

SHORT TAKES

Man stabbed to death in Shahdara

New Delhi: A 25-year-old man was stabbed to death allegedly by two people over a petty issue in east Delhi's Shahdara area, police said on Friday. The victim has been identified as Saalim. He was involved in several criminal cases, police said, adding that the incident took place on Thursday at Kanti Nagar. The two accused called Saalim to a place in Kanti Nagar. An argument took place between them during which the duo stabbed him with a knife. Later, they also hit him with a spade lying near the spot and fled the spot, a senior police officer said. Police said they have identified the two accused and teams have been formed to arrest them.

Air 'poor' in Noida, Faridabad, Gurgaon

Noida: The average air quality was recorded in "poor" category across Ghaziabad, Noida, Greater Noida, Faridabad and Gurgaon, according to data issued by a government agency on Friday. Pollutants PM 2.5 and PM 10 also remained high in the air of the five immediate neighbours of Delhi, as per the air quality index (AQI) maintained by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). An AQI between zero and 50 is considered 'good', 51 and 100 'satisfactory', 101 and 200 'moderate', 201 and 300 'poor', 301 and 400 'very poor', and 401 and 500 'severe'. The average 24-hour AQI at 4 pm on Friday was 252 in Ghaziabad, 214 in Greater Noida, 201 in Noida, 207 in Faridabad and 208 in Gurgaon, the CPCB's Sameer app stated. — PTI

Shalini, Sanjay Passi donate ₹10cr to TTD

New Delhi: Words of wisdom and acts of kindness hold great relevance, especially in troubled times. As the nation is slowly getting back on its feet, still reeling under the impact of the pandemic, power couple and caring corporates Shalini and Sanjay Passi have come forward to donate ₹10 crore to Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams. The donation will support the philanthropic goals of Sri Venkateswara Bhakti Channel and Sri Venkateswara Sarva Sreyas Trust. Possibly the world's most revered abode of God, the trust known for its many progressive social welfare programmes is not just spiritually close to the Passis, but the two also respect the many 'acts of kindness' undertaken by the trust ranging from education, hygiene, hunger management, health care, etc. Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams' philanthropy ranges from on-ground support to the visiting devotees, going beyond to fund super-specialty health care facilities, technical institutes, vocational training programmes, etc.

CIVIC POLLS: CM ARRIVES IN SURAT TO 'THANK' PEOPLE

Surat: Delhi chief minister and AAP convenor Arvind Kejriwal on Friday arrived in Gujarat's Surat to "thank" the people if the city, where his party has put up an impressive show by winning 27 seats in the recently-held civic polls. Talking to reporters on his arrival at the city airport in the morning, he said, "I have come here to thank people of Surat." Mr Kejriwal will take part in a road show in the city at 3 pm. It will begin from Varracha area and end at Sarthana, where he will address a public meeting. During his visit, he will also meet local office-bearers of his party and the newly-elected corporators. The AAP has made inroads into Gujarat's politics by winning 27 seats of Surat Municipal Corporation (SMC), one of the six cities where voting was held on Sunday. Although the BJP has retained power by winning 93 seats in the 120-member SMC, the AAP has become the opposition party by winning the remaining 27 seats. The Congress, which had won 36 seats in 2015, could not bag even a single seat this time. One of the main reasons for AAP's impressive show in Surat was the support it received from Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti (PAAS), a quota agitation body once led by Hardik Patel, who is now the working president of Gujarat Congress, political experts said.



Farmers shout slogans during their ongoing protest against the new farm laws at Ghazipur border in New Delhi on Friday. — PTI

Farmer who died in R-Day clash had no gunshot wounds: Cops

New Delhi, Feb. 26: The 25-year-old farmer, who died after his tractor overturned during the protesting farmers' tractor rally on Republic Day, did not suffer any gunshot wounds, the police of Delhi and Uttar Pradesh have told the Delhi High Court.

The police of the two states have made the submission relying upon the post-mortem and x-ray reports, given by the District Hospital at Rampur in UP, which prima facie state that "there was no gunshot injury in the body of the deceased".

Delhi Police has said that according to the post-mortem report the young farmer died due to a head injury as a result of the accident and all his injuries were possible in a road accident.

The submissions have been made in response to a plea by the deceased's grandfather — Hardeep Singh — claiming that the victim suffered gunshot injuries to his head. The petition, filed through advocates Vrinda Grover and Soutik Banerjee, has sought a court-monitored SIT probe into the death of the



Deep Sidhu

Collect evidence for true picture: Court tells cops on Sidhu's plea

New Delhi, Feb. 26: Police is not supposed to collect evidence only to prove the guilt of the accused but also to bring forth a true picture, a Delhi court said on Friday while directing a probe on the plea by actor-activist Deep Sidhu who claimed he was not an "instigator" of the Red Fort violence on the Republic Day during farmers' tractor parade against the Centre's three new agri laws.

The court added however that appropriate action may be taken and relevant sections added to the charges if Sidhu was trying to mislead the investigation by fabricating false evidence.

"IO (investigating officer) is duty bound to conduct proper investigation in the matter in a fair and impartial manner. He is not supposed to collect the evidence only to prove the guilt of the accused, rather he has to bring the true picture before the court," Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Gajender Singh Nagar said in his order.

The court was hearing Sidhu's plea seeking directions to the police to include all videos and other material on record which allegedly proved his innocence and conduct a fair and impartial investigation in the case.

During the hearing, advocate Abhishek Gupta, appearing for Sidhu, told the court that Sidhu was not an instigator of the incident at Red Fort, as alleged by the police. — PTI

▶ **DELHI POLICE** has said that according to the post-mortem report the young farmer died due to a head injury as a result of the accident and all his injuries were possible in a road accident

young farmer.

The high court on Friday listed the matter for further hearing on March 4.

The Delhi Police, represented by Delhi government standing counsel Rahul Mehra and advocate Chaitanya Gosain, has also relied upon the footage collected from CCTV cameras located at the site — Deen Dayal Upadhyay marg — where the young farmer died and said that he was driving the tractor at high speed and the vehicle overturned after hitting the barricades.

It said that the footage also shows that the police personnel were running away for safety from the speeding tractor and that none of them fired upon the vehicle or the driver.

The Delhi Police has also said that CCTV footage further indicates that the protestors did not take the injured Navreet Singh to any nearby hospital and

instead they attacked the ambulances that reached the site after hearing about the accident.

It said that the protestors instead of taking him to the hospital immediately, kept his body on the road for five hours and then spread rumours that he was killed in police firing.

The UP police, in its status report, has stated that no FIR has been registered by it in connection with the death as claimed by the petitioner.

"It is further submitted that there is no provision of giving the videography of the post-mortem or original X-ray plates which are medico-legal documents to the family of the deceased by the medical department," it has said in its report.

Grover, on the last date of hearing, had told the court that the way Delhi Police has conducted itself in the matter "does not inspire a shred of confidence".

She had said that the police abandoned all procedures, like carrying out inquest proceedings, conducting a post mortem and lodging of an FIR, as required under the law, even if it was a case of accidental death. — PTI

Market associations support 'Bharat Vyapar bandh' but keep shops open

New Delhi, Feb. 26: Various markets in the national capital remained open on Friday during the "Bharat Vyapar Bandh" called by traders' union with many saying that despite supporting the cause, they did not want to suffer another day of losses.

The Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) on Thursday had said all commercial markets across the country will remain closed on February 26 in view of its "Bharat Bandh" call demanding a review of the provisions of the goods and services tax (GST) regime.

The CAIT said dharnas (protests) will be held nationwide at 1,500 places to urge the Centre, state governments and the GST Council to keep in abeyance the "draconian" provisions of GST.

Brijesh Goyal, president of Chamber of Trade and Industry (CTI), said most of the markets in Delhi opened but the associations extended their support to the "bandh".

The move comes after it was found during an inspection that bars at some establishments were using liquor and beer bottles which did not have 2D bar-code and those that were not readable.

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In an order, deputy commissioner Rajeev Singh said this practice has been viewed "very seriously", adding that the absence of 2D bar-code on

"Around 98 per cent markets, hotels, restaurants and industrial areas were open except in some parts of Chawri Bazaar and Karol Bagh. However, they have extended their support. We also held a protest at Kashmiri Gate around 12.30 pm," Goyal said.

Although various market bodies said they support the cause for which the "bandh" was called, they however, could not shut down their shops or outlets due to multiple reasons.

The bandh was not enforced at Connaught Place market.

"We are completely in support of the cause. However, it was not practically feasible to enforce the "bandh" in the market this time. The traders are already reeling under the losses they incurred during the lockdown and they have heavy burden of rents. We completely support the cause and feel the demands are right," said Atul Bhargava, president, New Delhi Traders Association. — PTI

Govt warns clubs, hotels of strict action for using liquor bottles without 2D bar-code

▶ The move comes after it was found during an inspection that bars at some establishments were using liquor and beer bottles which did not have 2D bar-code and those that were not readable

the bottle will be treated as "non duty paid liquor" and action will be taken.

An official said a bar code shows that this is excise duty paid liquor and also indicates that liquor being served and sold to people is not spurious.

There are over 1,000

Experts warn against non-adherence to Covid norms

256 new coronavirus cases, highest daily count in Feb.

New Delhi, Feb. 26: Delhi recorded 256 new Covid cases on Friday, the highest number of single-day incidences in February, while one fresh death pushed the death toll to 10,906, according to data shared by the city health department.

This is the third successive day when daily cases count have stood at 200-mark or beyond.

On Thursday, 220 Covid cases were registered while on Wednesday the count stood at 200.

On all preceding days, spanning February 1-23, the count of daily cases had been recorded below 200. Delhi had recorded 199 fresh Covid cases on January 28.

From January 15-26, the daily figures ranged from 148 on January 25 to 299 on January 16, according to official data.

No Covid-related death was recorded in Delhi on February 17, the third time single-day fatality count had stood nil in this month.

On February 9 too, no



A police officer checks the temperature of a municipal worker who arrived to receive Covid vaccine at a private hospital in New Delhi. — PTI

fatality from coronavirus infection was registered, the first time this month, and after a gap of nearly nine months.

No death from Covid was recorded on February 13 as well.

On Friday, Delhi recorded 256 fresh Covid cases, while the positivity rate rose to 0.41 per cent, authorities said, adding that the infection tally in the city rose to 6,38,849, according to the latest

health bulletin issued by the city government.

These new cases came out of the 62,768 tests conducted the previous day, according to the health bulletin.

Delhi had recorded 94 fresh Covid cases on February 16, the lowest in over nine months.

Delhi had recorded 96 coronavirus cases on January 27, that time the lowest in over nine months, and the first time

the daily incidences count had stood below the 100-mark in that month.

The active cases tally on Friday rose to 1,231 from 1,169 the previous day, according to the bulletin.

The total number of tests conducted the previous day included 41,775 RT-PCR tests and 20,993 rapid antigen tests, the bulletin said.

The number of people under home isolation on Friday rose to 574 from 536 on Thursday, it said.

Just as the government had asserted that the coronavirus pandemic had been "defeated" in the national capital, cases are on the rise again dramatically, as doctors on Friday warned that the numbers could go up in the coming months and urged people to continue to wear masks and follow Covid safety norms.

Health experts and doctors on Friday attributed this "sudden rise" to complacency in people and not following Covid appropriate behaviour and "assuming all is well now." — PTI

5 held for looting cigarettes worth ₹14L

Noida (UP), Feb. 26: Five people, including two juveniles, allegedly involved in loot of cigarettes worth ₹14 lakh from a private company in Greater Noida have been nabbed following a gunfight with police, officials said on Friday.

Three of the accused got injured in the gunfight that broke out near the Dadha roundabout in the Beta 2 area late on Thursday night and were arrested.

The two juveniles who were travelling along with them on a pickup truck were apprehended, the officials said.

"These people had targeted a warehouse of a private company on Wednesday night and attacked a security guard with a knife. They had decamped with a Tata Ace pickup truck loaded with 14 cartons of cigarettes which cost around ₹14 lakh," Greater Noida Deputy Commissioner of Police Rajesh Kumar Singh said. He said the police had got a tip-off about the gang moving with the looted material during the night and intercepted them, leading to a gunfight.

"Three accused, Kapil and other two named Rohit, got injured in the cross-firing. All three hail from Ghodi Baccheda village in Greater Noida and Kapil worked in the same company until a year ago," Singh said.

All 14 cigarette cartons have been recovered, while three country-made pistols along with some ammunition were seized from the accused trio, he said, adding the two juveniles involved in the loot were also apprehended. — PTI

Man dies after 18-year-old rams Mercedes into scooty

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 26

A man was killed allegedly after a speeding Mercedes hit his scooter in south Delhi's Vasant Vihar area, police said on Friday.

The victim has been identified as Antony Joseph, a domestic help.

The police said Joseph died on the spot after the accident at 11.45 pm on Thursday. Later, he was shifted to Safdarjung hospital.

According to police, he received injuries on his head and other body parts. The post-mortem report will give the exact details.

Accused Aryan Jain (18), along with his two friends Samrath, an engineering student, and Bharat, a first-year stu-

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dent of Delhi University, went for a 15-minute drive on Thursday night, deputy commissioner of police (Southwest) Ingit Pratap Singh said.

The accident happened when they were coming back to Vasant Vihar, he said, adding that Jain was having a learner's license.

A case was registered under sections 279 (rash driving or riding on a

public way) and 304A (causing death by negligence) of the IPC at Vasant Vihar police station.

"Aryan Jain (18) was arrested. A medical test was done and no alcohol was found in his blood," Mr Singh said.

He was later released on bail, police said.

Joseph hailed from Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh. His wife is a cook in the house of a US Embassy official in Vasant Vihar and they both lived in servant quarters, the police said.

The father of the accused has a jewellery shop in a Saket mall, the police said, adding that Aryan Jain is a student of a university in the UK.

The car belongs to the father of the accused, they added.



BJP workers and supporters hold party flag during a roadshow ahead of MCD by-polls at Trilokpuri in New Delhi on Friday. — PTI

Metro services hit: Trains on Blue Line affected due to technical glitch

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 26

Services on a major section of the busy Blue Line of the Delhi Metro were intermittently affected for nearly two hours on Friday due to a technical snag, officials said.

The Blue Line connects Dwarka in Delhi to Noida City Centre.

The DMRC tweeted in the morning, "Delay in service from Dwarka to Rajiv Chowk. Normal service on all other lines."

A DMRC official later said, "The train services on Blue Line witnessed a minor delay on the up line as they headed from Uttam Nagar West station towards Dwarka station due to a technical issue with a track circuit intermittently near Uttam Nagar station between 8.00 am and 10.00 am

▶ **A DMRC** official later said, "The train services on Blue Line witnessed a minor delay on the up line as they headed from Uttam Nagar West station towards Dwarka station due to a technical issue with a track circuit intermittently near Uttam Nagar station between 8.00 am and 10.00 am."

Train services on the entire Blue Line were "broadly normal" during this period, he said.

Around 11.00 am, the DMRC (Delhi Metro Rail Corporation) again tweeted that "normal services have resumed" on the Blue Line.

SHORT TAKES

4 arrested for bid to rape, murder UP girl

Shahjahanpur (UP): Four people were arrested on Friday on the basis of a statement by a college student, who was found severely burnt and lying naked along a national highway here, police said. The woman, who is a BA second-year student of a college run by the Mumukshu Ashram of former Union minister Swami Chinmayanand, said in a statement before a magistrate that three people tried to rape her in a field near Rai Kheda village on Monday. When they did not succeed, they poured kerosene and set her on fire, she alleged. Police has added IPC sections 376D (gang-rape), 120B (criminal conspiracy), 201 (causing disappearance of evidence) besides others after statements of the victim were recorded. Earlier, the FIR was registered under IPC 307 (attempt to murder) and other sections, they said. — PTI

7 camps of Maoists destroyed in Bastar

Bhopal: Security forces have destroyed 7 camps of Maoists in Naxal-stronghold Abujmad, a 4,000 sq km area extending from south Bastar in Chhattisgarh to Gadchiroli in Maharashtra. Huge cache of explosives and arms were seized during the raids on the rebel camps, Bastar range inspector general of police P. Sunderraj told this newspaper on Friday. A counterinsurgency operation, launched in the region in the last 3 days, has uncovered the camps being run by the ultras in the remote pockets of Abujmad region of districts of Narayanpur and Kanker in Bastar, he said. Encounters took place between the security forces and Maoists at several places in the region leading to killing of a jawan of DRG and injuring to another jawan on the first day of the operation on Wednesday.

MP: Godse devotee's Cong entry opposed

Bhopal: The recent induction of a "staunch follower" of Mahatma Gandhi's assassin Natarum Godse in Congress has kicked up a storm in the party with former PCC president Arun Yadav on Friday threatening to stage a revolt against the state leadership over the issue. Mr Yadav on Friday released a video in which he made a scathing attack on the decision by Madhya Pradesh Congress chief Kamal Nath for welcoming Babulal Chaurasia, a former leader of Hindu Mahasabha who was caught on camera worshipping Godse in Gwalior in 2016, in the Congress a couple of days ago. He described the move as unacceptable to him and many other Congressmen and threatened to hit the street.

ED ATTACHES ASSETS OF J'KHAND MAOIST

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 26

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Friday attached assets of a Jharkhand-based Maoist operative as part of its money-laundering probe against him and others. In a statement issued by the central probe agency here on Friday, the ED said, "The frozen assets, worth ₹2.03 crore, are in the form of vehicles and are held in the name of Bindeshwar Ganju alias Bindu Ganju and his firm Ma Gange Coal Trading Pvt Ltd". The ED further said its criminal case against Ganju and others, under various sections of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), is linked to the extremists collecting funds through extortion of contractors, coal traders, coal transporters in the Magadh-Amrapali coal block area of Jharkhand. The state police and the National Investigation Agency (NIA) are also probing the accused and have filed multiple charge sheets against them. Bindeshwar Ganju, the ED said, "Used to collect levy from transporters and delivery order holders in Magadh-Amrapali coal block area in connivance with other extremists of Tritiya Prastuti Committee (TPC) in Chatra district of Jharkhand." The total value of assets attached under the latest order is ₹2.03 crore.

TN, Bengal give last-minute sops to voters

Wages of workers increased in Bengal, cooperative loans waived in TN

Knives out in Kerala; BJP seeks inroads in UDF & LDF bastion

AGE CORRESPONDENT
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, FEB. 26

With the Election Commission announcing single phase poll for Kerala on April 6, the principal parties are left with just 38 days for devising strategies, selecting candidates and venturing out on the ground to campaign.

The three major fronts; CPM led ruling LDF, Opposition Congress led UDF and BJP led NDA which were going slow on candidate selection, will have to expedite the process and introduce their contestants before the electorate at the earliest. The CPM district committees have already finalized the preliminary list of candidates which will vetted by state committee, UDF has decided to pre-

pare the list within in a week while the BJP-NDA also plans to do it by next week.

The ruling LDF is making an all out attempt to repeat 2016 victory, something which is considered impossible for any front in the state. The LDF under former chief minister V S Achuthanandan came very close to doing a repeat in 2011, when it won 68 seats leaving the UDF with a majority of just four seats including Speaker. However in the last elections the LDF secured a clear majority winning 91 seats and UDF could manage to get only 47 and BJP 1. However, this time its going to be a tight contest with the UDF giving a tough fight to the ruling front.

The LDF is fighting the elections on the government's performance. Infrastructure development projects, national high way widening, gas pipeline, social security initiative including welfare pension for the poor and marginalised and ration kits for families during Covid pandemic are some of the achievements it is highlighting among the electorate.

The UDF on the other hand is focusing on the failures of the government, corruption, gold smuggling case involving chief minister's former principal secretary, money laundering, backdoor appointments and unemployment. But the latest issue regarding the clandestine MoU signed with an American company for ₹5,000 cr deep sea trawling project is seen by the UDF as their trump card in polls.

Everyone on poll duty to get vaccine jab: Election panel

New Delhi: Everyone on election duty for the upcoming polls for five assemblies will be vaccinated against Covid-19 before polling day, the Election Commission said on Friday.

Voting will take place for 126 seats in Assam, 234 in Tamil Nadu, 294 in West Bengal, 140 in Kerala and 30 in Puducherry. Nearly 18.68 crore electors will be eligible to vote at 2.7 lakh polling stations for 824 seats in five Assembly elections, Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora said at a press conference here.

Arrangements will be put in place for candidates to file their nominations online for the five assembly polls.

Hours after foreign media reports that the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) has concluded that British alleged middleman Christian James Michel was being detained arbitrarily in India, New Delhi on Friday evening "rejected the opinion rendered by the Working Group", and "regretted that the conclusions drawn by the Working Group are based on limited information, biased allegations from an unidentified source and on an inaccurate understanding of India's criminal justice system".

Slamming the "selective leaks" of the WGAD opinion "even before its official release" in this case, India also said the "allegations which form the basis of the opinion rendered by the Working Group are contrary to facts", adding that "the Working Group is not a judicial body and therefore, its opinions are not legally binding on the Member States".

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▶ **IT MAY BE** recalled that in December, 2018, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had extradited Michel to India in the ₹3,546 crore AgustaWestland VIP chopper deal case.

Michel to India in the ₹3,546 crore AgustaWestland VIP chopper deal case. Michel was reportedly wanted on charges of alleged money laundering, bribery and fraud in connection with the cancelled deal. India had subsequently granted Britain consular access to Michel who is a British national. New Delhi said on Friday that the "extradition was done entirely in accordance with the provisions of the Extradition Treaty signed between two sovereign States", adding that the

petitioner judge facing disciplinary inquiry to withdraw the petition and instead face the inquiry, the Chief Justice Bobde said, "You are walking on very thin ice. You may have a chance that you may be acquitted. But as matters stand now, you are convicted. Sexual harassment allegations cannot be brushed under the carpet like this".

After hearing the matter, the top court said it will pass a short order dealing with the petitioner's contention and then dismiss the petition.

Sensing what is going to court from the court, the petitioner lawyer asked the court to allow him to withdraw the petition with the liberty to participate in the inquiry.



West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee addresses a press conference at Kalighat in Kolkata on Friday.

— PTI

Didi: 8-phase to help BJP manage its poll campaign

Kolkata, Feb. 26: Questioning the eight-phase assembly elections in West Bengal, chief minister Mamata Banerjee said on Friday that she suspects that the dates were announced as per the suggestions of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and home minister Amit Shah for better management of the BJP's poll campaign.

Addressing a press conference at her residence in Kalighat, Ms Banerjee said the Election Commission should not look at the state "through the eyes of the saffron camp" a reference to the BJP.

"With all due respect to the Election Commission, I want to say that questions are being raised on why elections will be held in so many phases in Bengal while other states will be voting in one phase. If EC doesn't provide justice to the people, where will the people go," she said. "I

WB Opp. parties welcome 8 polls

Kolkata, Feb. 26: The opposition parties in West Bengal welcomed the eight-phase elections in the state announced by the Election Commission on Friday with the BJP saying that it was hopeful about the polls being free and fair.

The state Congress said that it was looking forward to an election in 10 to 12 phases, while the CPI(M) maintained that the number of phases does not matter if the elections are held violence-free.

— PTI

request the Election Commission to consider West Bengal as their own state," the Trinamul Congress chief said. Ms Banerjee also raised questions on the way the phases were divided.

"They have divided our stronghold districts such as South 24 Parganas and North 24 Parganas into three parts. This is unprecedented," she said.

Ms Banerjee said that despite "all these tricks", she will win the elections.

"I have information from my sources that the poll dates are similar to the ones BJP wanted. Have the dates been announced as per Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah's suggestions? The PM and the home minister cannot misuse their power for the state elections," she added.

Ms Banerjee also urged the EC to stop the misuse of money power.

"The Union home minister should work for the country.

He cannot misuse his powers for the elections here. We welcome the PM, but he cannot misuse his powers for West Bengal polls," she said. — PTI

SC disposes of plea for contempt action on Maharashtra officials

PARMOD KUMAR
NEW DELHI, FEB. 26

The Supreme Court on Friday disposed of a plea seeking initiation of contempt proceedings against senior Maharashtra government officials including principal secretary to department of revenue and forest vikas kharge allegedly for announcing reward to the villagers who had killed tigress 'Avni' who was described as a "man-eater" and was being hunted for killing 13 people in the Pandharkawada — Ralegaon forests of Yavatmal district in Maharashtra in 2018.

A bench headed by Chief Justice Sharad A. Bobde and also comprising Justice A.S. Bopanna and Justice V. Ramasubramanian, which had earlier issued notice for initiating contempt action against Kharge and eight others, disposed of the matter after the court was informed that it had earlier accepted the killing of the tigress. "We cannot review the decision. Celebration after death was done by villagers ... Villagers were happy and hence they celebrated. Officers have stated on oath that they did not celebrate," the court said today.

TENDER NOTICE
The High Commission for Pakistan New Delhi invites sealed bids from reputable and registered firms for the repair and maintenance work. All eligible contractors may submit their sealed bids with prices and specification at the address below by 15 March 2021 till 1430 hrs. Bids will be opened on 15 March 2021 at 1500 hrs, in the presence of all the bidders/contractors. The High Commission reserves the right to accord contract depending upon the bid quoted for each item & also reserve the right to reject any bid with no liability to contractors/bidders under Public Procurement Rules 2004 available at www.ppra.org.pk/Rules.asp. Interested parties can obtain Bidding documents/complete details about the requirement from the following address:
Ghazanfar Bashir, Third Secretary (Finance & Accounts), High Commission for Pakistan, 2/50-G, Shantipath, Chanakyaapuri, New Delhi - 110021 (Ph: 011-26889186, Fax: 011-26872339) Mob. 9871437912 | Email: aciv1234@gmail.com Email. pakchnd@gmail.com

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The High Commission for Pakistan New Delhi invites sealed bids from reputable and registered firms for the purchase of stationery items. All eligible contractors may submit their sealed bids with prices and specification at the address below by 16 March 2021 till 1430 hrs. Bids will be opened on 16 March 2021 at 1500 hrs, in the presence of all the bidders/contractors. The High Commission reserves the right to accord contract depending upon the bid quoted for each item & also reserve the right to reject any bid with no liability to contractors/bidders under Public Procurement Rules 2004 available at www.ppra.org.pk/Rules.asp. Interested parties can obtain Bidding documents/complete details about the requirement from the following address:
Ghazanfar Bashir, Third Secretary (Finance & Accounts), High Commission for Pakistan, 2/50-G, Shantipath, Chanakyaapuri, New Delhi - 110021 (Ph: 011-26889186, Fax: 011-26872339) Mob. 9871437912 | Email: aciv1234@gmail.com Email. pakchnd@gmail.com

TENDER NOTICE
The High Commission for Pakistan New Delhi invites sealed bids from reputable and registered firms for the Purchase of IT equipment, plant & machinery items. All eligible contractors may submit their sealed bids with prices and specification at the address below by 19 March 2021 till 1430 hrs. Bids will be opened on 19 March 2021 at 1500 hrs, in the presence of all the bidders/contractors. The High Commission reserves the right to accord contract depending upon the bid quoted for each item & also reserve the right to reject any bid with no liability to contractors/bidders under Public Procurement Rules 2004 available at www.ppra.org.pk/Rules.asp. Interested parties can obtain Bidding documents/complete details about the items required from the following address:
Ghazanfar Bashir, Third Secretary (Finance & Accounts), High Commission for Pakistan, 2/50-G, Shantipath, Chanakyaapuri, New Delhi - 110021 (Ph: 011-26889186, Fax: 011-26872339) Mob. 9871437912 | Email: aciv1234@gmail.com Email. pakchnd@gmail.com

TENDER NOTICE
The High Commission for Pakistan New Delhi invites sealed bids from reputable and registered firms for the purchase of furniture and fixture items. All eligible contractors may submit their sealed bids with prices and specification at the address below by 17 March 2021 till 1430 hrs. Bids will be opened on 17 March 2021 at 1500 hrs, in the presence of all the bidders/contractors. The High Commission reserves the right to accord contract depending upon the bid quoted for each item & also reserve the right to reject any bid with no liability to contractors/bidders under Public Procurement Rules 2004 available at www.ppra.org.pk/Rules.asp. Interested parties can obtain Bidding documents/complete details about the items required from the following address:
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Sexual harassment cases can't be ignored: SC

PARMOD KUMAR
NEW DELHI, FEB. 26

The Supreme Court on Friday said it cannot allow sexual harassment cases to be swept under the carpet while refusing to interfere with disciplinary proceedings initiated against a former district judge by Madhya Pradesh high court.

The bench headed by Chief Justice Sharad A. Bobde and also comprising Justices A.S. Bopanna and V. Ramasubramanian said that this while hearing a petition by a former district judge of Madhya Pradesh, challenging the disciplinary proceedings initiated against him by Madhya Pradesh high court in the wake of a junior judicial officer making com-

SC seeks Centre's reply on 'caste census'

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 26

The Supreme Court on Friday sought response from the Centre, the ministry of social justice and the national commission for backward classes on a PIL by two Telangana residents seeing a caste-wise census of the backward classes in 2021.

After a brief hearing, a Bench headed by Chief Justice Sharad A. Bobde issued notice and tagged the matter with an earli-

er petition for hearing on April 16.

The top court had earlier on October 17, 2020, issued notice on a similar plea by one Tinku Saini.

The petitioners, G Mallesh Yadav and Alla Ramakrishna, have argued in their plea that there is a provision in the constitution under Articles 15(4), 15(5), 16(4) and 16(5) providing for reservation to the backward classes/castes in education and employment.

withdraw the petition challenging the disciplinary proceedings.

Asking the senior advocate R. Balasubramanian appearing for

petitioner judge facing disciplinary inquiry to withdraw the petition and instead face the inquiry, the Chief Justice Bobde said, "You are walking on very thin ice. You may have a chance that you may be acquitted. But as matters stand now, you are convicted. Sexual harassment allegations cannot be brushed under the carpet like this".

After hearing the matter, the top court said it will pass a short order dealing with the petitioner's contention and then dismiss the petition.

Sensing what is going to court from the court, the petitioner lawyer asked the court to allow him to withdraw the petition with the liberty to participate in the inquiry.

SHORT TAKES

AAP EYES GUJARAT
AFTER STRONG
SHOW IN SURAT

Surat, Feb. 26: Buoyed by the Aam Aadmi Party's good performance in the recently-held Surat civic polls, party chief Arvind Kejriwal has now set his eyes on the 2022 Gujarat Assembly polls.

Mr Kejriwal, who arrived in Surat on Friday, said that AAP would seek votes from the people of the state in the next Assembly polls based on the performance of the party's 27 newly-elected corporators in the city.

Polls to six civic bodies in Gujarat, including in Surat, were held on Sunday.

While the BJP retained power in the Surat Municipal Corporation (SMC) by winning 93 seats, the AAP bagged the remaining 27 seats. The Congress failed to win even a single seat.

During his address to the party corporators here, Kejriwal said, "The people of Gujarat are watching you with great hope. In our first attempt, AAP won 28 Assembly seats in Delhi and came to power. People trusted us because they knew that we are true patriots, as we were associated with Anna Hazare's agitation."

"In the 49 days of our rule, we did a lot of pro-people work. As a result, the people of Delhi gave us 67 seats in the second election. Now, six crore people of Gujarat will observe the work of 27 AAP corporators. If you perform well, I am sure there will be a huge revolution in 2022," the Delhi chief minister added.

Fearing a "poaching attempt", Mr Kejriwal warned the elected representatives to inform the party leaders if "anyone from the BJP" contacts them over phone and gives an offer to switch sides.

— PTI

CO-WIN CHIEF
HOLDS MEET
WITH STATES, UTS

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 26

As the government gears up to exponentially expand the vaccination coverage of the general population from March 1, the Union health secretary and chairman, Empowered Group on Vaccine Administration (Co-WIN) on Friday held a meeting with states and Union Territories to work out the final details.

The Covid vaccination of Age-Appropriate Groups — all citizens above 60 years of age, and those within the age bracket of 45 to 59 years with specified co-morbidities — will be held at government and private healthcare centres. During the meeting, States and UTs were explained the process of empanelment of private hospitals as Covid vaccination centres and process of advance self registration, on-site registration of potential beneficiaries.

"The new phase of vaccination of age-appropriate groups will expand the Covid vaccination in the country manifold. With a citizen-centric approach, the fundamental shift in this phase is that citizens in the identified age groups, as also those healthcare workers and frontline who have been missed out or left out of the present phase of vaccination, can select vaccination centres of their choice. Secondly, the private sector hospitals will be involved as Covid vaccination centres to harness their potential to expand the vaccination capacities," Union health ministry officials said.

ODISHA BJP MLA
ALLEGES FRAUD IN
PADDY PURCHASE

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO
BHUBANESWAR, FEB. 26

A Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) MLA from Odisha's Deogarh constituency, Subash Chandra Panigrahi, on Friday created a flutter in the State Assembly as he threatened self-immolation over the delay in the paddy procurement process at several mandis in different districts.

To draw attention of the government towards the plight of farmers, Mr Panigrahi also staged a dharna in the well of the House demanding immediate procurement of paddy lying at various mandis or market yards.

"I will set myself on fire if the procurement process was not streamlined and the produce of the farmers were procured at the earliest," said the aggrieved lawmaker.

He returned to his seat following a request made by the Speaker Surjya Narayan Patra.

HP gov 'manhandled', 5 Cong MLAs suspended

Speaker examining Assembly rules to lodge FIR against legislators, Opp. creates ruckus in House too

Shimla, Feb. 26: Himachal Pradesh governor Bandaru Dattatraya was allegedly manhandled by some Congress members in the Assembly complex on Friday, following which five MLAs were suspended for the remainder of the Budget Session.

The incident took place outside the Speaker's office when the governor was leaving for the Raj Bhavan after he cut short his address in the House following a ruckus create by the Congress on the opening day of the Budget session.

Speaker Vipin Parmar said the Opposition members tried to stop the governor, who was accompanied by Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur, when he was going towards his cavalcade.

They hit on the gover-

nor's back with copies of his address. They also hit the bonnet of the governor's car, the Speaker said, adding that he is examining the Assembly rules to lodge an FIR against the Congress legislators.

The Speaker told PTI that this is for the first time in the history of the Himachal Pradesh Assembly that a governor was manhandled by Opposition members.

After the incident, the Speaker suspended Leader of Opposition Mukesh Agnihotri and four other Congress MLAs Harsh Vardhan Chauhan, Satpal Raizada, Sunder Singh and Vinay Kuma for the entire Budget session till March 20 on a motion moved by Parliamentary Affairs Minister Suresh Bhardwaj.

Earlier, the Congress



Congress MLAs try to stop the car of HP governor Bandaru Dattatraya after his speech on the opening day of the Budget Session in the state Assembly in Shimla on Friday. — PTI

MLAs created a ruckus in the House during the governor's address. He then skipped to the last sentence after reading initial few pages and stated that the entire speech should be deemed as read.

Suspended Congress MLA Harsh Vardhan Chauhan told PTI that they were waiting outside the Speaker's office and just wanted to ask the governor why he cut short his address but they were not allowed to do so.

He alleged that it was Deputy Speaker Hans Raj who manhandled the MLAs, a charge denied by parliamentary affairs minister Suresh Bhardwaj, who said the Congress legislators had planned to create a scene.

Mr Chauhan also said they did not have any intention of manhandling

the governor.

"If any FIR is registered against us, we will not go to the court for bail, rather we will prefer to be arrested," he said, adding that the suspended Congress MLAs will sit outside the Assembly during the Budget session.

Earlier, while moving the motion in the House, Bhardwaj said Chief Minister Thakur had termed the manhandling an "attack on the governor".

The Assembly, which was adjourned till 2 pm on Monday earlier in the day, was reconvened at 1 pm on Friday to consider the motion moved by Mr Bhardwaj. No Congress MLA was present in the House at the time of suspension of the five MLAs.

The session is scheduled to conclude on March 20.

— PTI

India still needs effective
public sector banks: Modi

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 26

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday stressed on increasing credit to businesses to meet the needs of a fast refloating economy and said financial products will have to be tailor-made for fintech and startups.

He said that although the government's endeavour is to promote the private sector, the public sector still needs to have their presence in banking and insurance to support the poor.

"Our top priority is to ensure that the depositor as well as the investor experiences trust and transparency. The old ways and old systems of banking and non-banking sectors are being changed," Mr Modi said, pointing to the "severe harm" done to the banking and financial sector "10-12 years ago in the name of aggressive lending".

Mr Modi said this while addressing a webinar on effective implementation of Budget provisions



Narendra Modi

● **THE PRIME Minister stressed on increasing credit to businesses to meet the needs of a fast refloating economy and said financial products will have to be tailor-made for fintech and startups.**

related to financial services.

The Centre, he said, had taken steps to free the country from a 'non-transparent credit culture' where non-performing assets (NPAs) were brushed under the carpet.

Mr Modi said to help medium and small businesses during the Covid pandemic, 90 lakh Micro,

Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) were given credit worth ₹2.4 trillion.

"Supporting MSME and startups and expanding credit flow to them is necessary. The government has undertaken reforms and opened up sectors like farm, coal and space. Now it's the responsibility of the financial sector to understand the aspirations of rural and smaller cities and make them the strength of Aatmanirbhar Bharat.

"We understand the uncertainties of the business and recognise that every business decision is not underlined by bad intentions. In such a scenario, it is the responsibility of the government to stand by business decisions taken with a clear conscience, we are doing this and will continue to do so," he stated.

The new policy of disinvestment of public sector enterprises covered the financial sector as well, and private enterprises were being promoted wherever possible, he noted.

DGCA extends
suspension of
int'l flights

Mumbai, Feb. 26: Aviation regulator DGCA extended the suspension of international commercial passenger flight services till March 31.

Scheduled international flight operations were suspended from March 23 last year in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic in the country.

"In partial modification of circular dated June 26, 2020, the competent authority has further extended the validity.. regarding scheduled international commercial passenger services to and from India till 23.59 pm IST of March 31, 2021," the DGCA said.

However, international scheduled flights may be allowed on select routes by the competent authority on case-to-case basis, it said.

The restriction will not apply to cargo flights and flights specifically approved by DGCA, the circular added. Amid the suspension, special international flights have been allowed under the Vande Bharat Mission since May last year.

— PTI

Just a trailer, says letter in
car outside Ambani house

SHAHAB ANSARI
MUMBAI, FEB. 26

The Mumbai police on Friday made public content of the letter found inside explosives laden car parked near billionaire Mukesh Ambani's residence and said that it was a threat letter terming the incident as trailer and warning of returning with more preparation next time to target the family.

According to the police, it is a handwritten letter in a broken English, addressed to Mukesh Ambani and his wife Neeta Ambani. The police has stated that there are grammar mistakes in the letter and the writer is either not much educated



Mukesh Ambani

or is pretending to be so. The letter was found on next to driver's seat.

Scanning of the CCTV has also revealed that even though the said SUV was parked on the Carmichael Road near Ambani's residence Antilia at around 1am however, the driver of the car sat in the car post 3am. The driver came out of

the car from the rear door of the car but could not be identified, as he was wearing a mask as well as a hoodie.

The police is scanning CCTV's of nearby areas to locate the driver. The police will enhance the quality of the CCTV footage to identify the suspect.

Maharashtra home minister Anil Deshmukh has said that if needed security cover of Ambani family will be enhanced.

It may be recalled that a car carrying unassembled explosive materials was found abandoned at Carmichael Road in South Mumbai on Thursday evening, near the house of Reliance Industries chairman Mukesh Ambani.

Travel light and pay less: DGCA

Flight tickets to get cheaper if you don't carry check-in baggage

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 26

In a big relief to the fliers who travel light, the Director-General of Civil Aviation has asked the airlines to reduce their airfares if passengers do not have check-in baggage. The DGCA has, however, left to the airlines to decide the amount of concession in the airfare.

As per existing norms, a passenger is allowed to carry up to 7 kilograms of cabin baggage and 15 kilograms of check-in bag-

gage, though Air India allows 25 kg in its domestic flights in economy class. Any additional weight is chargeable by all airlines.

"On the basis of various feedback received, it is felt that many times the services provided by the airlines may not be required by the passengers while travelling. Considering the fact that unbundling of services and charges thereto has the potential to make basic fare more affordable and provide the consumer an option of

paying for the services which he/she wishes to avail, it has been decided by the government to allow these services to be unbundled and charged separately on an opt-in basis," the DGCA circular said.

In order to avail the discount, passengers will have to declare at the time of the booking of the ticket the weight of baggage they will be carrying.

"As part of airline baggage policy, scheduled airlines will be allowed to offer free baggage

allowance as well as zero baggage/no check-in baggage fares. This will be subject to the condition that the passenger booking ticket under such fare scheme is made aware of the charges that shall be applicable if the passenger turns up with the baggage for check-in at the airline counter. These applicable charges shall be reasonable; prominently displayed to the passenger at the time of booking of a ticket and also to be printed on the ticket," the circular said.

0.4% GDP growth in Q4

■ **Continued from Page 1**

implementation data showed on Friday.

Ging by this data, the government expects GDP to contract by eight per cent, compared to the earlier projection of a decline of 7.7 per cent, signalling a weaker than expected rebound in the March quarter. "A sharp recovery in manufacturing, construction and the government sectors, along with sustained agricultural expansion, is what boosted the headline growth figure. Most sectors, except mining, have seen growth in the third quarter of current fiscal on a year-on-year basis," it showed.

On the consumption front, the data further showed that private consumption, reflected in private final consumption expenditure, contracted 2.3 per cent in Q3 compared to a contraction of 11.3 per cent in Q2.

"Investments, as reflected by gross fixed capital formation, grew by 2.5 per cent in Q3,

after a contraction of 6.8 per cent in Q2. While the government final consumption expenditure contracted by 1.1 per cent in Q3, after a contraction of 24 per cent in Q2," it showed.

Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman met with the Niti Aayog CEO and the secretaries of 22 infrastructure ministries/departments in a virtual meeting earlier on Friday and discussed post-Budget action points for the infrastructure roadmap ahead, including the National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP) implementation. This was the third review meeting by the finance minister on the importance of NIP and the infrastructure sector to ensure a faster post Covid-19 recovery of the economy.

Ahead of the GDP data's release, the stock markets crashed drastically on Friday and posted their worst single-day performance since March 30, 2020. The Sensex tumbled

1,939 points, or 3.8 per cent, to close at 49,099.99, and the Nifty 50 index cracked 3.76 per cent, or 568 points, to settle at 14,529.15.

Also, economists as well as ratings agencies had widely expected India's GDP to grow in the third quarter on the back of higher economic activity and the reducing number of Covid-19 cases in the country. They are also hopeful that India's economic growth in the fourth quarter will improve further due to the mass vaccination drive that started from January.

India had slipped into a technical recession during July-September when the GDP fell for two successive quarters. In the July-September quarter, India's GDP contracted 7.5 per cent year-on-year. The economy shrank 23.9 per cent year-on-year in the April-June quarter after the Covid-19 outbreak and the nationwide lockdown to check the virus' spread.

Troops must leave all friction points

■ **Continued from Page 1**

dialogue and consultation with China to realise quick disengagement at the remaining points".

In a statement Friday, the external affairs ministry said: "The external affairs minister and the state councillor and foreign minister of China, Mr Wang Yi, had a phone conversation yesterday afternoon. It lasted 75 minutes. The two foreign ministers discussed the situation along the LAC in eastern Ladakh and also issues related to overall India-China relations. EAM... noted that the bilateral relations have been impacted severely over last year. EAM

said that boundary question may take time to resolve, but that the disturbance of peace and tranquility, including by violence, will inevitably have a damaging impact on the relationship."

The MEA added: "Noting the completion of disengagement in Pangong Lake area, EAM emphasised that both sides should now quickly resolve the remaining issues along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh. EAM said that once disengagement is completed at all friction points, then the two sides could also look at broader de-escalation of troops in the area and work towards restoration of peace and tranquility... It was

therefore necessary that the two sides should work towards early resolution of the remaining issues. It was necessary to disengage at all friction points in order to contemplate de-escalation of forces in this sector. That alone will lead to the restoration of peace and tranquility and provide conditions for progress of our bilateral relationship."

In its separate statement on the conversation, the Chinese foreign minister said: "State councillor and foreign minister Wang Yi ... noted that what had led to the situation last year at the China-India boundary was clear and that lessons from the past deserve

deep contemplation. There has been some wavering and back-peddalling in India's China policy, and practical cooperation between the two countries has been affected. This does not serve the interests of either side. Decades of experiences have shown repeatedly that heightening differences does not help solve problems, and that it only erodes the basis of mutual trust."

Beijing added: "Mr Wang said that the frontline troops of the two countries have recently completed disengagement in the Pangong Lake areas. The situation on the ground has been noticeably eased."

EC sets poll dates for 4 states, UT

■ **Continued from Page 1**

be done at polling stations in critical and vulnerable areas, while adequate deployment of Central armed police forces will be ensured. He added that all critical and vulnerable areas have been identified and advance teams have already been deployed across the four states and one Union Territory.

The CEC said that in view of the Covid-19 safety protocols, candidates can file their nominations online and voting will be allowed for an additional hour. Door-to-door campaigning will be restricted to five persons, including the candidate, while roadshows will be allowed with a maximum of five vehicles.

Meanwhile, in order to enable the voter to know the serial number of the electoral roll of his/her polling station, date of poll, time, etc, the EC has decided to issue a "Voter Information Slip" in place of the "Photo Voter Slip" which will include all such information but will not have the photograph of the voter. The Voter

Information Slip will be distributed at least five days before the date of poll to all enrolled electors by the district election officer. However, this Voter Information Slip will not be allowed to be used as a proof of identity for voters and people will have to carry other documents for identification.

THE ASIAN AGE

27 FEBRUARY 2021

A welcome first sign of an India-Pak thaw

The joint statement released by the militaries of India and Pakistan on Thursday, February 25, on observing the ceasefire at the Line of Control and in all other border areas, and respecting previous agreements in this regard, is a positive development that deserves to be built upon. It marks the first sign of thaw in India-Pakistan relations since January 2, 2016, when Pakistan-based terrorists struck the Indian Air Force base in Pathankot a mere eight days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's surprise visit to Lahore on Christmas Day to celebrate the birthday of then Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif. Understandably, this was taken as a sign that the Pakistan Army, which calls all the shots in that country, was not comfortable with the potential of an evolving entente between the two countries.

Since then it has been a roller-coaster ride of negativity in bilateral ties, as the Uri terror attack of September 2016, India's "surgical strike" days later, the subsequent Pulwama terrorist attack in early 2019 that killed 40 CRPF personnel, India's retaliatory airstrike across the LoC, and the immediate response of a Pakistani fighter jet crossing the LoC, showed.

If the Pakistan Army chief's initiative has to survive, he must ensure that J&K is out of bounds for terrorism. This means the message must go down to the homegrown Kashmir outfits as well.

After five years of a hostile stasis in the relationship, Pakistan Army chief Gen. Qamar Javed Bajaj, in a February 3 address, attempted to mark a change of course in ties with India. He said: "We stand firmly committed to the ideal of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. It is time to extend the hand of peace in all directions. Pakistan and India must also resolve the longstanding issue of Jammu and Kashmir in a dignified and peaceful manner."

The joint defence statement suggests that India was not unresponsive, and both sides got on to practicalities. Across governments, India has held that it is the Pakistan Army that is the fly in the ointment, and that a turn in a beneficial direction is contingent on the Pakistan Army desiring it. Evidently, Gen. Bajwa's remark has emerged as a possible catalyst.

How the thaw unfolds lies in the future. Over the decades, Pakistan Army has tied itself into knots by cultivating terrorist outfits as its surrogates operating in Kashmir, in other parts of India, and in Afghanistan with which India seeks to deepen its friendship.

If the Pakistan Army chief's initiative has to survive, he must ensure that J&K is out of bounds for terrorism. And this means the message must go down to the homegrown Kashmir outfits as well. Further, terrorist actions against all Indian entities in Afghanistan must also cease.

The joint statement is a military statement. At some point, if things go well, it needs to acquire a political dimension at the level of the two governments. The statement notes that it was "agreed to address each other's core issues and concerns which have (the) propensity to disturb peace and lead to violence". Such a formulation covers terrorism as well as Kashmir. India should not fight shy of taking the "K" word on board in all its dealings with Pakistan.

Diamonds aren't forever

The decks have been cleared for the extradition from Britain of the diamond merchant Nirav Modi. It is up to India to use its heft in pursuing the matter to a conclusion by convincing the UK home secretary Priti Patel to sign off on the court ruling and allow the repatriation of a jewel thief who masterminded one of the great heists of the time in defrauding the Punjab National Bank. The booty to the tune of Rs 14,000 crore (nearly US \$2 billion) is nearly the equivalent of what thieves took from the 1963 Great Train Robbery in the UK.

The Indian people, whose money it is that was swindled from the bank by the illegal use of Letters of Undertaking (LoUs) in connivance with bank officials, would be hoping that the justice system here would ultimately hand down an apt sentence commensurate with the crime. Mr Modi has also added to his repertoire such crimes as intimidation of witnesses in the form of death threats and tampering with the evidence. A jail in India may not, however, be to the liking of the notorious diamantaire as it may not quite match the decorated cell in Her Majesty's Prison in Wandsworth which boasts of flat screen TV, high ceiling fans and a large clean bathroom.

Indian officials have done exceptionally well in pursuing the case with all the documentation necessary for the judge to deliver such a stinging indictment of Nirav Modi's modus operandi. But, in its inability to ferret out a fraud amounting to robbery, the banking industry may not have acquitted itself as professionally. And this is not a case of straightforward business loss like many that have blighted banking to the tune of several lakh crores that have become NPAs in just the last two decades. There could not possibly any grounds on which such a character can claim asylum in Britain either, which means that at least one big fraudster who took India for a ride gets his comeuppance.

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Farrukh Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings



Life on Zoom: You learn a lot about yourself, and others too

"They say all property is theft
Hence, I own nothing and am left bereft
My ancestors were never Earls or thieves
And depending, then, on what one believes
About making it rich through toil and sweat
It's just not true — so I'll place my bet
On Proudhon who formulated the phrase
With which Marx disagreed — All praise, all praise!"

— From Dil Deykey Dildo by Bachchoo

To "zoom", a dictionary will tell you, is to travel fast or rise quickly and perhaps noisily. It must have been, I thought with some irony, that the principal instrument I seem to use to confer with anyone in the lockdowns of the plague year was called Zoom. One goes nowhere.

If it is, as I suspect, not a Chinese but an American device, there was probably no ironic intent in naming it. After all, 74 million Americans don't care whether a

person is a self-obsessed habitual liar, misogynist, racist, fraudster, rabble-rousing insurrectionist, anti-democrat and fantasist, they still want to make him President. Not very high on the irony scale, then.

But one must admit that Americans are good on the onomatopoeic front. It was their popular and renowned form of literature, the comic, which gave us words for violence. I suppose "bang bang" may have preceded Amerigo Vespucci's discovery of Trumpistan and may have been imported, perhaps from Ireland, but adding "Chitty Chitty" to it was a stroke of genius attributed to the USA. But I digress.

What I meant was that the comics gave us words for fisticuffs such as "sock" and "pow". Who can't see in their mind's eye the spiked splatter of a powerful punch from Superman or Batperson landing on the villain's skull as this nasty individual tilts away from the vertical? The words inside the spiked bubbles or splashes, giving visual form to the impact of fists, aren't exactly onomatopoeic, as a punch sounds more like "phut" — but "pow" packs

imaginative power.

So, gentle reader, Zoom, as the name of a device by which you connect to anyone (who has an appropriate electronic device, of course) anywhere in the world, may be a word that is supposed to and successfully conveys the speed of contact between stationary persons — two or a full screen of them.

If Indians had invented the ethereal conversation device and needed an onomatopoeic name for it, they would probably have called it "Dhishoom", because as far as I know it's the only sound word that we have invented. It is of course Bollywood for the sound of a gun going off, and there are always two shots fired so it becomes "Dhishoom! Dhishoom!" The precedent is the Western "bang bang" — because if it's just the one word, it could merely stand for the slamming of a door. I venture to speculate that we would have called our communication device "Dhishoom" because having invented the word, we use it as the name of a chain of very good British restaurants. That's not supposed to represent the explosion of your stomach when you eat there.

My constant, even daily, use of Zoom has given me several useless insights into human behaviour, perhaps not new ones, but ones that confirm what we do and are. It has also reinforced my self-consciousness in a not terribly positive way.

You see, Zoom forces you to see yourself as you speak to others and, depending on the strength of echo in your device, you can even hear yourself speak and, like me, be rather surprised at your lamentable accent, the slight lisp you hadn't noticed before and the stupid fumbles and pauses you thought others made but which your fluency was free of.

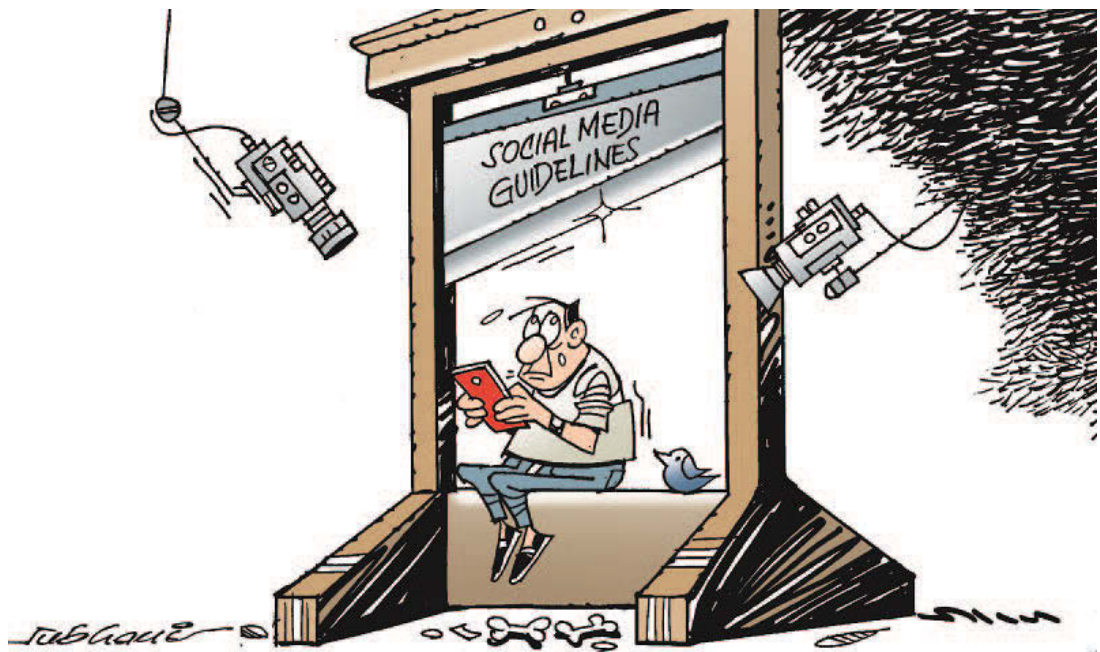
And then there's appearances, of course. Before a Zoom call, I check my hair and brush it this way and that. My creeping baldness (a family inheritance which, as they say, looking on the bright side, allows more space for rude tattoos) and the fact that I haven't had a haircut since the lockdown began does funny things, in my self-conscious perception, to my appearance. The hair in the centre of my head insists on standing upright, as though I was auditioning for the role of TinTin from the French comics.

I used to despise the self-deceivers who brushed their hair forwards to hide their baldness, but now find myself wondering, comb in hand at the mirror, whether it's a good strategy. It's not.

Gentle reader, in my job as a teacher, and then in my short and happy life as an agitator and pamphleteer, I have addressed countless classes, assemblies and audiences. I never began with the old opening: "unaccustomed as I am to public speaking", but perhaps should have. Zoom has demonstrated to me that any conceit I cultivate about my ability to present an argument is precisely that. I have now taken a vow during the Christian Lent to begin speaking on Zoom with that precise and modest caveat. Watch that screen!

Zoom gives one an insight into the rooms that your "zoomists" work or speak from. The convention is to have a bookshelf or some dignified piece of art behind you, but that may only be true of the people I associate with or speak to or watch on a televised Zoom. I wonder if others have dirty pictures or washing hanging up behind them as they interlocute.

Subhani



Judges need to protect right to dissent, protest



Patralekha Chatterjee

Dev 360

At a time when the people's faith in key institutions is plummeting, judicial verdicts that seek to restore the citizens' faith in justice and fair play are hugely welcome. In recent days, two court orders in particular have buoyed spirits because they emit a powerful signal — that the attempts to invoke the law to muzzle freedom of thought and expression and quieten disquiet will not always work.

A Delhi court has granted bail to 22-year-old climate activist Disha Ravi, arrested by the Delhi police on February 13 from her Bengaluru home in the by-now famous "toolkit" case, saying there was just not enough evidence to keep the young woman in custody. Additional sessions judge Dharmender Rana's order set Disha free on bail on the condition of her furnishing two sureties of ₹1 lakh each and with the directive that she cooperate with the investigation into the FIR and not leave the country.

A few days earlier, there was another welcome verdict. The Nagpur bench of the Bombay high court granted interim bail on medical grounds to ailing 82-year-old poet-activist Varavara Rao.

These verdicts are good news; but the questions they raise and the momentum they have generated need to be sustained and leveraged to trigger a public debate on judicial reforms.

As citizens, reading both the verdicts is instructive.

While granting conditional bail on medical grounds to Varavara Rao, an accused in the Elgaar Parishad-Bhima Koregaon case, the Bombay high court pointed out that the National Investigation Agency (NIA) had kept him in custody for a long period without framing charges.

Senior advocates Indira Jaising and Anand Grover, who argued on behalf of Mr Rao, pointed out that considering his age, medical history, and multiple health complications, the prison atmosphere was absolutely not conducive to his mental and physical well-being. Such well-being is a fundamental right of every prisoner, points out *Leaflet*, a legal website.

The NIA had opposed the bail plea citing a bar under Section 43-D (4) and (5) of the UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act), which says bail cannot be granted to an accused under the anti-terror statute if the prosecution makes out a prima facie case against the accused. Ms Jaising argued that the fundamental right to health of a prisoner could never be ousted by Section 43(D)(5) of the UAPA.

The high court observed that it was a "genuine and fit" case for granting relief in view of the advanced age of Mr Rao and inadequate facilities at the Talaja jail hospital; it argued that if it denied relief to Mr Rao, it would be abdicating its constitutional duties as a protector of human rights and right to health covered under Article 21 of the Constitution.

The arguments undergirding the verdict related to Disha Ravi, arrested on the charge of sedition, are equally important. The court punctured most of the arguments of the Delhi police against Ms Ravi, including her alleged engagement with groups with "dubious" credentials, her links with banned organisations, her alleged role in incitement as well as the destruction of "evidence" and gave detailed reasons for doing so.

While taking the decision to grant bail to Ms Ravi, the court noted that "mere engagement with persons of dubious credentials is not indictable". A key argu-

ment of the prosecution hinged on the charge that a group called "Poetic Justice Foundation" (PJF), which was allegedly pro-Khalistani and secessionist, and people associated with it, was involved in creating the "toolkit" document. The police alleged that two of Ms Ravi's associates, Nikita Jacob and Shantanu Muluk, attended a Zoom meeting in which activists of the PJF also participated along with many others and this somehow made Ms Ravi also culpable.

The court said that no real evidence had been put on record to establish a direct link between Ms Ravi and the PJF activists mentioned. "In my considered opinion, it is not mere engagement with persons of dubious credentials which is indictable, rather it is the purpose of engagement which is relevant for the purpose of deciding culpability," the judge said.

The prosecution had sought to connect Ms Ravi with the violence that rocked Delhi on January 26. The court pointed out that there was no evidence of this. The judge noted that merely sharing a platform with people who oppose a law is not secessionist.

"In the absence of any evidence to the effect that the applicant/accused agreed or shared a common purpose to cause violence on January 26 with the founders of the PJF, it cannot be presumed by resorting to surmises or conjectures that she also supported the secessionist tendencies or the violence caused on January 26, simply because she shared a platform with people who have gathered to oppose the legislation," the order said.

While granting bail to Varavara Rao, the Bombay high court pointed out that the National Investigation Agency had kept him in custody for a long period without framing charges

The crux of the matter, as the court pointed out, is whether Disha Ravi was merely involved in peaceful protest and dissent against the farm laws or if she was actually involved in seditious activities under the guise of protesting against these laws.

The court's view, as articulated in the order, is that citizens cannot be tossed behind bars simply because they disagree with the government of the day.

"Difference of opinion, disagreement, dissent, or for that matter, even disapprobation, are recognised legitimate tools to infuse objectivity in state policies... The offence of sedition cannot be invoked to minister to the wounded vanity of governments," the court said, citing a 1942 ruling.

Another critical observation by the court in the Disha Ravi case pivots around the right to dissent being firmly enshrined in Article 19 and that freedom of speech includes the right to seek a global audience.

These observations are welcome and will have far-reaching implications.

Young Indians, mostly women in their early 20s, have been arrested over the past few years merely for exercising their fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression, by engaging in democratic protests with no intentions of perpetrating violence and with no intention of inciting violence, members of the Delhi High Court Women Lawyers Forum have pointed out in a public letter to the Chief Justice of India and other Supreme Court judges. The letter notes that Disha was brought from Bengaluru to the national capital by the Delhi police without following the prescribed legal procedures.

"We feel that the Bar and Bench cannot watch silently as young people are forced into long incarceration," the letter said.

The judiciary must take heed.

The writer focuses on development issues in India and emerging economies. She can be reached at patralekha.chatterjee@gmail.com.

LETTERS

GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

It is refreshing that guns fell silent on the Line of Control and the International Border India shares with Pakistan on Thursday midnight. Both sides agreed to deescalate tensions and observe all bilateral ceasefire agreements and protocols. The truce follows China disengaging troops in the Pangong lake in Ladakh from stand-off positions, and both sides pulled back their troops. Give peace a chance!

N.J. Ravi Chander
Bengaluru

SURVEILLANCE STATE

THIS REFERS To the report, "Govt tightens grip over social media, OTT with new rules". This government cannot leave well alone. First it was the science webinars where it got duly rebuked by academics. Unfortunately, the artistic community in India does not carry that much heft. Add to it the possibility that the government, as has been so far the case, ends up exploiting such rules for furthering its political ends. Besides, if one has to meet editorial standards in order to put out a personal remark which can rightfully be motivated or frivolous, it defeats the very purpose of the medium which it is geared for — socialising. Will Big Brother watch over our friendships, too?

Deepak Singhal
Noida

TWO PATELS

IT IS A TALE of two Patels who, by weaving their mysterious web of spin, have handed down defeats to two powerful batting sides. It was way back in 1959-60 when off-spinner Jassu Patel captured 14 Aussie wickets to register a most sensational win against the then number one team in the world. And now, six decades later in 2021, another Patel, Axar, has made England bite the dust, capturing 11 wickets. This extraordinary feat saw the Pommies register their lowest total in a Test innings, 82. Also, the fixture scheduled for five days ended in less than two days; thereby creating another Test record.

Arun Mankar
Mumbai

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

SHORT TAKES

**7 DEAD, 1 HURT
AFTER PRISON
OUTBREAK**

Croix-Des-Bouquets: At least seven people were killed and one injured on Thursday after several inmates tried to escape from a prison in Haiti's capital, witnesses said. The incident occurred in northeast Port-au-Prince at the Croix-des-Bouquets Civil Prison, which is known for a 2014 breakout in which more than 300 inmates escaped. Residents in the area who declined to be identified out of concern for their safety said that they observed a group of heavily armed men start shooting at prison guards before the inmates began to flee.

**ISRAELI SHIP
EXPLODES IN
TENSE MIDEAST**

Dubai: An explosion struck an Israeli-owned cargo ship sailing out of the Middle East on Friday, an unexplained blast renewing concerns about ship security amid escalating tensions between the U.S. and Iran. The crew and vessel were safe, according to the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations, which is run by the British navy. The explosion forced the vessel to head to the nearest port. The site of the blast, the Gulf of Oman, saw a series of explosions in 2019 that the U.S. Navy blamed on Iran against the backdrop of steeply rising threats between former President Donald Trump and Iranian leaders. Tehran denied the accusations, which came after Trump abandoned Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers and reimposed harsh sanctions on the country. In recent weeks, as the administration of Joe Biden looks to re-engage with Iran, Tehran has escalated its breaches of the nuclear accord to create leverage over Washington. The deal saw Tehran agree to limit its enrichment of uranium in exchange for the lifting of crippling sanctions.

**HEAVY FIGHTING
KILLS 27 IN
CENTRAL YEMEN**

Sanaa (Yemen): Heavy fighting between rebels and government forces in Yemen's oil-rich Marib has killed at least 27 people, tribal leaders and security officials said on Friday, amid a resurgence of violence in the area.

The Iranian-backed Houthi rebels earlier this month renewed their attack on Marib, a stronghold for Yemeni forces allied with the internationally recognized government. The rebel offensive has faced stiff resistance and made little progress so far. The officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity as they were not authorised to talk to the media, said the uptick in violence came over the past twenty-four hours, adding that most of the dead were rebel fighters. Yemen's stalemated civil war began in 2014, when the rebels seized the capital of Sanaa and much of the country's north.

A Saudi-led coalition — with US backing — intervened months later to restore the internationally recognised government's authority.

**4 DIE IN SWEDEN
AFTER FALLING
ON ICEY LAKE**

Stockholm: Four people were killed when they fell through the ice on a lake in southern Sweden on Thursday, police said, as the country experiences a spell of unseasonably mild weather.

Four men aged between 65 and 75 were found in a hole in the ice on Savsjo lake, south of the town of Jonkoping, and could not be resuscitated after being pulled out of the water, a local police spokesperson said.

The exact circumstances of the incident were yet to be determined, she said.

Accidents caused by people walking across unstable ice are common in Sweden, but it is rare for the death toll to be so high. After several weeks of intense cold throughout most of the country, which drew walkers to frozen lakes and estuaries, parts of Sweden have seen a rapid hike in temperature over the past few days.

A national heat record for February was set on Thursday, according to the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute. A temperature of 16.8 degrees Celsius (62.2 degrees Fahrenheit) was registered in Kalmar, in the southeast of the country.

US strikes Iran militia in Syria

22 killed in first military action against Iran-linked groups since Joe Biden became US Prez

Beirut, Feb. 26: The US military has struck Iran-backed militias in eastern Syria, killing at least 22 fighters according to a war monitor, in what the Pentagon said was a message from the new administration after recent rocket attacks targeting US troops in Iraq.

In its first military action against Iran-linked groups since Joe Biden became president five weeks ago, the Pentagon said it had carried out air strikes on Thursday at a Syria-Iraq border control point used by Iran-backed groups, destroying "multiple facilities".

"At President Biden's direction", the US raids targeted "infrastructure

utilised by Iranian-backed militant groups in eastern Syria", spokesman John Kirby said in a statement.

"These strikes were authorised in response to recent attacks against American and coalition personnel in Iraq, and to ongoing threats to those personnel," he said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 22 fighters were killed when the strike hit three trucks loaded with munitions coming from Iraq near the Syrian border town of Albu Kamal.

Militia border posts were also destroyed, the war monitor said.

It said all the dead were from Iraq's state-sponsored Hashed al-Shaabi

paramilitary force, an umbrella group that includes many small militias with ties to Iran.

Kirby said the location was used by Kataeb Hezbollah and Kataeb Sayyid al-Shuhada, two Iraqi pro-Iran groups operating under the Hashed umbrella.

Kataeb Hezbollah has yet to formally comment but an official with the group said one of its fighters was killed.

"One of our fighters was killed and a small number wounded by two missiles targeting one of our points along the Syrian-Iraqi border" he said on condition of anonymity.

Syrian state television condemned the "American

aggression" against the Iraqi fighters, who are allied with the Damascus government.

The US action followed three rocket attacks on facilities in Iraq used by US and coalition forces fighting the Islamic State group.

One of those strikes, on a military complex in the Kurdish regional capital Erbil on February 15, killed a civilian and a foreign contractor working with coalition forces, and wounded several US contractors and a soldier.

The attacks in Iraq laid down a challenge to the new Biden administration just as it opened a door to resumed negotiations with Tehran over its nuclear

programme.

Last week, the administration offered talks with Iran led by European allies as it seeks to salvage a 2015 nuclear deal, left on the brink of collapse after Biden's predecessor Donald Trump withdrew from it.

But the administration has also made clear it will not brook "malign activities" in the region by Iran.

Although Kataeb Hezbollah did not claim responsibility for the attacks, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin said that the powerful pro-Iranian group was behind them.

"We're confident in the target we went after. We know what we hit," he told reporters on the plane back to Washington after a

tour of the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz off the California coast.

"We are confident that the target was being used by the same Shia militia that conducted the strikes" against US interests in Iraq, he said.

Iran is believed to be searching for an opportunity to avenge the US assassination of top general Qasem Soleimani one year ago. Soleimani, a senior Revolutionary Guards commander, was Iran's key liaison to its allies in Iraq and Syria, and elsewhere in the region.

He was killed in a US drone strike just as he arrived in Baghdad for meetings with top Iraqi officials.

— AFP

**US, EU AFFIRM
VAX ROLLOUT
IS ON TRACK**

Washington, Feb. 26:

The United States hailed progress in turning around its troubled Covid-19 vaccine rollout, as the European Union said it was on track to meet jab targets and Asia's inoculation drive gained pace on Friday.

Brazil hit 2,50,000 fatalities — the second-highest national death toll after the United States — while the worldwide vaccine campaign received the endorsement of Queen Elizabeth II, 94, who urged people not to be wary of the shot.

President Joe Biden declared the US rollout is now "weeks ahead of schedule" as he celebrated 50 million doses administered since he took office on January 20, but he warned Americans to keep masking up.

"We're moving in the right direction despite the mess we inherited," Biden said, referring to the program under his predecessor Donald Trump.

The United States is the world's hardest-hit country, with coronavirus deaths crossing the 5,00,000 mark earlier this week.

Rollouts in Asia also gathered momentum as Hong Kong and South Korea began their mass vaccination programs on Friday.

Both places were among the first to experience outbreaks after the coronavirus spread from central China early last year, but have kept infections comparatively low.

— AFP

**US PANEL TO
VOTE ON J&J
COVID VACCINE**

Washington, Feb. 26:

A US panel of independent experts was set to vote on Friday on whether to recommend emergency approval of Johnson & Johnson's single-shot Covid-19 vaccine, potentially paving the way for at least three million doses to ship next week.

The committee's 22 members, who were convened by the Food and Drug Administration and include leading scientists as well as consumer and industry representatives, will hold a daylong virtual meeting to decide if the known benefits of the drug outweigh its risks.

It is an exercise in transparency without parallel among other advanced countries, giving the public access to the nitty gritty details of the scientific debate.

Though the panel's recommendations aren't binding, they are usually followed, and the members are widely expected to vote in favor.

An emergency use authorisation (EUA) would soon follow, making the J&J vaccine the third to be greenlighted in the United States after Pfizer's and Moderna's were provisionally approved in December.

"If the FDA approves the use of this new vaccine, we have a plan to roll it out as quickly as Johnson & Johnson can make it," US President Joe Biden said on Thursday.

— AFP

US intel report to name MBS for Khashoggi killing

Washington, Feb. 26: The US director of national intelligence is expected to release a damning report on Friday that fingers Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for the brutal murder and dismemberment of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018.

The classified report is believed to say that, based on intelligence collected by the CIA and other spy bodies, the kingdom's de facto leader directed the assassination of the respected US-based writer in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

The prince has steadfastly denied a part in the murder, even as some of his closest advisors have been shown to be deeply involved.

Intent on strengthening relations with Riyadh, previous US president Donald Trump's administration avoided making the report public or naming Prince Mohammed in the case.

Its declassification and release comes just as President Joe Biden endeavors to reset US relations in the Middle East and return principles of human rights to a prominent position in US policy. Ahead of the release, Biden spoke on the telephone Thursday with Saudi King Salman, Prince Mohammed's father, in their first discussion since he became president five weeks ago.

A White House state-

● **THE CLASSIFIED** report is believed to say that, based on intelligence collected by the CIA and other spy bodies, the kingdom's de facto leader directed the assassination of the respected US-based writer in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

ment on the call did not mention the Khashoggi report, but Biden said Wednesday that he had read it.

A respected veteran Saudi journalist and editor, Khashoggi was in self-exile and residing in the United States, writing articles critical of the crown prince when he was assassinated on October 2, 2018.

The 59-year-old writer had been told by Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States to go to the Saudi consulate in Istanbul if he wanted to obtain documents for his forthcoming marriage to a Turkish woman, Hatice Cengiz.

There, he was killed and his body dismembered by a team sent from Riyadh under the direction of a top aide to Prince Mohammed, Saud al-Qahtani.

Just one month after the murder, the US Central Intelligence Agency concluded with high confidence that Prince Mohammed had ordered the assassination, according to *The Washington Post*.

— AFP

Festival of lights



People take photographs next to lanterns decorated with lights during the Lantern Festival, which marks the end of the Lunar New Year celebrations in Taiyuan, in northern China's Shanxi province on Friday.

— AFP

Russian B-777 lands in emergency

Moscow, Feb. 26: Russian media report said that a Boeing 777 plane made an emergency landing in Moscow in the early hours of Friday after the pilot reported a problem with the engine.

The Interfax news agency cited an anonymous source saying that the pilot on the flight from Hong Kong to Madrid reported a failure of one of the left engine control channels and requested an

emergency landing at the Moscow Sheremetyevo airport.

The plane landed safely and no one was injured, the report said. It was carrying out a "cargo-passenger" flight, Interfax said. The flight tracking website Flightradar24 confirms that the plane operated by Russia's state-funded Rossiya airline landed early Friday at the Moscow airport.

Earlier this month, a

Boeing 777 operated by United Airlines had to make an emergency landing in Denver after one of its engines blew apart, spewing huge chunks of wreckage that landed in neighbourhoods and sports fields.

The investigation is focusing on a fan blade that appeared to be weakened by wear and tear, a development reminiscent of a fatal failure on board another plane in 2018.

The event caused authorities to ground Boeing 777 models that use that engine, the Pratt & Whitney 4000-112. Flightradar24 identified the plane that landed in Sheremetyevo on Friday as a Boeing 777-31H model, which does not use the Pratt & Whitney engines. Instead, that model uses the General Electric GE90-115B engines, according to fleet tracking site Airfleets.net.

— AP

**FB SIGNS PAY
DEALS WITH 3
OZ PUBLISHERS**

Canberra, Feb. 26: Facebook announced on Friday preliminary agreements with three Australian publishers, a day after the Parliament passed a law that would make the digital giants pay for news.

Facebook said letters of intent had been signed with independent news organisations *Private Media*, *Schwartz Media* and *Solstice Media*. The commercial agreements are subject to the signing of full agreements within the next 60 days, a Facebook statement said. "These agreements will bring a new slate of premium journalism, including some previously paywalled content, to Facebook," the statement said. Schwartz Media chief executive Rebecca Costello said the deal would help her company continue to produce independent journalism.

"It's never been more important than it is now to have a plurality of voices in the Australian press," Costello said in the Facebook statement. *Private Media* chief executive Will Hayward said the new deal built on an existing Facebook partnership. Australia's Parliament on Thursday had passed the final amendments to the so-called News Media Bargaining Code. — AP

Nigeria gunmen kidnap 300+ girl students

Lagos, Feb. 26: Hundreds of girls are missing after a large group of gunmen raided a school in northern Nigeria early Friday morning, residents say. The Government Secondary Jangebe School in Zamfara state was the scene of the latest mass abduction of school children in northern Nigeria.

Nasiru Abdullahi said that school records show 300 girls are missing. His daughters, aged 10 and 13, are among them. Resident Musa Mustapha said the gunmen also attacked a

nearby military camp and checkpoint, preventing soldiers from interfering while the gunmen spent several hours at the school. It was not immediately clear if there were any casualties.

Several large groups of armed men operate in Zamfara state, described by the government as bandits, and are known to kidnap for money and for the release of their members from jail.

Nigeria," said Peter Hawkins, UNICEF representative in the country. "This is a gross violation of children's rights and a horrific experience for children to go through."

He called for their immediate release.

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The West African nation has seen several such attacks and kidnappings over the years, notably the mass abduction in April 2014 by jihadist group Boko Haram of 276 girls from the secondary school in Chibok in Borno state. More than a hundred of the girls are still missing.

Friday's attack came less than two weeks after gunmen abducted 42 people, including 27 students, from the Government Science College Kagara in

Niger State. The students, teachers and family members are still being held. In December, 344 students were abducted from the Government Science Secondary School Kankara in Katsina State. They were eventually released.

Anietie Ewang, Nigeria researcher at Human Rights Watch, noted the recent abductions and tweeted that "Strong action is required from the authorities to turn the tide & keep schools safe."

— AP

COURT ORDER

Begum had challenged the UK Home Office's decision to remove her citizenship

IS bride loses bid to return to UK for citizenship



Shamima Begum's sister holds her picture.

— AFP

London, Feb. 26: The UK government on Friday won a major legal battle as the Supreme Court ruled against allowing a London-born 21-year-old woman of Bangladeshi descent, who ran away to Syria as a teenager to join the Islamic State (ISIS) terror group, to return and fight her citizenship case.

The unanimous decision — with all five top court justices in agreement — comes six years after the then 15-year-old schoolgirl, Shamima Begum, ran away with two other friends to join the Islamic State (ISIS) group in February 2015. Begum had her British citizenship

revoked on national security grounds shortly after she was found in a Syrian refugee camp in February 2019.

"The Supreme Court unanimously allows all of the Home Secretary's appeals and dismisses Ms

Begum's cross-appeal," said Lord Robert Reed, the President of the Supreme Court. "The right to a fair hearing does not trump all other considerations, such as the safety of the public," he said.

Begum was born in the

UK to parents of Bangladeshi heritage. Begum, dubbed an ISIS bride in reference to her marriage to Dutch ISIS fighter Yago Riedijk, was one of three schoolgirls from Bethnal Green in east London who travelled via Turkey to ISIS headquarters in Raqqa.

When discovered in a refugee camp two years ago, she had already lost two children and was heavily pregnant with her third who died shortly after being born. Begum had challenged the UK Home Office's decision to remove her British citizenship and wanted to be allowed to return to the

UK to pursue that appeal. She is currently in a camp controlled by armed guards in northern Syria.

Initially, the UK Court of Appeal said she should be allowed to return to fight the case but in July last year it allowed a Home Office appeal and found that the case must go ahead to the Supreme Court before she is allowed back into the country because the case raised a point of law of public importance that only the highest court can resolve.

In November, the Home Office took its appeal to the Supreme Court arguing that allowing her to return to the UK "would

create significant national security risks" and expose the public to "an increased risk of terrorism".

In reference to the Court of Appeal's judgment, the top court said that it had failed to take proper account of the UK Home Secretary's case. "It did not give the home secretary's assessment the respect which it should have received, given that it is the home secretary who has been charged by Parliament with responsibility for making such assessments, and who is democratically accountable to Parliament for the discharge of that responsibility," said Lord Reed. — PTT



quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	49,099.99	-3.80
Nifty 50	14,529.20	-3.76
S&P 500*	3,853.11	0.62
Dollar (₹)	73.47	-1.42
Pound Sterling (₹)	101.83	0.80
Euro (₹)	88.76	-0.29
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	45,599*342	0.75
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	66.13	-1.12
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.229	0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.491	-0.024

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Inflation band okay for next 5 years: RBI report

With the next review of the flexible inflation target (FIT) framework coming up soon, the RBI said the current inflation target of 4 per cent with a +/-2 per cent tolerance band is appropriate for the next five years. India adopted the FIT framework in 2016, and the next review of the inflation target is due by March 31. "The current numerical framework for defining price stability...is appropriate for the next five years," it said.

PFC board okays ₹1 L cr borrowing plan for FY22



Power Finance Corporation said its board has approved a plan to borrow Rs 1 lakh crore under different debt segments. The borrowing will be made in one or more tranches in FY21-22, PFC said. The NBFC plans to raise a maximum of Rs 60,000 crore from long-term borrowing, Rs 20,000 crore from long-term foreign currency borrowing, Rs 5,000 crore from short-term borrowing and Rs 15,000 crore from commercial papers.

Volkswagen weathers Covid with \$11 bn profit

Volkswagen said it made better than expected profit of 8.8 billion euros (\$10.7 bn) after tax in 2020 despite the pandemic. The world's No. 2 automaker said the rapid recovery of China, its largest single market, and resilient sales of luxury vehicles helped the bottom line. VW gave an upbeat outlook for this year, saying it would carry momentum from the stronger second half of the year over into earnings going forward.

RailTel Corp makes strong market debut

Telecom infrastructure provider RailTel Corporation of India Ltd made a strong debut with its shares zooming over 29 per cent on closing compared with the issue price. On the BSE, the scrip opened on a strong note of Rs 104.6 apiece against the IPO price of Rs 94. In intra-day trade, the stock touched a high of Rs 125.5 before settling at Rs 121.4, higher by 29.15 per cent. The RailTel IPO was subscribed 42.39 times.

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■ Sensex sheds more than 1900 points US bombing, bond yields spook mkt

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, FEB 26

Investors suffered notional loss of over Rs 6 lakh crore as the domestic stock market experienced its worst fall in the last 10 months after the US bombing in Syria and sharp overnight rise in bond yields in the US market.

Rising Covid cases in India also added to negative sentiments in the market, said analysts.

The Sensex fell 3.8 per cent, or 1939 points, closing at 49099 while the Nifty-50 fell 3.7 per cent, or 568 points, to close at 14529.

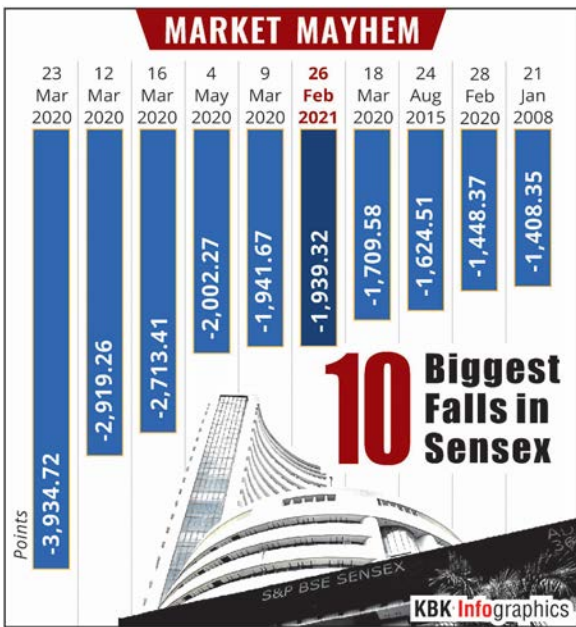
Intra-day the Sensex fell over 2000 points to a low of 48890.48. All the Sensex and Nifty constituents closed in the red.

Overnight US bond yield rose to a high of 1.61 and finally closed at 1.51 per cent, scaring the global investors. US benchmark indices Dow Jones fell 1.75 per cent and Nasdaq 100 fell 3.56 per cent, setting off negative opening for the Asian markets.

India's 10-year government bond yield also rose sharply intraday to 6.242 per cent and closed at 6.229.

As per provisional data, foreign portfolio investors were net sellers of equities worth Rs 8,295.17 crore.

Financials suffered the most among sectoral indices after the recent rally, with the Nifty Bank Index closing down 4.78 per cent. Other big losers were Nifty Auto (-3.12 per cent) and Nifty Metal (-2.70 per cent). NSE's volatility index



RUPEE DIVES 104 PAISE AGAINST \$

Mumbai, Feb. 26: The rupee on Friday posted its biggest single-day fall in nearly 19 months, tumbling 104 paise to close at 73.47 against the US dollar, as a rout in global bond markets weighed on investor sentiments. Besides, rising geopolitical tensions between the US and Syria also led to weaker appetite among investors in domestic forex markets, analysts said. At the interbank forex market, the rupee opened at 72.43 against the dollar, then lost further ground. It finally ended at 73.47. —PTI

India VIX shot up 22.93 per cent to 28.14, indicating a volatile market ahead.

The GDP data expected after the market hours also weighed on the market sentiments. "The Q3 GDP growth number at 0.4 per cent is lower than our esti-

mates of 0.8 per cent but quite short of some other estimates which were in the range of 1.4-2 per cent. The equity markets may be a tad disappointed with these data points," said Dhiraj Relli, MD & CEO, HDFC Securities.

Friday.

"Enhancement of sterilisation capacity may be necessary to deal with possible surges in capital flows in the future," the report pointed out. The RBI report recommended further strengthening foreign-exchange reserves, citing the swings in the rupee around the time of the global taper tantrum in 2013. India's stockpile is already close to \$600 billion and exceeds most standard metric requirements.

—Bloomberg

EMERGING MARKETS BRACE FOR CAPITAL FLIGHT

LIVIA YAP &
LILIAN KARUNUNGAN
FEB. 26

Emerging markets are bracing for an exodus of funds as a surge in US treasury yields evokes memories of the taper tantrum of 2013.

After rallying at the start of 2021, developing-nation assets have slumped during the past two days as US treasury yields jumped to the highest level in more than a year, sounding a warning about the outlook for interest rates and inflation. The MSCI Emerging Market Index of shares tumbled as much as 2.8 per cent on Friday.

Emerging-market assets are falling out of favour as expectations for tighter global monetary policy and a revival of inflation reduce the relative appeal of risk assets. This week's surge in US yields is reminding many of the taper tantrum, when the Federal Reserve's announcement that it would start winding back its quantitative-easing policy led to a spike in bond yields around the world.

"It appears the market is pricing in a taper tantrum whatever the Fed says," said Alvin T. Tan, head of Asia foreign-exchange strategy at RBC Capital Markets in Hong Kong. "Like in 2013, it is generally negative for EM FX," he said. —Bloomberg

SBI readies MF arm for IPO

BAIJU KALESH &
SUVAASHREE GHOSH
FEB. 26

State Bank of India, the country's largest lender, is preparing for its mutual fund joint venture for an initial public offering, according to people familiar with the matter.

SBI plans to ask investment banks for proposals after discussions with its board and shareholder Amundi Asset Management and kick off the process in the next few months, the people said. The lender could raise about \$1 billion from the offering, one of the people said, who asked not to be identified, as the informa-

Soon, get discount on life premium paid in advance

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, FEB. 26

Life insurance policyholders will soon be able to receive a discount if they pay the policy premium in advance. Also, from April onwards, those buying a personal accident cover would have the option to take a standardised cover, named Saral Suraksha Bima, from all general and health insurers.

Acting on representations from the industry, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (Irdai) has decided to permit life insurers to offer discounts on regular premiums paid in advance.

As per the draft guidelines issued by the regulator, the discount rate shall be equal to interest rates on savings bank accounts of State Bank of India as on April 1 of each financial year. Further, an addition of at least 100 bps shall be applicable for advance premiums received during the entire financial year.

"The industry has been undertaking several measures to ensure that renewal premiums are paid on time, as persistency is a key metric. By paying premiums in advance of three months or more, the policyholder can get a discount on premium that is higher than the interest rate on a savings account. While the customer will get a discount, we will have the renewal premiums already in the books. We will have to deploy our resources for reminding



Irdai has asked general and health insurers to offer a standard personal accident insurance product with common coverage and policy wordings across the industry from April 1

only those people who have not made advance payment," said Atri Chakraborty, chief operating officer, IndiaFirst Life Insurance.

According to him, the discount will be calculated for the number of months the premium is paid ahead of the renewal date. Currently, around 10 to 12 per cent of the policyholders pay their renewal premiums ahead of the due date.

The regulator has, meanwhile, asked general and health insurers to offer a standard personal accident insurance product with common coverage and policy wordings across the industry from April 1, 2021. This product, Saral Suraksha Bima, will have the basic mandatory covers as

specified in Irdai guidelines and will be uniform across the market.

The insurer can determine the price according to the covers offered. The policy tenure of the standard product shall be one year. This policy would also be offered as a group product. Minimum entry age will be 18 years and maximum age shall be at least 70.

The base cover will have to provide a death benefit up to 100 per cent of the sum insured to the policyholder if the death occurs due to injury in an accident, or the person dies within 12 months from the date of accident. The insured will also get 100 per cent of the sum insured for permanent total disability and 50 per cent for permanent partial disability.

Hospitalisation expenses arising due to accident shall be indemnified up to 10 per cent of base sum insured. On death or permanent total disability of the insured person, a one-time educational grant of 10 per cent of the base sum insured, per child, should be paid to all dependent children.

RBI report suggests issuing debt to mop up hot money

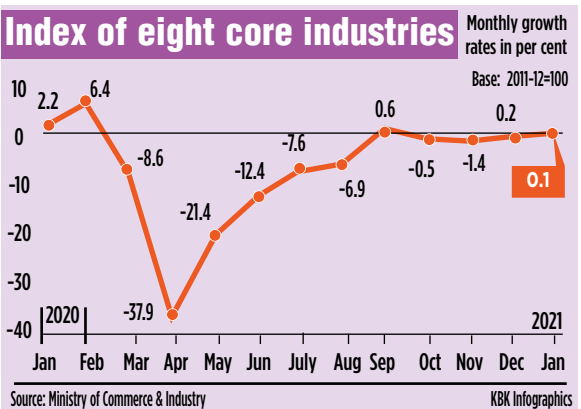
SUBHADIP SIRCAR &
ASHUTOSH JOSHI
FEB. 26

The Reserve Bank of India may consider issuing its own bonds to help soak up a deluge of foreign money into stocks that threatens financial stability, according to a report published by its researchers.

Current laws forbid the RBI from selling its own paper, and budgetary constraints could prevent the government from issuing so-called market stabilisation

scheme, or MSS, bonds that authorities have used in the past. That's made it harder for the central bank to navigate what's known as the Impossible Trinity, i.e. maintaining an independent monetary policy while also allowing free flows of capital and ensuring a stable currency.

"Sterilised intervention is an effective solution to managing the trilemma in India," the central bank said in its annual Report on Currency and Finance, published on



Sony to open PS 5 for storage upgrades

TAKASHI MOCHIZUKI
FEB. 26

Sony Corp. is preparing to open up its PlayStation 5 for internal storage upgrades this summer, lifting a bottleneck that prevents gamers from having more than a few marquee games on their console at one time, people briefed on the plan said.

Adding support for additional drives will be enabled with a firmware update that also unlocks higher cooling-fan speeds to ensure the console doesn't overheat, the people said, asking not to be named because the plans are not yet public. The PlayStation 5 comes with a custom solid-state drive with around 667GB available for storing games,

apps and media—at a time when the latest Call of Duty game needs 133GB of installation space and most major titles take up at least 40GB each.

Sony's latest console has a customised architecture that accelerates loading and processing times, but makes it impractical to plug in an external hard drive, the typical way gamers add storage. Such a drive can only be used for older PS4 games. After the planned firmware upgrade, players need only take a plastic cover off the PS5 and attach a new storage unit to add space.

"We are working to enable M.2 SSD storage expansion for PlayStation 5. The timing has not been announced," a Sony spokesman said. —Bloomberg

HUL aims to achieve 100% plastic waste collection in 2021

New Delhi, Feb. 26: Hindustan Unilever on Friday said it will achieve 100 per cent plastic waste collection from 2021 onwards as it will collect and process more plastic packaging waste than the plastic in packaging used by it.

The company will enable processing of over one lakh tonnes of post-consumer plastic waste through collection from

more than 100 towns across India, said HUL in a statement.

HUL has partnered with various organisations for the collection of plastic waste, including Saahas, Carpe, Recykal, Planet Savers, RaddiConnect, Geocycle and Ramky Enviro.

Through its partners and with support from municipal corporations, the company has reached out to



Sanjiv Mehta

The company is also working in partnership with the United Nations

housing societies and commercial establishments to improve the collection of plastic waste.

Development Programme and the international organisation Xynteo.

Commenting on the development, HUL chairman and managing director Sanjiv Mehta said: "We believe that this is a collection of responsibility, and each stakeholder needs to play an active role in managing plastic waste to fulfil the vision of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan." —PTI

MOBILE | TO MOBILITY Firm in talks with carmakers to use their plants

Battered Huawei plans foray into EVs

JULIE ZHU, YILEI SUN
HONG KONG/BEIJING,
FEB. 26

China's Huawei plans to make electric vehicles under its own brand and could launch some models this year, four sources said, as the world's largest telecommunications equipment maker, battered by US sanctions, explores a strategic shift.

Huawei Technologies Co Ltd is in talks with state-owned Changan Automobile and other automakers to use their car plants to make its electric vehicles (EVs), according to two of the people familiar with the matter. Huawei is also in discussions with Beijing-backed BAIC Group's BluePark New Energy Technology to manufacture its EVs, said a separate person with direct knowledge of the matter.

The plan heralds a potentially major shift in direction for Huawei after nearly two years of US sanctions that have cut its access to key supply chains, forcing it to sell a part of its smartphone business to keep the brand alive.

Huawei was placed on a trade blacklist by the Trump administration over national security concerns. Many industry executives see little chance that blocks on the sale of billions of dollars



of US technology and chips to the Chinese company, which has denied wrongdoing, will be reversed by his successor. A Huawei spokesman denied the company plans to design EVs or produce Huawei branded vehicles.

"Huawei is not a car manufacturer. However through ICT (information and communications technology), we aim to be a digital car-oriented and new-added components

provider, enabling car OEMs (original equipment manufacturers) to build better vehicles."

Huawei has started internally designing the EVs and approaching suppliers at home, with the aim of officially launching the project as early as this year, the sources said.

Richard Yu, head of Huawei's consumer business group who led the company to become one of the world's largest smartphone makers, will shift his focus to EVs, said one source. The EVs will target a mass-market segment, another source said.

All the sources declined to be named as the discussions are private.

—Reuters

SHORT TAKES

Hima inducted as DSP in Assam

Guwahati: Star sprinter Hima Das was on Friday inducted as Deputy Superintendent of Assam Police in the presence of chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal and described the moment as a childhood dream coming true. Hima was handed the appointment letter by Sonowal, also a former Union Sports Minister, at a ceremony attended by the top functionaries of the state government as well as from the police department, including the Director General of police. "People here know and I am not going to say anything different. Since my early school days, I harboured a wish to become a police officer one day and my mother also wished that," Hima said. "I got everything due to sports, I will try to work for betterment of sports in the state and try to make Assam one of the best performing states in the country, like Haryana," Hima further added. — *PTI*

Deepak stuns world champion

New Delhi: Asian silver-winner Deepak Kumar (52kg) on Friday stunned Olympic and world champion Shakhobiddin Zoirov of Uzbekistan to storm into the finals of the 72nd Strandja Memorial Boxing Tournament in Sofia, Bulgaria. Deepak clinched one of the most memorable wins of his career with a 4-1 win over more fancied Zoirov, who had claimed the 2019 world championship title beating India's Amit Panghal.

In the quarterfinals on Thursday, Deepak defeated Bulgaria's Darislav Vasilev 5-0. However, former youth world champion Jyoti Gulia (51kg) and Bhagyabati Kachari (75kg) bowed out of the women's competition. With their loss, India's challenge in the women's draw has come to an end without anyone managing to secure a medal. — *PTI*

Charlotte to lead cricketers union

London: England great Charlotte Edwards has become the first female president of the Professional Cricketers' Association.

An outstanding top-order batsman, Edwards scored over 10,000 runs in more than 300 matches during an international career that lasted from 1996 to 2016. Edwards, who succeeds Graham Gooch, another former England captain, was elected for an initial two-year term at Thursday's annual general meeting of the PCA, which represents all professional cricketers playing in England. "I'm hugely honoured to be given such a prestigious title in being the president of the PCA," said Edwards. Edwards was England captain when they won both limited-overs World Cups in 2009, while she remains the country's leading run-scorer in both women's one-day internationals and Twenty20s. — *AFP*

Belinda sees off Coco, into final

Adelaide: Second seed Belinda Bencic battled for almost three hours before seeing off 16-year-old American Coco Gauff in three sets Friday to reach the final of the Adelaide International. Bencic set up a final showdown against Poland's French Open champion Iga Swiatek with her 7-6 (7/2), 6-7 (4/7), 6-2 win. Fifth seeded Swiatek had a much easier passage to the final, beating Swiss player Jil Teichmann 6-3, 6-2. Bencic went into the semi-final against Gauff as favourite, but the young American has been in good form this week, winning through two rounds of qualifying just to make the main draw. — *AFP*

Live on TV

FOOTBALL

English Premier League:

Manchester City vs West Ham United from 6 pm; West Brom vs Brighton from 8.30 pm; Leeds United vs Aston Villa from 11 pm; Newcastle United vs Wolverhampton Wanderers from 1.30 am (Sunday) on Star Sports Select 1, HD

Indian Super League:

Odisha vs East Bengal from 7.20 pm on Star Sports 2, 3

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SURESHOT SPINNER

Match-winner Axar says confidence did trick

Ahmedabad, Feb. 26: It was a long wait for Axar Patel and it didn't help that everyone around him had just one question for the past three years — "Why aren't you in the Indian team?"

But Patel was unfazed as he knew, his time would come.

"I think it's all about confidence," said the 27-year-old spinner from Anand in Gujarat.

With his record 11 wickets in the day-night third Test against England, the left-arm spinner finally found his big moment in international cricket, seven years after he made his India debut in an ODI against Bangladesh.

Since that day, he has been in and out of the team with the spin all-rounder's spot firmly with Ravindra Jadeja.

In this series too, he made it because Jadeja was out injured. He hadn't been in the national team since 2018 and made his Test debut in the second game against England last week in Chennai.

"I have been out of the team for three years and at that time, I used to think about the areas of my game which need to be worked upon. So, I was working on my bowling and batting," he told Hardik Pandya in a *bcci.tv* interview, thoroughly enjoying his good time.

"When you are out of the team, many people, friends keep asking you 'why aren't you in the team despite doing well?' These things keep coming in the mind," he said.

"So, I told myself 'just wait for the right time and whenever I get an opportunity I will give my 100 per cent,'" he added.

Captain Virat Kohli said England may have been "relieved" when Jadeja was injured.

"But then this guy comes in. Bowls it quicker and from a bigger height as well."

It is a tribute to his hard work, his accuracy," said Kohli.

"It is impossible to sweep him, impossible to defend him all day. If the wicket gives him anything he is just a lethal bowler," Virat added. — *PTI*

HUSSAIN SAYS ENGLAND WERE SCARED RABBITS

London, Feb. 26: England have lost their batting rhythm after playing on two difficult surfaces and looked like "startled rabbits" in the second innings of the third Test against India, according to former skipper Nasser Hussain.

"Especially on this pitch, where one spins prodigiously and the other skids on, you lose all kind of rhythm. That's what successive Test matches on these sorts of pitches do for your mind-set," Hussain said.

"England looked like startled rabbits in that second innings. I don't think it was an 81 all out pitch but this was a much tougher pitch than Chennai," he added.

"Axar is very accurate. He bowls stump to stump and some balls turn and some don't. Most of his wickets came from balls that didn't turn, so people say 'why not play for those straight deliveries?' but it's the ball before," he added. — *PTI*

Surat, Feb. 26: Skipper Krunal Pandya's unbeaten 133 formed the cornerstone of Baroda's 13-run win over Chhattisgarh in an Elite Group 'A' game of the Vijay Hazare Trophy here on Friday, even as Atit Sheth blazed away to a 16-ball 51.

Opting to bat, Baroda rode on Pandya's hundred and Sheth's big-hitting to post 332/6 after a top-order failure, and then restricted the opposition to 319/9 to record their fourth win on the trot. Baroda lost openers



India's star spinner Axar Patel appeals for a wicket during the third Test in Ahmedabad.

Rohit bats for batting intent

Ahmedabad, Feb. 26: Intent to score and not just survive was the key to flourish on the Motera pitch, asserted India opener Rohit Sharma who batted effortlessly on the "interesting but normal" pitch that was declared difficult and challenging by visiting England batsmen.

Rohit attributed his sublime first innings half-century to the positive intent that he displayed during the day-night third Test in which England got thrashed by 10 wickets inside two days on the spin-friendly pitch.

"When you are playing on a pitch like that, you need to have an intent and look to score runs as well. You can't just keep blocking," Rohit said during the virtual conference after the match on Thursday.

When you are playing on a pitch like that, you need to have an intent and look to score runs as well. You can't just keep blocking. You just need to be slightly ahead at times and try and find ways to score runs.

— **ROHIT SHARMA**
India star batsman



England captain Joe Root and Zak Crawley had earlier described the track as challenging.

The senior opener scored India's only half-century of the game with the home side spinners accounting for 19 wickets. England batsmen were deceived by left-arm Axar Patel's straighter deliveries that skidded straight instead of turning. Rohit felt that during

his innings of 66, he was a step or two ahead of England bowlers.

"You just need to be slightly ahead at times and try and find ways to score runs. My intent was not just to survive but try and score runs as well, while respecting the good balls. That's all I tried to do."

"The pitch was an interesting one and odd ball was just coming in and

some were taking turns. On a track like this, you need to have a clear mind-set, which I think I did until I played that sweep shot," Rohit added.

He felt that Patel's strategy of attacking the stumps paid off well. The spinner ended the game with 11 wickets in his kitty.

"Axar was simply brilliant," Rohit said, lauding the bowler who had big shoes to fill.

"Coming out from nowhere and performing is never easy. He was out injured, slightly down, came back and bowled very well in Chennai. He understands conditions well and how to vary the pace and what lines to bowl," Rohit added.

Coming wider off the crease was also another effective ploy used by Patel. — *PTI*

INDIA CAN WIN AGAINST ODDS, SAYS HAYDEN

Chennai, Feb. 26: Indian team has all the markings of a great side as it can not only fight it out but win against the odds in all conditions, Matthew Hayden said.

"India have shown that they are a modern team who can not only fight it out but win against the odds in all conditions. This is a mark of all the great teams in history. The ability to win both at home and away," Hayden said. The wickets in Chennai and Ahmedabad came in for sharp criticism during the second and third Test of the ongoing series.

Asked if too much was being made about the pitches especially when they were spin-friendly, Hayden said: "Provided the wickets are not unfairly groomed, reducing the game to only one type of cricket, I don't have a problem with it at all. Conditions should promote an even game."

— *PTI*

Coach kills self after sex slur

Lansing (USA), Feb. 26: A former U.S. Olympics gymnastics coach with ties to disgraced sports doctor Larry Nassar killed himself, hours after being charged with turning his Michigan gym into a hub of human trafficking by coercing girls to train and then abusing them.

John Geddert faced 24 charges that could have carried years in prison had he been convicted. He was supposed to appear in an Eaton County court, near Lansing, but his body was found at a rest area along Interstate 96.

Geddert, 63, wasn't arrested and transported to court. Rather, Nessel's office allowed him to show up on his own.

"We had no indication that Geddert intended to flee or hurt himself or others. We had been in contact with his attorney and were assured of his cooperation," Nessel spokeswoman Kelly Rossman-McKinney said.

Calls seeking comment from attorney Chris Bergstrom weren't immediately returned.

Geddert was head coach of the 2012 U.S. women's Olympic gymnastics team, which won a gold medal. He was long associated with Nassar, who was the Olympic team's doctor and also treated injured gymnasts at Twistars, Geddert's Lansing-area gym. Among the charges, Geddert was accused of lying to investigators in 2016 when he denied ever hearing complaints about Nassar. But the bulk of the case against him involved his gym in Dimondale and how he treated the young athletes whose families paid to have them train under him.

The charges against Geddert had "very little to do" with Nassar, said Assistant Attorney General Danielle Hagaman-Clark. — *AP*



Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang of Arsenal celebrates after scoring his side's third goal against Benfica during their Europa League Round of 32 match at Georgios Karaiskakis stadium in Piraeus port near Athens on Thursday. Arsenal won the match 3-2. — *AP*

Auba nets brace to beat Benfica

Paris, Feb. 26: Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang scored twice including a late winner as Arsenal qualified for the last 16 of the Europa League on Thursday with a 3-2 victory over Benfica in Greece, while Manchester United and Rangers cruised through to the next round. The Gabon striker put Arsenal ahead at the Karaiskakis stadium in Piraeus in their home leg of a tie relocated due to Covid-19 travel restrictions between Portugal and the United Kingdom.

Diogo Goncalves levelled the contest with a magnificent free-kick and Rafa Silva gave Benfica a 2-1 lead on the night when he took advantage of an error from Dani Ceballos on the hour.

Kieran Tierney rifled in an equaliser and Aubameyang headed in the decisive goal from Bukayo Saka's cross on 87 minutes, earning the Gunners a 4-3 aggregate victory and saving them from an unusual away goals exit following a 1-1 draw in the first leg in Rome.

Leicester City, who are behind second-placed United in the Premier League only on goal difference, were knocked out after sliding to a 2-0 loss at

● **US Olympics coach John Geddert faced 24 charges that could have carried years in prison had he been convicted. He was supposed to appear in an Eaton County court, near Lansing, but his body was found at a rest area along Interstate 96.**

home to Czech champions Slavia Prague.

Lukas Provod fired Slavia in front just after half-time following a goalless draw in the first leg, and Senegalese teenager Abdallah Sima ensured the visitors extended their run in the competition.

Steven Gerrard's Rangers progressed following their 5-2 win over Belgian side Antwerp at Ibrox, with five different players on target for the Scottish league leaders. — *AFP*

THE RESULTS

Arsenal (Aubameyang 21, 87, Tierney 67)	3
Benfica (Goncalves 43, Silva 61)	2
Manchester United	0
Real Sociedad	0
AC Milan (Kessie 9-pen)	1
Red Star Belgrade (Ben Nabouhane 24)	1
Napoli (Zielinski 3, Fabian Ruiz 59)	2
Granada (Montoro 25)	1
Slavia Prague (L. Provod 49, Sima 79)	2
Leicester City	0

national debut under M S Dhoni, IPL debut under Shane Warne, Ranji debut under Jacob Martin and would like to thank them for believing in me," he added.

fifties. He also featured in 22 T20Is where he made 236 at a strike-rate of 146.58 and was also a part of Kolkata Knight Riders' triumphs in the IPL. "I still remember the day when I wore the India jersey for the first time. I didn't only wear the jersey that day, but I took upon my family's, coach's, friends the whole country's and my own expectations on my shoulders as well," Pathan recalled.

"Winning two World Cups for India and lifting Sachin Tendulkar on my shoulders were some of the best moments of my career. I made my international debut under M S Dhoni, IPL debut under Shane Warne, Ranji debut under Jacob Martin and would like to thank them for believing in me," he added.

Meanwhile, veteran Karnataka medium pacer R. Vinay Kumar, who also represented India and led his state team to successive Ranji Trophy titles, also announced his retirement from international and first-class cricket.

The 37-year-old Kumar played one Test, 31 ODIs and nine T20 Internationals for India, taking 49 wickets across the three formats. — *PTI*

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