments in the entire energy value-chain in India". The decisions had been announced on December 8 after a phone conversation between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Amir of the State of Qatar Sheikh Tamim



S. Jaishankar

Bin Hamad Al-Thani. India's outreach is significant, given the politics in the Gulf region and Qatar's stormy relations in the past three years with Saudi Arabia which is widely considered the leader of the Arab world. India has excellent ties with Saudi Arabia too and efforts are reportedly underway between Saudi Arabia and Qatar to mend their own bilateral ties.

In a statement issued late on Saturday evening, the MEA said, "(EAM) S. Jaishankar's visit to Qatar will be his first visit to the country as EAM. During the visit he will hold talks with his counterpart on bilateral issues as well as regional and international issues of mutual interest. He will convey special gratitude to the State of Qatar for

taking care of Indians during the Covid-19 pandemic. India and Qatar have maintained close high-level contacts during the Covid-19 pandemic. Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi and the Amir of the State of Qatar, HH Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani have spoken thrice on telephone in the past few months. EAM and other Cabinet Ministers have also spoken with their Qatari counterparts."

The MEA added, "India and Qatar enjoy strong economic, cultural and people-to-people ties. Qatar hosts more than 7 lakh Indians. The bilateral trade was US\$ 10.95 billion in 2019-20. Both sides remain committed to intensify bilateral cooperation in various fields including energy and investments. India and Qatar have also worked together to face the Covid-19 pandemic and coordinated smooth operation of flights under an Air Bubble arrangement."

BHASKAR HARI SHARMA
NEW DELHI, DEC. 26

A 45-year-old man died in a fire at a mask manufacturing factory in West Delhi's Mayapuri on Saturday morning, a Delhi Fire Service (DFS) official said.

A call about the fire was received at around 3.50 am and six fire tenders were rushed to the spot, he said.

A case was registered against the factory owner and he was later arrested, the police said, adding that short-circuit is suspected to be the reason behind the incident.

DFS director Atul Garg said that fire officials broke down the door of the factory and rescued three people, one of whom was unconscious.

The man was taken to the Deen Dayal Upadhyay Hospital where he was declared brought dead, he said, adding that he was identified as Jugal Kishor.

The fire broke out on the third floor of the fac-

► **The garment manufacturing unit had been operating since the last six years. It was shut briefly amid the Covid-19 outbreak but resumed work with four workers and started manufacturing masks, the police officer added. The two people rescued were identified as Aman Ansari (18) and Feroj Ansari (24).**

tory where machines and raw materials were kept, Mr Garg said.

According to the fire department, the factory did not have adequate fire safety measures in place nor did it have a no objection certificate (NOC) from fire authorities.

Additional deputy commissioner of police (West) Subodh Kumar said a case was registered under IPC Sections 285 (negligent conduct with respect to fire or combustible matter) and 304A (causing death by negligence).

The owner of the factory, identified as Rakesh Khanna, a resident of Paschim Vihar, was arrested in connection with the incident, he said.

The deceased was a resident of Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh and had been working at the factory as a tailor for many years. He usually slept inside the factory after work, the officer said.

Mr Kumar said the man was sleeping inside the factory when the fire broke out. It is suspected that he died due to suffocation after inhaling smoke.

The garment manufacturing unit had been operating since the last six years. It was shut briefly amid the Covid-19 outbreak but resumed work with four workers and started manufacturing masks, the police officer added.

The two people rescued were identified as Aman Ansari (18) and Feroj Ansari (24), officials added.

Shah sounds '21 election bugle in Assam

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Shah said that neither Congress nor any other party cannot stop infiltration. "Infiltration affects our culture, arts and snatches away opportunities from our youth," Mr Shah said while addressing a public rally at Amingaon.

He said, "All separatist groups have slowly left the path of violence and joined the mainstream. Bodo youth who used to carry guns are now joining the mainstream. Recently conducted polls saw 80 per cent voting without a single incident of violence. This pair of BJP leader — chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal and minister Himanta Biswa Sharma has crossed several hurdles in the story of Assam's progress. People of Assam will give the mandate to BJP in 2021."

"The Bodoland election... was only a semi-final. Now the final is ahead. In the Assam polls, we will have a full majority. The Sonowal-Himanta combination has worked wonders for Assam," he said.

He sought to evoke 16th-century Assamese cultural icon Srimanta Sankaradeva to recall the richness of the state's culture and history, which, he said, will give it a new beginning.

Lauding the initiative of BJP government to support and develop the state's traditional Vaishnavite monasteries, Mr Shah said that it would lead to social transformation in Assam's villages that would also stop young people from taking up arms.

He said that the government was extending a financial assistance of Rs 2.5 lakh each to 8,000 "Namghars", the state's traditional Vaishnavite monasteries, that are over 50 years old.

Mr Shah also laid the foundation stone for the second medical college in Guwahati, nine new law colleges and 'Batadrava Than'.

'Some in Delhi trying to teach me democracy'

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teaching me democracy is in power in Puducherry," the Prime Minister said, without naming the Congress, which has been ruling the UT since 2016.

It shows the gap between what some parties preach and what they do, and also highlights their commitment to democracy, he said in a dig at his rivals.

Noting that local body polls were last held in 2006 in Puducherry, he said its term ended in 2011 but new elections were not held.

"You will be surprised to know that the Supreme Court had given an order in this regard in 2018, but the government there has been delaying it," the Prime Minister said.

Noting that the people braved cold weather and the Covid-19 pandemic to enthusiastically participate in the election, the Prime Minister said he had heard from every political party about the high level of transparency during the polls and how free they were.

"I feel so proud... This is a moment of pride for India," he said, lauding the local administration and security forces.

"These election results have thrown up victors, many of whom have come up from among the masses and who have won due to their work, not their name," he said.

"This is the beginning of a new leadership of a new era in a new decade," he said.

He noted that the BJP was once a part of the government in the erstwhile state and added that it pulled out because the saffron party wanted panchayat elections to be held and people be given their rights in these polls, people have left history behind and voted for a future of hope, he said.

An official statement said about six lakh families of the UT were getting the benefit of the Ayushman Bharat scheme, and now all 21 lakh families will get it.

Noting that J&K's residents can avail of the health insurance anywhere in India except a state like West Bengal, the Prime Minister took a jibe at the Trinamool Congress government for not joining the Ayushman Bharat scheme.

— PTI

Murder accused forcibly taken from jail compound, court seeks report

New Delhi, Dec. 26: A court here has sought a report from the city police regarding the whereabouts of a murder accused who was allegedly manhandled by some unknown people and policemen and forcibly taken away in a car from a jail compound where he had gone to surrender.

An application was moved by the counsel of the accused.

Metropolitan magistrate Raghav Sharma directed the concerned assistant commissioner of police (ACP) to file a report regarding the whereabouts of the accused, Kartik, and the current status of the investigation in the case.

An application was moved for Kartik's surrender in the murder case on December 12 and the court had directed the investigating officer

(IO) to file a report in the matter on December 23.

When the IO failed to appear before the court on December 25, it noted that it was a serious disregard of its orders.

"Not only did the IO not appear before this court, he has also switched off his mobile phone in order to avoid phone calls from the court staff. No report of the FIR, which was called by the order of this court, has

been filed yet," the court said in its order dated December 25.

"This is a serious disregard of the orders of this court and cannot be tolerated at any cost," it said.

The application moved by advocate Anwar Ahmed Khan along with Purushendra Bhardwaj said that on the morning of December 25 some unknown people thrashed the accused

and his counsel after they entered the jail compound through the police headquarters (PHQ).

It further alleged that two-three police personnel also entered the jail and manhandled Kartik and his counsel before forcibly taking him away in a car.

Kartik's counsel said they managed to record the incident on the phone.

— PTI

MP Cabinet's nod to 'Love Jihad' bill with 10 yrs imprisonment

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The Cabinet meeting, state home minister Narottam Mishra said the new Bill provides imprisonment of 1-5 years and fine of ₹25,000 for forced conversion and if the victim of forced religious conversion belonged to scheduled caste or scheduled tribe or is a under aged, the offence would attract a minimum jail term of 2-10 years with a maximum penalty of Rs 1 lakh.

Under the new Bill, it is made mandatory for both the bride and groom sides to notify the local district magistrate on change of religion two months ahead, failing which the marriage would be outlawed.

Religious leaders and priests associated with such marriages would attract five years jail term and the organisations and institutions involved in such marriages would be deregistered.

The Uttar Pradesh government passed a similar law on November 28. Since then cases of abuse of the law in Uttar Pradesh have come to fore.

Farmers' union leaders urge Centre to hold talks Dec. 29

Continued from Page 1
including elderly and women, were seen on the Amritsar-Delhi national highway.

The road from Delhi to Ghaziabad near the Ghaziapur border was also closed as the farmer protest spilt over to the other carriageway.

Kisan Union leader Dr Darshanpal said on Saturday that the farmers will celebrate the martyrdom of Guru Govind Singh's son on December 27 and December 28.

The protesters will then meet the Centre for the next round of talks on December 29.

On December 30, farmers will march from Singhu to Tikri and Shahjahanpur alongside their tractors, Dr Darshanpal added. He went on to say that the farmers are inviting everyone to have langar with them on December 31 and January 1 at Singhu border.

Priyanka likely to take part in 'save farmer, save cow' yatra

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the scheme. According to Uttar Pradesh Congress leaders the conditions of cowsheds in the state are very bad. The party wants to highlight the issue and since farmers and cows are interlinked the party wants to make it a talking point. The party also wants to use this to build its cadre strength and instill confidence in workers. Ms Priyanka Gandhi on Thursday asked party office bearers in Uttar Pradesh to spend at least 20 days in districts assigned to them to strengthen the organisation. She was addressing the state executive meet-

► **Since farmers and cows are interlinked the Congress party in Uttar Pradesh wants to make it a talking point. The conditions of cowsheds in the state are very bad, the party said.**

ing in which she spoke about the sangathan sri-jan abhiyan meaning the revival of the party cadres at the grassroots level. With Assembly elections in the state are just a year away, the Congress wants to ensure that it has fighting candidates in all the Assembly segments.

IN BRIEF

Cong is spreading misinformation on farm laws: Mantri

Dhenkanal, Odisha: Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan on Saturday alleged that the Congress is spreading misinformation on the new agriculture laws and creating a sense of fear among farmers across the country, while the BJD is supporting such activities. He claimed that the new farm laws were aimed at making farmers self-reliant. Mr Pradhan, while addressing a farmers' rally here, said that the Congress is spreading misinformation and creating a sense of fear among the farmers that their lands will be taken away by corporate houses and the minimum support price system will be abolished. The BJD is backing such activities. He claimed that the new laws, on the contrary, will ensure that farmers get a good price for their produce. The Union minister for petroleum and Natural Gas said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made a comprehensive plan to increase the income of farmers manifold by enacting the new laws. He said the MSP on paddy has been increased from ₹1,310 in 2013-14 to ₹1,815 now. Targeting state food and supplies minister R.P. Swain over irregularities in disbursement of cooperative loans to farmers, he alleged that the state minister's brother is being accused of being behind such irregularities. He claimed that the Centre has provided ₹60,000 crore to farmers in Odisha in the last six years and attacked the state government for not sending the final list of beneficiaries of the Prime Minister Kisan Nidhi scheme.— *PTI*

S. Viswam, former Deccan Chronicle chief, passes away

AGE CORRESPONDENT HYDERABAD, DEC. 26

S. Viswam, senior journalist and former bureau chief of *Deccan Chronicle* in Bengaluru, passed away on Friday. He was 96. He had suffered shivering bouts last week and was rushed to hospital with complaints of breathlessness. He was put on ventilator support but passed away on Friday evening. Viswam's last rites were carried out on Saturday in Bengaluru. His friends and colleagues remember Viswam as a very affable person who worked very easily with his juniors. He was a regular at the foreign office in Delhi and had received briefings from Prime Ministers since 1960. A sensitive, humane and well-liked person, he was respected not only by his colleagues but also by bureaucrats. Viswam started his career with the Free Press Journal in Mumbai in 1940s. After 20 years, in 1960, he moved to New Delhi. From then on, he began covering news at the office of Prime Minister and the foreign office. Anand Sahay, a senior editor who worked with him, recalled the affectionate relationship he had shared with Viswam from 1975. Said Sahay: "He was a tall and handsome person with a very soft side to him. He was not only liked by his colleagues but also by bureaucrats with whom he interacted. He was very close to H.Y. Sharada Prasad, information adviser to Indira Gandhi." Viswam later left New Delhi and moved to Bengaluru and was working with *Deccan Chronicle* till 2008. Journalist Dipankar Chakraborty said, "In 1991, when I joined *Deccan Chronicle*'s Delhi bureau, his literally larger than life presence was both awe-inspiring and overwhelming."

Scindia attends BJP's camp, says learnt a lot about party

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY BHOPAL, DEC. 26

Senior BJP leader and Rajya Sabha MP Jyotiraditya Scindia on Saturday attended the training camp of the party held in Sehore, nearly 45 km from Bhopal. This was the first time Mr Scindia participated in the training camp of BJP after crossing over to the party from Congress in March this year. The party was holding a training camp for heads of BJP's district units in the state. Chief minister Shiraj Singh

Chouhan and state party president Vishnu Dutt Sharma were among the senior leaders of the party who attended the training camp.

"It was good and new experience for me. I have learnt about policies and culture of the party. Party leaders shared their views (on the occasion). This will help strengthen the party", he told reporters here. Speaking on the occasion, Mr Chouhan said BJP has a unique identity for its distinct style of functioning and policies. That was the reason why BJP has now grown as the largest political party in the world.



Jammu and Kashmir lieutenant-governor Manoj Sinha hands over the golden cards to beneficiaries of the Ayushman Bharat PM-Jay Sehat scheme, after it was rolled out by Prime Minister Narendra Modi virtually, in Jammu, on Saturday.

— *PTI***RLP splits from NDA over farm laws**

Jaipur, Dec. 26: Rashtriya Loktantrik Party (RLP) convenor and Nagaur MP Hanuman Beniwal on Saturday announced a split from the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) over the Centre's new farm laws. "I am not stuck with the NDA. Today, I separate myself from the NDA," Mr Beniwal said at a farmers' rally at Shahjahanpur in Alwar district after starting a march to Delhi in support of the farmers who have been protesting against the contentious laws.

In September, the Shiromani Akali Dal

(SAD) had quit the NDA over the three farms laws. Thousands of farmers, mostly from Punjab and Haryana, have been camping on Delhi's borders since November 26, demanding a repeal of these laws.

Mr Beniwal was elected as BJP MLA in Rajasthan for the first time in 2008 but later left the party. He won the 2013 assembly elections as an independent and formed the RLP ahead of the 2018 assembly elections. His party allied with the BJP for the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

The RLP leader said that farmers were running the agitation in the country

and he was not trying to gain political mileage with his action.

He had resigned from three parliamentary committees last week in support of farmers' agitation.

"Farmers are peacefully carrying out their protest. I request them to protest peacefully. If farmers are cane-charged, then we will forcibly march towards Delhi," Mr Beniwal, a three-time MLA, said.

Farmers from Rajasthan have been protesting in Shahjahanpur near the Rajasthan-Haryana border on the Jaipur-Delhi highway for 14 days.

Farmers on Saturday blocked two-way traffic on

Jaipur-Delhi national highway, which was partially blocked until now.

The police administration has diverted heavy vehicle traffic on the highway from the Paota-Bansur route and light four-wheelers from the Behror-Khairthal route to avoid inconvenience to passengers.

"Highway has been blocked on both sides today. Traffic from Delhi has been diverted from Bhiwadi-Dharuhera. Ample arrangements have been made for smooth traffic transition on the diverted route," Alwar SP Tejaswini Gautam said.

Enacted in September,

the three farm laws have been projected by the Centre as major reforms in the agriculture sector that will remove the middlemen and allow farmers to sell their produce anywhere in the country.

However, the protesting farmers have expressed apprehension that these laws would pave the way for eliminating the safety cushion of the MSP and do away with the 'mandi' (wholesale market) system, leaving them at the mercy of big corporates.

The government has repeatedly maintained that the MSP and mandi systems will continue.

— *PTI***‘Those who joined BJP before ’19 polls will return to NCP’**

SONU SHRIVASTAVA MUMBAI, DEC. 26

Deputy chief minister of Maharashtra and NCP leader Ajit Pawar on Saturday said that leaders who had joined the BJP will return to NCP in the next three-four months. Mr Pawar said that he will refrain from commenting on who will be joining the party as election code of conduct for the gram panchayat elections is in effect as of now.

Few days ago 18 Congress corporators shifted their loyalty to NCP. Mr Pawar indicated that BJP leaders are next in line. Mr Pawar said that those joining the NCP were earlier in the same party before defecting to the BJP. These leaders are not being heard by the BJP.

The NCP leader's statement would assume a political significance as elections of the several local bodies and gram panchayats are round the corner.

"The leaders who joined the BJP thought that they would be heard when the BJP would come to power. Now, they want to leave BJP because their works weren't done. Some leaders from Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad have wished to return. They will soon be welcomed," Mr Pawar said.

Reacting to Mr Pawar's statement, the BJP state president Chandrakant Patil said, "When Ajit Pawar failed to keep his 28 MLAs, whom he thought were with him when tried to form the government with the BJP, how would he get any other MLA now?"

BJP to hold 25 webinars to push idea of 'one nation, one election'

New Delhi, Dec. 26: The BJP will organise nearly 25 webinars over the next few days on the issue of "one nation, one election", as it seeks to build popular support for what has been a strong plank of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Party sources said its senior leaders, besides members of academia and legal fraternity, will

be attending these "webinars", seminars that are held online.

"We plan to hold 25 webinars by the end of this month," a party leader said.

Since coming to power in 2014, Mr Modi has often advocated holding all elections together, from Lok Sabha to state Assemblies and local bodies.

— *PTI***NTF: No need to change protocol for new strain 8 UK returnees to Kerala test +ve**

SHASHI BHUSHAN NEW DELHI, DEC. 26

The National Task Force (NTF) on Covid-19 has concluded that there is no need to change the existing treatment protocol in view of SARS-CoV-2 mutations emerging in the United Kingdom and spreading to some countries. The NTF on Saturday discussed evidence-based modifications in testing, treatment and surveillance strategies for Covid-19 in view of the new virus strain.

The NTF deliberated on aspects related to the treatment protocol, testing strategy and surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 vis-a-vis the UK variant. It emphasised that since the UK strain is implicated to cause increased transmissibility of the virus, it is critical to identify individuals infected with this strain and adequately contain them to prevent its transmission in India.

The NTF recommended that in addition to the existing surveillance strategies, it is critical to conduct enhanced genomic surveillance for SARS-CoV-2 specially in incoming passengers from the UK. Besides, it will also be critical to conduct genome sequencing in samples where there is drop-out of the S gene in lab diagnosis, proven cases of re-infections etc. Routine genomic surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 from representative samples all across the samples needs to be a continuous

and well planned activity.

According to the Union health ministry, the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) informed that the Centre has taken cognizance of the reports of mutant variants of SARS-CoV-2 reported from the UK and the response of other countries to these reports. The situation is being monitored proactively. A strategy has been put under place to detect and contain the mutant variant.

"The NTF concluded that there is no need to change the existing treatment protocol in view of mutations emerging in the strain. Further, since

decided to subject the returnees to more tests, she added.

Surveillance at the four international airports in the state have been further strengthened. After the recently held local body polls, it was feared that there would be a massive surge in cases. However, that did not occur.

The death rate did not go up in the state as the government had taken precautionary steps in this regard, she said.

— *PTI*

ICMR has always advocated use of two or more gene assays for testing SARS-CoV-2, it is unlikely to miss infected cases using the current testing strategy," said the Union health ministry.

A total of 251 new deaths and 22,273 infections of Covid-19 were, meanwhile, reported in the country. The number of people who have recovered from the disease climbed to 97,40,108, pushing the national recovery rate to 95.78 per cent, while the fatality rate stands at 1.45 per cent. The active caseload remained below three lakh for the fifth consecutive day.

Omar Abdullah: Govt facilitating horse-trading More leaders & activists held by cops in J&K

YUSUF JAMEEL SRINAGAR, DEC. 26

The J&K police have, once again, gone on arrest spree. In past one week, about 100 political activists have been taken into 'preventive custody' across the UT and, as per official sources, some of them may be formally detained under the stringent Public Safety Act (PSA) to "prevent breach of peace".

The police began taking Opposition political leaders and activists into 'preventive custody' on December 21, a day before the counting of votes in the recently held DDC elections in the UT. Among the first apprehended included senior PDP leader and former minister Naeem Akhtar and two other former lawmakers Muhammad Sartaj Madni and Mansoor Hussain.

Though the authorities refused to give out the exact number of the detainees, unofficial sources put the number at 75 to 100. They include second-rung leaders and activists mainly of PDP and NC — two main constituents of Opposition parties' amalgam 'People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration and those of separatists organisations, mainly Jamaat-e-Islami.

The official sources said that "undesirable" political activists, separatist leaders and Over Ground Workers (OGWs) of militants are being taken into preventive detention and some of them are likely to be booked under the PSA to prevent "breach of peace". But the NC has

On one hand, PM Narendra Modi and J&K L-G Manoj Sinha boasts on DDC polls and claim democracy has won, but on the other hand, democracy is being discredited

— Omar Abdullah, NC leader

alleged that the arrest of mainstream political activists is to make horse-trading of elected DDC members easy.

NC vice-president and former CM Omar Abdullah accused the J&K administration led by lieutenant-governor, Manoj Sinha, of (mis)using police to force the winning candidates of PAGD to join JKAP, which he called "B-Team" of the BJP.

"On one hand, PM Narendra Modi and J&K L-G Manoj Sinha boasts on DDC polls and claim democracy has won, but on the other hand, democracy is being discredited," he said while addressing a press conference on Saturday.

Mr Abdullah played a purported call recording in which the husband of a woman DDC candidate namely Yasmeena Jan who was elected from Imam Sahab segment of southern Shopian on NC ticket could be heard admitting to another person how he made his wife join Apni Party in lieu of getting her brother released from detention.

2 militants killed in 20-hr gunfight in J&K's Shopian

2 Army jawans hurt in encounter

AGE CORRESPONDENT SRINAGAR, DEC. 26

A gunfight that lasted for about twenty hours in a remote village of Jammu and Kashmir's southern Shopian district left two Al-Badr outfit militants dead and two Army jawans injured. The private house in which the militant duo had been trapped during a search operation of security forces was damaged extensively, the police sources said on Saturday.

The officials identified the slain militant as Owais Farooq and Asif Lone, both local cadres of Al-Badr, who were "part of the group involved in several terrorist activities including attacks on security forces and civilian atrocities".

The fighting broke out on Friday after a joint team of J&K police's counterinsurgency Special Operations Group (SOG), the Army 44 Rashtriya Rifles and 178th Battalion of the Central Reserve Police

Force (CRPF) laid siege to Shopian's Kanigam village to carrying out searches.

"During the search operation, as the presence of terrorists got ascertained they were given the opportunity to surrender. However, they fired indiscriminately upon the joint search party, which was retaliated leading to an encounter. In the initial firing two Army personnel got injured and were shifted to hospital for treatment," a police statement said. It added, "Due to darkness, the operation was suspended and the whole area was put under strict cordon".

The operation resumed at first light on Saturday and ended with the killing of the militant duo later during the day, the police said.

BOOK LAUNCH On New Year's Day, Making of a Hindu Patriot will be launched at Gandhi Darshan**RSS chief to release new book on Gandhi**

New Delhi, Dec. 26: Mahatma Gandhi's 1909 work "Hind Swaraj" is grounded in 'dharma' which is often but inadequately translated as religion, says a new book on the father of the nation scheduled to be launched on January 1 by RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat.

Authors J.K. Bajaj and M.D. Srinivas say their book "Making of a Hindu Patriot: Background of Gandhiji's Hind Swaraj" has evolved out of their earlier effort to prepare an

authentic edition of "Hind Swaraj" based on Gandhi's handwritten manuscript of 1909 in Gujarati and his English translation of the text published from Phoenix in 1910.

They say they have tried to tell the story of the evolution of "Hind Swaraj" as a text of religious patriotism and of Gandhi as a Hindu patriot, perhaps the greatest, Deshbhakta Mahatma, of our times. "We tell this story largely in his own words," say Bajaj, founder-director of

THEY SAY they have tried to tell the story of the evolution of 'Hind Swaraj' as a text of religious patriotism and of Gandhi as a Hindu patriot, perhaps the greatest, Deshbhakta Mahatma, of our times

Centre for Policy Studies, and its founder-chairman Srinivas.

Gandhi always perceived himself as a Hindu, perhaps a better Hindu than most others, and that is

how his contemporaries saw him, they say. They argue that Gandhi's early contact with the people of a different civilisation made him to "think consciously about the faith and ways of the ordinary small-town Hindu that he had imbibed and taken for granted since his early childhood".

"In South Africa, under pressure to convert from some of his Christian and Muslim well-wishers, he began a serious exploration into his own religion,

and also Islam and Christianity, to discover for himself the meaning and responsibility of being a Hindu," says the over 1,000-page book, published by Har-Anand Publications.

"At the same time, faced with the extreme prejudice against Indians, to which he was personally exposed within the first few weeks of his arrival there (South Africa), he began to study and meditate on the difference between the Indian and the modern Western civilisation," it says.

According to the authors, "Hind Swaraj" is best read as a text of religious patriotism. "Leading and engaging in this (Satyagraha) struggle for establishing and preserving the dignity of India and the Indian people were thus a religious duty. It was also a patriotic duty. The two for him had become the same. He could say with conviction, as he did often, that patriotism for him was an aspect of his religion," they say.

— *PTI*

OUR CRITIC'S RATING Outstanding ★★★★★ | Great ★★★★ | Good ★★★ | Okay ★★ | Poor ★ | Truly Terrible TT

The burden of proof is hers alone

Criminal Justice: Behind Closed Doors

CAST: Kirti Kulhari, Pankaj Tripathi, Jisshu Sengupta, Adrija Sinha, Anupriya Goenka, Mita Vashisht, Ashish Vidyarthi, Deepti Naval, Khushboo Atre, Kalyanee Mulay, Shilpa Shukla

DIRECTOR: Rohan Sipky and Arjun Mukherjee

STREAMING ON: Disney+ Hotstar

RATING: ★★★

SUPARNA SHARMA

Murder is a crime against the Union of India and it is designed to rise to defend itself.

Marital sexual abuse is not a crime. Not in the eyes of the Union of India. It is trained not to react.

Criminal Justice: Behind Closed Doors is an eight-part series that conducts the forensic examination of our *purush-pradhan samaaj* and some of its institutions while it investigates a murder.

As the series goes about interrogating the accused, digs into the actions and personality of the victim, it lays bare the most horrific abuse that goes on in the privacy of homes, behind bedroom doors, where nightly assaults leave no scars.

Bikram Chandra (Jisshu Sengupta) is a well-regarded, well-heeled lawyer who fights the cases of the dispossessed. He is also a devoted husband to Anu Chandra (Kirti Kulhari) who is a quiet, even strange sort. She's forgetful, nervous, in constant need of reminders and calming pills.

Outwardly it seems like a straight-

forward crime involving a husband, a wife and an eyewitness.

But the series, sharply tuned to catch overt misogyny and micro sexism of the police force, the legal system and the family, takes us into confidence right at the beginning. It shows us the obsessive, controlling actions of one and the fear-stricken jitters of another, thus casting us in the role of an anxious juror who is the keeper of a secret. But things are kept suitably ambiguous, everything is not made clear — his actions and hers, their motivations. This adds an element of desperate urgency for us to get to the truth.

Like us, Bikram and Anu's 13-year-old daughter Rhea (Adrija Sinha), an eyewitness to what happened that night and on several other nights, knows some things for sure but is confused about others.

Criminal Justice: Behind Closed Doors is in slow-burn mode. While it keeps its main focus on unravelling what happened, it spends a considerable amount of time on the tangents that spring from this one crime, and the tributaries that join it.

After the murder is reported and the wheels of the criminal justice system start to move, an ecosystem begins to take shape for several to feed off and benefit from.

Lawyers are either out to earn some money or to bolster their reputation while restoring the balance of patriarchy and earn kudos from brother lawyers.

Cops want to earn brownie points or make money.

Jail inmates need a friend or a foe. Family members and friends pick sides.

This entire ecosystem of criminal justice is pivoted on one inherent belief — of man's innate goodness. Running parallel to this is the belief that women are evil. And

if they prove that they are not, then they are either wrong, misguided or mad.

Thus, the system is

designed to give the man the benefit of the doubt and make the woman carry the burden of proof, even when she is the victim.

Thankfully, *Criminal Justice* is not simple minded. Everything is layered here, everyone carries patches of grey. There is no innocent, blemish-free victim here.

There's the accused who doesn't speak, not even in her own defence, and like her lawyers — Madhav Mishra (Pankaj Tripathi), Nikhat Hussain (Anupriya Goenka) — her silence hassles us, especially because we know what happened. And then we are told that she is flawed.

Criminal Justice challenges us, makes us struggle to decide which side we are on even as we watch active misogyny at play that taints everything, from evidence collection and interrogation to what gets asked and how it gets presented in the media. We see whose character the system is interested in "exposing" and whose character it would rather not discuss.

The show ventures behind several closed doors, including those of several bedrooms, the jail and the chambers of powerful lawyers. Through three couples — cops Gauri (Kalyanee Mulay) and Pradhan (Ajeet Singh Palawat), and advocate Madhav and his adorable wife Ratna (Khushboo Atre), Nikhat's ammi and abbu — we see varying degrees of sexism.

But it's the marriage of the Chandras that shows us, in disturbing detail, how marital abuse works. How the perfect son, brother, lawyer, husband exorcises all his demons and complexes when bedroom doors are shut. How fine that crack between words and actions is.

"I love you, I will take care of you." *Criminal Justice* shows how these sweet, simple words get weaponised, disappointment, disapproval and

anger is used to cover abuse, and a woman's belief in herself, her abilities is shaken to the core, so much so that till the very end she thinks she deserved it.

The second season of *Criminal Justice*, which is based almost verbatim on the 2009 BBC series, carries along a few worthies from the first season — advocates Madhav Mishra, Nikhat Hussain (Anupriya Goenka), and Mandira Mathur (Mita Vashisht), the high-powered corporate lawyer.

That is partly because that's how it was in the BBC series but also because Pankaj Tripathi now has the power to make us smile everytime he is on screen. Here, however, he takes a courteous step back, letting the women around him shine.

Anupriya Goenka is efficient but Khushboo Atre, who plays his adorable wife, insistent on initiating conjugal ties, is very good. Kirti Kulhari's silent, stoic but also quaking and crying performance is the series' centrepiece. She deserves awards just for the litres of tears she has shed here.

Mita Vashisht has always had a powerful presence on screen. Though here she sometimes projects more than is required, as if she can't do light touch, she makes her presence felt as the mover-shaker. Matching her heavy footprint is the male lawyer she recruits, played by Ashish Vidyarthi.

Ajeet Singh Palawat, who plays the cop Pradhan, is excellent. Deepti Naval brings a lot of class and manages to anchor this gritty crime-court room-jail drama.

Jisshu Sengupta has very few scenes and yet his presence lingers throughout. Much like the insidiousness of sexual abuse, long after a controlling partner is gone, his noose-like, suffocating grip remains.



An entertaining meta experience

AK vs AK

CAST: Anil Kapoor, Anurag Kashyap, Yogita Bihani, Sonam Kapoor, Harshvardhan Kapoor

DIRECTOR: Vikramaditya Motwane

STREAMING ON: Netflix

RATING: ★★★

SUPARNA SHARMA

I have always worried, rather needlessly up until now, at having to use the word "meta". I have always sensed a distinctive pretentiousness to it and despite looking up its meaning a hundred times, it has never sat well with me.

Meta means being self-referential, having and showing explicit awareness of oneself. And there really is no other way to describe *AK vs AK* except as a major meta experience and experiment.

Thankfully, unlike the word, the film is not just hugely entertaining but is also a sharp commentary on our current voyeuristic state of being.

In *AK vs AK*, actor Anil Kapoor and director Anurag Kashyap are playing themselves, their "characters" generously and

wickedly embellished by their real-life professional glories and glitches, as well as their personality traits and reputations.

Kashyap is a director who is riding a high after some critically acclaimed films and moves around with a camera constantly filming him.

One Yogita is shooting a film school documentary on the best of Indian cinema and the first episode is on him. "*Mere baad sab gobbar hai*," he tells Anil Kapoor who is telling him that he is keen to work with him.

But Kashyap still cradles a 17-year-old grouse and reminds Kapoor how he turned down his dream project. And now, he tells Kapoor, "I have now moved on. And in any case, you are no longer hero material. You are playing grandfather in *Dil Dhadakne Do*." He says all this while texting. He's probably in the midst of another Twitter spat.

This being the mood before the two appear before an audience for a panel discussion, it takes just a few more insults and a glass of water to bring the two to a head-on collision.

A full-blown fight ensues and the industry takes sides. Anil Kapoor the star emerges as the winner and Kashyap sinks. And then he plots.

Kashyap barges into Anil Kapoor's set one day and then into his vanity van with the camera



lady in tow saying he is shooting a hostage thriller and Kapoor now has to look for his daughter, Sonam, who has been kidnapped.

He Facetimes a hooded man who has Sonam Kapoor bound, gagged and weeping.

Kashyap insists that Kapoor adhere to his rules if he wants to see his daughter alive, and that he has to find her by sunrise.

No cops, no outsiders, camera won't be switched off, all calls have to be on speaker mode and it's 14 hours to sunrise.

What follows are sequences that showcase how powerful and insidious reel life is — even when an actor wants to shed it, it won't

leave them.

Some of these scenes, like the one in a police station, are funny, while others, where Kapoor is asked to dance for a bit of information, are scathing.

The idea for *AK vs AK* and to pull off its script required both — megalomania and humility. So, perhaps, it is appropriate that it's written by Anurag Kashyap. The writing is sharp, political, funny, and the jokes are often on Kashyap himself.

While the dizzy, hand-held camera gives a reality *waali* feeling to *AK vs AK*, two interesting things happen simultaneously in the film — one

is entertainment that draws all its power, jokes and insults from the real lives of these two Bollywood personalities, and the other is us, the viewer, cringing at the gleeful voyeurism of people who don't see the reality and trauma of Kapoor, but treat it as an act, a performance.

The film recruits most of Anil Kapoor's family members and some of Kashyap's, but sometimes it is too made-up. This is because while the characters are real, Kapoor and Kashyap's silly fight, rivalry is not. It is not like, say, watching Rekha and Jaya fight over Amitabh Bachchan in *Silsila*.

There is a fakeness to it. And that is why, for a while in the middle, the film, which is mostly *faltu* fun, becomes a bit tedious and dull. But then a chase is thrown in, followed by a twist.

AK vs AK is a clever plot executed very well by director Vikramaditya Motwane and can be put down as a fun milestone of lockdown creativity.

Both Anurag and Anil Kapoor are very good and convincing. While Kashyap exudes a certain creepy vibe laced with arrogance, Kapoor again reminds us of how good he is. While he is obviously acting, he has to swing between "acting" and "reality", or be meta within meta. That requires swag. And he still has it.

In 'Copperfield,' Iannucci brings Dickens to life

JAKE COYLE

It's not hard to draw a straight line from Charles Dickens to Armando Iannucci. In each there's a passion for human frailty and absurdity, and, above all, a richness of people. Nobody filled pages with a vivid cast of characters like Dickens, so who better to take a shot at "David Copperfield" than the man behind the teaming ensembles of "*Veep*," "*In the Loop*" and "*The Death of Stalin*"?

In his third film as director, following his farce of bumbling and bloody Kremlin power struggles, Iannucci has turned to Dickens' most quintessential and autobiographical novel with the same zeal he previously reserved for political parody: "*The Personal History of David Copperfield*" is one of the more lively, colorful and whimsical Victorian costume dramas you're likely to see. It's a movie flowing with fresh air, which isn't something normally said of adaptations of 700-something-page books.

Iannucci, famed for his improvisational style and expletive-laden barrages, clearly finds in Dickens a writer simpatico in fondness for language and taste for multitudes. In many ways, they make a good match, with Iannucci's more anarchic, free-wheeling style animating the wit and idiosyncrasies of Dickens' tome.

And just as in the absurdly deep bench of "*Veep*," casting has made a difference. Dev Patel winningly plays Copperfield, once out of childhood (as a boy, he's played by compelling youngsters Jaiaraj Varsani and Ranveer Jaiswal), with wide-eyed wonder, always alive to the world around him, if generally

The Personal History of David Copperfield

CAST: Dev Patel, Aneurin Barnard, Peter Capaldi, Morfydd Clark, Daisy Mary Cooper, Rosalind Eleazar, Hugh Laurie, Tilda Swinton

DIRECTOR: Armando Iannucci

Playing in theatres

RATING: ★★★

rather mystified by it. Still, the film belongs largely to the overall cast, including Tilda Swinton, as David's aunt Betsey Trotwood; Hugh Laurie as the mentally ill, King Charles I-obsessed Mr. Dick; Peter Capaldi as the creditor-evading Wilkins Micawber; Rosalind Eleazar as the romantic interest Agnes Wickfield; Benedict Wong as the wine-swilling Mr. Wickfield; Ben Whishaw as the plotting Uriah Heep.

The performers, a distinctly multicultural cast, add considerably to the vibrancy of the film, collectively making a fairly irrefutable argument for colorblind casting, for anyone who needs one.

But while "*The Personal History of David Copperfield*" keeps a restless, brisk pace as it rushes through Copperfield's life, Iannucci and his co-writer Simon Blackwell arrange the film in such distinct chapters that the movie feels more like a litany of scenes than the dramatic evolution of a young man. Some sections are better than others. The episode with Laurie and Swinton at their country home, flying kites and chasing away donkeys, is so good that you want a whole film of them. —AP



Wonder Woman combats a huckster's rise in 1984

JAKE COYLE

If you're going to make a movie about wish fulfillment, 1980s America is about as good as you can do for a setting outside the Arabian Desert.

"*Wonder Woman 1984*," Patty Jenkins' time-traveling sequel to 2017's record-setting "*Wonder Woman*," shuttles Gal Gadot's warrior to the era of Regan economics, parachute pants and "Rio." All have their cameos in "*Wonder Woman 1984*," a superhero parable of greed and fanny packs with pointed references to today.

Two movies in, it's clear that Jenkins and DC Comics have a thankfully different concept for *Wonder Woman* as a film franchise. Like its predecessor, "*Wonder Woman 1984*" is spirited, purposeful and blessedly lacking in grandiosity. And both films place *Wonder Woman* not under the burdensome heft of world building or even universe saving — or at least Gadot comes across as too resplendently regal to ever seem weighed down. She's more a moral and muscular counterweight to ego-driven male misdirections, steering history through the repeating pitfalls of megalomaniacs intoxicated by power.

Last time, it was German and British military leaders under the sway of Ares, the god of war. This

Wonder Woman 1984

CAST: Gal Gadot, Chris Pine, Kristen Wiig, Pedro Pascal, Robin Wright, Connie Nielsen

DIRECTOR: Patty Jenkins

Playing in theatres

RATING: ★★★★

time, it's a struggling entrepreneur/TV personality who, in stealing an ancient gem — the "dream stone" — from the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. (where Gadot's Diana now works), gains the power to grant wishes. Max Lord (Pedro Pascal) goes from deadbeat dad to despot, turning into a conman of mythical dimensions. He's a diabolical genie without a bottle, or to paraphrase Robin Williams's Aladdin, he's got phenomenal cosmic powers sans the itty bitty living space.

A snake oil salesman who placates cravings while stealing everything else is, you might say, a touch timely. "*Wonder Woman 1984*" plays up its Trump critique about as much as it does its '80s style. In one scene, Steve Trevor (Chris Pine), summoned from the grave by Diana's own wish while holding the gem, giddily tries on all the period-appropriate clothing like Ken's fashion show in "*Toy Story 3*." Best in the first "*Wonder Woman*" were the screwball fish-out-of-water

scenes of Diana experiencing London with Trevor; this time the roles are reversed, and the charm a little less.

What does Max's rise have to do with *Wonder Woman*? A huckster is a kind of perfect foil to Diana, conceived from the start as a force for truth. (Her lasso of truth was modeled after the polygraph, an invention of *Wonder Woman* creator William Moulton Marston.) Jenkins opens the film with an Amazonian flashback to an obstacle course race on the island of Themyscira where a young Diana learns the value of truth. "No true hero is born from lies," says Antiope (Robin Wright).

The dream stone transforms another, too: Barbara Minerva, a meek archeologist played by Kristen Wiig. Awkward in heels and most everything else, she mutters that she'd like to be more like Diana when holding the stone, setting off a metamorphosis that playfully remakes Wiig's typical screen presence, and creates another foe for *Wonder Woman*.

Just as in "*Wonder Woman*," I think Jenkins has left some opportunities on the table. The first film, despite being set in 1918 during WWI, omitted any real interaction with the era's then-flourishing women's rights movement — a vital source of inspiration to Marston. Likewise, "*Wonder Woman 1984*" — more focused on "greed is good" decade and its contemporary resonances

— doesn't much pause to interrogate the 1980s' gender imbalances. Like the last movie, "*Wonder Woman 1984*" becomes consumed by its (admittedly quite good) antagonist. It drags in the third act in a messy White House battle and a prolonged finale.

But I still like these movies more than most superhero films. They feel both campier and more real than Marvel movies — more like the page-turning thrill of a comic book. The ambitions of "*Wonder Woman 1984*" may be just outside its grasp, but it seldom feels predestined or predictable — a preciously rare commodity in the genre.

As its characters awaken to their powers, turning from recognizable people to monsters, the film keeps changing shape, enlarging as it goes. Jenkins' pop cinema craft is limber and lucid. Pascal's performance, more sweet than sinister, is scintillatingly over the top.

Premiering in theaters and on HBO Max in North America, "*Wonder Woman 1984*" will close out a year largely absent of superheroes in a release plan that has upended the film industry. It's a very big film heading primarily to the small screen, at a time when the pandemic has made the escapist, popcorn-eating moviegoing that superhero movies are made for impossible, or nearly so. That makes "*Wonder Woman 1984*" a nostalgia act in more ways than one. —AP



THE ASIAN AGE

27 DECEMBER 2020



Shreya Sen-Handley

Off the beaten track

2020, the year I learn I am neurodivergent

The year-end roundup is a festal favourite; a December convention. What is there to celebrate this pandemic year you wonder. But if, instead of asking ourselves how the year shaped up, we asked how it shaped us, would it seem such a wasted year? This solitary annum, without even stepping outside, we've learnt more lessons than in a score of uneventful years.

We've learnt that our sons-of-the-soil leaders care nothing for the true sons of the soil: the farmers, labourers, and key workers. We've unexpectedly found anti-vaxxers amongst friends and neighbours, who, in ignoring science and the common good, will ensure the world remains vulnerable not only to Covid, but a hundred vanquished diseases making a comeback. Most of all, we've discovered important facets of ourselves; a love for baking, an allergy to webinars, or quite simply, who we really are.

What I learned changed my life. I discovered I am, and have always been, autistic. One of the many definitions of autism offered up by the Internet calls it 'a complex, lifelong developmental disability that typically appears during early childhood and can impact a person's social skills, communication, and relationships. It is a "spectrum condition" that affects people differently and to varying degrees. I have what used to be called Asperger's Syndrome. Modern medicine however doesn't see it as a syndrome, but another way of being; atypical, but by no means "abnormal". No more "wrong" than being brown in a white country or a woman in a man's world, but subjected to the same marginalisation as any group outside the mainstream.

Did I know I was different? Yes; having been insistently told all my life. Whilst watching the Rain Mans and The Big Bangs had I suspected I might be one of "them"? No, they never felt true to life. Did it knock me for a six? OMG yes. Was I distraught and crestfallen? Confused at first but then, it brought me peace. My life seen in this new light suddenly made sense.

They say you can't change your past, but this mindboggling new knowledge did just that. It transformed my view of the life I've led, which is the next best thing. Mistakes, misunderstandings, the mistreatment I've borne — much of which I've never forgiven myself for, I now could. We all blame ourselves for so much, but the failure of the neurodivergent to conform and resultant societal exclusion, leads to anxiety, stress, heart disease, and often early death. A recent study of people who had discovered their autism in middle-age revealed how life-changing this is. All of them attested to how they had internalised a lifetime of being told they were "wrong" and "bad". Routine censure and rejection for their unconventional responses had taken a terrible toll on their physical and mental health.



Young neurodivergents (like you) are the real X-Men. Mutants with a mission to change the world for the better, you are superheroes.

Over the last nine months of reading, analysing and embracing it, I knew I wanted to help prevent this eviscerating future generations of the neurodivergent. Related to the unearthing of my own "condition" was the stressful process of autistic assessment someone I loved dearly had embarked upon. My discovery had been a blessing for me, but what would it mean for this young person?

Mercilessly bullied at school, they were already aware of the dangers of atypicality, so I endeavored to present them with the positives. To tell them all I knew, which was the merest slither on a spectrum of neural states so vast that one in 66 people in the world inhabit it. But when I told him it was as much a gift as a curse I was not dissembling ("Auties/Aspies" can't). Gifts this young man was already displaying in abundance; topping nationwide exams and mathematical challenges. Atypicality not only gave them an approach to life that was original and creative, it equipped them with application not always found in the mainstream.

Putting my arms around him ("Aspies" develop a defensive bubble they allow few into), I reassured that being different wasn't bad. But for the men and women who lived, loved, ideated and worked differently, for reasons of sexuality, belief, neurodiversity, and more, there would have been no advances in science, art, or ways of living. Without the likes of Einstein, Newton, Emily Dickinson, and Bach, this planet would have been a much poorer place (long before 2020). They are the atypical to keep in mind, not Sheldon or Rain Man. Young neurodivergents like you, I encouraged, are the real X-Men. Mutants with a mission to change the world for the better, you are superheroes, not villains. You forge ahead to accomplish so much, surmounting the peer understanding and support you lack.

Besides which, minds can be changed, I emphasised, even if it's one person at a time, and feels like it's taking forever. Providing information is the first step towards dispelling the misconceptions that drive the prejudice you face. There are so many things people don't know. For example, the autistic are often very bright, sometimes exceptionally so, but with some there is a few-seconds lapse before verbal information registers. This doesn't make them stupid, or deaf, or even vague (I always thought I was that). Their brains just work differently. The penny drops infinitesimally slower. But drops with the power of a bomb. Because what they then do with that information has often changed the world.

Ironically, in a year in which I completed writing my third book *The Accidental Tourist*, I found out just how much of an accidental tourist I was on this earth. In beginning to understand myself, I learned to forgive too, not just myself but those I'd felt had let me down and/or misbehaved. We're all bad at "getting" those we perceive as different, and the only thing that makes the neurotypical more culpable is that they are the norm: the muscular majority, with the power to change how society works. How it perceives difference and treats it. Differences frighten people, and scared folk will lash out. For my young superhero, and millions of young 'uns like him, a standing back to consider, a little thinking over, and even a tentative welcoming in, is a large part of what they need from society.

My resolution for 2021 is to convince, if not the typical into seeing the worth of the A, then the atypical themselves of their own value. To exhort them to continue charting their individual course, because neurodivergence, instead of a stigma, is a strength and should be a joy. But it isn't yet. Let this column in which I "out" myself be my first salvo towards this end.

Shreya Sen-Handley is the author of the recently published *Strange: Stories, the award-winning Memoirs of My Body*, and a forthcoming book of travel misadventures. Her Twitter and Insta handle is @shreyasenh.

Subhani



Politics didn't limit the enigma that was Atalji



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya's View

There is a new nostalgia for Atal Behari Vajpayee, whose birthday falls two days ago, coinciding with Christmas. Shakti Sinha's book on Atalji is out. Vinay Sitapati has written another one on the "jugalbandi" between Atalji and Shri L.K. Advani. Sagarika Ghosh is finishing a book on him. What explains this renewed spurt of interest in the former Prime Minister?

Not everybody has to agree with everything he believed in, or support him politically, but there will be very few who will disagree with the assessment that Atal Behari Vajpayee was a very likeable human being. Although a product of the RSS, and, therefore, supportive of its wider worldview, he somehow managed to retain an individuality that refused to be straitjacketed in mindless ideological terms. That is why, his relationship with the RSS was often strained.

The thing about Atalji was that he was in politics but not — as with the current crop of BJP leaders — entirely limited by it. In that sense, he was both a participant in the paraphernalia of power, and transcendent of it. There was not a whiff of bigotry in his thinking. His spirit was eclectic, his patriotism transparent, and his worldview suffused with a rare idealism. But, in all of this, there was always that irrepressible humour. Once his foster daughter, Namita, told me that *Baapji* — as Atalji was fondly called — told her that it would be nice if I could write some of his written speeches. "But, perhaps, Pavanji is annoyed with my party,"

Atalji said. "Please tell him," he quickly quipped, "I am not happy with my party either!"

This disarming humour was reflective of a person who carried the burdens and pageantry of office lightly. The poet in him told him that all this was passing, a shadow play, a fleeting moment in the grand canvas of time. Behind it, ultimately, there was a loneliness that prompted a spontaneous sense of detachment, a *virakti*, a deliberate denial of ownership. It was this interplay between the participant, forever in battle for what he believed was right, and the observer, perpetually aware that for all the sound and fury, this was part of the overpowering transience of all human endeavour, that made Atalji the man he was. Only he, therefore, at the pinnacle of power could confess: "Sometimes I am overcome by the urge to leave it all behind and lose myself in books, writing and thought. But I have been unable to do that. I have lived over seven decades in this dilemma, and what is left of my life will probably be spent no differently."

I still remember that memorable evening, when I met Atalji at the PM's residence and he

There was not a whiff of bigotry in his thinking. His spirit was eclectic, his patriotism transparent, and his worldview suffused with a rare idealism. But, in all of this, there was always that irrepressible humour.

This disarming humour was reflective of a person who carried the burdens and pageantry of office lightly. The poet in him told him that all this was passing, a shadow play, a fleeting moment in the grand canvas of time.

asked me if I would translate his poems into English. However, I put a condition, which was an audacious thing for a junior joint secretary in the MEA to do, for the request was from no one less than the PM. But, the greatness of Atalji was that he was talking to me then not as the PM of India, but as a poet, and I was responding not as a bureaucrat, but as a writer. I said that I would like to translate his personal poetry, those that he had written not from the pedestal of a politician but from his heart, as one aware of the mortality of life, and not his political poetry. It was his humility, as always accompanied by that remarkably twinkle in his eyes, that he readily agreed.

Atalji was not an insecure person. He was willing to respond to criticism, but was not afraid of it, or did not wish to suppress it. A leading TV anchor once told me that, after Atalji had recorded a show with him, he said — as he was leaving: "I am not happy with you. Come and see me at the PM's residence." The anchor was apprehensive, afraid that, perhaps, he had been too aggressive, and had asked the wrong question. When he went to see the PM, this is what Atalji said: "I said I am unhappy with you because you gave me much too easy a time. You did not ask the tough questions." Contrast this with how sensitive the BJP has become today to all questions that are

remotely critical, dubbing all those who ask them as "anti-national". Our PM today does not even meet the press in a direct interaction, leave alone feeling unhappy that he was not asked an uncomfortable question. The absence of insecurity facilitates honesty. Nothing brings this out more vividly than Atalji's poetry. For instance, a man who led the BJP campaign in 2004 on the slogan of "India Shining", was the same man who had the honesty to write:

*Dharmaraj has not overcome
His addiction to dice.
In every panchayat
Draupadi is robbed of her honour.*

*Without Krishna
Today
The Mahabharata will be fought,
No matter who claims the throne,
The poor will continue to suffer.*

Those in power would do well to remember afresh what makes leaders like Atalji so resiliently popular. When leaders become humourless, unsmiling, insular and inaccessible, and governments become hyper sensitive to criticism, arrogant, perpetually aggressive, and obsessed solely with power, they would do well to remember what Atalji wrote:

*My Lord!
Never place me so high
That I cannot embrace
Those who are not my own.*

The writer, an author and former diplomat, is in politics

Atalji was not an insecure person. He was willing to respond to criticism, but was not afraid of it, or did not wish to suppress it... The absence of insecurity facilitates honesty. His poetry brings this out vividly.

LETTERS
GREEN REVOLUTION

India's farmers have vowed to expand their protests across the country, buoyed by growing support from key groups like military veterans. Farmers' issues are both emotive as well politically significant in the country of more than 1.4 billion people, where over 60 per cent depend on agriculture either directly or indirectly. Banking and IT workers as well as a dozen Opposition parties and 10 trade unions also back the demonstrations. Lakhs of farmers have been camping out near several entry points to New Delhi since November. The government is caught between a rock and a hard place. The question is, when will it see sense finally?

Bhagwan Thadani
Mumbai

BREXIT BEDLAM

THE UK WENT FOR Brexit more in haste than by design. Cynical inter/intra party politics neither spared the people nor the courts, to now find hesitant denouement, but the government's bargaining power could remain no different. The UK leader of Opposition found the deal far from what the government had promised but supported it. Sad that such bi-partisan ethos was absent for three long years, post referendum. The genesis of the Brexit bedlam is the abject abdication of legislative onus by the executive and the parliament and worse, lack of willingness to assess or face its complexities.

R. Narayanan
Navi Mumbai

DELHI UNDER SIEGE

RESPONDING TO the Prime Minister's speech on Friday, Jagmohan Singh, general secretary of BKU (Dakaunda) and working committee member of the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee, said it showed that the government was not going to repeal the laws and the agitating farmers will not leave the borders of Delhi till they are repealed. Supreme Court's stay on the new farm laws till the issue is resolved and formation of a committee of experts to find out the way of settling the dispute to the satisfaction of both the sides, government and the farmers, is a viable option. Delhites have been under siege of the protesting farmers for over a month and must not be left in the same state indefinitely.

M.C. Joshi
Lucknow

A NOBLE ACT

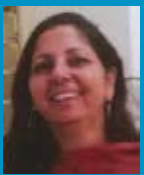
A 41-year-old woman, Syed Rafath Parveen, a resident of Indirapuram in Ghaziabad, gave a gift of life to four people in her death through organ donation. She suffered from bleeding of blood vessels in the brain last week and was declared brain dead on Thursday. Her heart, kidneys and liver were harvested.

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

Every Monday the best letter of the week wins ₹500. Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com. Else, send to Jawaharlal Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi 110002.

Anita Katyal

Political Gup-Shup



Wait for RSS' pungent take on a Turkish drama series

The Turkish television drama series *Diriliş: Ertuğrul* has been a runaway hit not just in Turkey but across the world with Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan suggesting that everyone in the country should watch it as it promotes an understanding of Islam. The show, which chronicles the life of Ertugrul, the father of Osman I, founder of the Ottoman empire, has also proved to be extremely popular in Kashmir. But guess who else is watching the series being aired on Netflix? None other than some members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Not just that but they are also recommending the drama series to others. The Sangh members apparently evinced interest in the show after they learned about its popularity in Kashmir. They felt it will help the RSS to understand the psyche of the Kashmiri Muslim and also provide vital inputs in furthering its agenda of Hindu nationalism by fuelling Islamophobia. The RSS is helped by the fact that the Turkish series portrays Islam as a militant religion,

which has been decried by moderate Muslims.

When Congress president Sonia Gandhi called a meeting of senior party leaders, including the core group of dissenters last week, it was expected that Rajya Sabha MP Kapil Sibal would be among them as he has been a leading member of the G-23 as this group is called. But surprisingly, he was not present at the long-awaited interaction. Different reasons have been cited for his absence. It is said that Sibal was not in Delhi on the day of the meeting as he had made prior plans to go on holiday to Dubai for the festive season. Though he was urged to change his flight plans by other members of the G-23 but he declined to delay his departure. However, the other side of the story is that perhaps Sibal was kept out of the list of invitees by Sonia Gandhi's office. The names of the G-23 representatives were sent in advance and were apparently vetted by Priyanka Gandhi who was in constant touch with former Mad-

hya Pradesh chief minister Kamal Nath who was mediating between the dissenters and Sonia Gandhi's office. As the most visible and vocal member of the G-23, Sibal would have done some plain speaking at the meeting unlike his colleagues who were at their diplomatic best.

While on the subject of Sonia Gandhi's much-talked-about meeting, the development has catapulted former Maharashtra chief minister to the political centre stage once again. Chavan has been sidelined ever since he demitted office as chief minister. As an MLA from Karad, he has been confined to Maharashtra for the past six years now. There was some talk that he would be included in the Congress Working Committee, the party's highest decision-making body, or given some other responsibility at the Congress headquarters in Delhi since he has the seniority and the experience for such a slot — he was a minister in the Manmohan Singh government and also served as party general secretary. But unfor-

tunately for him, he was not considered by the Congress leadership for any important slot in Delhi. After his inclusion in the group of dissenters invited by Sonia Gandhi, Chavan is back in the limelight. Later, he was also asked to brief the media about the deliberations.

If reports from Jaipur are anything to go by then the Ashok Gehlot government in Rajasthan is set to face serious trouble in the coming months. Apparently, the BJP has renewed its efforts to topple the Congress government. It is obviously undeterred by its earlier efforts when it was let down by Congress rebel leader and former deputy chief minister of Rajasthan Sachin Pilot who could not muster the requisite numbers to oust his bete noire Gehlot. The BJP has since sidelined former chief minister Vasundhara Raje who had played spoiler last time and ensured that her party's plans did not fructify. The saffron party is reasonably confident that it will succeed this time as home minister Amit Shah has placed his loyalists

in key positions in the desert state.

At a meeting convened recently, BJP MPs from Uttar Pradesh were specifically told that they should only display photographs of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the banners and hoardings they put up for programmes in their constituencies. This has obviously not gone down well with the lawmakers but they have little option but to abide by this direction. Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh are due only in 2022 but these instructions are obviously aimed at sending out a clear message that the electorate is voting for Modi who is synonymous with the BJP. Interestingly, even photographs of Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath are not to be displayed. Maybe, this has something to do with the fact that Yogi has acquired a larger-than-life image and is even being talked about as the BJP's future prime ministerial candidate.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

SHORT TAKES

MOROCCAN KING GETS BIBI INVITE TO VISIT ISRAEL

Jerusalem, Dec. 26: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Morocco's King Mohammed VI held a telephone conversation during which the Israeli premier invited the king for a visit, Netanyahu's office said Friday.

The phone call comes three days after an Israeli delegation signed a US-sponsored normalisation agreement with Morocco in Rabat.

"The leaders congratulated each other over the renewal of ties between the countries, the signing of the joint statement with the US, and the agreements between the two countries," a statement from Netanyahu's office said.

"In addition, the processes and mechanisms to implement the agreements were determined," it added.

MALI: FRENCH SOLDIER SHOTS TWO OTHERS

Paris, Dec. 26: A French soldier deployed to Mali as part of the Barkhane force fighting jihadist insurgents has wounded two comrades with a pistol while drunk, the army headquarters said Saturday.

The confrontation under the influence happened overnight from December 24 to 25 at a base in Gao in eastern Mali.

"Two soldiers from the same unit were getting on each other's nerves. One soldier wounded two of his comrades with his service weapon," an automatic pistol, army spokesman Frederic Barbry said.

One of the two men was wounded very lightly, while the other's injury was more serious although not life-threatening. Both were flown out following the shooting and brought to hospital in France.

Military police are probing the incident and "once the probe is over, (the shooter) will be flown home," Barbry said.

ATTACK KILLED 207 IN ETHIOPIA: HR COMMISSION

Addis Ababa, Dec. 26: A total of 207 people were killed in a Wednesday attack by gunmen in western Ethiopia, the country's Human Rights Commission (EHRC) said, more than doubling a previous count.

The independent government body had on Wednesday said 100 people were killed in their sleep and crops burned in a pre-dawn assault in the Metekel area of the Benishangul-Gumuz region.

"133 of the victims were adult men and 35 were adult women. Seventeen children, one of whom a six-month-old baby, and 20 elderly persons were killed," the EHRC said in a statement posted to Twitter late Friday.

Mostly inhabited by ethnic Shinasha, Oromo and Amhara people — the last two making up Ethiopia's most numerous groups — the Metekel area has suffered a string of deadly attacks in recent months.

Local leaders blame ethnic Gumuz people for the violence.

Following Wednesday's attack, "effort is underway to identify the victims with the help of survivors and identity cards," the EHRC said.

3 PEACEKEEPERS OF UN KILLED IN C. AFRICA

Bangui, Dec. 26: Three United Nations peacekeepers have been killed by unidentified combatants in the Central African Republic, the United Nations said, as the country prepares for a general election and fighting continues between rebels and government forces.

The news came after a rebel coalition called off a ceasefire and said it would resume its march on the capital, as well as the arrival of troops from Russia and Rwanda to shore up the government of the resource-rich country.

"Three peacekeepers from Burundi were killed and two others were wounded" following attacks on UN troops and Central African national defence and security forces, the UN said in a statement Friday.

The assaults took place in Dekoa, central Kemo Prefecture, and in Bakouma, in the southern Mbomou Prefecture, it said, without providing further details.

Stephane Dujarric, spokesman for the UN Secretary-General, strongly condemned the latest incident, and called on the CAR authorities to investigate the "heinous" assaults.

Beijing rushes senior CPC leader to Nepal

To assess the ground situation, avert a vertical split in NCP

Oli Govt for Jan 1 winter session

Kathmandu, Dec. 26: A wary China is rushing a high-level delegation led by a vice minister of the Chinese Communist Party here to assess the ground situation and avert a vertical split in the ruling Nepal Communist Party, according to media reports on Saturday, nearly a week after embattled Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli got the House of Representatives dissolved.

Nepal plunged into a political crisis last Sunday after Oli, known for his pro-Beijing leanings, in a surprise move, recommended dissolving the 275-member House, amidst a tussle for power with former prime minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'. Acting on Prime Minister Oli's recommendation, President Bidya Devi Bhandari dissolved the House the same day and announced fresh elections on April 30 and May 10, sparking protests from a large section of the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) led by Prachanda, also a co-chair of the ruling party. China is sending a high-level delegation led by Vice Minister of the International Department of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) Guo Yezhou to Kathmandu, *The Kathmandu Post* reported.

Leading a four-member team, Guo is scheduled to land in Kathmandu on Sunday morning on a regular China Southern Airlines flight," the paper reported, citing sources in both factions of the NCP. Bishnu Rijal, Deputy Head of Department of Foreign Affairs of the NCP's Prachanda-led faction, said that the Chinese side has communicated about Guo's visit to Kathmandu. "I don't have much detail to share with you at this point of time," Rijal was

Kathmandu, Dec. 26: Embattled Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli-led government has recommended the president to summon the winter session of Parliament's upper house on January 1, nearly a week after the lower house was dissolved. Nepal plunged into a political crisis after President Bidya Devi Bhandari dissolved the House of Representatives and announced dates for mid-term elections at the recommendation of Prime Minister Oli on Sunday, sparking protests from a section of the ruling party and various opposition parties.

The ruling Nepal Communist Party has now been virtually divided more than two years after it was formed following the merger of CPN-UML led by Oli and CPN-Maoist Centre led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal

On Sunday, after the dissolution of the House of Representatives, seven ministers close to Prachanda-led faction had resigned from their posts. The budget session of Parliament was prorogued on July 2 by the president on the recommendation of the government.

— PTI

2 cops killed as explosions strike Kabul

Kabul, Dec. 26: A series of explosions hit the Afghan capital on Saturday morning, killing at least two police officers and wounding another two plus a civilian, officials said.

The officers died and a civilian was hurt when a magnetic bomb attached to a police vehicle detonated in western Kabul, said police spokesman Ferdaws Faramarz. Two other police were wounded when a bomb attached to their car exploded earlier Saturday in southern Kabul, Faramarz said.

A third magnetic bomb detonated in eastern Kabul but caused no casualties, he said. There were reports of at least two other blasts elsewhere in the city but police had no immediate details.

The latest attacks came as Taliban and Afghan government negotiators held talks in Qatar, trying to hammer out a peace deal that could put an end to decades of war.

No one has immediately claimed responsibility for the attacks in Kabul. The Islamic State group has claimed responsibility for multiple attacks in the capital in recent months, including on educational institutions that killed 50 people, most of them students.

The talks in Doha have been suspended until early January and there is speculation they could be further delayed.

At the same time, Taliban militants have waged bitter battles against IS fighters, particularly in eastern Afghanistan, while continuing their



Afghan security personnel inspect the site of a bomb attack in Kabul, on Saturday.

insurgency against government forces and keeping their promise not to

attack US and NATO troops. IS has also claimed

responsibility for last week's rocket attacks targeting the major US base

in Afghanistan. There were no casualties. — AP

RUSSIA DETAINS TOP ASSOCIATE OF NAVALNY

Moscow, Dec. 26: A top associate of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was detained after doorstepping an alleged security operative who has inadvertently revealed details of Navalny's supposed poisoning with a Soviet-era nerve agent.

Lyubov Sobol, a key figure in Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, was detained on Friday for 48 hours after a day of interrogation on charges of violent trespassing. The move followed Sobol's attempt on Monday to enter the Moscow apartment of the alleged operative, whom Navalny had previously duped into describing details of the alleged poisoning. Sobol has denied the accusations and insisted that she violated no law by ringing the doorbell to the apartment.

While Sobol was being questioned, the state Investigative Committee issued a statement accusing her of trespassing — charges her colleagues have rejected. Earlier this week, Navalny released the recording of a phone call he said he made to a man he identified as Konstantin Kudryavtsev and described as an alleged member of a group of officers of the Federal Security Service, or FSB, who purportedly poisoned him with the Soviet-era Novichok agent in August and then tried to cover it up.

Navalny said he phoned the man hours before the group Bellingcat released a report. — AP

Blast in Nashville: Communications outages affect all

Nashville, Dec. 26: A recreational vehicle parked in the deserted streets of downtown Nashville exploded early Christmas morning, causing widespread communications outages that took down police emergency systems and grounded holiday travel at the city's airport.

Police were responding to a report of shots fired Friday when they encountered the RV blaring a recorded warning that a bomb would detonate in 15 minutes, Metro Nashville Police Chief John Drake said.

The RV exploded shortly afterward, Drake said. "This morning's attack on our community was intended to create chaos and fear in this season of peace and hope. But Nashvillians have proven time and time again that the spirit of our city cannot be broken," Mayor John Cooper said at a news conference after issuing a curfew for the area.

Police believe the blast was intentional but don't yet know a motive or target, and Drake noted that officials had not received any threats before the explosion. The chief said investigators at the scene "have found tissue that we believe could be remains, but we'll have that examined and let you know at that time."

Police could not say whether it potentially came from someone inside the RV. Three people taken to area hospitals for treatment were in stable condition Friday evening, Cooper said. Surveillance video published on a Twitter account Friday that appeared to be across the street from the blast captured the warning issuing from the RV, "... if you can hear this message, evacuate now," seconds before the explosion.

The blast sent black smoke and flames billowing from the heart of downtown Nashville's tourist scene, an area packed with honky-tonks, restaurants and shops. Buildings shook and windows shattered streets away from the explosion near a building owned by AT&T that lies one block from the company's office tower, a landmark in downtown.

Police declined to say how widespread outages were. The AT&T outages site showed service issues in middle Tennessee and Kentucky. Several police agencies reported that their 911 systems were down because of the outage, including Knox County, home to Knoxville about 180 miles (290 kilometres) east of Nashville.

AT&T said that it was bringing in portable cell sites and was working with law enforcement to get access to make repairs to its equipment. — AP

Intercepted attack plot by IS: Russia

Moscow, Dec. 26: Russia's FSB security service said Saturday it had foiled an attack planned by a cell loyal to the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group in the country's unstable southern republic of Dagestan, arresting four people.

"Members of the group planned to detonate an explosive close to an administrative building belonging to security services, followed by an armed attack against interior ministry employees" in regional capital Makhachkala, the FSB said in a statement.

As well as arresting four "members of the international IS terrorist group", investigators found "firearms and bladed weapons, a large amount of ammunition and an explosive device", it added, along with mobile phones containing "exchanges with organisers located abroad".

On December 17, police killed two attackers targeting security forces in Russia's neighbouring republic of Chechnya.

Six people were also killed during an October "counter-terrorism" operation in Chechnyan capital Grozny, including two members of the security forces.

Russia's territories in the Caucasus were ravaged by two wars between federal troops and Chechen separatists in the 1990s and 2000s.

Increasingly Islamist in character, the insurgency spread to other republics in the region and declared allegiance to IS in 2015.

While the jihadist group's influence remains limited, occasional attacks against the authorities persist in Chechnya, — AP

● **POLICE WERE** responding to a report of shots fired Friday when they encountered the RV blaring a recorded warning that a bomb would detonate in 15 minutes.

● **POLICE EVACUATED** nearby buildings and called in the bomb squad. The RV exploded shortly afterward, Metro Nashville Police Chief John Drake said.

● **POLICE BELIEVE** the blast was intentional but don't yet know a motive or target, and Drake noted that officials had not received any threats before the explosion.

● **THE BLAST** sent black smoke and flames billowing from the heart of downtown Nashville's tourist scene, an area packed with honky-tonks, restaurants and shops.

● **BUILDINGS SHOOK** and windows shattered streets away from the explosion near a building owned by AT&T that lies one block from the company's office tower, a landmark in downtown.

"We do not know if that was a coincidence, or if that was the intention," police spokesman Don Aaron said. He said earlier that some people were taken to the department's central precinct for questioning but declined to give details. AT&T said the affected building is the central office of a telephone exchange, with network equipment in it.

The blast interrupted service, but the company declined to say how widespread outages were.

The AT&T outages site showed service issues in middle Tennessee and Kentucky. Several police agencies reported that their 911 systems were down because of the outage, including Knox County, home to Knoxville about 180 miles (290 kilometres) east of Nashville.

AT&T said that it was bringing in portable cell sites and was working with law enforcement to get access to make repairs to its equipment. — AP

TWO ARRESTED FOR CRASH THAT KILLED 2 GOVS

Mexico City, Dec. 26: Four people have been arrested in connection with the 2018 crash of a helicopter that killed a central Mexican governor and her husband — who had preceded her as governor — authorities said. The Agusta 109 helicopter crashed in flames 10 minutes after takeoff on Dec. 24 that year while carrying newly installed Puebla Gov. Martha Erika Alonso and her husband, former Gov. Rafael Moreno Valle, as well as three other people.

The Puebla state prosecutor's office Friday said the four suspects worked for a Rotor Flight Services, a company "related to the functioning of the aircraft."

It said the suspects were accused of culpable homicide, damage to another's property and false testimony.

The Mexico City prosecutor's office said Friday the woman detained in the capital had been in charge of the shop where the helicopter had received maintenance. Mexico's then secretary of communications and transportation, Javier Jiménez Espriú, said in March 2019 that investigators had concluded the crash was probably caused by a technical problem. — AP

Dagestan and neighbouring Ingushetia. — AFP

FLIP | SIDE

Judges who have him to thank for their position rebuffed his claims

Trump made lasting impact on courts

Washington, Dec. 26: On this, even President Donald Trump's most fervent critics agree: He has left a deep imprint on the federal courts that will outlast his one term in office for decades to come.

He used the promise of conservative judicial appointments to win over Republican skeptics as a candidate. Then as president, he relied on outside conservative legal organisations and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to employ an assembly line-like precision to install more than 230 judges on the federal bench, including the three newest justices of the Supreme Court.

Trump never tired of

boasting about it. Indeed, undeterred by Democratic criticism, the Senate was still confirming judges more than a month after Trump lost his reelection bid to Joe Biden.

"Trump has basically done more than any president has done in a single term since (President Jimmy) Carter to put his stamp on the judiciary," said Jonathan Adler, a law professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Law in Cleveland, Ohio, adding that Congress created around 150 new judgeships during Carter's presidency.

The impact will be enduring. Among the Trump-appointed judges, who hold lifetime positions,

● **AS PRESIDENT**, he relied on outside conservative legal organisations and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to employ an assembly line-like precision to install more than 230 judges on the federal bench, including the three newest justices of the Supreme Court.

several are still in their 30s. The three Supreme Court picks could still be on the court at the 21st century's midpoint, 30 years from now. Beyond the Supreme Court, 30 percent of the judges on the nation's court of appeals,

where all but a handful of cases reach their end, were appointed by Trump. But numbers don't tell the entire story.

The real measure of what Trump has been able to do will be revealed in countless court decisions in the years to come on abortion, guns, religious rights and a host of other culture wars issues. When it came to the president's own legal challenges of the election results, however, judges who have him to thank for their position rebuffed his claims.

But in many other important ways, his success with judicial appointments already is paying dividends for conservatives. When the Supreme Court

blocked New York from enforcing certain limits on attendance at churches and synagogues in areas designated as hard hit by Covid-19, Justice Amy Coney Barrett, the newest member of the court, cast the decisive fifth vote.

Previously, the court had allowed restrictions on religious services over the dissent of four justices, including the other two Trump nominees, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh. Five Trump appointees were in the majority of the 6-4 decision by the full 11th US Circuit Court of Appeals in September that made it harder for felons in Florida to regain the right to vote.

— AP

SHORT TAKES

JUDGE DELAYS
EXECUTION OF
U.S. WOMAN

Washington, Dec. 26: A federal judge said the Justice Department unlawfully rescheduled the execution of the only woman on federal death row, potentially setting up the Trump administration to schedule the execution after president-elect Joe Biden takes office.

US District Court Judge Randolph Moss also vacated an order from the director of the Bureau of Prisons that had set Lisa Montgomery's execution date for January 12.

Montgomery had previously been scheduled to be put to death at the Federal Correctional Complex in Terre Haute, Indiana, this month, but Moss delayed the execution after her attorneys contracted Coronavirus visiting their client.

TURKISH OPPN
TV STATION
SHUTS DOWN

Istanbul, Dec. 26: A private Turkish TV station that aired pro-Kurdish opposition views has shut down less than a month after launch, raising press freedom concerns in a country often chastised by rights groups.

Olav TV, owned by businessman and former minister Cavit Caglar, began broadcasting on November 30 and was pulled off the air on Friday.

Its staff announced its closure live on air.

Caglar said he pulled out of the venture because the station's editorial line veered too close to the pro-Kurdish opposition, while the editor claimed he had bowed to government pressure.

Executive editor Suleyman Sarilar said on air that the network had aimed to maintain equal distance from every segment in Turkey's polarised society. "But we have seen that we can no longer keep up with this kind of broadcasting ... Cavit (Caglar) said he was under intense pressure from the government and that he cannot move forward," he claimed.

BUTCHERING
LOVER: RUSSIAN
GETS 12.5 YRS

Saint Petersburg, Dec. 26: A Russian historian and Napoleon enthusiast was sentenced to 12-and-a-half-years in prison for murdering and dismembering his young lover last year.

The Saint Petersburg trial, which spurred activists to voice growing anger over domestic abuse in Russia, began in June after delays due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Oleg Sokolov, 64, had admitted murdering 24-year-old Anastasia Yeshchenko but said he committed the crime against his former student and lover in the heat of the moment during an argument.

He was arrested in November last year after he was found drunk and carrying a backpack containing a woman's arms. Judge Yulia Maximenko sentenced Sokolov on Friday to "12 years and six months in a strict regime penal colony" on charges of murder and the illegal possession of firearms.

"He was aware of his actions at the time of the crime," Maximenko said as she read out the verdict.

BRITISH DOUBLE
AGENT GEORGE
BLAKE DIES

Moscow, Dec. 26: George Blake, a former British intelligence officer who worked as a double agent for the Soviet Union, has died in Russia. He was 98.

Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, known as SVR, announced his death Saturday in a statement, which didn't give any circumstances of his death. Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed condolences, hailing Blake as a "brilliant professional" and a man of "remarkable courage." Blake has lived in Russia since his daring escape from a British prison in 1966 and was given the rank of Russian intelligence colonel.

Born in the Netherlands, Blake joined British intelligence during World War II. He was posted to Korea when the war there erupted in 1950 and was detained by the Communist north. He said he volunteered to work for the Soviet Union after witnessing relentless US bombing of North Korea. In a statement issued in 2017 through SVR, Blake emphasised that he decided to switch sides after seeing civilians massacred by the "American military machine."

UK variant strikes Spain, France

New virus strain has prompted more than 50 countries to impose travel restrictions on the UK

Madrid, Dec. 26: Spain has registered its first cases of a Coronavirus variant believed to be particularly infectious that emerged in Britain. Madrid's regional government said on Saturday.

The first case of a particularly infectious coronavirus variant that recently emerged in Britain has been confirmed in France, the health ministry said on Friday.

The person — a French citizen living in Britain — is asymptomatic and self-isolating at home in Tours in central France, the ministry said.

The person arrived from London on December 19 and was tested in hospital on December 21 and found to be positive for the strain of the virus known as VOC 202012/01.

"The health authorities have carried out contact-tracing for the health professionals taking care of the patient," the ministry said in a statement.

Any of their contacts that were seen as vulnerable would similarly be isolated, the statement said.

In addition to this first case, "to date, several positive samples that may suggest the VOC 202012/01 variant are being sequenced" by the specialist laboratories of the national Pasteur Institute, the statement added.

The region said four cases had been detected involving people who had recently arrived from the UK or had close contact with someone who had.

The father, mother and sister of a young man who arrived in Madrid by plane last week have tested positive for the coronavirus variant, it added.

The young man is suspected to have the new variant as well but Spanish authorities are waiting for the results of a polymerase chain reaction PCR test to confirm this.

The fourth confirmed case of the new variant involves a man who arrived in Madrid on December 20 on another flight.

"The patients are not seriously ill, we know that this strain is more transmissible, but it does not cause more serious illness," Madrid regional deputy health chief Antonio Zapatero told a news conference.

"There is no need for alarm." There are another three suspected cases of the coronavirus variant but the results of tests will only be available on Tuesday or Wednesday, Zapatero said.

The new strain of the virus has prompted more than 50 countries including Spain to impose travel restrictions on the UK.

Madrid has banned all entries from the United Kingdom except for Spanish nationals and residents.

France and Italy have also already confirmed cases of the new variant, while the World Health Organisation reported that nine cases have been detected in Denmark and one each in the Netherlands and Australia.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said the new viral strain "may be up to 70 percent more transmissible than the original version of the disease". — *AFP*



A near-deserted Old Bond Street in London is pictured on Saturday, as Londoners continue to live under Tier 4 lockdown restrictions. Fears over new strains and surging Covid-19 infections in general across Europe have severely dampened the mood over the holiday season. — *AFP*

UK millions face tough
post-Christmas curbs

London, Dec. 26: Millions more people across different parts of the UK entered tougher lockdown restrictions from December 26, the day after Christmas marked annually as Boxing Day, as part of plans announced earlier this week to contain the rapid spread of a highly transmissible variant of Coronavirus.

Around six million people in east and south-east England have joined many others into Tier 4, England's highest Covid level which includes a "stay at home" order.

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● **LOCKDOWNS HAVE also started in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and measures have been reimposed in Wales after being eased for Christmas Day, when the UK crossed another grim milestone of 70,000 virus deaths.**

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Under the toughest Tier 4 restrictions, all non-essential shops, bars and

restaurants are closed and people are not allowed to meet other households, except in a support bubble or in an outdoor public space with one other person. Large parts of England were already in this tier pre-Christmas, including London, after the new mutation was found to be spreading fastest in those regions. With the devolved administrations setting their own strategies,

Northern Ireland goes into a six-week lockdown from Saturday with non-essential shops shut and the hospitality open only for takeaway services. — *PTI*

NO COMMERCIAL
FLIGHTS IN LANKA
AS OF NOW

Colombo, Dec. 26: Sri Lanka has postponed the reopening of its airspace for commercial flights, scheduled for Saturday, to prevent the spread of a new variant of the Coronavirus, officials said.

The next date for resumption of flights will be announced later. The Civil Aviation Authority of Sri Lanka (CAASL) had announced last week that it will resume international flights operations from December 26, eight months after they were closed in view of the Covid-19 outbreak. The decision was taken in the wake of the new Coronavirus strain. — *PTI*

Beijing residents
face restrictions

Beijing, Dec. 26: China's capital has urged residents not to leave the city during the upcoming Lunar New Year holidays, implementing fresh restrictions after several Coronavirus infections last week.

Two domestic cases were reported on Friday, a convenience store worker and a Hewlett Packard Enterprise employee. Another two asymptomatic cases were discovered in Beijing earlier in the week.

Two domestic cases were reported on Friday, a convenience store worker and a Hewlett Packard Enterprise employee. Another two asymptomatic cases were discovered in Beijing earlier in the week. Beijing is conducting testing on a limited scale in the neighbourhoods and workplaces where the cases were found. To contain any new outbreaks, the Beijing government cancelled big gatherings such as sports events and temple fairs. It says applications will be strictly reviewed for any major events. Venues such as cinemas, libraries and museums have to operate at 75% capacity. It also called on companies not to arrange business trips outside the city and abroad. Lunar New Year is on February 12. Separately, officials in the northeast-

ern port city of Dalian said Friday that they had tested over 4.75 million people for the Coronavirus after 24 confirmed infections this month.

Authorities have shut schools and all public spaces in five neighbourhood divisions in Dalian, and only essential workers can leave their compounds. — *AP*

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TOKYO CONFIRMS
RECORD HIGH OF
949 NEW CASES

Tokyo, Dec. 26: Tokyo has confirmed 949 new cases of the deadly novel Coronavirus, a new high for the Japanese capital, as the country struggles with an upsurge that is spreading nationwide.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government said on Saturday that the additional cases bring the prefectural total to 55,851. Japan had 3,823 new cases on Friday for a national total of 213,547, with 3,155 deaths, the health ministry said.

Japan has not been able to slow the infections despite government requests for the people to avoid going out for dinner and parties before and during the holiday season. Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike has ordered bars to close early and urged residents to avoid nonessential outings.

But many people have continued commuting on crowded trains and going out for dinner and drinks. And now with a new virus variant from the United Kingdom reaching, there's danger: — *AP*

EU starts vaccine
rollout: Doses reach
Italy, Spain, France

Paris, Dec. 26: The European Union teed up a vaccine rollout Saturday, even as countries in the bloc were forced back into lockdown by a new strain of the virus, believed to be more infectious, that has spread from Britain to France and Spain and even as far as Japan.

The pandemic has claimed more than 1.7 million lives and is still running rampant in much of the world, but the recent launching of inoculation campaigns has boosted hopes that 2021 could bring a respite.

First doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine arrived in hard-hit Italy, Spain and France on Saturday morning ready for distribution to elderly care facilities and hospital staff.

"We'll get our freedom back, we'll be able to embrace again," Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio said as he urged Italians to get the shot.

Vaccinations in all 27 European Union countries will begin on Sunday, after regulators approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine on December 21.

Several countries including France, Spain, Japan, Denmark, Lebanon, Germany, Australia and the Netherlands have reported ca-

POC DOCTOR DIES
OF COVID AFTER
RACIST PLAINTS

Indianapolis, Dec. 26: A Black doctor who died battling Covid-19 complained of racist medical care in widely shared social media posts days before her death, prompting an Indiana hospital system to promise a "full external review" into her treatment.

Dr. Susan Moore, 52, tested positive for Covid-19 late last month and was admitted to IU Health North Hospital in Carmel, Indiana, according to a Facebook post. Acutely aware of her condition and medical procedures, the physician said had to repeatedly ask for medication, scans and routine checks while admitted at a hospital in Carmel. — *AP*

ses of the new strain, which has sent jitters through already overstretched health services. More than 25 million total infections have been recorded in Europe on Friday, and Russia on Saturday said it had topped three million. — *AFP*

Ahead of WHO
probe, China hails
handling of virus

Beijing, Dec. 26: China's ruling Communist Party leaders have congratulated themselves on their "extremely extraordinary" success in handling the Covid-19 outbreak domestically, ahead of a World Health Organisation probe into the disease's origins.

China faced a barrage of criticism at home and abroad over its initial handling of the virus, which emerged in the central city of Wuhan last December.

China's Politburo, the top decision-making body of the Communist Party, said late Friday that the party leadership "played a decisive role in leading ... China in prevailing over the rare risks and challenges this year." "At the critical moment ... the Party Central Committee took a long-term view ... achieving an extremely extraordinary glory in this extremely unusual year," state news agency Xinhua reported, citing a statement issued after the two-day meeting.

China has largely curbed the spread of the virus, and was one of the only major economies to report growth this year. But it has been accused of covering up the initial outbreak, and so contributing to the virus' spread internationally. At home, Beijing has attempted to stifle criticism by punishing at least eight whistleblowers. A Chinese citizen journalist who reported on Wuhan's outbreak, Zhang Zhan, has been detained since May and is expected to go on trial on Monday. — *AP*

TURKMENISTAN
PREZ: LICORICE
CAN CURE COVID

Ashgabat, Dec. 26: Well-known for his baffling botanical pronouncements, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov claimed Saturday that licorice could cure Coronavirus, the latest supposed miracle cure in a country still claiming zero cases.

"Scientists from every country are looking for effective cures, running various studies, and one of them could be licorice root," the leader of the authoritarian ex-Soviet country told ministers.

Without citing any scientific evidence, former dentist Berdimukhamedov claimed that "Licorice stops the Coronavirus from developing" and "even a weak concentration of a water-based extract has a neutralising effect." — *AFP*

cism by punishing at least eight whistleblowers. A Chinese citizen journalist who reported on Wuhan's outbreak, Zhang Zhan, has been detained since May and is expected to go on trial on Monday. — *AP*

LOW-KEY | EVENT

Families that reunite for Christmas celebrated apart this yr

Services move online, people stay home

Rome, Dec. 26: Families that usually reunite on Christmas over a hearty, lingering meal celebrated apart Friday, services shifted online, and gift exchanges were low-key in one of the most unusual and subdued holiday seasons in decades.

The Coronavirus left almost no one unaffected. Patricia Hager, 60, delivered homemade caramel rolls for breakfast to family and friends in Bismarck, North Dakota, a state that didn't get hit until later in the pandemic but was struck hard.

It seemed every time she opened her door this holiday season, someone had left smoked salmon, baskets of nuts or cookies.

"This year Christmas love is expressed at the door," she said.

"I'm glad that people will probably be with us next year with the vaccines. I can give up anything for that." With a child due in February, Song Ju-hyeon of Paju, South Korea, near Seoul, said home is the only place she feels safe.

The government reported 1,241 new cases Friday, a new daily record for the country. "It doesn't feel like Christmas anyway, there's no carols being played on the streets," she said. "It's Christmask," the *Daily Nation* newspaper declared in Kenya, where a surge in cases led to doctors ending a brief strike Christmas Eve.

● **POPE FRANCIS delivered his Christmas blessing from inside the Vatican, breaking with his traditional speech from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica to tens of thousands in St. Peter's Square.**

Celebrations were muted in the East African hub as a curfew prevented overnight church vigils.

Pope Francis delivered his Christmas blessing from inside the Vatican, breaking with his traditional speech from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica to tens of thousands in St. Peter's Square. Tourism in Italy has virtually vanished and the government's

Coronavirus restrictions for the holidays foiled any plans by locals to flock to the square. Citing a cause for optimism, Francis said the development of Covid-19 vaccines shines "lights of hope" on the world.

In a passionate appeal to leaders, businesses and international organisations, he said they must ensure that the most vulnerable and needy in the pandemic be first in line to receive the vaccine. Bells rang out around Bethlehem as the traditional birthplace of Jesus celebrated.

But the closure of Israel's international airport to foreign tourists, along with Palestinian restrictions banning intercity travel in the are-

as they administer in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, kept visitors away.

In Beijing, official churches abruptly cancelled Mass after China's capital was put on high alert following two confirmed Covid-19 cases last week. Two new asymptomatic cases were reported Friday. With economies reeling around the world, it wasn't a year of lavish gifts.

Robin Sypniewski of Middlesex County, New Jersey, was furloughed twice from her job serving school lunches and is now on reduced hours as her husband retires next week as a trash collector and her daughter wrestles with student debt. — *AP*

— *AFI*