

SHORT TAKES

Police constable beaten by protesters

New Delhi: A head constable of Delhi police was allegedly beaten by anti-farm laws protesters at the Tikri border on Friday. According to the Delhi police, head constable Jitender Rana was present at the spot to put up a poster of a missing protester. The Delhi police said that the police personnel has received multiple stitches and an FIR has been registered against an unknown person in this regard. Tikri border is one of the protesting sites where farmers are agitating against the farm laws. Farmers have been protesting at different borders of the national capital since November 26 last year against the three newly enacted farm laws—Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020; and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020.

City budget likely in 2nd week of March

New Delhi: The Delhi government is expected to present its budget for 2021-22 in the second week of March, focussing on its key areas of health, education and infrastructure including water supply, although new taxes are unlikely, sources in the government said on Friday. The government is readying the blue print of the budget and meetings with different departments are being held to determine their demands and likely revenue collections, said a source in the government. “Economically speaking, 2020-21 was a very difficult time for the government, yet it successfully met all the challenges of dealing with the Covid, despite a steep fall in revenue,” the source said. The government had presented ‘65,000 crore budget for 2020-2021 that was around 10 per cent more than that in 2019-20. “Although no dates have been fixed for presentation of the budget, it’s likely to come around second week of March,” the source said. — PTI

Shah: J&K will get statehood at right time

■ **Continued from Page 1** annulled it. Jammu and Kashmir has been a top priority for the current government since it took power in 2014, he said.

Responding to Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury’s charge that foreign delegations were being taken to the region, but no all-party delegation was sent to the UT, Mr Shah said the Opposition parties were “free to visit the region.”

During his reply, the home minister also assured people of Jammu and Kashmir that “no one will lose their land” and the government has sufficient land for development works.

Decentralisation and devolution of power have taken place in the Union Territory following the revocation of Article 370, Mr Shah said, noting that panchayat elections saw over 51 per cent voting. “Panchayats have been given administrative and financial powers for local development, something they lacked earlier,” he added. — PTI

Republic Day clash: 16 farmers who participated in tractor parade still untraceable

Farmer unions seek high-level judicial inquiry

New Delhi, Feb. 13: Protesting farmer unions on Saturday demanded a high-level judicial inquiry into the violence during the tractor rally in Delhi on January 26 and the alleged “false” cases slapped on the peasants.

Addressing a press conference at the Singhu border, Samyukta Kisan Morcha leaders asked farmers who are getting police notices not to appear before the force directly and instead approach the legal cell constituted by the unions for any assistance.

Kuldeep Singh, a member of SKM’s legal cell, said that a retired judge of the Supreme Court or high court should probe the incidents to unravel the “conspiracy” behind the January 26 violence and the alleged “false cases” against the farmers.

According to SKM leaders, 16 farmers who had participated in the tractor parade are still untraceable. In the Republic Day violence, over 500 police personnel had been injured, while a protester had died. On January 26, thousands of protesting farmers who reached ITO from the Ghazipur border clashed with the police. Driving tractors, many of them reached the Red Fort and entered the monument, where a religious flag was hoisted.

At the press conference, another leader Ravinder Singh said that 122 farmers had so far been arrested by Delhi Police in connection with 14 of the 44 FIRs, adding that SKM will provide legal and financial aid to all the arrested farmers.

The Morcha leaders

■ **ADDRESSING A** press conference at the Singhu border, Samyukta Kisan Morcha leaders asked farmers who are getting police notices not to appear before the force directly and instead approach the legal cell constituted by the unions for any assistance

claimed that “false” cases were being slapped on farmers charging them with serious offences like dacoity and attempt to murder to “harass” them.

“Ten farmers have been granted bail so far and five bail applications have been filed. Priority is being given to those farmers who are not booked under Section 307 of the IPC or other serious offences,” the SKM said in a statement later.

Ravinder Singh said that the Morcha will provide ₹2,000 to every arrested farmer for spending in the prison canteen.

A legal team of SKM had on Friday visited the Tihar jail where 112 farmers were currently lodged, he said. The union leaders have requested Delhi Jal Board V-C and senior AAP leader Raghav Chadha to ensure that farmers are kept in one jail.

In the statement, the SKM demanded that its legal panel be allowed to meet the arrested farmers without any restrictions and its monetary help be disbursed to them.

“The SKM legal panel has strongly condemned the Delhi government and the police for issuing notice under section 160 CrPC to the farmers in order to rope them in false cases,” it stated. — PTI



Mahatma Gandhi's granddaughter Tara Gandhi Bhattacharjee on Saturday visited Ghazipur on the Delhi-Uttar Pradesh border to extend support to the farmers' movement against the farm laws. — PTI

Delhi police chief reviews arrangements at borders

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 13

Delhi police commissioner S.N. Shrivastava on Saturday reviewed the law and order situation and arrangements at various borders points of the national capital in view of the agitation by farmers protesting the three agri laws, officials said.

During the crime review meeting held with senior officers of the force, the police chief also took stock of action taken against criminals involved in burglary, and other cases related to Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act (NDPS), Excise Act and gambling, they said.

To reduce such crime, Mr Shrivastava stressed the need to take effective and sustained steps.

He insisted on carrying out regular checking of listed criminals, including jail/bail/parole released, temporal and special analysis of crime incidents as well as optimal use of available human resources and technology.

He also stressed the need to assess the performance of anti-snatching teams and use of crime teams regularly.

During the meeting, Special Commissioner of Police (Operation) also briefed Shrivastava about the progress in the ongoing Covid vaccination of Delhi Police personnel, said Anil Mittal, Additional PRO, Delhi Police. Mr Shrivastava also rewarded the police team involved in cracking the “Reliance Jewellery showroom dacoity” case that took place under the Maurya Enclave police station in January.

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During the meeting, Special Commissioner of Police (Operation) also briefed Shrivastava about the progress in the ongoing Covid vaccination of Delhi Police personnel, said Anil Mittal, Additional PRO, Delhi Police. Mr Shrivastava also rewarded the police team involved in cracking the “Reliance Jewellery showroom dacoity” case that took place under the Maurya Enclave police station in January.

Jailed former DU professor tests positive for corona

Nagpur, Feb. 13: Former Delhi University professor G.N. Saibaba, who is serving life term in Nagpur Central Prison for Maoist links, has tested coronavirus positive, a jail official said on Saturday.

Along with him, three other inmates of the jail were found to have contracted the infection, he said.

“G.N. Saibaba tested positive for Covid yesterday. He will be taken for a CT scan and other tests, after which doctors will decide whether to shift him to the Government Medical College and Hospital for treatment,” jail superintendent Anup Kumre said. Earlier this week, gangster Arun Gawli and four other inmates of Nagpur jail had tested positive for the infection.

Saibaba is wheelchair-bound with 90 per cent physical disabilities.

In 2017, a court in Maharashtra’s Gadchiroli had convicted him and four others for Maoist links and indulging in activities amounting to waging war against the country. — PTI

Wrestling coach held in Rohtak firing case

BHASKAR HARI SHARMA
NEW DELHI, FEB 13

In a joint operation by Delhi Police and Haryana police, 31-year-old wrestling coach wanted in the sensational Rohtak murder case was arrested from Samaypur Badli area following inputs received from the Haryana Police. He was involved in the firing incident that took place at a wrestling centre in Rohtak on Friday. In the incident, five people were killed and two were injured.

The accused was identified as, Sukhwinder Mor

■ **THE ACCUSED** was identified as, Sukhwinder Mor (31) resident of Tehsil Gohana, dist Sonapat Haryana. He confessed that he had murdered five people in Jaat College where he was working as a wrestling coach

■ **AMONG THOSE** killed were college employee Manoj Malik, his wife Sakshi Malik, posted with the Railways, a wrestling coach, Satish, and a woman player

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Haryana. He confessed that he had murdered five people in Jaat College where he was working as a wrestling coach.

He is younger of two siblings of an ex-serviceman. After his graduation and one-year course at NIS Patiala he started his career as a wrestling coach in Jaat College Rohtak. He had a troubled married life and got separated from his wife and was thus living alone.

Among those killed were college employee Manoj Malik, his wife Sakshi Malik, posted with the Railways, a wrestling coach, Satish, and a woman player. Among the

injured was a four-year-old son of Manoj and Sakshi, who is undergoing treatment at the PGI in Rohtak, said police, adding that his condition is critical.

According to Delhi DCP (outer north) Rajeev Ranjan, there were inputs that the murderer had escaped in a car and sneaked into Delhi. During patrolling in Badli area, staff found a car moving suspiciously. The car was chased and stopped further during the search a country-made pistol along with 5 rounds was recovered from him.

The Haryana Police was

intimated who also joined the interrogation of the accused.

Earlier superintendent of police Rohtak Rahul Sharma told reporters that the main accused, Sukhwinder, had been working as a wrestling coach at the college’s gymnasium.

After receiving some complaints, Manoj Malik had terminated his services, said Sharma. Prima facie, because of this grudge, he (Sukhwinder) committed the crime, said Mr Sharma.

A case under the appropriate sections of the law has been registered and is being investigated.

Partly cloudy sky, dense fog likely today

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 13

A thick blanket of fog enveloped Delhi on Saturday morning, with the visibility dropping to 50 metres at Safdarjung and 250 metres at Palam at 8.30 am, MeT officials said. The MeT predicted a partly cloud sky with “dense to very dense fog” on Sunday morning. Airport in a statement said that due to fog, low visibility procedures are in progress at Delhi airport, however, all flight operations are normal.

Rahul becoming ‘doomsday man for India’

■ **Continued from Page 1** rejected by the people... The shadows, who were invited to even develop a port. No open tenders, no global tenders. These tendencies of the Congress makes it clear their belief in a democratic system is finished. He (Rahul Gandhi) is probably becoming a Domsday Man for India,” she added. Her remarks irked the Congress and sources said its members have moved a privilege motion against the F

Responding to Mr Gandhi’s “hum do, hamhare do” comment Ms Sitharaman brought the reference of Mr Robert Vadra terming him as “damaad”.

“It would have been nice if he (Mr Gandhi) who talked about “hum do hamhare do” also talked about damaads returning land.. but didn’t say anything about this,” she said while referring to investigations into land

deals involving Mr Vadra. Defending the government on the contentious farm laws, the finance minister said nothing has been done so far that would adversely affect the farmers. She accused the Congress for misguiding the farmers and changing its previously held position on the issue. “I wanted to know from the Congress why it took a U-turn on the farm laws but no reply came,” she said, adding that Mr Gandhi had failed to explain why the Congress ruled Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh did not waive farm loans as promised in their manifestos. “Have APMCs been closed after the introduction of the Farmers Act? He (Mr Gandhi) was speaking like they had been. They (the new laws) are also helping improve the condition of APMCs. He (Mr Gandhi) is insulting everyone...

whether President, Prime Minister or Speaker... constantly lying and insulting the country,” Ms Sitharaman said. Ms Sitharaman also defended the Centre over schemes like the Prime Minister Street Vendors’ ATmanirbhar Nidhi (PM SVANidhi) scheme - which offers collateral-free loans to street vendors. “The PM SVANidhi Yojana, for those who constantly accuse us of dealing with cronies, doesn’t go to cronies. Damaads get land in states which are governed by some parties — Rajasthan, Haryana once upon a time,” she said. The FM said that the government, undeterred by the Covid-19 pandemic, has been pursuing reforms for achieving sustained long-term growth in a bid to make India one of the top economies of the world in the coming decades.

Hitting at the economic models adopted by the Congress regime in the past, the Finance Minister said India used to follow a model based on proximity with some country or other. “We (Congress) were socialist at one particular point of time, communist at another point of time, licence quota, crony capitalism another point of time, and finally even opening of Indian economy, it was us,” she quipped.

However, she said, Bharatiya Janata Party since Jan Sangh days believed in Indian entrepreneurial skills, Indian managerial skills and Indian trade skills. “Unless business creates wealth, the government has nothing to distribute to the poor and migrant labour,” she said, adding, wealth creators, honest taxpayers are, therefore, respected in the country.

Centre may give written assurance on issue of MSP

■ **Continued from Page 1** Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader Mr Rakesh Tikait said the law assuring MSP by the central government would be beneficial for all the farmers of the country while adding that the Indian farmers are being looted by the traders in the absence of such a law.

Sources said the Government believes that the farmers’ agitation should not continue for too long and the issue should be resolved at the earliest. Home Minister Mr Amit Shah has been playing an active role behind the scene on the issue though Agriculture Minister Mr Narendra Tomar and Railway Minister Mr Piyush Goyal were sitting face to face during the talks with the farmers’ unions. The last talks between the two

sides was on January 22.

It is believed that the Government may now give “some sort of written assurance on MSP” to resume talks with the farmers.

“This cannot be an endless agitation and we need to find a solution to the problem. So to break the deadlock the Government is working out a plan to give some written assurance to farmers on MSP. Consultations are currently going on among the highest level in the Government on whether this would be in form of law or some sort of a written assurance and guarantee,” a senior Government functionary said.

Farmers have intensified their agitation in the last few days holding mahapanchayats in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Rajasthan.

Right to protest can’t be anytime, everywhere: SC

■ **Continued from Page 1** and dissent go hand in hand, the apex court had said. Constitutional scheme comes with the right to protest and express dissent, but with an obligation towards certain duties.

It had said the mode and manner of dissent against colonial rule during India’s freedom struggle cannot be equated

with dissent in a self-ruled democracy.

“However, while appreciating the existence of the right to peaceful protest against a legislation... we have to make it unequivocally clear that public ways and public spaces cannot be occupied in such a manner and that too indefinitely,” the top court had said. — PTI

PM wants to ‘hand over’ entire agri biz to his ‘2 friends’: Rahul

■ **Continued from Page 1** Gabbar Singh ‘Tax was brought and small businesses were hit, Mr Gandhi said in the farmers’ rally.

Farmers, labourers, traders are being sidelined and the path is being cleared for two

three businessmen. During the coronavirus lockdown, labourers requested the Prime Minister to give them tickets to go home but he did not yield to it and waived loans of ₹1.5 lakh crore of the rich, he alleged. — PTI

अपर मुख्य कार्यपालक अधिकारी

SHORT TAKES

Security tightened for Kangana in MP

Bhopal: Madhya Pradesh home minister Narottam Mishra on Saturday ordered to strengthen security for shooting of Bollywood actress Kangana Ranaut's upcoming film Dhakad, currently in progress at Sarni in Betul district in the state. The order comes in the wake of disruption of shooting of the film by Congress workers on Friday evening. Congress workers raided the shooting site forcing police to act. Police force deployed at the site canned the unruly protesters to disperse them. The Congress workers were protesting the recent tweet by the actress in which she purportedly termed farmers participating in the stir in Delhi as terrorists. The Congress workers threatened to disrupt the shooting of her film till she apologised for her tweet. Mr Mishra said that strong action would be taken against those who tried to disturb peace.

2 Faruqi accused released from jail

Indore: Following the Madhya Pradesh high court's order, the two men accused of organising a comedy show of stand-up comedian Munawar Faruqi were released from jail on Saturday evening. The Indore bench of the high court had on Friday granted interim bail to Prakash Vyas (23) and Adwin Anthony (25), who were accused of organising a comedy show in Indore, during which Faruqi allegedly insulted Hindu deities. As per the high court's order, the district court on Saturday ordered the release of Vyas and Anthony on a bail of ₹50,000 and a surety of the same amount. The central jail administration released the duo, who refused to say anything to the media on the allegations in the FIR lodged against them. — PTI

6 of family killed in Rajasthan accident

Jaipur: Six people, including four women, were killed and seven others injured when a jeep in which they were travelling collided with a trailer in Sriganganagar district of Rajasthan on Saturday, police said. The incident occurred in Rajiyas when the collision left six people dead on the spot. The injured were rushed to a nearby hospital, police said. All the passengers were from the same family and on their way to Jaisalmer from Sangaria in Hanumangarh district when the accident occurred on a state highway. The deceased were identified as Aarju, Soniya, Suman, Manju, Anil and Bhavishya, the police said. Governor Kalraj Mishra and chief minister Ashok Gehlot expressed grief over the incident and condoled the deaths. — PTI

GOVT TO ORGANISE MUSHAIRA ON THEME OF UNITY

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 13

Minority affairs ministry will be organising a "mushaira" on the theme "Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat" (one India, great India), which is also one of the key programmes of the Narendra Modi government, on February 20 in the national capital. One of the main aims of the 'Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat' encouraging the celebration of India's vibrant regional cultures and diversity. Renowned poets from across the country will recite their poems and couplets. Some of the participants include Wasim Barelvi, Shabeena Adeeb, Manzar Bhopali, Popular Meeruthi, Saba Balrampur, Naseem Nikhat, Mumtaz Naseem, V P Singh, Alok Shrivastava, Surendra Singh Shajar, Khurshed Haider, Aqeel Nomani, Nayyar Jalalpur and Sikandar Hayat Gadbadi. The event will be organised at the Ambedkar International Centre. Minority affairs minister Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi said poets will present their poetry on the theme "Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat" and "Aatmanirbhar Bharat". Noting that "mushaira" and "kavi samelan" have a rich cultural legacy, which strengthens the fabric of unity in diversity, the minister said such events spread the message of peace and also strengthen social harmony and brotherhood in the society.

Jaish cadre conduct recce at NSA's office in New Delhi JeM threat: Doval security increased

New Delhi, Feb. 13: The security has been beefed at the office and residence of national security adviser Ajit Doval after the arrest of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) terrorist Hidayat-Ullah Malik, a Shopian resident. The terrorist had conducted recce at Sardar Patel Bhawan, and other high-value targets in Delhi and had passed on sensitive information to his handlers in Pakistan.

While Malik was arrested on February 6, at least four others were questioned in connection with the case. Amongst them are two residents of Shopian, including Hidayat-ullah Malik's wife, a college student pur-

suing a course in Chandigarh and a Bihar resident.

On February 6 afternoon, Malik was arrested along with arms and ammunition. A vehicle was also seized during the arrest. A case has been registered at Gangyal police station after Malik, chief of a Jaish front group, Lashkar-e-Mustafa, was arrested in Anantnag, and arms and ammunition were found in his possession.

Following his arrest, Malik made a startling disclosure and told interrogators that on the directions his Pakistani handler identified as 'Doctor', on May 25, 2019 he had recorded



Ajit Doval

videos of important installations at New Delhi, including Doval's office.

He took a flight from Srinagar airport on May 24, 2019 to reach Delhi and had returned to Kashmir in a bus following the recce. He also admitted to his Jammu & Kashmir

Police interrogators that he also reced the Samba Sector border area in 2019.

He carried out a recce of the Samba border area along with another terrorist who was arrested in the Ban Toll Plaza attack case. J&K Police also found that Malik had provided a Santro car to one terrorist for a fidayeen attack in May 2020. Malik was deeply entrenched in the terror ecosystem, said the investigators. A senior J&K Police officer said, "He is an important catch. From conducting recce, planning terror attacks to picking and dropping terror operatives, Malik was involved in all."

— Agencies



Sewa Sankalp Yuva Sangathan activists light lamps to pay tributes to martyred CRPF personnel on the eve of the second anniversary of the Pulwama attack in Bhopal on Saturday.

— PTI

J&K HC quashes sedition charges against Cong neta

AGE CORRESPONDENT SRINAGAR, FEB. 13

A former Congress leader of Kargil who was booked by the local police for sedition, among other charges, has been absolved of the same by the Jammu and Kashmir high court.

The court quashed criminal proceedings against the accused Zakir Hussain, a councillor of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC)-Kargil, who was arrested in June last year and charged with sedition and other offences for his audio clip mocking Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and the Army in the wake of a violent face-off between India and China in Ladakh's Galwan valley.

The court said that the offences under which petitioner Hussain has been charged were not made out by the police and, therefore, the registration of FIR, which culminated into filing of the final police report without previous sanction from the competent authority before the Chief Judicial Magistrate, Kargil "is sheer abuse of the process of law."

While allowing the petition of Hussain, Justice Sanjeev Kumar said, "This Court, therefore, finds it a fit case to invoke its inherent powers vested by Section 482 CrPc and quash all the criminal proceedings pending against the petitioner including the impugned FIR with

GALWAN CLASH

▶ **THE COURT** quashed criminal proceedings against the accused Zakir Hussain, a councillor of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC)-Kargil, who was arrested in June last year and charged with sedition and other offences for his audio clip mocking Prime Minister

regard to the audio clip, which allegedly contains conversation between him and one Nissar Ahmed Khan."

A longtime Congress activist, Hussain was arrested by the police on June 19 last year after the audio of his telephonic conversation with Khan in which he could be heard telling the other that the Chinese troops have occupied a large area of Ladakh and that India could hardly stop it from moving ahead further went viral. He was booked under Section 124A (sedition), 153A, 153B, 505(2) and 188 of Indian Penal Code (IPC) at the Police Station, Kargil. The Congress was quick in expelling him from the party even though he had offered a public apology over his remarks. However, the J&K high court granted him bail on September 24 following which he filed a formal petition before it saying the charges leveled against him were false and frivolous.

J&K: Militant accused of killing 3 BJP activists held

YUSUF JAMEEL SRINAGAR, FEB. 13

The Jammu and Kashmir police on Saturday claimed that a "The Resistance Front (TRF)" militant involved in the killing of three BJP activists and a policeman in southern Kulgam district last year was arrested from Samba area of Jammu region overnight. Inspector General of Police (Jammu range), Vijay Kumar, said that a most wanted militant Zahoor Ahmed Rather alias Sahil alias Khalid was hiding in the frontier district for some time and was arrested following receiving specific information about it from the Anantnag police.

TRF which the police insist is a front of outlawed Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT) surfaced in J&K last year and has claimed responsibility for several violent acts that took place across the Valley over a period of time.

On the night of October 29, 2020, a group of militants had killed Fida Hussain Itoo, general secretary of the J&K unit of BJP Yuva Morcha, and two other party workers Umar Ramzan Hajam and Umer Rashid Beigh in Kulgam's Yarpipora village. Earlier in July last year, a police head-constable Abdur Rashid Dar was shot dead from point blank range by gunmen outside his Kulgam's Furrah village.

A statement issued by the police here said that Rather, a resident of Anantnag's Jalkreeri Dooru village, who was involved in these killings was arrested from Teli Basti of Samba's industrial township.

Kotia 'gram panchayat in Odisha' is claimed by both states AP ignores Odisha, holds rural polls

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO BHUBANESWAR, FEB. 13

Despite request by the Odisha government, the Andhra Pradesh government on Saturday executed its plan amid tight security in the disputed Kotia region in Odisha's Koraput district.

In presence of Andhra electoral officials, the voting began at 6.00 am in five villages of Kotia clusters. The villages include Madkar, Daliamba, Barnapadu, Patuineri and Konadara. The voters were seen in a long queue in the morning to cast their votes even after efforts by Potangi block

development officer (BDO) and tehsildar to convince the villagers not to participate in the electoral process.

The Andhra Pradesh government had deployed security personnel at the polling stations.

According to sources, the polls began at 6 am and continued till 3 pm.

On Friday, Koraput collector Abdaal Akhtar had written to his Vizianagaram counterpart appealing not to conduct the elections in the disputed region of Kotia as the matter is currently sub-judice in the Supreme Court.

"I am to bring to your attention that in Contempt

TERRITORIAL DISPUTE

▶ **PEOPLE RESIDING** in border areas have developed weakness towards Andhra Pradesh despite having an emotional bond with Odisha.

Petition No. 172/2021 arising out of Original Suit No. 10/1968 (The State of Odisha Vs. M.Hari Jawaharlal and Others), the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India has been pleased to issue notice to the State of Andhra Pradesh and post the case to Friday, the 19th February, 2021. In its oral

observations, the Court has also observed that should the State of Andhra Pradesh go ahead with its plans as regards the subject mentioned above, necessary consequences will follow. The same was pronounced in the presence of counsel for the State of Andhra Pradesh. A copy of the associated case documents have been handed over to the counsel for the State of Andhra Pradesh," the Collector wrote in the letter.

However, paying no attention to the request, the Andhra Pradesh government conducted the panchayat polls to claim its jurisdiction rights over Kotia.

No Covid death reported in 17 states, UTs in 24 hrs

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 13

In a significant development on the Covid-19 front, 17 states and union territories have not reported a single death in the last 24 hours in India while 13 states and UTs had deaths ranging between 1 to 5. Total fatalities due to novel coronavirus in the last 24 hours were 103.

The new cases too are on a decline as 12, 143 fresh cases were detected in the last 24 hours. India's total active caseload currently stands at 1.36 lakh consists of just 1.25% of country's total positive cases

is 97.32%. Kerala, with highest number of positive cases (5, 397) has also reported the maximum number of single day recoveries (5,332). In Maharashtra, 2,422 people recovered in the past 24 hours followed by 486 in Tamil Nadu. Kerala continues to report the highest daily new cases at 5,397. It is followed by Maharashtra with 3,670, while Tamil Nadu reported 483 new cases.

Meanwhile, India has vaccinated 80.52 lakh

healthcare and frontline workers with the first dose and the second dose to complete immunization against Covid-19 has started. The central government has asked states to adhere to the timelines for vaccinations.

The immunisation of healthcare workers, that had started on January 16, had to be completed by February 20 with the second shots and for those left behind, the states can complete the ₹mop up' round by February 25. Similarly, for the frontline workers the deadline to end vaccination is March 1 with additional five days given to cover those left behind for any reasons.

A total of 27 deaths have been reported among those who have been vaccinated out of which 3 deaths have taken place in the last 24 hours.

Meanwhile, India has vaccinated 80.52 lakh

to amazement of the gathering.

A painter in her was first spotted by the renowned artist J. Swaminathan, the first chairman of Bharat Bhavan, when he saw her drawing some pictures in a paper then.

"I was encouraged by Swaminathan Sir to paint on a canvas. I was later hired as a temporary artist to work in Bharat Bhavan. I have blossomed as an accomplished artist

of Bhil painting under his tutelage", Bhuri Bai, who has no formal education, narrated.

She has been honoured with Sikhar Samman and Devi Ahalya Bai awards of Madhya Pradesh government and Rani Durgawati national award during the period.

Bhuri Bai came to Bhopal along with her husband immediately after her marriage when she was barely 12 years old.

2 Maoists gunned down in MP encounter

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY BHOPAL, FEB. 13

Two Maoists including a woman were early on Saturday morning killed in an encounter with police in tribal-dominated district of Mandla in Madhya Pradesh.

The encounter took place in the forested village of Lalpur.

The 2 slain Naxals, identified as Pramila (25) and Mainu Uike (21), hailed from south Bastar district of Sukma in Chhattisgarh and together carried a bounty of ₹14 lakh, state home minister Narottam Mishra said.

They belonged to platoon number 3 of Vistar dalam of outlawed CPI (Maoist) functioning in south-western Madhya Pradesh districts of Balaghat, Mandla and Dindori.

Acting on a tip off on the presence of a dozen armed Maoists in Sala forest, security forces launched a search operation in the area, police said. The Maoists opened fire on security forces when the latter zeroed in on the rebel camp, leading to a fierce gun battle between them that lasted 4 hours. Bodies of the 2 slain Maoists recovered at the encounter site.

A SLR assault rifle, one 303 rifle and a 315 bore gun were recovered at the encounter site.

Bhuri opens art event at complex where she worked as labourer

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY BHOPAL, FEB. 13

Padma Shri Bhuri Bai, who "singlehandedly" took traditional painting of her tribe Bhil from her village to international level, on Saturday graced as chief guest on the occasion of 39th foundation Day celebration of the iconic art complex Bharat Bhavan here where she worked as a labourer nearly 40 years ago.

The tribal woman from remote village of Pituri in Madhya Pradesh's Jhabua district was overwhelmed with emotion as she recounted her days of carrying bricks on her head during construction of Bharat Bhavan around 4 decades ago and mesmerising the connoisseurs of art at her exhibitions in the western countries in the last two and half decades.

"I vividly remember how I used to perspire profuse-



▶ **Padma Shri Bhuri Bai**, who "singlehandedly" took traditional painting of her tribe Bhil from her village to international level, on Saturday graced as chief guest on the occasion of 39th foundation Day celebration of the iconic art complex Bharat Bhavan

ly while carrying bricks on my head in those summer days, how I used to create mixture of cement and sand manually and how I was savouring 4

'rotis' during the lunch break under a tree then. Every inch of the Bharat Bhavan had been drenched with my sweat then", she narrated, much

THE ASIAN AGE

14 FEBRUARY 2021



Sanjeev Ahluwalia

Off the beaten track

A bottom-up view of the annual Budget

Despite the hoopla around the Union government's Budget, for citizens, allocations in their state budgets matter more. Nearly two thirds of total government expenditure is done by states and for capex, this proportion increases to 90 per cent (FY 2020-21 BE data).

Twenty-eight states and eight Union Territories share the enlarged pie at their level. No individual state matches the fiscal power of the Union finance minister's signature releasing budget allocations. But for citizens, at the receiving end of the pipe, what matters most is the efficiency and effectiveness of the last-mile expenditure management by the state governments.

Living in a well-performing state matters and not just for employment. Progressive "states" bend with the breeze blowing from Delhi, to tap the flow of funds, their way. Telangana is a good example. More importantly, enjoying decent levels of basic public services — subsidised food, education, public health, drinking water electricity and public transport, direct income transfers to farmers, women, old age pensioners and support to the specially-abled, subsidised credit — depends crucially on the efficiency of the local administration.

The primary federal fiscal role of the Union is to collect tax and pass through a mandated share (41 per cent XV Finance Commission) to the states. The Union government, however, games how much it passes through. The mandatory sharing applies only to tax not cess (say on petroleum products). Increasing the cess on imported liquor, as done in the Budget, whilst lowering the duty rate, avoids sharing the extra revenue with states. This is in bad faith.

Voluntary adoption of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017 enhanced centralisation of fiscal power in the Union. The GST council collectively determines tax rates. But the Union has veto power. Happily, the benefits, despite the convoluted design (multiple rates) of the GST, far exceed the costs from dilution of state tax autonomy. The avoided cost of pancaked sales tax on goods sold across state borders and the ease of movement — most recently via e-tax invoices — will reduce tax leakage and benefit both the Union and the states.

Significant "tax gouging" potential, however, remains with states via punitive tax on the non-virtuous (excise duty on alcohol) and the well-off (exorbitant sales tax on petroleum products and registration fee on purchasing a personal motorised vehicle or property). Less developed states use this mechanism pervasively. The share of "tax gouging" sources was just 46 per cent (2020-21 BE) in well-developed Maharashtra as compared to 63 per cent in Telangana and 57 per cent in Uttar Pradesh. Significantly, Maharashtra and Delhi — both high-income states — recently reduced the registration fee on property purchase, hoping to boost real estate transactions.

Less developed states rely heavily on tax receipts shared by the Union government, per the formula of the quinquennial finance commission, which compensates states with low tax potential to promote "balanced development". For Maharashtra and Telangana, central tax transfers are only 21 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively, of own tax revenue. Conversely, in Uttar Pradesh, central tax transfers are 87 per cent of own tax revenue.

Irrespective of the state you live in, if your annual income is more than Rs 1 million you are in the top quintile (20 per cent). Be prepared to finance delivery of common use public services to the bottom 40 per cent for some time. Aspirers (40 per cent) in the middle do not pay income tax either. But they consume more and thereby pull their tax weight by paying GST, sales tax and excise and bear the impact of customs duties (indirect taxes). It rankles that honest taxpayers also subsidise fraud and tax evasion. Their rightful outrage was mellowed by the Union Budget retaining this year's tax regime including the income tax relaxations and rationalised GST rates. But watch out for your state budget levies coming soon!

A "soft tax" regime rides majorly on the government's ability to ramp up tax collections using big data analytics to make tax evaders and their in-government colluders accountable. It does not help when ideologically driven e-privacy paranoia results in data "privacy" being privileged over better tax collection!

The only upward bias in the Budget is in import taxes to protect domestic manufacturing under the Atma Nirbhar Bharat program, possibly to finance the new performance linked financial incentives for 13 industrial sectors. The intent, as also behind the proposal to set up three new textile parks, is to encourage global entrepreneurs to set up manufacturing hubs in India and create good new jobs — on the template of China three decades ago.

The big push is on capital investment, financed by imported capital. Foreign investment in insurance is now liberalized, raising the limit from 49 per cent to 75 per cent. Private Banks (ICICI, HDFC and Axis Bank) already operate under majority foreign ownership. There are also plans for restarting privatisation after a lapse of 15 years creating new opportunities for inward financial flows.

The International Financial Centre at GIFT city got another round of special incentives to ramp up business. Asset reconstruction and management companies are proposed to deal with the swollen non-performing assets (13.5 per cent of assets per RBI), giving public sector banks a clean slate to restart lending. Less convincingly, a Development Finance Institution is to re-engage with long-term project finance to compensate for an absent corporate bond market. Fintech, meanwhile, awaits formalisation, through legislation, of the hitherto ambivalent regulatory regime for cryptocurrency.

The revised FY 2020-21 Budget is expansionary with government borrowing a "never before" net ₹18.5 trillion (fiscal deficit 9.5 per cent of GDP). For the moment inflation is moderating as the RBI curtails excess liquidity and the economy heals steadily.

What follows next depends on the course of the pandemic. There is enough fiscal power in the FY 2021-22 Budget (fiscal deficit 6.8 per cent of GDP) for enhancing demand and facilitating growth. This comes at the expense of pandemic-related relief measures, which are skimpy and will be missed by the bottom 40 per cent who are also the least able to deal with inflation and suffer most from the downturn in employment. In the meantime, fingers crossed.

The writer is adviser, Observer Research Foundation

Subhani



De-escalation at LAC: Is a real solution in sight?



K.C. Singh

Former Army Chief and now Union minister V.K. Singh's rash comment on the Line of Actual Control having often been breached by both India and China caused an uproar, with Beijing seizing on it as proof that India was the aggressor. But when news emerged of a likely coordinated de-escalation in Ladakh, after the nine-month standoff between Indian and Chinese forces, Gen. Singh's downgrading of the LAC acquired an intent. It was to ensure any withdrawal deal would not draw attention to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assertion last year that no one had intruded into India.

Defence minister Rajnath Singh told Parliament on Thursday that a mutual and calibrated withdrawal of forces, north and south of Pangong Tso, was underway, but unwisely refused to share details, pleading their "sensitive and operational" nature. This naturally raised questions whether the likely buffer-zones ceded space historically and traditionally patrolled by Indian soldiers. Some speculated whether China had managed by subterfuge to push the LAC closer to its 1959 claim-line.

The defence ministry decried the next day "mis-informed and misleading comments". It reasserted India's old claims, including the illegal occupation by China of 43,000 sq km in Aksai Chin, as shown in Indian maps. The LAC passes through Finger 8, north of Pangong. Mutual withdrawal will create a buffer-zone between Fingers 4 and 8. India will retain its Dhan Singh Thapa outpost near Finger 3, while Chinese troops shall stay beyond Finger 8.

The intrusions at Hot Springs, Gogra and Depsang Plains will be tackled after current withdrawals are completed. The 255-km Durbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi road runs at places alongside the LAC, giving connectivity to the Karakoram Pass. At Depsang plains, the flat terrain allowed China to make deep intrusions, threatening the highway.

Multiple questions on about the timing and depth of the Chinese intrusions from April-May 2020, in the middle of a global pandemic it caused. Also, why the flexibility now after months of sabre-rattling, China may have had multiple motives for the sudden, heavily armed and wide-fronted intrusion, under the subterfuge of spring military exercises in Tibet. It had strongly objected in August 2019 to the unilateral revocation of Article 370, affecting the status of a "disputed territory", where China had a stake. In September, the "Howdy Modi" Houston rally with President Donald Trump signalled a growing India-US proximity. Meanwhile, US-China relations mired in trade sanctions. Then came Mr Trump's return visit to India in February 2020, in an US election year, indicating a deeper Trump-Modi connect. Meanwhile, the Covid-19 epidemic began swirling as Wuhan was locked down. In mid-March 2020 President Trump termed the new pandemic "China Virus". All these would have heightened Chinese paranoia. China also saw a chance for strategic gain by repositioning as the world was distracted by the pandemic.

Thus, China also began ratcheting up its aggressive behaviour towards US allies Australia and Japan, that along with the

US and India are part of the "Quad". In May 2020, as the Ladakh LAC heated up, China hit Australian barley and beef exports. In August, Australian wine faced anti-dumping duties. By September, China fully suspended barley imports, ordering stricter controls on wheat. The next month, the squeeze was extended to Australian coal. Similarly, regarding Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands held by Japan, in the 17-month period from April 2019 to August 2020, Chinese vessels were inside contiguous zone 456 days out of 519, as against half that in the previous period. Chinese President Xi Jinping's Japan visit, due for early April 2020, was postponed, ostensibly due to the pandemic. In July, Japan's ruling party cancelled it over China's imposition of a new national security law on Hong Kong.

Initially surprised, the Indian Army quickly mirrored Chinese deployments, by inducting armour, drones, etc backed by air power and artillery. It upped the ante by seizing heights overlooking Spanggur Gap, south of Pangong, stymieing any Chinese thrust towards Chushul, besides dominating Chinese deployments in the sector. India, despite the financial cost, also dug in for the winter, demonstrating resolve. India also began raising the economic and reputational cost for China by banning several "apps" and tightening trade. China in May 2020 imposed draconian controls over Hong Kong, in breach of its international commitment to Britain. China also sharpened its tone on Taiwan, as the US began upgrading its Taiwan ties. The US-China verbal exchanges exacerbated as US presidential

elections neared. After Mr Trump's defeat, outgoing secretary of state Mike Pompeo directly alleged genocide by China in Xinjiang against the Uighurs.

Having opened multiple flashpoints against its continental and maritime neighbours, China awaited the outcome of US presidential elections before reassessing tactics. The Biden administration's endorsement of the Trump approach to China, but with smarter tactics like outreach to key allies for building an "alliance of democracies", put China on notice. India's success in handling the Covid pandemic and its economy recovering rapidly also showed that the Chinese browbeating had faltered. China in any case had succeeding in underscoring Indian vulnerability to determined Chinese pressure at the LAC, especially with an irate Pakistan acting in tandem. India also needed to buy peace abroad, with farmers agitating at home and a Biden administration murmuring nervously about human rights and democracy breaches in India.

Will buffer zones be a precursor to a mutually acceptable delineation of the LAC or just a Band-Aid solution to a deeper problem of China seeking Asian hegemony and bipolarity with the US globally? Are there some unwritten understandings on India scaling back its border infrastructure upgrade, handling of the Dalai Lama, non-militarisation of the "Quad"? It is unlikely China will curb its South Asian ingress, using the Belt and Road projects. It is unimaginable that a nationalist Indian government will concede Chinese hegemony. Thus, the Ladakh de-escalation may just be both sides stepping back, having tested each other's "red lines", to try rebuilding trust and resume the usual path of cooperation, competition and calibrated friction.

India's success in handling the Covid pandemic and its economy recovering rapidly also showed that the Chinese browbeating had faltered

The writer is a former secretary in the external affairs ministry. He tweets at @ambkcsingh.

LETTERS FORCE MAJEURE

The agreement between India and China for troops withdrawal from the sensitive Pangong Tso area is a feather in the cap for the tactful diplomacy of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi government. But what has come as a bit of a surprise is the speed at which the PLA is hurriedly moving away its troops and heavy armour from the hilly terrain. Perhaps, the tightening of screws by America in the form of a threat to impose sanctions, coupled with strained relations with Taiwan, as also fast developing situation in the South China Sea might have forced the hand of the Beijing commissariat.

Arun Malankar
Mumbai

SURVEILLANCE STATE

THE UNION HOME ministry's call to citizens to become "cyber volunteers" and identify and report "anti-national" online content is perhaps the most brazen and dangerous sign yet of an attempt to turn our democratic and free society into a "surveillance state". The pilot project is to be implemented in Jammu and Kashmir, and Tripura. The Gestapo had civil informants and the Stalinist State had a network of informers. The system being developed in India will work in much the same way. Who is it in the Narendra Modi government who aspires to be Lavrenty Beria?

Shovanlal Chakraborty
Kolkata

SHOT OF VACCINE

THE CANADIAN Prime Minister's suspected change of stand on the farm protests is sure to take the steam out of them. Three months back, when the protests started, he openly supported the farmers. Now he is hailing India's handling of them. It may be noted that Canada has requested the Indian Prime Minister to send the Covid-19 vaccine to his country. India has assured it will "do its best" in this respect. It appears that the vaccine supplies may be the reason for this change of stand.

D.B. Madan
New Delhi

BENGALURU'S MOMENT

BENGALURU earning the 13th rank among the top 30 cities in the foreign direct investment (FDI) global list is a proud moment. This accolade makes Bengaluru the only city in the country to make it to the list. Singapore, London and Dubai topped the podium in that order. Though Bengaluru has many feathers in its cap, it is imperative that the government gets its act together and does more to improve the city.

N.J. Ravi Chander
Bengaluru

WASTED EDUCATION?

THERE ARE STORIES galore of professionals giving up their corporate lives to become monks. But a Surat boy Harsh Singh, 25, became a chartered accountant (CA) professional as a precondition to renounce worldly pursuits. He will take diksha from Bhakti Yogacharya Yashovijaysuriji Maharaj in May. He had made up his mind to become a monk when he was in his teens. What a waste!

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

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

Claude Arpi



Trusty old allies India, France can bond over big research

President Xi Jinping recently affirmed that "time and momentum are on China's side". The Great Helmsman believes in the "great rejuvenation of Chinese nation" led by the soon-100 years old Communist Party of China; he, however, cited challenges, adding: "The world is in a turbulent time that is unprecedented in the past century."

Only the future will ascertain if the "momentum" is indeed on China's side, but there is no doubt that the world is going through uncertain and difficult times. As this is bound to continue in 2021 and probably beyond, India has to find reliable and unwavering support abroad.

Addressing the World Economic Forum in Davos, Mr Xi recently asserted, somewhat ironically: "The misguided approach of antagonism and confrontation... will eventually hurt all countries' interests and undermine everyone's well-being."

For over 20 years, France and India have been practising cooperation. Recently, India had supported France when the country was attacked by Islamic fundamentalists: "India stands with Paris at this difficult

moment and fully supports the French government on this issue," affirmed New Delhi.

Trust is the key in every relationship. When President Jacques Chirac came to India in 1998, he proposed a strategic partnership. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee readily agreed to give a concrete shape to one based on shared values.

The 1998 Indo-France partnership is deep for many reasons; one of them is a shared vision of the world. Further, France has never tried to bully India into accepting its views, while standing by India during the nuclear tests, in favour of a UN Security Council seat and on terrorism. This has not always been the case with other countries, including the United States.

The recently-concluded "Exercise Desert Knight-21" held in Jodhpur is another example of sharing. With 11 Rafale aircrafts having already joined that Indian Air Force (IAF), the collaboration has been a game changer for India in the confrontation with China in Ladakh.

Speaking in Jodhpur, Air Chief Marshal Rakesh Bhaduria said the first priority had been for the IAF to

integrate the fighter planes in the existing fleet: "It has been done and the current exercise Desert Knight is the result of that." French Ambassador to India, Emmanuel Lenain, noting that the first French aircraft landed in India in 1953, observed "the partnership has persisted through good and bad times".

New Delhi and Paris also held their annual Strategic Dialogue on January 7. National security advisor Ajit Doval met his French counterpart Emmanuel Bonne, the French President's diplomatic advisor (known as the "Sherpa"). According to a South Block press release: "The two sides held discussions on... counter-terrorism, cybersecurity, defence cooperation, maritime security, regional and global issues, and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region."

According to some sources, France agreed to an Indian request that defence technologies will not be shared with Pakistan. Further, Mr Bonne would have offered that 70 per cent of the assembly line for future Rafales could come under "Make in India" scheme, with technology transfer.

During the recent India-France-Japan Workshop on the Indo-Pacific held in

Delhi, the foreign secretary said: "The Indo-Pacific has become an essential concept in international relations today." It is certainly a field where Paris and Delhi could collaborate, however a "turbulent-time" partnership means more than joining a new grouping or buying a few combat aircrafts. Of course, sharing advanced technology is difficult; years ago, Safran, the French company which has developed the engine for the Rafale, tried to work with DRDO on a new engine for the Tejas, nothing has materialised.

One still remembers how difficult has been the cooperation and transfer of technology under the "75 Project" for six Scorpene submarines. The fifth Scorpene, *INS Vagrir*, built by the Mazagon Docks Limited (MDL) with technology transfer from France was launched in November 2020; MDL will manufacture a total of six submarines with technology assistance from the Naval Group under a US \$3.75 billions deal signed in October 2005.

Concrete collaborations are, and will be, undoubtedly difficult, they will face obstacles, which in the end can only help deepen bilateral relations.

It is ironic that for years Paris

believed in the depth of its relations with China, so much so that a P4 Lab was "offered" to China in Wuhan, with consequences that are suspicious today. The P4 lab episode is an example of what should never be done — work with untrustworthy partners.

What is required for France and India is to take their relations to the next level; for this, both nations need to work on a "big" research project.

I am thinking of an armed drone of the next generation; another field could be quantum communication, yet another could be a sixth-generation aircraft. In Jodhpur, the Air Chief said, "Our present vision is to incorporate all the latest technologies and sensors in our fifth-generation aircraft" and at a later stage work on a sixth-generation plane, a project in which both nations could collaborate.

For this, the thrust of the leaders of both countries is necessary — but can they find time to "dream" in these turbulent times?

The writer is based in South India for the past 42 years. He writes on India, China, Tibet and Indo-French relations.

SHORT TAKES

FED AGENTS
FATALLY SHOOT
MAN IN FLORIDA

Coral Gables (Florida), Feb. 13: Federal agents investigating a financial scheme fatally shot a man in South Florida on Friday, authorities said.

The shooting occurred in Coral Gables and involved agents from the US Department of Homeland Security, the Miami Herald reported. Coral Gables is located just southwest of Miami.

During a large-scale financial investigation, an individual brandished a weapon at special agents with Homeland Security Investigations, as a result agents fired at the suspect, agency spokesman Nestor Yglesias said in a statement. The agents were treated at a local hospital for injuries that were not life-threatening, Yglesias said.

Investigators recovered a weapon at the scene, Yglesias said. Florida state law enforcement officials were investigating the shooting.

The man wasn't immediately identified.

BROKER TO BE
EXTRADITED TO
VENEZUELA

Madrid, Feb. 13: Spain's National Court has approved the extradition of a financial broker wanted in Venezuela on charges of fraud and embezzlement of funds.

The ruling on 40-year-old Ernesto Quintero triggered protests Friday among the Venezuelan community in Spain and Venezuelan opposition representatives.

Protesters, including Quintero's wife, demonstrated near the court in Madrid, calling for Spain to stop the extradition given the political instability in the Caribbean country. Quintero worked in a stock exchange in the western Venezuelan city of Maracaibo that was seized by authorities in 2010 owing to alleged fund-management irregularities, the unauthorised sale of client investments and for funneling money to Britain's Virgin Islands. He was arrested in Spain early in 2019 but released with conditions while his extradition was studied. He was detained again this week.

The court's three-judge panel rejected Quintero's argument that there were political motivations behind Venezuela's extradition request and that he would be in physical danger if handed over.

Antonio Ecarri, a Venezuelan politician designated as ambassador to Spain for the parallel government of Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó, claimed that any extradition now was a virtual death sentence given Venezuela's human rights record. Spain has previously rejected other extradition requests.

1 PEACEKEEPER
HURT IN MALI
HAS DIED: UN

United Nations, Feb. 13: One of the 28 UN peacekeepers wounded in an attack on a temporary United Nations base in central Mali has died from his injuries, the United Nations announced Friday.

Mali remains the deadliest of the UN's 12 far-flung peacekeeping missions and the peacekeeper from Togo was the sixth killed just since January in hostile acts in which 46 peacekeepers were also injured.

UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric, who announced the peacekeeper's death, extended the UN's deepest condolences to his family and the people and government of Togo and wished a speedy recovery to the 27 other peacekeepers.

The UN has condemned Wednesday's complex attack using direct and indirect fire against the temporary base in Kerena, near Douentza. There have been no claims of responsibility for the attack, but Islamic extremists linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group have staged regular attacks on UN peacekeepers and soldiers. Dujarric said the Kerena base was set up recently to better protect the local population, bring back calm in areas impacted by intercommunal violence, as well as to reduce the threat of improvised explosive devices.

Mali has been in turmoil since a 2012 uprising prompted mutinous soldiers to overthrow the president. The power vacuum that resulted ultimately led to an Islamic insurgency and a French-led war that ousted the jihadists from power in 2013.

The country has also been plagued by a series of coups, the latest in August that overthrew President Ibrahim Boubacar.

7 injured in fuel tanker blast
at Afghanistan-Iran border

The blaze consumed more than 500 trucks carrying natural gas and fuel

Herat (Afghanistan), Feb. 13: A fuel tanker exploded Saturday at the Islam Qala crossing in Afghanistan's western Herat province on the Iranian border, injuring at least seven people and causing a massive fire that consumed more than 500 trucks carrying natural gas and fuel, according to Afghan officials and Iranian state media.

It wasn't immediately clear what caused the blast. Wahid Qatali, Herat's provincial governor, said Afghan first responders did not have the means to put out the fire and had requested support from Iran in the form of fire-fighting aircraft.

"For the time being, we can't even talk about the casualties," Qatali told The Associated Press.

The intensity of the flames meant ambulances were having trouble reaching the wounded or getting close to the site of the

07 people injured by the fire have been admitted to the hospital so far, said Mohammad Rafiq Shirzy, spokesman for the regional hospital in Herat's provincial capital.

02 explosions, around half-an-hour apart, at the border crossing were powerful enough to be spotted from space by NASA satellites.

75 miles is the distance of the Islam Qala border crossing from the city of Herat. It is a major transit route between Afghanistan and Iran.

blast, said Mohammad Rafiq Shirzy, spokesman for the regional hospital in Herat's provincial capital, also named Herat.

Seven people injured by the fire have been admitted to the hospital so far, he said.

Iran's semi-official ISNA news agency quoted truck drivers as saying more than 500 trucks carrying

natural gas and fuel have been burnt so far.

Two explosions at the border crossing were powerful enough to be spotted from space by NASA satellites. One blast erupted around 1:10 p.m. Afghan time (0840 GMT), the next around a half hour later at 1:42 p.m. local (0912 GMT).

The fire continued to burn after nightfall, and

forced Afghanistan to shut down its electrical supply from Iran, leaving Herat in the dark, said Wahidullah Tawhidi, spokesman for the Ministry of Power Supply.

The road between the city of Herat and Islam Qala is a dangerous stretch of highway that Afghans rarely travel at night for fear of attacks by criminal gangs. Taliban insurgents also travel freely in the area. Afghan security services had set up checkpoints and were assisting ambulances and emergency vehicles traveling to and from the border crossing.

Iran's state-run IRNA news agency reported that following the request from Herat's governor, Iranian "rescue forces and fire fighters are underway to extinguish the fire inside Afghanistan," according to Mohsen Nejat, director-general of crisis management in Iran's Khorasan

Razavi province.

The fire spread to the Dogharoon customs facilities on the Iranian side and first responders — including the fire department, the Iranian army and border forces — were assisting in extinguishing the blaze, according to Iranian state television. Trucks carrying natural gas and fuel were directed to leave the scene.

The Islam Qala border crossing is around 120 kilometres (75 miles) west of the city of Herat. It is a major transit route between Afghanistan and Iran.

The United States allows Afghanistan to import fuel and oil from Iran as part of a special concession that exempts Kabul from sanctions against Iran. Satellite photos taken Saturday showed dozens of tankers parked at the border crossing before the explosion.

— AP

Charge against
Trump a lie,
say his lawyers

Washington, Feb. 13 : Donald Trump's insurrection incitement charge is a "monstrous lie" and the impeachment proceedings against the former president a "politically motivated witch hunt" by the Democrats, his lawyers said as they presented evidence in the US Senate. Trump, a Republican, is accused of inciting riots in the US Capitol on January 6 which left five people, including a police officer, dead.

Trump's lawyers Bruce Castor, David Schoen and Michael van der Veen each took turns addressing the Senate members on Friday, day four of Trump's impeachment trial, to describe Trump as a staunch supporter of law and order, not someone who incited the chaos at the Capitol.

His attorneys had up to 16 hours over the course of two days to push back on House impeachment managers' case that Trump should be convicted and barred from running for future office for inciting the attack on the Capitol to try to stop Joe Biden's presidential election victory being certified.

There is a complete lack of evidence on the article of impeachment against Donald Trump, his lawyers told the United States Senate. "We have a complete lack of evidence for the article of impeachment presented by the House managers," Trump's lawyer Castor said.

The impeachment by the House, the case for which was laid out by the House managers in the Senate during the last two days, was political.

"Their goal is to eliminate a political opponent, to substitute their judgment for the will of the voters," he said as he showed clips of various Democratic leaders. Castor said that the critical issue in this case is the very narrow issue that is charged against the 45th president.

"That issue is did the

AS VOTE DRAWS
NEAR, MCCONNELL
REVEALS LITTLE

Washington, Feb. 13: Seldom has Mitch McConnell signaled so little about such a consequential vote.

While many expect the Senate's top Republican to back acquitting former President Donald Trump of inciting rioters who assaulted the Capitol last month, no one is really sure. The Washington political universe and the world beyond will collectively hold its breath when the Senate impeachment trial roll call reaches the Kentuckian's name.

Over 36 years in the Senate, the measured McConnell has earned a reputation for inexpressiveness in the service of caution. This time, the suspense over how he'll vote underscores how much is at stake for him.

— AP

Paint on Thai riot cops



Riot police covered in red paint thrown by pro-democracy protesters stand guard during an anti-government demonstration next to the Grand Palace in Bangkok on Saturday as demonstrators scaled a Bangkok monument, draping it in a crimson cloth and calling for the kingdom to abolish its draconian royal defamation laws.

— AFP

Biden: Govs, mayors need \$350 bn to fight virus

US: China must make available
data of outbreak's earliest days

Washington, Feb. 13: The US on Saturday demanded that China must make available its Covid-19 data from the earliest days of the outbreak to the world to better understand the pandemic and prepare for the next one.

China reported the first Covid-19 case in the central city of Wuhan in late December 2019 and since then the disease has snowballed into a pandemic, affecting 108,822,502 people with 2,396,283 deaths worldwide. According to Johns Hopkins Coronavirus tracker, the US, which is the worst affected country in the world, has reported over 27,189,188 cases

and 468,103 deaths from the deadly virus.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, in a strongly-worded statement, expressed deep concerns about the way in which the early findings of the Covid-19 investigation by the World Health Organisation (WHO) were communicated. "We have deep concerns about the way in which the early findings of the Covid-19 investigation were communicated and questions about the process used to reach them. It is imperative that this report be independent, with expert findings free from intervention or alteration by

the Chinese government," he said.

"To better understand this pandemic and prepare for the next one, China must make available its data from the earliest days of the outbreak. Going forward, all countries, including China, should participate in a transparent and robust process for preventing and responding to health emergencies — so that the world learns as much as possible, as soon as possible," Sullivan demanded. The mission of the WHO has never been more important, and the US has deep respect for its experts and the work they are doing every day.

— PTI

AIRLINES PUSH
WH TO REJECT
TESTS FOR FLYERS

Washington, Feb. 13: Leaders of several major US airlines met online Friday with White House officials to press their case against requiring Coronavirus tests for passengers on domestic flights, saying it would undermine the already fragile industry.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki downplayed speculation that the Biden administration could soon impose a requirement that passengers on domestic flights first pass a Covid-19 test. But she stopped short of taking the idea off the table.

"Reports that there is an intention to put in place new requirements such as testing are not accurate," Psaki said. A person familiar with the discussions said the airline CEOs talked with White House Coronavirus-response coordinator Jeff Zients.

— AP

WH aide threatens
reporter, suspended

Washington, Feb. 13: White House deputy press secretary T.J. Ducklo has been suspended for a week without pay after he reportedly issued a sexist and profane threat to a journalist seeking to cover his relationship with another reporter.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said in a statement Friday that Ducklo had been suspended without pay with the approval of White House chief of staff Ron Klain.

She said Ducklo is the first to acknowledge this is not the standard of

behaviour set out by President Joe Biden, and that Ducklo had sent the reporter in question a personal note professing his profound regret.

Ducklo's personal life came under scrutiny earlier this week when *Politico* reported on his relationship with a reporter for the news outlet Axios who was assigned to cover the Biden campaign and its transition.

Before *Politico* broke the story Tuesday, *People Magazine* published a glowing profile of the relationship.

— AP

NO SHOWS

A testament to the grit of organisers who followed French rules

Circus festival adapts to Covid-19 rules

Marseille, Feb. 13: It's been a tough year for the performing arts in most countries, with virus lockdowns cancelling shows and shuttering venues.

But the world's top circus festival has found a way to flourish between the cracks in the rules — even without the huge crowds that would normally have attended. Ending Saturday in the Mediterranean port city of Marseille, the fourth edition of the Circus Biennale (BIAC), held every two years in the south of France, celebrates

the injury-defying and spine-stretching arts that fuel the storied spectacle. More than 110,000 people attended the last BIAC, in 2019. This year it had up to 2,000 visitors, all professionals who work in the circus or are looking to buy shows. Even that is a testament to the grit and determination of the organisers, who skillfully adapted their festival to the French authorities' rules and regulations.

"We started with a plan A, then plan B, then plan C, then plan D, and finally

● **IN FRANCE,** theatres, concert halls and other venues have been shuttered since Oct. 30 due to Covid-19.

we decided to do plan E which was a Biennale for professionals. That was possible, we were allowed to do it," said BIAC organizer Raquel Rache de Andrade. The dozens of performances featured upside-down tutus, acrobatic bicycles, multicoloured parachutes and enough contortionism to shock

a chiropractor.

Virus safety signs put up at the port-side venue showed a clown with red nose, bow tie and mask, and the accompanying text: "Having a big nose does not exempt you from wearing one." In France, theatres, concert halls and other venues have been shuttered since Oct. 30 due to Covid-19. Before that, they were shut from mid-March to late June.

No one knows when the performing arts will be allowed to begin again. But it's important to show

that culture is essential, according to Yoann Bourgeois, a dancer and choreographer who trained in the circus arts and is the flagship artist of this year's BIAC.

"The management of this crisis has had an extremely violent impact on poets, artists, people who dedicate their lives to culture in general," Bourgeois said. "It has categorised what is considered essential or non-essential. We are convinced that poetry is essential to live."

— AP

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

When gibberish pretends to have meaning

SUPARNA SHARMA

The year 2021 hasn't begun well for Malayalam film director Lijo Jose Pellissery. First, his film *Jallikattu*, India's entry to the Oscars, didn't impress the Academy judges, and now the director, who has acquired a cult following, seems to have disappointed his devoted fans with his latest film, *Churuli*, which premiered at the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK) on Thursday.

There was palpable enthusiasm in the lead up to the film's show at Thiruvananthapuram's Kairali theatre, causing much anxiety to IFFK organisers who are determined to maintain social distancing in theatres. But, daunted by the long queues of young boys and girls as well as unannounced guests of the state government, some adjustments had to be made in the cinema hall where alternate seats had been taped up to avoid Corona spread. For *Churuli*, the audience sat elbow-to-elbow in a few rows. The director's loyal fans applauded cheerily at all of the film's piffing jokes, but as the film progressed they seemed bewildered. The mandatory clapping at the end of the film was tentative and weak, as if they were all wondering whether they didn't get it, or it just didn't make sense.

Churuli, billed as a science fiction horror film, begins with gorgeous and haunting aerial shots

Churuli

CAST: Chemban Vinod Jose, Vinay Forrt, Joju George, Soubin Shahr, Jaffar Idukki
DIRECTOR: Lijo Jose Pellissery
RATING: ★★

of a bus winding its way on a serpentine road that cuts through a lush green forest. The eagle eye view injects mystery and suspense to the film which seems to be getting into the thick of the forest in search of a fable-like tone.

This eerie note accompanies the two cops — one experienced and cynical, the other a younger, enthusiastic sort — who are en route, in mufti, to nab a criminal hiding in the misty forest.

Anthony (Chemban Vinod Jose) and Shahjiva (Vinay Forrt), their assumed names, tell the villagers that they are labourers who have come looking for work. But the man on whose rubber plantation they are to dig pits is away. So they get hired as helping hands at an arrack bar-cum-restaurant run by a husband and wife duo. There is no pay, but there's boarding, lodging and drinking.

The film is light and fun as long as it stays with the two bumbling, bantering cops. Shajivan is keen to get the job done quickly, but his senior, Anthony, is treating this as a relaxed retreat. As the film goes on a hunting



trip and then ventures into a rather strange sauna-cum-massage parlour run by a paan-spewing lady, we are amused en route by Pellissery's delightfully subversive politics where the bar gets turned into a temporary chapel. But then, the inexplicable intervenes — an axe-wielding resident, a drunk man, a tree hugger, a game of slapping and a death. There

are also two alien-like creatures with torch-lights for eyes who keep meandering about.

Churuli, based on a short story, opens with a fable about a Brahmin going to a forest to capture a phantom named Perumadan. But the shape-shifting phantom tricks him and the Brahmin, the story goes,

is still wandering the forest looking for Perumadan while carrying the phantom on his head.

Lijo's film is like that Brahmin. Trying to get somewhere but never quite getting there.

Churuli means a helix, a spiral, and the film's story by Vinoy Thomas, which was turned into

a screenplay by S. Hareesh, is about losing the way and one's self while in pursuit. *Churuli* drops obscure hints about its theme but is so taken in with bizarre happenings and characters that it doesn't care to join the dots. We are left to fend for ourselves, to piece together a disjointed narrative.

The forest is the film's stage but also a character in *Churuli*. It breathes, observes and reacts. Much like the jeep which makes a fuss every time it has to cross a bridge to the forest.

Churuli is shot in High Range, Kerala, and is gorgeous. It also has the chops and atmospherics — sharp, high-strung montages, a cool background score, random absurdities and lots of forestry. But its long, pointless sequences are exhausting and nothing to the story. In skilled hands, the random, the inexplicable, the absurd can be fun. Here it feels amateurish, forced, self-conscious.

Churuli carries that silly, childish misconception which besets many students' films — that obtuse dialogue, vague characters and badly shot scenes can somehow be sold as something deep and clever coming together. When, in fact, it's just a bad script transmuted to cinematic gibberish.

Lijo, who has made *Ee. Ma. Yau.* and *Angamaly Diaries*, is a fine director when he is tethered to the ground and reality. Here he takes flight and loses the plot.

A resurrection, a hanging and a father in search of a home for his son

Thiruvananthapuram, Feb. 13: Attending film festivals is like taking a trip across the world — visiting places, meeting people, soaking in cultures — all from a reclining, cushioned seat. That's why film festivals ought to be on everyone's "things to do before I die" list. And among all the many international film festivals in India and abroad, the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK), now in its 25th year, is up there with the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) in its fabulous choice of films. It has the best of world cinema, showcases several indie Indian filmmakers, and, like TIFF, it is easily accessible. Register, book tickets, watch films.

Organised by the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy, the Covid pandemic has both been a bane and a boon for IFFK.

The crowds outside theatres have shrunk to a single-file queue, the number of days and films have shrunk, but the festival is also, for the first time, traveling around the state.

Headquartered and held annually in Thiruvananthapuram, this year IFFK is folding its *mundu* knee-high and venturing into untested waters. Fingers are crossed and chairman Kamal and artistic director Bina Paul's team, seemingly calm, is constantly at work coordinating shows, tickets, seats, dinners, invites.

It's a well-oiled machine supported by a dedicated team of enthusiastic volunteers. Eager, efficient and so pleasant. The general decency that resides south of Vindhyas is in full bloom at IFFK. I am not romanticising. I am stating a fact.

Here are five stand-out films that you can catch when the festival travels to Ernakulam (from February 17-21), Thalassery (February 23-27) and Palakkad (March 1-5).

Night of The King

Directed by Philippe Lacôte

In the forest of Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), squats "La Maca", a prison run by its inmates. It's a real setting for a fictional tale that draws inspiration from the story of Scheherazade and Arabian Nights, while dipping generously into all sorts of traditions of theatre — Shakespeare's tragedies and the Greek chorus — for its narrative structure.

Lord Blackbeard (Steve Tientcheu), a towering but dying inmate, runs La Maca. Other factions, less honourable ones, are itching to take charge. But Lord Blackbeard spots a new inmate (played by Bakary Kone) and designates him to be the new "Roman". As tradition goes, he must tell a story to other prisoners. It must begin with the rising of the red moon, and must not finish till dawn. Else he will be killed.

As the young inmate narrates the story of a legendary outlaw named "Zama King", Night of the King turns into a dizzy, trippy ride that plays simultaneously at three levels. There's the inmate telling the story in a hyper masculine, violent prison, then there's the story of Zama King which transports us back



■ Night of the kings



■ There is no Evil

in time to a village where a tribal queen with magical powers fought her brother and a potential coup, and offstage is the attempt for a hostile takeover of La Maca.

This is not a Burial, It's a Resurrection

Directed by Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese

Indians have nothing in common with Basothos, people native to Lesotho and South Africa, and yet our human experience is eerily similar.

This is Not a Burial, It's A Resurrection is Lesotho's first ever submission to Oscars. Though it didn't make the cut this year, the film is a moving and empowering tribute to people's movement to resist a takeover of their land and rights.

This is Not a Burial... tells the story of Mantoa (Mary Twala Mlongo), an 80-year-old woman who lives in what her people call "Plains of Weeping". She has lost every family member and is now making arrangements for her burial and preparing to die.

Mantoa's physical fragility is often foregrounded beautifully against rich, vibrant backgrounds. Her house has deep blue walls and she reclines on a red quilt in a bronze silk dress.

Every morning Mantoa takes out the batteries from her radio and puts them in the sun to be recharged. And when her village is threatened with forced resettlement due to the construction of a reservoir, she comes back to life, finding the strength to resist and defy.

The film's final moment is reminiscent of what happened years ago when 12 mothers in Manipur shed their clothes and walked to the gates of Assam Rifles and screamed, "Indian Army, rape us". And it's a reminder of



■ Nowhere Special



■ This is not a Burial



■ The Wasteland

"no".

There Is No Evil won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival last year and a month later Iranian authorities sentenced Rasoulof, who lives in Germany, to jail on the charge that his films were "propaganda against the system". He is yet to present himself for incarceration.

The Wasteland

Directed by Ahmad Bahrami

Shot in black and white, Ahmad Bahrami's *The Wasteland* tells a relentlessly bleak story in a cinematic style that is stunning and unforgettable.

Set in an old brick kiln, the film is constructed around one episode that is shown repeatedly, from the perspective of each employee, and the owner.

The kiln is not making money and the owner calls a meeting to give everyone a day's notice to leave. There is the assurance that their dues will be cleared soon, but no guarantee. As the employees retire to their rooms for a meal, the camera follows each one, one by one, to listen to the women talk of being exploited, of wages pending for months, and the helpless men escaping reality with a nap.

Helping each worker is Lotfollah, the manager-caretaker. In between bringing ice for Sarvar, a young, beautiful woman who works at the kiln and lives with her son, he tells each one to go meet the boss and discuss their dues. These scenes too plays in a loop. There's the request for money followed by empty assurances, and before leaving they all complain about Lotfollah and the special treatment he reserves for Sarvar.

The film is set in the sort of dry, ruthless places we often pass by when driving on highways. The

wind is constantly blowing, never letting the dust settle on the many mounds of earth dug up. A lot of time is spent in showing the very physical hard labour involved in making bricks. The camera, like a keen, mute observer, follows each character as they turn mud into bricks, have a fight, or when Ebrahim calls Gohar over for a meeting in Lotfollah's room.

At the end just Lotfollah is left at the kiln. With no hope.

Nowhere Special

Directed by Uberto Pasolini

John (James Norton) is a 35-year-old window cleaner who lives with his four-year-old son Michael (Daniel Lamont).

John is quiet, reserved, a dedicated father and he is dying. His last few days are consumed by meeting and interviewing prospective parents for Michael.

Time is short. Shona, the social worker, is trying her best, but she is running out of options for John.

No family feels like a good fit for Michael. Not the very rich couple who plan to send Michael to a posh boarding school, and not the strange woman who wants Michael to return the stuffed bunny he has been playing with.

Director Uberto Pasolini says that he wanted to make this film as soon as he read about the case of a terminally ill father attempting to find a new family for his toddler son before his death. But that he didn't want to turn it into a melodrama.

Nowhere Special is very special because it tells the story of the father and his son with care and dignity. It doesn't exploit a devastating story, neither does it reduce characters to pitiful creatures. It just stays with them as they go about their life, in search of a home for Michael.

Potent history in Judas and the Black Messiah

JAKE COYLE

Forces of revolution and oppression collide and entangle in Shaka King's blistering *Judas and the Black Messiah*, a potent and vividly acted drama about the FBI's subversion and assassination of Chicago Black Panther leader Fred Hampton.

King's film, which he wrote with Will Berson, plunges into the dark chapter in American history when J. Edgar Hoover's FBI used surveillance, infiltration and worse to check the ascent of Black movements both peaceful (as in the case of Martin Luther King Jr., chronicled recently in *Sam Pollard's MLK/FBI* documentary) and more militant.

Hampton, played by Daniel Kaluuya, was just 21 when he was shot and killed in an FBI raid in 1969. The raid was carried out, in part, due to information from Hampton's own security chief, William O'Neal (LaKeith Stanfield), a car thief turned informant four years earlier by the FBI's Roy Mitchell (Jesse Plemons). In the movie's first scenes, O'Neal storms into a bar in a trench coat and fedora, flashing a fake badge — a ruse that nearly scores him a car. When he's caught, the police ask him why not use a knife or a gun.

"A badge is scarier than a gun," he answers. Faced with a lengthy prison term or going undercover with the Black Panthers, O'Neal opts to work for Mitchell. This brings us into the heady orbit of Hampton. As played by Kaluuya, he is a forceful, magnetic orator who, through toil and charisma, is building a "rainbow coalition" of the oppressed in Chicago. So commanding is Kaluuya that *Judas and the Black Messiah* (on HBO Max and in theaters Friday) loses some of its punch when he's not around. (For a spell, Hampton is jailed.)

It's not that the rest of the cast isn't superlative; especially good as Hampton's partner, Deborah Johnson, is Dominique Fishback — a memorable presence on *The Deuce*, and, I suspect, a future star. But "Judas and the Black Messiah" is best

when Kaluuya's Hampton is in full, fiery voice and King's film is directly channeling the Black power movement of the era.

If Kaluuya gives *Judas and the Black Messiah* its strength, Stanfield supplies its unease. King doesn't dwell on O'Neal's psychological stress as an informant the way that Sidney Lumet's police corruption opus *Prince and the City* does. King relies on juxtapositions of O'Neal's time among the Panthers and sit-downs with Mitchell. The FBI agent believes he's on the side of justice. Comparing the Black Panthers to white supremacists, he says: "You can't cheat your way to equality and you certainly can't shoot your way to it."

But Mitchell is an operative in Hoover's FBI. When Hoover (Martin Sheen) makes an appearance, *Judas and the Black Messiah* hints at a wider war of oppression — a war, Hoover says, over "our way of life." This makes King's film a clear counterpoint to Spike Lee's *BlackKkKlansman*, which showed the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (Cointelpro) aiding, not sabotaging, Black radicals.

Caught in between the Panthers and the feds is O'Neal. For Stanfield, the gifted actor of *Sorry to Bother You* and *Knives Out*, it's a compelling tightrope of a slippery performance, poised between empathy and judgment for the pitiable O'Neal. As damning as the film's title is, Stanfield's O'Neal is never quite aware of the seriousness of the game he's playing until its gruesome and appalling end.

It's a balance reflective of King's film overall. *Judas and the Black Messiah*, resurrecting a painful saga of police racial injustice, is a self-evidently timely film without stating its contemporary resonance literally. If anything, you want it draw Stanfield and Kaluuya together more often than it does. Instead, the movie devolves and grows more sorrowful as Hampton's movement is stymied, and we're left feeling the loss of a history that might have been.

— AP



A still from *Judas and the Black Messiah*

SHORT TAKES

Sandeep, Priyanka break nat'l records

Ranchi: Three Indian race walkers qualified for the upcoming Tokyo Olympics during the National Open Race Walking Championships here on Saturday, with Sandeep Kumar and Priyanka Goswami shattering national records in the men's and women's 20km events respectively. With the three new entrants, the total number of Indian race walkers who have qualified for the Tokyo Games has swelled to five as K T Irfan (men's 20km) and Bhawana Jat (women's 20km) have already made the cut earlier. Sandeep clocked 1 hour 20 minutes and 16 seconds to win the men's group 'A' 20km event while Goswami emerged victorious in the corresponding women's group 'A' event with a time of 1:28:45. Rahul, who finished second in the men's group 'A' 20km race walk event with a time of 1:20:26, also qualified for the Tokyo Olympics. — *PTI*

Navdeep, Arvind secure Oly berths

Dubai: Para-athletes Navdeep and Arvind secured quotas for the upcoming Tokyo Paralympics as India's gold medal tally swelled to nine after the third day of competitions at the 12th Fazza International World Para Athletics Grand Prix here. Overall, India has claimed 17 medals including nine gold, with four of them coming on Friday. The day was lit up by brilliant shows by Indian men's javelin throwers — reigning world champion Sandeep Chaudhary (F44), Ajeet Singh (F46) and Navdeep (F41). However, javelin thrower Sundar Singh Gurjar (F46) had to settle for a bronze. Arvind attained the Minimum Qualification Standard with a distance of 14.05m in men's shot put final F35/36 to clinch Tokyo Paralympics spot. — *PTI*

Leicester humble Liverpool 3-1

Leicester: Slumping champion Liverpool fell to a third straight loss in the Premier League after a dramatic late collapse against Leicester, conceding three goals in seven minutes in a 3-1 defeat at King Power Stadium on Saturday. Leading 1-0 through Mohamed Salah's league-high 17th goal of the season, Liverpool was pegged back in the 78th when James Maddison's low free kick crept in and then went behind after another blunder by goalkeeper Alisson Becker. Jamie Vardy and Harvey Barnes netted the next two goals for Leicester and tilted the mach in their favour. Fourth-place Liverpool dropped six points behind Leicester, which climbed above Manchester United into second place. — *AP*

Utah put Bucks through wringer

Los Angeles: Rudy Gobert and Joe Ingles scored 27 points each as the league-leading Utah Jazz used an explosive and balanced attack to beat the Milwaukee Bucks 129-115 and continue their dominant run through the NBA on Friday. The Jazz had four players score 25 points in a game for the first time in franchise history as Donovan Mitchell (26) and Jordan Clarkson (25) also got into an offensive flow in front of a pandemic-limited crowd of almost 4000 at the Vivint Smart Home Arena. It was the sixth straight win and the 17th victory in 18 games for the Jazz, who became the first NBA team to reach the 20 win mark when they beat Boston on Tuesday. — *AFP*

Live on TV

TENNIS

Australian Open: Matches from 5.30 am on Sony Six, from 1.30 pm on Sony Ten 2, HD

CRICKET

India vs England: Second Test, Day Two, from 9.20 am on Star Sports 1

Pakistan vs South Africa: Third T20 from 6.30 pm on Sony Ten 1

FOOTBALL

English Premier League: Southampton vs Wolves from 5.30 pm; West Brom vs Manchester United from 7.30 pm

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Chepauk Ro-mance

Rohit cracks whip with 161 to lift India against England

C. SANTHOSH KUMAR
CHENNAI, FEB. 13

As expected, the ball gripped, bounced and turned sharply. It was a tricky pitch to bat on, but an elegant Rohit Sharma made it look easy. The opener's classy 161, his seventh Test century, put India in the driver's seat against England in the second Test here at the M.A. Chidambaram Stadium on Saturday. At stumps, India were 300 for six in 88 overs with Rishabh Pant (33 not out) and Axar Patel (5 not out) threatening to pile on runs.

Winning a crucial toss on a bunsen track, India suffered an early jolt when England pacer Olly Stone trapped Shubman Gill in the second over of the day. But Rohit, in the calm company of Cheteshwar Pujara, steadied the ship by stitching together a brisk partnership of 83 runs.

India, however, found themselves on the back-foot again shortly before lunch. Pujara's dismissal — after poking a shot away from his body off left-arm spinner Jack Leach — triggered a mini collapse. Virat Kohli's stay in the middle lasted just five balls. Off-spinner Moeen Ali knocked down the Indian skipper's off-stump to dismiss him for a duck. Kohli stood there in disbelief before trudging back to the pavilion. At this juncture, India were 86 for three.

Mumbaikars Rohit and Ajinkya Rahane forged a delightful stand for the fourth wicket (162 runs off 310 balls) to put an end to their lean patch. With Rahane (67 off 149) playing the perfect second fiddle, Rohit took the responsibility of unsettling the bowlers.

Rohit set the tone for the day by pulling Ben Stokes for back-to-back boundaries, including a six. Skipper Joe Root had to take Stokes off the attack and he never returned to bowl.

Against spinners, Rohit used his feet effectively. His sweep shots were perfect examples of controlled aggression. It was a treat for the weekend crowd that walked through the turnstiles of a cricket ground in India for the first time since January 2020. Rohit took just 130 balls to complete his century, with a paddle shot towards fine leg. Moeen, playing his first



India's Rohit Sharma plays a shot against England during the first day of their second Test at M.A. Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai on Saturday.

— BCCI

Test after an 18-month break, struggled to offer the same control that Leach provided from the other end. The productive sweep shot proved to be Rohit's undoing in the end as he holed out at deep square leg off Leach.

Rahane, too, followed suit. He was bowled while trying to sweep a full-length delivery shortly after England's appeal for a bat-pad catch was

wrongly turned down by the third umpire.

Rahane said the plan was to play with positive intent. "You can't be too defensive on this pitch and need to be one step ahead of the opposition. We had discussed, in our batting meeting, what shots to play and had to make them change their game plan. And that's what Rohit did by playing sweeps," said Rahane.

NUMBERS GAME

ROHIT SHARMA'S FOURTH 150+ SCORE IN TESTS:

● Rohit Sharma became the 20th Indian batsman on 26 occasions to score 150 plus runs in an innings against England by making 161 off 231 balls with 17 fours and two sixes on the first day of the second Test match at Chennai on Saturday (February 13).

● It was Rohit Sharma's fourth 150 plus knock in 60 innings of 36 Test matches.

● After this innings, Rohit Sharma's Test average in India reached to 83.55. Among the 203 batsmen who have scored at least 1500 runs at home, Rohit Sharma reached that milestone today — only one batsman, Don Bradman, has a managed better.

● Sharma has seven hundreds in 23 innings in India, of which four have been 150-plus scores. Only once has he been dismissed for less than 150 after he has passed 100.

● Rohit Sharma made 19 hundreds in international cricket since the beginning of 2018, the most among all batsmen. Virat Kohli (18) and Joe Root (13) are next in the list. Rohit Sharma has struck four hundreds in Tests, 13 in one day internationals and two in Twenty-20 internationals; no other batsman has struck multiple hundreds in each format in this period.

● Rohit Sharma's 161 was seventh hundred in Tests at home for Sharma, without a single overseas century. Among all batsmen without an away hundred, only one — Mominul Haque — has more centuries at home (10). Only two other batsmen have scored their first away hundred after making more than seven centuries at home: Allan Lamb (nine) and Mahela Jayawardene (eight). Robin Smith had seven centuries in England before scoring his first one away from home.

— S. PERVEZ QAISAR

SCORECARD

India 1st Innings: Rohit Sharma c Moeen b Jack Leach 161, Shubman Gill lbw b Olly Stone 0, Cheteshwar Pujara c Stokes b Jack Leach 21, Virat Kohli b Moeen 0, Ajinkya Rahane b Moeen 67, Rishabh Pant batting 33, Ravichandran Ashwin c Ollie Pope b Root 13, Axar Patel batting 5. Extras 0. **Total: (for six wickets in 88 overs) 300.**

FoW: 1-0, 2-85, 3-86, 4-248, 5-249, 6-284. **Bowling:** Stuart Broad 11-2-37-0, Olly Stone 15-5-42-1, Jack Leach 26-2-78-2, Ben Stokes 2-0-16-0, Moeen Ali 26-3-112-2, Joe Root 8-2-15-1.

Muchova sends Pliskova packing

Melbourne, Feb. 13: World number one Ashleigh Barty gave long-suffering Melbourne something to cheer as the home hope swept into the Australian Open last 16 at an empty Margaret Court Arena following a snap Coronavirus lockdown on Saturday.

Barty's straightforward 6-2, 6-4 win over Russia's Ekaterina Alexandrova put her into the fourth round without dropping a set as she bids to become the first Australian winner since Chris O'Neil in 1978.

As play unfolded in Melbourne Park's empty arenas on Saturday, former world number one Karolina Pliskova had a racquet-smashing tantrum en route to a 7-5, 7-5 defeat by fellow Czech Karolina Muchova.

Meanwhile, Rafael Nadal extended his winning streak against fellow left-handers to 18 with a 7-5, 6-2, 7-5 victory over Cameron Norrie that earned him a place in the Australian Open's fourth round.

The latest curbs triggered bizarre scenes late on Friday as Novak Djokovic's injury-hit win over Taylor Fritz was suspended at 11:30 pm local time to

remove fans before the midnight lockdown.

The defending champion's tournament now hangs in the balance over the midriff injury he said could rule him out of his last 16 match against Milos Raonic.

Ukrainian fifth seed Elina Svitolina beat Yulia Putintseva 6-4, 6-0, and Russia's men's fourth seed Daniil Medvedev overcame buttock pain and a mid-match lapse in his 6-3, 6-3, 4-6, 3-6, 6-0 win over Filip Krajinovic of Serbia.

"It's a different atmosphere, different vibe," said Stefanos Tsitsipas, after his 6-4, 6-1, 6-1 win over Mikael Ymer.

Casper Ruud became only the second Norwegian to make the last 16 of a Grand Slam Saturday, emulating his father Christian who made the grade at the Australian Open in 1997.

The 22-year-old outlasted Radu Albot 6-1, 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 to book a fourth-round Melbourne Park clash with Russian Andrey Rublev and said he was proud to match his dad's achievement.

Rublev crushed Feliciano Lopez 7-5, 6-2, 6-3.

— Agencies



Karolina Muchova of Czech Republic celebrates after defeating her countrymate Karolina Pliskova 7-5, 7-5 during their women's singles match at the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne on Saturday.

— AFP

SELECTED RESULTS

Men's singles third round: Rafael Nadal bt Cameron Norrie 7-5, 6-2, 7-5; Mackenzie McDonald bt Lloyd Harris 7-6 (7), 6-1, 6-4; Casper Ruud bt Radu Albot 6-1, 5-7, 6-4, 6-4; Daniil Medvedev bt Filip Krajinovic 6-3, 6-3, 4-6, 3-6, 6-0; Stefanos Tsitsipas bt Mikael Ymer 6-4, 6-1, 6-1; Andrey Rublev bt Feliciano Lopez 7-5, 6-2, 6-3; Matteo Berrettini bt Karen Khachanov 7-6 (1), 7-6 (5), 7-6 (5); Fabio Fognini bt Alex de Minaur 6-4, 6-3, 6-4.

Women's singles third round: Elina Svitolina bt Yulia Putintseva 6-4, 6-0; Karolina Muchova bt Karolina Pliskova 7-5, 7-5; Jessica Pegula bt Kristina Mladenovic 6-2, 6-1; Jennifer Brady bt Kaja Juvan 6-1, 6-3; Donna Vekic bt Kaia Kanepi 5-7, 7-6 (2), 6-4; Elise Mertens bt Belinda Bencic 6-2, 6-1; Ashleigh Barty bt Ekaterina Alexandrova 6-2, 6-4; Shelby Rogers bt Anett Kontaveit 6-4, 6-3.

Rohit happy with fans' return DRS REVIEW KICKS UP ROW

AGE CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, FEB. 13

Rohit Sharma knew he had to be "proactive and not reactive" on a challenging Chepauk pitch that offered bounce and spun sharply. Calling his seventh Test century one of the most satisfying knocks, Rohit said it was the result of subtle adjustments he made in his game.

"When you play on turning pitches, you have got to be proactive. We wanted to make sure we used our feet more and swept the ball," said Rohit.

"Getting on top of the bowler and making sure you are ahead of him is very crucial. The preparation helped. We knew how the pitch was prepared and that it would turn. We had a few good training sessions before the game and trained according to what we were going to expect in the middle," he added.

Rohit said he had worked out plans for each bowler. "What helped me was the preparation I did before the game. Understanding the line that Moeen Ali was bowling. He was trying to bowl in the rough outside

the off-stump. So there was very little chance of being out lbw when you are sweeping from outside off. With two fielders on the boundary line, even if I top-edged it, I knew it was going to land in a safe area. Against Leach, I wanted to make sure I played with an angled bat with the turn," he explained.

Asked to rate Saturday's knock, Rohit said: "I am not going to rate any of my knocks because every knock comes with a different kind of pressure and this too came from different circumstances. I am

not one to rate my knocks. A little disappointing to get out like that but I'm happy the team is in a good position." Rohit said the return of spectators changed the atmosphere. "It was great to have them back. It's something that livens up the whole atmosphere. Without spectators, the intensity was a bit low in the first game. It's been a long time since fans enjoyed live action at the stadium. I am happy they witnessed some good cricket today. I am sure they're going to enjoy the rest of the days as well," he said.

AGE CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, FEB. 13

A third umpire decision which wrongly went against the visiting England team has kicked up a controversy, England asked for a DRS review when the on-field umpire gave 'not out' to the appeal against Ajinkya Rahane for a bat-pad catch. The third umpire, Anil Chaudhary, upheld the decision without seeing the full video. It emerged that Chaudhary missed out on seeing another angle which

clearly showed that Rahane was indeed out. The ball touched Rahane's gloves before landing in the hands of short-leg fielder Ollie Pope.

England spinner Jack Leach said that the DRS behaved like a Video Assistant Referee (VAR), which has been a controversial addition to football. "We were trying to get the third umpire to roll it through, they were checking LBW, we knew that would have been not out, we were just trying to get them to look at what

happened after the ball hit his pad. It is a bit like VAR today, still controversial, it is what it is," said Leach.

"They said they were checking it, then the LBW picture came up, we were saying no. We wanted them to check the other one. I got the impression that they hadn't checked it (the other angle). There was nothing I could do about it. I was angry but to get Rahane's wicket in the next over made things a little easier," further added the England spinner Leach.

Is toxicity of politics spreading tentacles into sport?



Ayaz Memon
Over The Top

Last week's distressing development in Uttarakhand cricket involving coach and mentor Wasim Jaffer has rudely interrupted what was otherwise turning out to be a fantastic season for the sport despite the looming presence of Covid-19. In this is also a warning bell for Indian cricket, and society at large.

Allegations of communalism against Jaffer by some officials of the Uttarakhand Association

will astound those who know him even briefly.

In fact, the charges against Jaffer portray him completely out of character.

There hasn't been even a speck of complaint against him on any ground, leave aside stoking such horrid sentiments, in his two-decade-plus career which includes 31 tests for India, making the highest number of runs in the Ranji Trophy and leading Mumbai and Vidharbha to

the national title.

If anything, Jaffer has been extolled for his congenial personality, strong work ethic, fantastic performances as batsman and captain, and maturity as coach and mentor. This is borne out by the support he has received from those he has played with and against.

Anil Kumble responded swiftly on Twitter, putting his weight behind his one-time colleague in the dressing room. Irfan Pathan, Manoj Tiwari, Amol Muzumdar and Mohamed Kaif were also among those who rubbished the allegations.

Some have of course asked why renowned cricketers, who jump on social media for other

issues, have not come to Jaffer's support. I am in no position to answer this, though privately, several have expressed anguish as I have gathered. On social media, there has been a furore, with Jaffer getting untainted support.

Be that as it may, support on social media is not germane to the issue. It is not reflective of the right or wrong of a situation. A commonsensical understanding of the situation, of the probity of charges and how well they stand up to scrutiny, must have greater weightage.

Charges against Jaffer emerged after he quit from his post, stating in his resignation letter how he wasn't allowed to do his job as coach by a section of offi-

cials and selectors in Uttarakhand cricket. That he wasn't even informed of what players had been picked ratified his decision to resign, as Kumble highlighted.

It is revealing that Uttarakhand cricket has had three coaches in the past three seasons, none of whom completed a full season. If nothing else, this suggests massive tugs and pulls, internecine politicking and powerplay within the state association, which obviously can't be of help to a coach or players.

Post the allegations, Jaffer held a virtual press conference, explaining his position on key aspects raised in the charges against him: of players he chose for representing

Uttarakhand in the Mushtaq Ali Trophy, why a maulvi was allowed to lead Friday prayers for a handful, why he wanted a generic slogan for the team before taking the field in a match.

There has been no response as yet from the state association. Astonishingly, after the controversy erupted and Jaffer's press conference, the secretary of the association has distanced himself from charges of allegations against the former coach, leaving the manager of the team as virtually the sole complainant.

The BCCI should swiftly institute an inquiry and take the strictest action against whoever is guilty. Communalism is a sinister

issue. This may have been prevalent to some degree in sport in colonial India, when divide and rule was a policy, but not since Independence to my knowledge. In four decades and more of covering sport, this is the first I have heard of it. Players from different faiths have occupied not just the dressing room, but also when sharing hotel rooms where they have pursued their beliefs, rituals whatever without problem. This is true not just of cricket, but every sport in the country.

What's happened in Uttarakhand cricket is distressing. Hopefully, it is not a pointer that the toxicity of our politics is spreading its tentacles into sport too.