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coup Feb. 1 that ousted a elected civilian government and reversed a decade of progress toward democracy in the Southeast Asian country. Hundreds of civilians have been killed by security forces trying to put down opposition to the coup.

The U.S. state department on Tuesday ordered non-essential U.S. diplomats to leave their families to leave Myanmar, expecting that protests to continue. The U.S. earlier suspended a trade deal and imposed curbs on junta leaders and restricted business with military holding companies. —A

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SHORT TAKES

Learner's licence for e-rickshaws made easier

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

People seeking a learner's licence for e-rickshaws can now approach the licensing authority directly, without having to go through the process of taking a prior appointment, the Delhi government said on Wednesday. The decision is part of the government's efforts to bring changes in the way zonal offices or regional transport offices (RTOs) operate in the city, with "faceless services" being launched for Registration Certificates (RCs) and licence-related activities, which are currently undergoing trials. "The applicant can directly approach the licensing authority of the concerned zone between 2 PM and 4 PM on every working day after depositing fees through the online software of Sarthi," the city government said in a statement. "The department and our team of (motor licensing officers) MLOs are putting in their best efforts to monitor any issues that are coming up in real-time and guide applicants on any difficulties they might face in shifting to the new system," it added.

Delhi Transport Minister Kailash Gahlot said the aim is to have a seamless system in place which would successfully do away with any waiting time. According to the statement, the department is planning to scale up the faceless system to 70 essential services in two phases over the next few months. Additionally, in order to facilitate the process of securing a driving licence for those who find it difficult to take a test on a working day, the government has also given the option of appearing for the test on Sundays, it said. In its bid to promote electric vehicles under the Delhi EV Policy, 2020, the city government will also be providing a subsidy of ₹30,000 on the purchase of every e-rickshaw in the state, the statement said. The government is also planning to provide a five per cent interest subvention on loans through the Delhi Finance Corporation (DFC) on the purchase of every such vehicle, it added.

2 of Nandu gang held after shootout

New Delhi: Two members of a criminal gang, involved in a series of murder cases, have been arrested after a brief exchange of fire in Dwarka here, police said on Wednesday. The accused duo — Dharmender Rana (26) and Lucky (21) — are alleged to be sharpshooters of Nandu gang, they said. The accused had fired upon a property dealer in front of Najafgarh police station on March 7 and days later, the two again opened fire in a cable office in Kapashera while on March 22, they shot an ex-serviceman in the area of JP Kalan, police said. With their arrest, police claimed to have worked out five cases including that of murder and attempt to murder. A trap was laid near the spot and about 11:30 pm the duo came there on a Bullet motorcycle. They were intercepted but the accused fired upon the police team. During the exchange of fire, three rounds were fired by the criminals and four rounds were retaliated by the police team. The police said they recovered a sophisticated pistol, a country made pistol, three live cartridges and a stolen Royal Enfield Bullet motorcycle. — PTI

'Metro recharge' option on Amazon

New Delhi: Delhi Metro commuters can now open the Amazon shopping app and click on the "Metro Recharge" option under Amazon Pay tab to recharge their smart cards. After entering their Metro Smart card number, they can choose any amount between ₹100 to ₹2000 to recharge their smart cards. After successful payment, they need to tap the card at the automatic vending machine (AVM) at any Delhi Metro station and select "Top-UP" to add the balance to their card. The facility was jointly introduced by DMRC's managing director Mangu Singh and Amazon Pay CEO Mahendra Nerurkar through video-conferencing in the presence of other senior officials on Wednesday. — PTI

Mercury may be above normal till June: IMD

'Below normal seasonal maximum temperatures are likely over most of southern peninsula, north-east India'

New Delhi, March 31: Day temperatures are likely to be above normal over north and east India from April to June, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said in its summer forecast.

The IMD said below normal seasonal maximum temperatures are likely over most of south India, parts of east India, north-east and extreme north India.

"During the upcoming hot weather season (April to June), above normal seasonal maximum temperatures are likely over most of the subdivisions of north, northwest and few subdivisions of east-central India," the IMD

said. The IMD said the probability forecast for minimum temperatures indicate that above normal minimum (night) temperatures are likely over a few subdivisions of west coast — Konkan and Goa and Coastal Karnataka — and west India — Saurashtra and Kutch.

"However, below normal seasonal maximum temperatures are likely over most of the subdivisions of south peninsular India and few subdivisions of east, northeast and extreme north India," the IMD added.

The east-central India divisions comprise states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha.

'Hottest March in Delhi since 2010'

New Delhi, March 31: Delhi recorded a mean maximum temperature of 33.1 degrees Celsius this month, making it the "hottest" March in the last 11 years, the India Meteorological Department said on Wednesday. This is the highest mean maximum temperature in March since 2010 when it was 34.1 degrees Celsius, an official said. Such high temperatures

in the month of March this year can be attributed to the absence of strong western disturbances, the official said.

"Only one WD affected Delhi this time and the city recorded rainfall only on two days. The capital had registered 10 rain days in March last year," he said.

The mean maximum temperature for the month of March was 28.2 degrees Celsius in 2020

and 2019.

On Monday, Delhi reeled under a "severe" heat wave as the maximum temperature shot up to 40.1 degrees Celsius, making it the hottest day in March in 76 years, the IMD had said.

The city had recorded a maximum of 40.5 degrees Celsius on March 31, 1945 and 39.6 degrees Celsius on March 29, 1973, according to the IMD.

PTI

extreme north India comprise the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh.

The IMD also said currently, moderate La Niña conditions are prevailing over equatorial Pacific and sea surface temperatures (SSTs) are below normal over central and eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean. The latest forecast indicates warming of SSTs during the coming season and there is a possibility of transition of La Niña conditions to ENSO neutral conditions during the forthcoming hot weather season.

El Niño is associated with the heating of the Pacific waters while La

Niña is linked to cooling of the cooling of Pacific waters. Both have an impact on the Indian sub-continent, especially the monsoon. Several parts of the country saw temperatures crossing 40 degrees Celsius in March.

This is the second summer forecast by the IMD. Earlier this month, it had issued a forecast for March to May.

It said during March to May, day temperatures are likely to be above normal in north, northeast, parts of east and west India. However, it has forecast a likelihood of below normal temperatures in south and the adjoining central India. — PTI

50 patients evacuated after fire in Safdarjung hospital

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

A fire broke out on Wednesday morning in the ICU of the Safdarjung Hospital here following which 50 patients were evacuated, fire officials said.

No casualty has been reported in the blaze that broke out around 6:30 am, they said. Nine fire tenders were rushed to the spot. Around 50 patients were immediately shifted to other wards with the help of hospital staff, the officials said.

The hospital said that

the fire probably broke out due to high voltage fluctuation and a short circuit.

"There was a minor fire incident in medicine ward 11 (HDU) in Safdarjung Hospital on Wednesday probably due to high voltage fluctuation and short circuit. All the patients admitted in HDU and the ward were evacuated immediately to other wards by our nursing staff and security personnel. There was no loss of life. The fire was controlled immediately by our hospital fire safety team. Regular fire drills in the hospital with cooperation

from Fire Department helped in managing the situation in time," the spokesperson of the hospital said.

A senior police officer said that prima facie, it looks like the fire broke out due to a short circuit which was brought under control in time by the hospital staff.

Last week, ten patients died after a fire broke out at a Mumbai mall hospital where coronavirus patients were being treated. The fire broke out at the Sunrise Hospital in the Dreams Mall building in Bhandup area.

DTC signs agreement with IGL for CNG supply

New Delhi, March 31: The Delhi Transport Corporation on Wednesday signed an agreement with Indraprastha Gas Limited (IGL) for supply of CNG to DTC buses and also to private vehicles in the national capital, government officials said.

The agreement signed by Vijay Kumar Bidhuri, Managing Director of DTC, and A K Jana, Managing Director of IGL, in presence of transport minister of Delhi Kailash Gahlot shall be operational for 10 years, they said.

Gahlot said IGL will continue to provide CNG for DTC buses and other vehicles in the same professional manner as it used to do earlier, and the relationship of DTC with IGL shall mature further with the execution of the agreement.

According to a government statement, under the agreement, the discount being provided by IGL to DTC on bulk purchase of CNG for its buses has been enhanced to 6.5 per cent, and this would save the corporation around ₹9.6 crore per annum.

"Further, an increase of rates of land usage fees w.r.t hybrid CNG facilities, meant for supply of green CNG fuel to private vehicles in Delhi, shall earn revenue of ₹2 crore per annum," it added.

— PTI

2 killed, many injured as truck rams into 2-wheeler

New Delhi, March 31: Two persons were killed and as many injured after a tempo hit a two-wheeler and climbed a footpath in north Delhi's Kashmere Gate area in the early hours of Wednesday, police said.

The driver of the two-wheeler has been identified as Vohram Khan (34), a resident of the national capital's Matia Mahal area, they said.

Police on Wednesday said around 6.15 am, the patrolling staff of Kashmere Gate police station noticed an accident on loop road towards Nigambodh Ghat from Yudhister Setu.

The tempo, which was coming from the Shastrī Park side, hit the two-wheeler before climbing the footpath where some people were sleeping, a senior police officer said.

One unknown homeless person aged around 35 died at the spot. Three injured persons, including Khan, were shifted to Trauma Centre, where

Khan was declared dead. The other two homeless injured are also in a serious condition, the officer said.

One injured has been identified as Ramesh, 52, a resident of Ludhiana, however, the identity of the other injured person is yet to be revealed, police said.

The truck driver, Ateek Ahmad, a resident of the city's Nehru Vihar, Mustafabad area, was nabbed by patrolling staff that was present near the accident spot, they said.

He has been arrested and a case registered against him, they said, adding that the tempo is registered in the name of his mother.

There were some plants and saplings in the tempo, police said.

Khand, who used to work in civil defence, was returning home after dropping his mother. He is survived by his pregnant wife, mother and four brothers, police said. — PTI



Employees of Delhi zoo sanitise the premises on Wednesday as it prepares to open to the public from Thursday with Covid-19 safety protocols in place. — AFP

Gangetic West Bengal, Sikkim and sub-

Himalayan West Bengal and Assam while the

■ Next phase of Covid vaccination from today ■ Testing to be increased to 80K per day

Govt orders increase of 838 normal beds, 220 ICU beds in 33 Delhi pvt hospitals

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

Amid the recent spike in coronavirus cases, Delhi health minister Satyendar Jain on Wednesday informed that Covid-19 testing will be increased to 80,000 per day in the national capital, adding that the Delhi government has ordered an increase of 220 ICU beds and 838 normal beds in the wards of 33 private hospitals.

Over 25,000 beneficiaries received Covid-19 vaccine shots in the national capital by 6 pm on Wednesday, and only one of them has reported adverse events so far, officials said here. The number of beneficiaries was less compared with other days as dispensary-based session sites are not functional on Wednesdays and Fridays, an official said.

In the age bracket of 45-59 years, 2,489 beneficiaries received vaccine shots, while 12,637 senior citizens also got their first jabs by 6 pm, an official said.

The second dose of the

vaccines were given to 6,808 people, he said, adding that 1,892 frontline workers and 1,456 healthcare workers got their first shots.

A total of 25,282 people were vaccinated across the city, and only one case of minor AEFI (adverse events following immunisation) was recorded by 6 pm, the officials said.

Delhi has been witnessing a surge in Covid-19 infections in the past few days, reporting 992 new infections on Tuesday.

"Delhi recorded 992 positive cases yesterday. The positivity rate was 2.7. The testing has been increased. The testing rate had dropped for the last two days, from today onwards 80,000 tests will be done...30 contacts each of every Covid-19 positive patients are being traced," Mr Jain said.

"An ample number of beds is available in government hospitals. The overall occupancy in private and government hospitals in Delhi is 25 per cent. A shortage of ICU beds has been reported at



A health worker takes a random Covid sample in New Delhi on Wednesday. — G.N. JHA

three to four private hospitals, so we have ordered an increase in ICU beds," he added.

Talking about the next phase of vaccination starting Thursday where all above 45 years of age are eligible, the health minister said: "There are 65 lakh people above 45 years of age, including 20 lakh people above the age of 60 years in Delhi. The eligible recipients will be 65 lakhs. The vaccination

drive will be on a large scale from tomorrow. There are 500 centres running in Delhi. The time to receive vaccines is from 9 am to 9 pm."

"People were facing difficulty in registration for vaccination and some don't reach the centres on time. So, the government has decided to keep a 3 pm-9 pm window when people can go for vaccination without registration," he added.

Delhi BJP has stalled home delivery of dry rations to harass the poor: AAP

New Delhi, March 31: The Delhi BJP has stalled home delivery of rations in the city to harass the poor, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) alleged on Wednesday.

BJP-ruled municipal corporations in Delhi have inaugurated the scheme of providing dry rations to school children but distributed the same at only one MCD school, AAP spokesperson

Saurabh Bhardwaj claimed at a press conference here. Responding to the allegation, the Delhi BJP said AAP leaders Saurabh Bhardwaj and Durgesh Pathak seemed to be in a daily competition to level baseless charges on the civic bodies.

At the press meet, Bhardwaj claimed there was no clue whether four lakh students of MCD

schools in Delhi will get dry rations or not. "It's shameful that BJP-ruled MCD has distributed dry rations to only one MCD school, and the tender for this scheme is yet to be floated," he added.

"Delhi BJP chief Adesh Gupta, North MCD mayor and other BJP leaders inaugurated this scheme in a school and that's about it. Don't they have any shame," Bhardwaj

asked.

Delhi BJP spokesperson Praveen Shankar Kapoor, however, said ration distribution to children in North Delhi Municipal Corporation schools has been started using unutilised rations from the mid-day meal scheme for which no tender is required. Tenders will be floated for the scheme after April, he said. — PTI

Fake call centre busted, 16 arrested

New Delhi, March 31: The Delhi Police busted a fake call centre in west Delhi's Kirti Nagar and arrested 16 people who were allegedly engaged in duping US citizens by pretending to be tech supporters of e-commerce giant Amazon, officials said on Wednesday.

The accused procured details of the US residents by using illegal techniques, VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) calling and caller ID spoofing. They then approached these residents on the pretext of providing them technical support by pretending to be tech supporters of Amazon, police

said.

The accused may have duped the victims of crores of rupees, they said, adding that the investigation is on in the matter.

"Acting on a tip-off, a police team reached the call centre where several callers were engaged in making and receiving international calls. One Taranjot Singh, the manager and Krishna Gurung, the senior executive of the firm, were supervising the activities.

"During questioning, they admitted that they were engaged in calling foreign (US) nationals and impersonating as tech

supporters of Amazon through VOIP calls," Urvija Goel, deputy commissioner of police (West) said.

The accused used to dupe the victims with pre-recorded threatening robocalls claiming to be from Amazon and tell the recipients that suspicious transactions had taken place in their Amazon accounts. They then deceitfully persuaded them to resolve the issue through their Amazon accounts linked to credit/debit cards, claiming those to be dummy transactions and part of the verification process, the officer said. — PTI

Lockdown left 75% migrant workers without income: Survey

45% migrants are facing difficulties due to food shortages and 31% have no access to healthcare system, says DWWP

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

A survey conducted on 8,000 workers who had to migrate after Covid-induced lockdowns has revealed that 75 per cent of them have been left without any source of income, 45 per cent are facing difficulties due to food shortages and 31 per cent have no access to healthcare system.

The survey was conducted by the Daily Wage Worker Platform (DWWP), in association with the

Jindal Global University and other NGO partners like the Mahashakti Foundation, Centre for Youth and Development Activities, Adithi and Tatvasi Samaj Nyas, in Bihar, Odisha and Maharashtra to study the impact of Covid-19 on migrant workers.

The survey, carried out from September 1, 2020 to February 26, 2021, has revealed that 95 per cent of the workers had Aadhaar Cards but only 67 per cent of these were linked to their bank accounts as a

result of which they were not eligible to receive the Direct Benefit Transfers under the Public Distribution System.

The survey showed that 59.7 per cent of the workers did not have ration cards, which was required to get access to food grains for free or subsidised rates under the National Food Security Act, 2013.

The survey found that uneven economic development and rural economic distress had been the key drivers of interstate migration to the cities.

The report said: "Under the recommendations of the Working Group of Migration, National Commission on Rural Labour and the Second National Commission on Labour, rural/local employment must be increased through investment in rural development and the farming sectors. By subsidising industrial investment in rural areas with an abundance of low-cost labour, improving rural road networks and incentivising transport operators to function in

► **THE SURVEY** showed that 59.7 per cent of the workers did not have ration cards, which was required to get access to food grains for free or subsidised rates under the National Food Security Act, 2013

rural areas, infrastructure development can be expedited."

The report said that an improvement in the implementation of MGNREGA with an increase in average person-days of work

generated along with reductions in wage payment delays can also go a long way in addressing the increase in interstate migration.

The report suggested that States with a high influx of workers such as Maharashtra and Telangana, should have a dedicated Nodal Agency under their Labour Departments to oversee the process of data collection by the Urban local bodies S. "States with a high outflow of migrant workers such as Bihar and

Chhattisgarh should have a similar agency, except with the responsibility of looking over the work of data collection through the Gram Panchayats and the Districts."

The report recommended that a nodal agency under the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE) should be established to coordinate the work of the State Level Agencies. "This agency will be responsible for the overall formalisation of the migrant worker community across the country."

SHORT TAKES

Three more Rafale jets leave for India

New Delhi: Three more Rafale fighter jets on Wednesday took off from France for a non-stop flight to India, the Indian embassy in France said. The jets are being provided mid-air refuelling by aircraft from the United Arab Emirates, it said. "Another batch of #Rafale take to the skies on non stop flight to India with mid air refueling by UAE. Indian Air power grows further!" the embassy tweeted. The first batch of five Rafale jets arrived in India on July 29, nearly four years after India signed an inter-governmental agreement with France to procure 36 of the aircraft at a cost of ₹59,000 crore. The formal induction ceremony of the fleet had taken place at Ambala on September 10 last. A second batch of three Rafale jets arrived in India on November 3 while a third batch of another three jets joined the Indian Air Force on January 27. — PTI

EC shifts 3 cops in poll-bound TN

New Delhi/Chennai: The Election Commission on Wednesday ordered transfer of three police officials, including two IG ranked officers, in poll-bound Tamil Nadu, following "adverse inputs". In a communication to the Tamil Nadu chief secretary, with a copy marked to the state chief electoral officer (CEO), the EC directed the transfer of IG Central H.M. Jayaram, IG West Dinakaran and SP Rural Coimbatore Arul Arasu. The EC directed the transfer of the officials "based on adverse inputs", it said, and also named the replacement for the respective officials. "Jayaram, Dinakaran and Arul Arasu will be attached to the DGP Headquarters awaiting posting orders" and their posting cannot be done without its permission, the EC said. — PTI

Ex-PM Deve Gowda, wife test Covid +ve

Bengaluru: Former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda on Wednesday said he and his wife Chennamma have tested positive for Covid-19. "My wife Chennamma and I have tested positive for Covid-19. We are self-isolating along with other family members," the 87-year-old JD(S) patriarch tweeted. "I request all those who came in contact with us over the last few days to get themselves tested. I request party workers and well-wishers not to panic," he added. The couple are currently undergoing treatment at Manipal Hospital, hospital sources said. Mr Gowda's son and former CM H.D. Kumaraswamy in a video statement said, there was no reason for worry and his parents were getting good treatment. — PTI

NIA INVOKES UAPA IN FEB. 17 WB BLAST CASE

PRANMOY BRAHMACHARI
BERHAMPORE, MARCH 31

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) has invoked the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act charges in the bomb blast which left Trinamul Congress minister Zakir Hossain and 26 others injured at the Nimtita railway station in Murshidabad on February 17. The NIA has questioned former MLA Imani Biswas, also a TMC candidate, several times in the last one month. Sections 16 (terrorist act) and 18 (conspiracy) of the UAPA have been added in the case as the place of occurrence is close to the India-Bangladesh border and hence the possibility of a subversive act can not be ruled out in the blast on February 17 night, according to NIA sources. Though a case under Sections 307 (attempt to murder), 326 (grievous hurt) and 120B (criminal conspiracy) of the IPC and Sections 3 and 4 of the Explosives Act was initiated at the Azimganj government railway police station, the NIA took over the probe on March 2 from the criminal investigation department after it arrested two accused — Abu Samad and Sahidul Sheikh — and seized several objectionable documents. Later the NIA found several phone calls from Bangladesh, detected some codes and questioned Mr Biswas at least thrice.

'Shuvendu a bigger leader than Didi'

TMC chief scared she'll face defeat at the hands of her nemesis, claims Nadda

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, MARCH 31

Calling his party candidate in Nandigram, Shuvendu Adhikari, a "bigger leader" than his opponent West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee, BJP president J.P. Nadda has claimed that the Trinamul Congress supremo has been scared because she would face defeat at the hands of her nemesis in the hot seat going to polls in the second phase of Assembly Election on Thursday.

On Wednesday Mr Nadda told a rally at Dhaniakhali in Hooghly, "The first phase of polls was peaceful. That is why Mamataji has been panicked. TMC leaders rushed to the Election Commission complaining that it was not right. Media claims Mamataji accepted a challenge by contesting from Nandigram. Tell me one thing whether she has gone to Nandigram leaving Bhowanipore or Shuvendu has gone to Bhowanipore? Who becomes a bigger leader when a CM jumps to fight a minister (read former)?"

He added, "Remember Mamataji is going to lose in Nandigram. This election shows that it was Shuvendu who accepted the challenge while Mamataji went to fight." Tearing into the TMC chief for her politics of appeasement, Mr Nadda also asked her whether she would now quit politics following her promise if she would be proved wrong for her stand on the Batla House encounter in Delhi.

"In the Batla House, the Delhi police took action against the terrorists. One of the cops was killed. Mamataji called it a fake encounter. She traveled to Delhi and gave a lecture on injustice in the name of fake encounter. For us, all are same be it Hindu or Muslim. A terrorist is a terrorist," he said.



Officials carry election materials from a distribution centre as they travel towards a polling station in an autorickshaw in Nandigram on Wednesday, the eve of second phase of the West Bengal Assembly polls. — PTI

All eyes on Nandigram as Bengal votes for Phase 2

Nandigram, March 31: The stage is set for the second phase of Assembly poll in West Bengal on Thursday when more than 75 lakh voters will decide the fate of 191 candidates in 30 seats as eyes are set on the high profile Nandigram constituency where Mamata Banerjee is pitted against her protegee-turned adversary Suvendu Adhikari

Parganas and 72 in Bankura, the sources said. TMC and BJP are contesting in all the 30 seats, while CPI(M) is in the fray in 15 and its alliance partners of Sanjukta Morcha the Congress and ISF are competing in 13 and two seats respectively. Polling will take place amid strict Covid-19 guidelines in nine seats of Paschim Medinipur, eight in Bankura, four seats in South 24 Parganas and nine in Purba Medinipur — the home ground of TMC turncoat and BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari. Nandigram falls in Purba Medinipur district. The agrarian constituency which shook the foundations of the mighty Left regime over the anti-land acquisition movement in 2007, has now turned into a battleground of titans with Ms Banerjee suddenly deciding to switch from her Bhowanipur seat to the constituency held by Mr Adhikari, her former lieutenant who has switched loyalty to the BJP.

For Mr Adhikari it is a battle for political survival as a defeat would be a devastating blow and might also put a question mark on his political graph in the new party the BJP. Similarly, a victory would not only establish him as one of the tallest leaders in Bengal but would also push him few miles ahead of others in the chief ministerial race in case the BJP is voted to power. For Ms Banerjee a victory is a must to lead the government and keep together her party, which is faced with exodus. — PTI

BJP targets Didi over 'gotra card'

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

With the TMC supremo and chief minister Mamata Banerjee forced to play the "gotra (sub-caste) card" in the electoral battle of West Bengal apparently to woo the Hindu voters, the BJP on Wednesday claimed that Ms Banerjee mentioning her "gotra" is a realisation that she has lost ground and the voters are now aware of her "political paakhand (political hypo-



crisy)." The BJP, which had been accusing Ms Banerjee and the TMC of appeasement politics, also reminded the TMC supremo that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi had also played the "gotra card" but his party "lost miserably".

Facing a tough challenge from her former close aide and now a BJP candidate

Suvendu Mukherjee on the prestigious Nandigram Assembly constituency, from which Ms Banerjee is contesting this time, it is not easy for the TMC to retain power as the BJP has also put up a tough fight in the state.

"You are disclosing your gotra and are opposing 'Jai Shri Ram' and also disallowed Ma Durga's immersion during Durga Puja. People understand everything as to who is genuine and who is not," said information and

broadcasting minister Prakash Javadekar.

In Nandigram, while ending her poll campaign, Ms Banerjee had said during her speech that her gotra was "Shandilya".

While recalling that Mr Gandhi had also mentioned his "gotra", the Union minister said, "Now she is telling her 'gotra' and she will also lose very badly because it shows that she is not genuine as she was disclosing this on the eve of her election." — PTI

Didi: Will take action against my attackers, have evidence

Goghat (West Bengal), March 31: West Bengal chief minister and Trinamul Congress supremo Mamata Banerjee on Wednesday said that she has photographs and videos of those who attacked her car in Nandigram on Tuesday and would take up the issue after the elections.

Ms Banerjee said that she refrained from any action as elections are on and the model code of conduct is in place.

"How dare they attack my car! I kept mum only because the elections are on. Or else I would have seen how big they have grown," Ms Banerjee said at a rally.

"I have videos of the goons attacking my car. Let the elections be over in Bengal, then I will take action," the chief minister said, adding a Bengali proverb "*Ami dekhbo koto dhane koto chaal hoi* (They will learn what's what)".

A visibly agitated Banerjee said of her attackers, "I will see which 'gaddar (traitor)' shelters you. Where will you go? To Delhi, Bihar, Rajasthan or UP I will drag you back here (West Bengal)." The fiery leader was heckled by alleged Opposition party supporters when she visited a TMC worker, undergoing treatment after being beaten up. — PTI

Launching a frontal attack on PM Narendra Modi Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday accused him of lying and said that if you want to listen to lies — about Assam, farmers, about anything — then switch on your TV, look at Mr Modi's face and listen to him as much as you want. Addressing a public rally he said, "I have not come here to lie to you. My name isn't Narendra Modi. If you want to listen to lies — about Assam, farmers, about anything — then switch on your TV, look at Narendra Modi's face and listen to him as much as you want. He lies to India all 24 hours. Mr Gandhi on Wednesday started his two-day visit to poll-bound Assam by visiting Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati where he interacted with devotees around the temple and also addressed three public rallies. Pointing out that the Congress has given five guarantees to voters of Assam that will be fulfilled, Mr Gandhi said, "I want to give you guarantee that the govt of grand alliance will not be run on dictates from Nagpur or New Delhi. Our government will be receiving orders from the people of Assam." "We are not BJP, we fulfill our promises. Tea garden workers must remember our guarantee of Rs 365 per day as minimum wage," Mr Gandhi said. The Congress has promised in its "guarantees" that it will not allow the controversial CAA to be implemented in Assam, provide employment to five lakh youth, give monthly assistance of Rs 2,000 to every housewife, besides raising the minimum daily wages of tea garden workers.

MANOJ ANAND
GUWAHATI, MARCH. 31

Mr Gandhi on Wednesday started his two-day visit to poll-bound Assam by visiting Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati where he interacted with devotees around the temple and also addressed three public rallies. Pointing out that the Congress has given five guarantees to voters of Assam that will be fulfilled, Mr Gandhi said, "I want to give you guarantee that the govt of grand alliance will not be run on dictates from Nagpur or New Delhi. Our government will be receiving orders from the people of Assam." "We are not BJP, we fulfill our promises. Tea garden workers must remember our guarantee of Rs 365 per day as minimum wage," Mr Gandhi said. The Congress has promised in its "guarantees" that it will not allow the controversial CAA to be implemented in Assam, provide employment to five lakh youth, give monthly assistance of Rs 2,000 to every housewife, besides raising the minimum daily wages of tea garden workers.

Deputy speaker, 5 mantris in fray in Assam Phase 2

Guwahati, March 31: The fate of five ministers, the deputy speaker and a few significant Opposition faces will be decided as 39 seats in Assam go to the polls in the second phase on Thursday.

In all, 345 candidates, including 26 women, are in the fray in this phase, the polling for which will be held from 7 am to 6 pm amid heavy security and strict Covid-19 guidelines, officials said.

The ruling BJP is contesting 34 seats, while allies Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) are fighting in six and three seats, respectively.

There are "friendly contests" between the BJP and the AGP in Patharkandi and Algaipur, while the BJP is engaged in similar fights with UPPL in Majbat and Kalaigaon.

The Grand Alliance's Congress is contesting in 28 seats, the AIUDF in seven and Bodoland Peoples' Front (BPF) in four. The newly-formed Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) is contesting in 19 seats.

There is a direct contest between the NDA and the Grand Alliance in 25 constituencies, while the rest are witnessing triangular fights.

BJP minister Parimal Suklabaidya is in a direct contest with Congress's Kamakhya Prasad Mala in Dholai, while Deputy Speaker Aminul Haque Laskar of the BJP is in a straight contest with AIUDF's Karim Uddin Barbhuiyan in Sonai.

THE RULING BJP is contesting 34 seats, while its allies AGP and UPPL are fighting in 6 and 3 seats

THE GRAND Alliance's Cong is contesting in 28 seats, Bodoland Peoples' Front in 4 & AIUDF in 7

Minister Pijush Hazarika is locked in a triangular contest with Congress's Swapan Kumar Mandal and AJP's Bubul Das from Jagirao (SC), and his Cabinet colleague Bhabesh Kalita is in a direct fight with AJP's Babul Saharia in the Rangia constituency.

Rajya Sabha MP Biswajit Daimary is fighting against BPF's Karuna Kanata Swargiary in Paneri, while AIUDF's Sirajuddin Ajmal, a former MP and MLA, is fighting the elections against AGP's Sadikullah Bhuyan from Jamunamukh.

Former Congress minister Gautam Roy, contesting on a BJP ticket from Katigora, is in a direct fight with his ex-party colleague Khalliuiddin Mazumdar: Gautam's son Rahul Roy, contesting as an Independent, is in a triangular contest with former Congress minister Ajit Singh and sitting BJP MLA Mihir Kanti Shome from Udhahbond.

Gautam Roy's daughter-in-law Daisy Roy is also contesting as an Independent from Algaipur where the AGP's Aftabuddin Laskar and BJP's Moon Swarnakar are in a 'friendly contest'. — PTI

I'm not like Modi, I don't lie to country 24/7: Rahul

I want to give you guarantee that the govt of grand alliance will not be run on dictates from Nagpur or New Delhi

— Rahul Gandhi, Cong leader

filled, Mr Gandhi said, "I want to give you sixth guarantee that the government of grand alliance will not be run on dictates from Nagpur or New Delhi. Our government will be receiving orders from the people of Assam."

"We are not BJP, we fulfill our promises. Tea garden workers must remember our guarantee of Rs 365 per day as minimum wage," Mr Gandhi said.

The Congress has promised in its "guarantees" that it will not allow the controversial CAA to be implemented in Assam, provide employment to five lakh youth, give monthly assistance of Rs 2,000 to every housewife, besides raising the minimum daily wages of tea garden workers.

Odisha hijacking schemes sponsored by Centre: BJP

Refrain from using state logo in PMAY-G houses: Centre

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO
BHUBANESWAR, MARCH 31

With the BJP accusing the Odisha government of hijacking Central government-sponsored schemes, the Centre has asked the state government to refrain from co-branding PMAY-G (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yajana-Gramin) houses with the logo of the Biju Pucca Ghar Yojana (BPGY) which would result in "misinterpretation" of the scheme by the beneficiaries.

In a letter to the Odisha chief secretary Pradipta Kumar Mohapatra, the principal secretary of ministry of Union rural development department, Nagendra Nath Sinha, stated that the PMAY-G, which is a Central-sponsored scheme, should be implemented in its original form only.

"The use of the state scheme, i.e., BPGY logo is not permissible under the provisions of the PMAY-G, I would, therefore, once again request you to use official logo of the PMAY-G only," the letter read.

Mr Sinha further stat-

Principal secretary of the ministry of Union rural development department pointed out that the state had agreed to implement the Central scheme with the contribution of its own minimum share and doesn't confer the rights for use of any other logo other than PMAY-G



ed the scheme should be implemented in its original form under the name of PMAY-G and no other name can be appended. The ministry had also conveyed all the states/Union Territories in the past to use only the official logo of PMAY-G, he said.

Mr Sinha further pointed out that the state had agreed to implement the Central scheme with the contribution of its own minimum share and doesn't confer the rights for use of any other logo other than PMAY-G.

"This will also lead to misinterpretation of the scheme among the PMAY-G beneficiaries about the benefits of the scheme," he added. The issue was highlighted by the state unit of BJP in the State Assembly on Wednesday. Leader of the

Opposition Pradipta Kumar Nayak alleged that the Odisha government had tried to hijack the Central scheme by pasting stickers of BPGY on the wall of the houses constructed under PMAY.

Ruling BJD legislator Amar Prasad Satpathy said since the state government was giving 40 per cent matching share to the PMAY-G from BPGY, there was no wrong in using the state logo.

As the BJD and BJP sparred over the use of double logos on PMAY-G houses in the Assembly, the House was adjourned till 4 pm.

Earlier, a BJP delegation led by the Leader of Opposition (LoP) Pradipta Naik had also submitted a memorandum to the Governor, Professor Ganeshi Lal in this regard.

Pawar recovering well after surgery for stone removal

SONU SHRIVASTAVA
MUMBAI, MARCH 31

NCP president Sharad Pawar is doing well after undergoing a surgery for removal of a gallbladder stone at a private hospital in Mumbai on Tuesday night, Maharashtra health minister Tope informed. The minister said that Mr Pawar will get relief from abdominal pain as the stone has been removed successfully.

"The decision for gallbladder surgery would be taken by the doctors after a few days. Mr Pawar is stable and there is no reason to worry," Mr Tope said.

The NCP chief was supposed to be admitted on Wednesday, but since he had experienced pain in his abdomen, he was admitted on Tuesday afternoon itself.

Mr Tope said that after conducting all diagnosis, the doctors concluded that the main reason behind the abdominal pain was the stone developed in gallbladder. "The stone was removed through endoscopy. He is now feeling relief from night and pain has also been reduced. Doctors



THE NCP chief was supposed to be admitted on Wednesday, but since he had experienced pain in his abdomen, he was admitted on Tuesday afternoon itself

have planned to remove the gallbladder, which contains more stones, after eight to 10 days once all the parameters would be stabilised," he added. "A surgery was necessitated on him following some complications. We will decide on surgery on the gallbladder later. Currently, Pawar is under observation. He is doing well," Dr Amit Maydeo said.

Mr Tope further said that the removal of gallbladder will not affect Mr Pawar's daily routines. "The doctors have come to this decision so that abdominal pain does not occur frequently."

PUNJAB STATE TRANSMISSION CORPORATION LIMITED	
(Regd Office: PSEB Head Office, The Mall, Patiala - 147001)	
Corporate Identity No. U40109PB2010SGC033814, www.pstcl.org	
Oio: SE / TS (Design), Telefax: 0175-2207774, Email: se-trd@pstcl.org	
Notice Inviting E-Tender	
Enquiry No.	STO-5131
Description	220KV CTs & 220KV PTs
Qty.	84Nos. CTs & 25Nos. PTs
Last Date / Time for Downloading of tender	03.05.2021 upto 11.00AM
Last Date & Time for receipt of tender	04.05.2021 upto 11.00AM
Date & Time for Opening of tender	06.05.2021 at 11.00 AM
Detailed NIT/specification may be downloaded from PSTCL e-tendering website https://eproc.punjab.gov.in. Corrigendum, if any, will not be published in newspapers. As such the website may be visited regularly for updates.	
RO No PR-Advt. No. - 76/12/68/2021/3236 Dy.CETS (Design), PSTCL, Patiala.	

NORTHERN RAILWAY	
NOTICE INVITING TENDER	
Name of Work and its location	30-Elect-26-T-R1-20-21-E3 Electrical work in connection with urgent replacement of indoor in important Rooms and non repairable VRF ODU's at Raj Bhawan.
Approximate Cost of the work in	₹31.24 Lakh
Address of the office	Sr. Divl Elect. Engineer/General, New Delhi
Earnest money	₹00.00
Date & time of submission of tender	28.04.2021, 12:00 hrs.
Opening of tender	28.04.2021, 12:00 hrs.
Website & notice board	www.irps.gov.in & Sr. Divl. Elect. Engineer/General, New Delhi
745/21	
SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE	

NORTHERN RAILWAY	
TENDER NOTICE (Through e-tendering)	
Name of work with its location	Work for formation LAN Cabling in C/w Rallinet/Internet connectivity to workshop/DEMU Shed/Coaching Depot / Freight maintenance depot at NDLS, NZM, ANVT, DEE, BLC Depot / TKD & SSB.
App. Cost of the work (₹)	₹ 67,66,675.60/- only
Tender Document Fee (₹)	₹ 0/- only
Earnest Money Deposit (₹)	₹ 0/- only
Address of the office	Senior Divisional Signal & Telecom Engineer-C, Northern Railway, 3 rd Floor, Annexe-1, DRM Office, New Delhi-110055.
Date & time for upload the tender / closing of tender	Tender uploading / closing date & time - 28.04.2021 upto 15.00 hrs.
Website particular & notice board location where complete details of the tender can be seen etc.	See the Northern Railway website www.irps.gov.in & Notice board at S&T branch, 3 rd Floor, DRM Office, State Entry Road, New Delhi-110055.
Tender No. 558-Sig-16-Tel-OT-929 Dated: 30.03.2021. 740/21	
SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE	

SHORT TAKES

SCHOOL DROPOUT RATE STANDS AT 4.75% IN ODISHA

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO
BHUBANESWAR, MARCH 31

In Odisha, the dropout rate in upper primary schools stood at 4.75 per cent in 2019-20. Similarly, the dropout rate for primary schools during the same period stood at 1.53, state school and mass education minister Samir Ranjan Dash informed the Assembly while replying to a question by BJP lawmaker Mukesh Mahaling. Nabarangpur recorded the highest 13.35 per cent dropout rate in upper primary schools. As regards the highest primary school dropout rate of 5.28 per cent was recorded by Gajapati district. On the positive side, Kendrapara, Sambalpur and Khordha districts reported zero dropout in upper primary schools while the figure was nil for Angul, Bolangir, Cuttack, Ganjam, Jajpur, Khordha, Nuapada and Sambalpur districts in primary schools. School dropout rate in Odisha has always been a major political issue with the BJP and Congress blaming the ruling BJD for the “unwarranted phenomenon.” “Nearly half of the total 51,094 primary and upper primary schools have no playgrounds. A few schools have pipe-water supply facilities. Similarly, there are no separate toilets for girls and boys in several schools and the construction work of kitchen for cooking meals under midday meal scheme is still in progress in schools. In 95 per cent schools, there are no teachers for each class and one teacher has to take care of multi classes.

NCB ARRESTS AJAZ KHAN IN DRUGS CASE

Mumbai: The Narcotics Control Bureau has arrested Bollywood actor and former Bigg Boss contestant Ajaz Khan in connection with a drugs case, a senior NCB official said on Wednesday. Khan was initially detained by the NCB Mumbai zonal unit on Tuesday after he landed at the city airport, he said. His name had cropped up during the interrogation of arrested drug peddler Shadab Batata, the official said. Accordingly, Khan was questioned by the NCB at its office in south Mumbai and his statement was recorded late Tuesday night. After examining his role in the crime, he was placed under arrest, the official said. A team led by NCB's zonal director Sameer Wankhede also conducted searches in suburban Andheri and Lokhandwala on Tuesday in connection with the case, he said. While speaking to media persons before entering the NCB's office on Tuesday, Khan said he was not detained and he had himself come to meet the anti-drug agencies officers. The actor has worked in some Bollywood films and TV shows. — PTI

Where is FIR? Are you above law? HC raps Param Bir Singh

Reserves order on maintainability of 5 pleas against Deshmukh

SHAHAB ANSARI
MUMBAI, MARCH 31

The Bombay high court on Wednesday reprimanded Param Bir Singh, Mumbai's former commissioner of police, for approaching the court to order a CBI inquiry based only on his allegations without even registering an FIR against state home minister Anil Deshmukh.

Making it clear that FIR is the first step to launching any investigation, Bombay high court Chief Justice Dipankar Datta said, “You are a police commissioner, why should the law be set aside for you? Are police officers, ministers and politicians all above the law? Are you saying that you are above the law? We cannot throw aside laws because the home minister and chief minister are involved. If a PM is involved who will



▶ **PARAM BIR** has approached the HC seeking CBI probe against Mr Deshmukh for his alleged criminal malpractices

▶ **THE HIGH COURT** told him an investigation cannot be conducted without an FIR and, given that, how can such a prayer be made

investigate? You want a super power from outside?”

The court also directed the police to bring the station diary to verify what action they have taken on the complaint filed by one advocate, Jayshree Patil.

The chief justice praised Ms Patil for showing the courage to file a police complaint against the home minister and police commissioner.

Interestingly, another HC bench had dismissed Ms Patil's petition on Tuesday, calling it a “publicity stunt”. There are

three PILs and two writ petitions before the HC.

Mr Singh has approached the HC seeking CBI probe against Mr Deshmukh for his alleged criminal malpractices.

Chief Justice Dipankar Datta reserved the order on the maintainability of the PIL filed by Mr Singh and other petitions after hearing senior lawyer Vikram Nankani for Param Bir Singh, advocate general (AG) Ashutosh Kumbhakoni on behalf of the state and additional solicitor general (ASG) Anil Singh for CBI.

During the hearing, the petitioner's lawyer, Mr Nankari, pressed for an investigation by an independent agency, like the CBI. However, the Chief Justice (CJ) repeatedly asked him how the court could issue directions for a probe when there is no FIR.

The bench told him an investigation cannot be conducted without an FIR and, given that, how can such a prayer be made, especially in a public interest litigation.

Arguing on behalf of Mr Singh, Mr Nankani told the court that it was not a case of whistleblower but hard facts coming from a person who was holding the highest position in the city police. Hence, he said, this could be looked into under Article 226 of the Constitution of India and an independent agency can be appointed.



People play with colours and water during the Holi celebration amid rise in coronavirus cases in Prayagraj on Wednesday. — PTI

CBI court discharges last 3 Ishrat Jahan case accused

Says ‘no question of any fake encounter’ on their part

Ahmedabad, March 31: A special CBI court here on Wednesday discharged three police officers in the 2004 Ishrat Jahan case and observed that there was “no question of any fake encounter” on their part and that there is nothing on record, even prima facie, to show that the four deceased in the case were not terrorists.

The court of special Judge V.R. Raval made the observation while discharging police officers G.L. Singhal, Tarun Barot (now retired) and Anaju Chaudhary in the Ishrat Jahan case. The fourth applicant, J.G. Parmar, had died during the course of hearing.

They were the last accused in the case against whom charges of murder, abduction, and criminal conspiracy were dropped by the court after the Gujarat government declined

▶ **OUT OF** the total seven accused against whom the CBI had filed a charge sheet in 2013, three other police officers - P.P. Pandey, D.G. Vanzara and N.K. Amin - had been discharged in 2018 and 2019

sanction against them as sought by the CBI on the order of the same court.

Out of the total seven accused against whom the CBI had filed a charge sheet in 2013, three other police officers — P.P. Pandey, D.G. Vanzara and N.K. Amin — had been discharged in 2018 and 2019.

“Being high rank police officers, it was their bounden duty to take necessary steps in order to maintain law and order. There is no question of any fake encounter on the part of any such police officer. All the police officers were to be more cautious and alert to main-

tain peace in the public at large,” the court said in its order.

It said that the information received by the police officers regarding the four victims “was correct, sound, and there was substantial force in the information”.

“There is nothing on record, even prima facie, to suggest that the victims were not terrorists...the IB inputs were not genuine,” the court observed.

It further said that the four offenders were “not simple and ordinary”.

“It's clear that the act which is alleged to have been done by the accused was in discharge of their duties or purported to be in discharge of their duties,” it said.

The CBI had on March 20 conveyed to the court that the state government had declined sanction for prosecution of the three accused. — PTI

Amit Shah...

■ **Continued from Page 1**
paanch saal de dijiye, aadmi toh kya parinde bhi ghus nahi sakenge (Give us another five years, and we will ensure that not just infiltrators, but even birds don't enter illegally,” said Mr Shah.

Reminding people how late Congress chief minister Tarun Gogoi rejected Mr Ajmal by saying, “Who is Ajmal?” Mr Shah regretted that Mr Rahul Gandhi is saying that Mr Ajmal is Assam's identity.

“Assam's identity is Vaishnav saint Srimanta Sankardeva, Bharat Ratna Gopinath Bordoloi and Bhupen Hazarika who represent Assam's identity and the Congress and Mr Ajmal will not be allowed to change it at any cost,” he said and reiterated that it is the BJP's double-engine government — at the Centre and the Sarbananda Sonowal and Himanta Biswa Sarma government in the state — which successfully ended violence and agitation in the state and took it forward on the path of development.

“Five years ago, I as the party president had come to you and promised to make Assam free from violence and agitation and ensure development. We have fulfilled our promises. Give us another five years and we will make the state infiltrator-free and flood-free,” he said.

Pak Cabinet gives nod

■ **Continued from Page 1**
told Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a letter that Pakistan is “convinced that durable peace and stability in South Asia is contingent upon resolving all outstanding issues between India and Pakistan”, in particular the Kashmir issue. He added Pakistan desires “peaceful, cooperative relations with all neighbours, including India”. The “creation of an enabling environment is imperative for a constructive and result-oriented dialogue”, the Pakistan PM had added. The letter dated March 29 was a reply to Mr Modi's letter last week to wish Mr Khan on Pakistan National Day on March 23, in which he had said that India wanted cordial relations with its neighbour, but for that an environment of trust devoid of terror and hostility was imperative.

‘Huge potential to boost Indo-Tajik ties’

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

External affairs minister S. Jaishankar on Wednesday said that there is potential for further bolstering India-Tajikistan economic cooperation after his meeting with his Tajikistan counterpart Sirojiddin Muhriddin and urged the business community on both the sides to engage more intensively with each other.

Mr Jaishankar, who is in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, attended the 9th Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan on Tuesday. It is his first bilateral official visit to the key Central Asian country as the foreign minister.

“Development cooperation has also become an important pillar of our bilateral relationship. We have successfully commissioned a number of projects over the years in Tajikistan under our

grant assistance, including IT equipment in schools, food processing plant, engineering workshop, pharmaceutical plant, IT centres, rehabilitation and modernisation of the Varzob-1 hydroelectric power plant etc,” he said.

In a statement, he said that the 9th Ministerial Conference of the Heart of Asia — Istanbul Process on Afghanistan was indeed a timely one.

“President of Tajikistan Emamoli Rahmon emphasised on greater economic cooperation between our two countries, particularly in respect of investments from Indian companies in Tajikistan. This will be a focus area of our future cooperation,” Mr Jaishankar said.

The minister said that he had “detailed talks” with foreign minister Sirojiddin on “all aspects of our bilateral relationship as well as issues of regional and international interest”.

After 132 years, Army shuts Military Farms

PAWAN BALI
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

After supplying milk to the Indian Army for 132 years, Military farms on Wednesday were officially disbanded.

The Flag ceremony of the Military Farms Records Delhi Cantonment was held on Wednesday.

The military farms were set up with the sole requirement of supplying hygienic milk to troops in various garrisons across British India. They played an important role before the white revolution or Operation Flood was launched in the 1970s to make India self-dependent in milk production. In August 2017, the

▶ **THE FARMS** are spread over more than 20,000 acres of defence land across the country in cities such as Ambala, Kolkata, Srinagar, Agra, Pathankot, Lucknow, Meerut, Allahabad and Guwahati

defence ministry had announced a series of reform measures for the Indian Army which included shutting down the military farms.

The military farms in India are spread over more than 20,000 acres of defence land across the country in cities such as Ambala, Kolkata, Srinagar, Agra, Pathankot, Lucknow, Meerut, Allahabad and Guwahati. The first military farm

was raised on 1st February 1889 at Allahabad. After independence Military Farms flourished with 30,000 heads of cattle in 130 Military Farms all over India in varied Agro-climatic conditions. Military Farms were even established in Leh and Kargil in the late 1990s, with the role of supply of fresh and hygienic milk to troops at their locations on daily basis. Another major task was the management of large tracts of defence land, production and supply of Baled Hay to animal holding units.

For more than a century Military Farms with their dedication and commitment supplied 3.5 crore litres of milk.

■ Forest patches destroyed, wild animals ‘safe’, say officials

Fire break out at Bandhavgarh reserve

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY
BHOPLAL, MARCH 31

A massive wildfire has broken out in Bandhavgarh tiger reserve (BTR) in Madhya Pradesh, causing huge damages to floras in some forest ranges under the national park.

However, wildlife animals, including tigers have remained unaffected by the forest fire, BTR field director Wincnet Rahim told this newspaper on Wednesday.

“No faunas including the tigers and the avian species have been affected by the fire,” he added. “The fire broke out on

Tuesday. It spread to the ‘fire points’ in three core ranges and three buffer areas of the BTR. The fire has now been extinguished,” he said.

He said floras such as bamboo clumps and grasslands in these areas were destroyed in the fire.

However, locals said the wildfire broke out on Monday and spread very fast in the jungle. The fire could be brought under control on Wednesday afternoon with the help of ground-level forest staff, police and local villagers.

“Dry leaves and dry tree branches had helped the wildfire spread fast in the forest”, the local villagers said.

▶ **FOREST OFFICIALS** suspect the Holi festival revellers may have caused the fire. BTR with a tiger population of a little more than 100 is a key wildlife tourist destination in the country.

A panic button was pressed among the forest officers when the fire started engulfing the Mahaman and Bhadrasila forest patches under the Magadhi range, the core area of tigers in BTR, prompting the forest staff to intensify firefight measures, sources said.

The wildfire had spread to the forest ranges of Tala, Magadhi, Khitauli,

3 teachers, 56 kids test +ve in Valley, 6 schools shut

YUSUF JAMEEL
SRINAGAR, MARCH 31

Half a dozen schools in Kashmir Valley were on Wednesday shut for three days to one week after 56 students and three teachers tested positive for Covid-19. This has, once again, set alarming bells ringing among students and parents alike.

Official sources said that positive cases for the virus among students and teachers surfaced at two schools in the central district of Budgam and one each in Bandipore, Anantnag, Srinagar and Kulgam districts during a drive of mass testing of students and teachers. The sources said that the J&K health department had collected swab samples at these institutions a few days ago.

The J&K government on Tuesday announced a slew of measures to contain coronavirus pandemic in view of a fresh surge in positive cases. The fresh guidelines say that online and distance learning shall continue to be the preferred mode of teaching and that it should be “encouraged”.

However, the educational institutions where physical classes are being held have been asked to “take full safety precautions especially by ensuring social distancing, staggered attendance, maintaining sanitation, hygiene and early identification and isolation of cases in view of the recent spike in Covid-19 cases”.

J&K reported 373 fresh Covid-19 cases on Wednesday, the maximum in a day, so far this year, taking the overall tally of the infections to 130,960. The death toll has reached 1,994, including 1,258 in the Valley and the rest in the Jammu region. Among the latest fatalities is a 70-year-old tourist from Pune who died at a Srinagar hospital early Wednesday.

Jagargh. Panpatha and Pataur, a senior forest officer said.

“We are yet to make an assessment of damages caused by the wildfire. Our priority was to extinguish the fire”, Mr Rahim said.

Forest officials suspect the Holi festival revellers may have caused the fire.

BTR with a tiger population of a little more than 100 is a key wildlife tourist destination in the country.

With a tiger density of eight per sq km, the BTR is considered an assured place of tiger spotting by tourists. The reserve forest is also considered one of the richest biodiversity in the country.

Mamata takes aim at EC

■ **Continued from Page 1**
Midnapore, eight from Bankura and four from South 24 Parganas, where 171 candidates are in the fray.

In a virulent speech, Ms Banerjee told a TMC rally at Uleberia East in Howrah: “The EC scheduled the poll dates going by the mandals of the BJP. I discovered it. It is true. I was surprised. In the EC, each looks like a mandat committee president. I respect the EC as much as it needs. With humble regards, I request the EC: Be impartial. Is it a must to pay heed to whatever the BJP says? Even yesterday BJP workers attacked me and pushed my car in Nandigram. But the EC did not take any action. My personal security personnel tried their best. But the way the EC is giving its instructions, people see it as (acting) for the BJP only.”

She alleged: “All TMC flags and hoardings have been removed because Prime Minister Narendra Modi will address a rally. This is the main job of the BJP. It only acts as a broker of the BJP. Listen, this is Bengal. If I ask some boys and girls just once, they will throw them out by slapping in a second. But I do not indulge in it. I am a peace-loving individual. I want a peaceful election in a democratic way. The EC has snatched away our total law and order as if it is conducting the polls by imposing President's Rule.”

The CM claimed: “Officers in the rank of DG, DIG, SP are being turned into OOs and ICs at police stations. Such a big insult! They got promoted in their ranks through their hard

work over the years. Still, they are being insulted. We will give our reply to this insult and take revenge too. We also have many MPs and MLAs. The home minister of the BJP is steering the EC. Why? We do not want anything other than an impartial poll.”

She asked the EC: “Why are you allowing the goons from outside here? They are still camping in those areas where polls are over. Why has there not been a night patrol? Why are the goons of the BJP staying at hotels and guest houses with cash? The Government of India and the governments of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Assam and Tripura are here with cash. The CMs, deputy CMs and ministers are doing the same thing here also. It did not happen during the tenure of T.N. Seshan and S.Y. Quraishi at the helm of the EC. Why is it happening now? As soon as the BJP asks for the transfer of officers, orders are also issued from the EC. The EC is doing what the BJP is asking for. It has become the spokesperson of the BJP.”

Taking potshots at the saffron party over its candidates' crisis, Ms Banerjee argued at another rally in Singur, in Hooghly district, that it gave the most tickets to those who were either “hired” from the TMC or were earlier in the CPI(M), while an MP like Lockett Chatterjee has been “downgraded” to contest the Assembly polls. She also revealed that she had earlier wished to contest the polls from Singur.

3rd phase vaccination for 45+

■ **Continued from Page 1**

many as 14 states/UTs have not reported any Covid-related death in the last 24 hours. These are Rajasthan, Assam, Odisha, Ladakh (UT), Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, Manipur, Tripura, Sikkim, Lakshadweep, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.

The Union health ministry advised states to keep Covid vaccine wastage under one per cent. At a high-level meeting to review preparations before vaccinations open up for those 45 years of age and above, the ministry also directed states to identify low vaccine coverage pockets, particularly in districts showing Covid-19 surge, and to take corrective measures.

“Maintain vaccine wastage at less than 1% (present national wastage percentage being 6%). Regularly review vaccine wastage across all levels to minimise the same. Ensure timely utilisation of available stocks to avoid expiry of vaccines without usage. Timely updating of data of vaccine consumption to be ensured on CoWIN and eVIN portals,” the health ministry directed all the states.

Union health secretary, Rajesh Bhushan, and R.S. Sharma, chairperson, empowered group on vaccination, held the online meeting with health secretaries, state mission directors of National Health Mission, and state immunisation officers of all states and Union Territories to review the status, pace and issues regarding Covid vaccination

across the country as well as the preparations for April 1, 2021.

For vaccinating healthcare and frontline workers, the states were asked to ensure that only eligible beneficiaries are registered and vaccinated under the category; archive incorrect entries or duplications on CoWIN; identify pockets of low vaccination coverage at health facility, professional associations, blocks and districts to take corrective action; and ensure saturation of vaccination of these groups on priority.

The Central government assured states that there was no shortage of Covid-19 vaccines and no problem in the storage and logistics of vaccines, and that it will continually replenish the stocks based on consumption trends.

Small savings, PPF rates cut

■ **Continued from Page 1**

citizens' scheme is paid quarterly. The interest rate on Kisan Vikas Patra (KVP) has been cut to 6.2 per cent. Besides, the interest rate on post office savings deposits has been slashed to 3.5 per cent. On the other hand, term deposits of one-five years will fetch interest rate in the range of 4.4-5.1 per cent, to be paid quarterly, while the

interest rate on five-year recurring deposit is pegged at 5.8 per cent,” it said.

The interest rates for small savings schemes are generally reviewed and notified by the finance ministry on a quarterly basis. “With the spread of the Covid-19 virus that caused massive job losses for the middle class, it led to abysmal savings for fixed income investors in

2020. As the virus' spread continued, it looks the same in 2021. This could be reason why the government decided to cut interest rates of small savings schemes,” a senior finance ministry official said on condition of anonymity.

However, economists argue that the government continues to rely on small savings for financing its fiscal deficit.

THE ASIAN AGE

1 APRIL 2021

Not all gloom, but clearly complacency will be fatal

A recent surge in coronavirus cases across India has triggered concerns over the growth trajectory of the economy. A free hand given by the Union home ministry to state governments to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic and threats to impose lockdown by states like Maharashtra have given rise to concerns about the fragile economic recovery.

Nevertheless, Reserve Bank of India governor Shaktikanta Das believes that the economy will move only upwards from now on. Though the benchmark market indices Sensex and the Nifty were in jitters over the rising viral infections, Mr Das does not see a need for a revision in the central bank's growth estimate, which was pegged at 10.5 per cent for the financial year 2021-22.

The downside of the people's confidence in the government's ability to deal with the pandemic would be complacency, as could be seen across India

The RBI's assessment of the economy appears to be based on three factors — first, an unlikely prospect of a complete lockdown as India had witnessed between April and May 2020; second, Covid is not as unknown to Indians as it was in 2020; third, an improved ability of the Indian healthcare system to handle the Covid-19 disease, though the vaccination programme is going on at a rather slow pace.

Compared to 2020, the Indian industry, too, has adapted itself to working in a new normal created by the Covid-19 pandemic. People are not as unsure about their future as they were in April 2020, which will not force them to sit tight on their spending. As a result, there won't be any drastic fall in demand and, therefore, the production.

Some economists, however, expressed concerns about the Maharashtra government's threat to impose localised lockdown in the state, which has been contributing around half of the total cases in the country. The western state contributes 14.5 per cent of the Indian GDP and is one of the powerhouses of the country in manufacturing. If the lockdown was imposed in the state, they argue that it would disrupt the supply chain and cause great harm to the economic recovery. After witnessing the economic and social consequences of the 2020 lockdown, no government would ever repeat it again.

The downside of the people's confidence in the government's ability to deal with the pandemic would be complacency, as could be seen across India. People stopped following Covid-appropriate behaviour because of a lower number of cases in January. Politicians should also be blamed for complacency as many of them began to write off Covid by moving around without masks, which inspired people to dodge social distance norms.

After the second wave of cases, governments and people have woken up to reality and have begun to take quick steps to slow down the spread of infection. The reports of healthcare infrastructure being overwhelmed in bigger cities like Delhi and Mumbai would trigger a course-correction in people's behaviour. As a result, an SBI research report claims that the second wave could peak in mid-April and ebb in May. It means the second wave would last for 100 days, which is not a period long enough to push the Indian economic growth into negative territory once again.

Wrong signal in Valley

Former J&K chief minister and PDP leader Mehbooba Mufti was recently informed that her application for passport extension has been rejected. The state CID has given an "adverse" report. If this should cause surprise, no less surprising is the ground for rejection given by the CID. It appears issuing a passport to the former CM — who is a key mainstream politician of Kashmir — will be detrimental to national security.

This is Kafkaesque. Until not long ago, Ms Mufti's party ran a coalition government in J&K with the BJP, the party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Wholly unlike one another in ideology, these parties had come together on account of the unusual Assembly election result of 2014. Many thought that if a Valley-based party got together with a national entity which had a pronounced Hindu community tilt and was well-grounded in the Hindu-majority Jammu region, many of the (then) state's woes will be over.

These were lofty reasons intended to serve the national interest in a troubled part of the country. But BJP and PDP have since split. Ms Mufti was thrown into prison along with hundreds of other Kashmir politicians, not excluding all the leading lights. And Ms Mufti has suddenly become a threat to national security, no less.

Even if the Government of India, to which the state CID reports since J&K is no longer a state but a UT, is being petty since Ms Mufti is an ally-turned political adversary of the ruling party BJP, what about the former CM's old mother, Gulshan Nazir, widow of the PDP founder Mufti Mohammed Sayeed who had brought his party and BJP together? It appears the old lady, too, has been denied a passport for the same reason as her politician-daughter.

This is beyond petty and smells of vendetta. Perhaps all senior mainline Kashmir politicians, not just the separatists, will share the Mufti family's fate if they applied for a passport. Naturally this makes India laughing stock in the world and in the region. It also makes the ordinary people of Kashmir wonder about the Centre's intention about them. For the Modi government, an anxious and dissatisfied populace in the border regions when fresh talks with Pakistan are envisaged cannot be a good sign.

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Dilip Cherian

Dilli Ka Babu

High court pulls up Punjab govt for tainted cops in IPS positions

The Amarinder Singh-led Congress government in Punjab is getting flak from the Punjab and Haryana high court and the issue has had ramifications across the country. The court has directed the state government to explain how and why it has chosen to appoint Punjab Police Service (PPS) officers to IPS-cadre posts of SSPs in the state. The court has held that these appointments are in violation of the IPS cadre rules and has also impleaded the Centre as a party to look into these "apparent violations".

The court noted the instance of PPS officer Rajinder Singh Sohail who was convicted in a criminal case but has been posted as the SSP of Gurdaspur, a post meant for the IPS cadre.

Further, the court has issued a show-cause notice to additional chief secretary (home) Anurag

Aggarwal for "filing of false affidavit" in the matter. Mr Aggarwal may face perjury proceedings if the court is not satisfied with his response. The court has directed the state government to remove tainted or convicted police officers from duty until a policy is framed on action to be taken against these officers. Future proceedings in the court will be watched with great interest. Watch this space for updates.

BIHAR STRUGGLES TO FILL IAS VACANCIES

The Nitish Kumar-led NDA government in Bihar is increasingly re-employing retired officers. Its latest appointment is of retired IAS officer Deepak Kumar as the principal secretary to the chief minister. Mr Kumar, a 1984-batch officer, retired in February and was promptly rehired.

Sources say the government has

little choice when it comes to appointments due to the acute paucity of IAS officers in Bihar. Bihar apparently has only 202 IAS officers against a sanctioned strength of 359 officers. Not surprisingly, the deficit has impacted the quality of administration. It is not unusual for senior officers to be burdened with three or four departments each, apart from their principal task.

It is learnt that Nitish Kumar has requested the Centre to allot 54 IAS officers based on the civil service exam last year. It is reportedly also facilitating appointments to 22 posts from the 2018 batch, 15 posts from the 2019 batch and 16 posts from the 2020 batch under the promotion quota.

GOA CHIEF SECY IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

The Goa government's move to place a serving IAS officer in the

State Election Commission (SEC) has backfired badly for not just chief minister Pramod Sawant but also the state chief secretary Parimal Rai. The Supreme Court has cancelled the recent appointment of state law secretary Chokha Ram Garg as the state election commissioner. In its stinging order, the apex court noted that the move was "a mockery" of constitutional mandate.

The court has further issued directions to all states and Union territories to cancel similar appointments and to appoint only "independent persons to this high constitutional office", nipping in the bud any similar approaches that other states may have been contemplating. Mr Sawant's "innovative" approach is now unlikely to "inspire" other states to attempt something along similar lines.

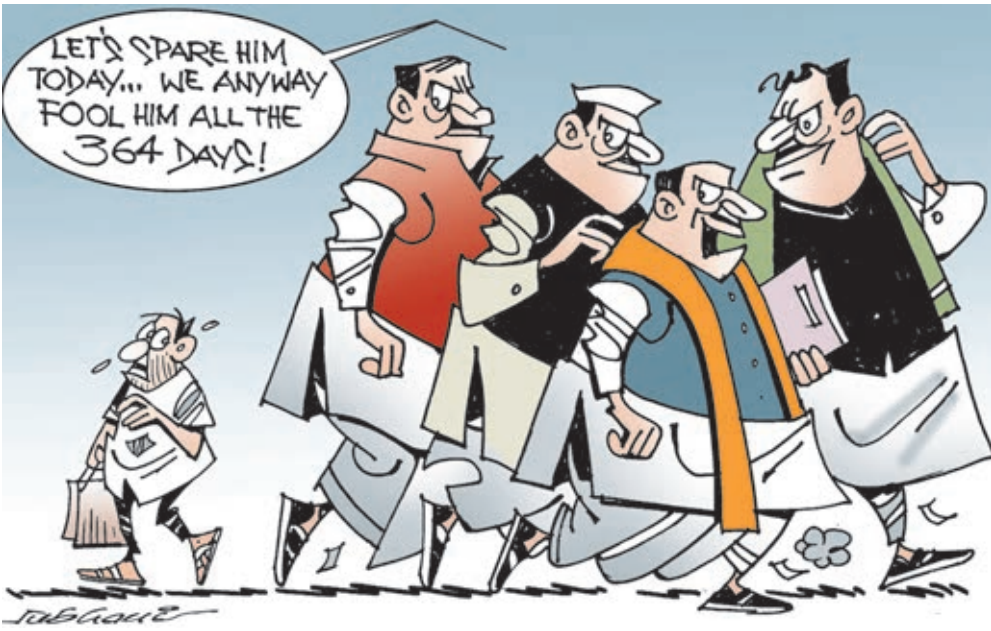
While political reactions to the decision have been muted, howev-

The Goa government's move to place a serving IAS officer in the State Election Commission has backfired badly for not just chief minister Pramod Sawant but also the state chief secretary Parimal Rai. The Supreme Court has cancelled the appointment of state law secretary Chokha Ram Garg in the post.

er, within babu circles in Panjim, it is chief secretary Rai who has become the most visible face to take the blame for this harsh indictment by the court.

Share a babu experience! Follow [dilipthecherian@Twitter.com](#). Let's multiply the effect.

Subhani



Being politically correct in times of Covid & polls



Devi Kar

Through most of 2020, as the fearsome Covid-19 pandemic engulfed the whole world, the stormy American presidential elections took up much of our attention. No matter where you are, you simply can't get away from the tumult of politics. Perhaps I feel this all the more because West Bengal, where I live, is in the midst of the eight-phase Assembly elections while we teachers are struggling to run our schools with full Covid-19 protocols in place. The spectre of the board exams is looming before us; they have to be administered after the election results are out.

Meanwhile, politics began interfering with the distribution of vaccines, and sadly with children's books as well.

At the beginning of this month, it was announced that six of Dr Seuss' titles would be recalled because of the "racist tropes" that people had been talking about. It is well known that banned or unattainable objects are always the most attractive. Therefore, I promptly ordered a copy of the delightful Dr Seuss book *And to Think I Saw It on Mulberry Street* before it became unavailable. Maybe it is a good thing that the United States is finally becoming sensitive to the feelings of non-whites. But removing stereotypical line drawings from books does not really get to the heart of racism. I don't know about others, but if an Indian woman was depicted as a brown sariclad figure eating out of a thali with her fingers, I would not mind at all. It is only if we believe that white is the only acceptable complexion, or that eating with one's hands is unacceptable, that we would feel upset by such illustrations. Come to think of it, there are no "racist tropes" around white people — and it is

not difficult to fathom the reason. Dr Seuss himself explained how he went about changing his original yellow-skinned, pig-tailed "Chinaman" whom he had drawn wearing a conical hat and eating out of a bowl with sticks. He changed "a Chinaman" to "a Chinese man", but after deleting his conical hat and pig-tail and removing the yellow from his skin, Dr Seuss thought that his Chinese man looked more like an Irishman!

Politics dominates society so powerfully that everywhere and at all times we are required to be "politically correct". This has reached such ridiculous lengths that very often the replaced "correct" expression can't be comprehended. These "correct" terms have been especially coined to protect people from feeling hurt. In this context, it has to be mentioned that people seem to have very thin skins these days and get hurt far too easily. So, we have to look out for racist innuendos, references to skin colour, remarks on religion which may be deemed hurtful or even sacrilegious by some group or the other. We must remember not to call short people "short" though it is fine to call tall people "tall". You had better not refer to a person who is hard of hearing "deaf" or for that matter a visually impaired person "blind". You will be called all kinds of names if you use an "incorrect" term — racist, sexist,

Maybe it is a good thing that the US is becoming sensitive to the feelings of non-whites. But removing stereotypical line drawings from books does not really get to the heart of racism.

An ad for 'reliable and hardworking applicants' was seen as offensive! The current euphemism for 'old people' is 'senior citizens', but I suspect that this too will in time offend people of an advanced age.

insensitive to alternative sexual orientation (in some places the term "homosexual" is taboo, you must say "same gender loving"), intolerant of other religions, and so on. A few decades ago, Americans became so self-conscious about being Christian-centric that to be perceived as inclusive, they began to call the Christmas season "the holiday season" and wishing each other "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas". But surely, calling a Christmas tree a "holiday tree" seems a bit too much.

This sort of political correctness without bringing about a radical change in attitudes is quite meaningless. It is true that certain words genuinely acquire connotations which are insulting to groups. For instance, the word "Negro" — although if it merely referred to the Negroid "type", it would be taken as just a scientific fact. Today the term cannot be dissociated with the history of slavery. Unfortunately, "black" has also taken on a similar meaning. But then if you truly believe that "black is beautiful", you wouldn't mind being described as a black-skinned or dark-skinned person. The trouble is that ethnicity is a loaded concept, and simple words have become complex. In India, where colour matters a great deal, people use the word "mailla", or dirty, to describe someone's dark complexion.

I hope it was a joke, but I have read that an advertisement for "reliable and hardworking applicants" was rejected as it could offend unreliable and lazy people. The current euphemism for "old people" is "senior citizens", but I suspect that this too will in time offend people of an advanced age.

Recently, I named a virtual classroom "Brainstorming Room", and soon after that I read that the term "brainstorming" could threaten epileptic people. The suggested alternative term was "Thought Showers". It is nerve-racking to even speak these days.

Going back to children's books, it is not only the allegations of racism or "hurtful" religious references that have generated trouble but also certain references to political ideology. "I know up on top you are seeing great sights, but down here on the bottom we too should have rights" — in Dr Seuss' *Cat in the Hat* was found to be "too political" for children. In West Bengal, the withdrawal from the primary curriculum of Tagore's *Sahaj Path* by the former Left Front government had caused a furore. One of the reasons for withdrawing these beloved books, some alleged, were a couple of lines that showed a *zamindar* to be benevolent. This was certainly not in alignment with the CPI(M)'s principles. I know that the now condemned Enid Blyton books were read innocently and with great enjoyment by generations of children without a thought about racism or classism. However, I do believe today that stereotyping the stepmother as evil in children's stories could have a detrimental effect on children's minds. Such stereotypes must be avoided.

In conclusion, it can be stated that a balance must be sought between a genuine need to change terminology and the rush to appease thin-skinned groups.

The writer is a veteran school educator based in Kolkata

However, I do believe today that stereotyping the stepmother as evil in children's stories could have a detrimental effect on children's minds. Such stereotypes must be avoided.

LETTERS

MYSTERY RIVER

The Mithi river is in the thick of news as more and more hardware accessories are being fished out of it as part of the Sachin Vaze expose. A senior investigating officer believes that the printer recovered was used to print the threat letter addressed to the Ambanis, found along with 20 gelatin sticks. Thus the entire mystery is submerged in the river as to who sent the threat mail and what was their motive as well as who killed Mansukh Hirani. In any case, this is right time to clean the river before the arrival of the monsoon rains as it should not end up flooding the city.

Akhila Gopalan
Mumbai

DIFFICULT APRIL

APRIL WILL BE SUCH a difficult month for senior citizens. Banks will be closed for 15 days during this month. These dates are April 1, April 2 (Good Friday), April 4, April 5 (Babu Jagjivan Ram Jayanti in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana), April 6 (Assembly elections in Tamil Nadu), April 10 (second Saturday) April 11 (Sunday), April 13 (Gudi Padwa), April 14 (Ambedkar Jayanti), April 15 (Bengali New Year's Day), April 16 (Bohag Bihu), April 18 (Sunday), April 21 (Ram Navami), April 24 (fourth Saturday) and April 25 (Sunday).

Bhagwan Thadani
Mumbai

BEAR IN BENGALURU

A WILD BEAR straying into Bengaluru and attacking six people in the city's outskirts has come as a rude shock. The hairy monster inflicted severe injuries on three of the victims before disappearing into the forest. Bears attacking people living on the city's fringes is unusual, and this episode points to another man-animal conflict.

N.J. Ravi Chander
Bengaluru

LATE AWAKENING

THE BJP-LED government in Manipur has withdrawn a directive to five districts bordering coup-hit Myanmar to "politely turn away" those seeking refuge. The rethink came after the "unconstitutional" approach in dealing with an unfolding humanitarian crisis drew widespread criticism. Myanmar's junta killed at least 114 persons on Saturday. India should uphold democratic traditions and basic human rights of the Myanmar people.

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

SHORT TAKES

ATTEMPT TO
HARM QUEEN: 5
THAIS INDICTED

Bangkok, March 31: Prosecutors in Thailand indicted five pro-democracy activists on Wednesday for attempting to harm the queen during a street demonstration last October. Queen Suthida, the wife of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, was not in any evident danger in the incident, which occurred when a limousine carrying the queen and the king's son, Prince Dipangkorn Rasmijoti, passed through a small crowd of protesters mixed with supporters of the royal family.

'99 MASSACRE:
ACCUSED SERB
ARRESTED

Pristina (Kosovo), March 31: Kosovo's police on Wednesday arrested a Serb, identified only as M.A., suspected of taking part in the massacre at Izbice on March 28, 1999, when Serb police, military and paramilitary forces found thousands of ethnic Albanian refugees in a meadow outside a village.

They stole money and other valuables before separating the men from the women and children. The 130 men were then shot dead.

SECOND BITING
INCIDENT BY
BIDEN DOG

Washington, March 31: US President Joe Biden's dog, Major, has been involved in another biting incident at the White House, his second in less than a month, according to a media report.

Major, one of President Biden's two German shepherds, attacked on Monday just days after returning from training in Delaware. The incident involved a National Park Service employee on the South Lawn on Monday afternoon, according to CNN.

The employee was working at the time and needed to stop in order to receive treatment from the White House medical unit, the report said.

Major, a three-year-old German Shepherd is the younger of the Bidens' two dogs and the White House's first ever rescue dog.

BBC SCRIBE
LEAVES CHINA
AMID SAFETY

Beijing, March 31: A veteran BBC correspondent whose coverage angered China has left the country amid concerns for his safety, the BBC and a journalist organisation said.

The BBC said John Sudworth had relocated to Taiwan and would continue to be the British public broadcaster's China correspondent. The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China said that Sudworth had left last week "amid concerns for his safety and that of his family."

The organisation said that Sudworth's wife, Yvonne Murray, a correspondent for Irish broadcaster RTE, had left with him. "John's work has exposed truths the Chinese authorities did not want the world to know," the BBC said.

SPYING: ITALY
EXPELS TWO
RUSSIANS

Rome, March 31: Italy on Wednesday ordered two Russian Embassy officials expelled and arrested an Italian Navy captain on spying charges after police caught the Italian allegedly giving classified documents to one of the Russians in exchange for money.

Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio told a joint session of the Italian Parliament's foreign relations committees that the alleged incident was a "hostile act of extreme gravity". The Italian Foreign Ministry said it summoned Russian Ambassador Sergey Razov to protest the "grave incident" after a sting operation on the outskirts of Rome allegedly caught the Italian and one of the Russians in a "clandestine operation" to exchange the documents late Tuesday.

Italy's Carabinieri paramilitary police said in a statement that the Italian naval officer, who is a frigate captain, had been arrested. The Russian observed with him, a member of the Russian armed forces stationed at the Russian Embassy in Italy, was initially detained but not immediately placed under arrest given his diplomatic status. He was ordered expelled along with another Russian Embassy official allegedly involved.

Biden will unveil
huge \$2 trillion
infra programme

Washington, March 31: President Joe Biden will on Wednesday unveil a \$2 trillion infrastructure plan aimed at modernizing the United States' crumbling transport network, creating millions of jobs and enabling the country to "out-compete" China. The first phase of Biden's "Build Back Better" programme, which he will unveil in a speech in Pittsburgh, will detail massive investment spread over eight years.

It is designed to inject \$620 billion into transport, including upgrading 20,000 miles (32,000 kilometres) of roads and highways, repairing thousands of bridges and doubling funding for public transit. The president, whom Donald Trump tried to caricature as "Sleepy Joe" and a man without strong ideas or motivation, intends to make infrastructure investment one of his flagship policies. "He views his role as laying out... a broad vision, a bold vision for how we can invest in America, American workers, our communities," White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said.

The cost would be partly paid for by raising corporate tax from 21 percent to 28 percent.

"The president is proposing to fundamentally reform the corporate tax code so that it... ensures that large corporations are paying their fair share," a senior administration official said ahead of the speech.

The new spending offensive comes soon after the United States passed a nearly \$2 trillion Covid-19 economic stimulus plan.

And Biden's speech is set to open a bitter battle in Congress, where the Democrats hold only a narrow majority and will face strong opposition

from the Republicans. The first criticisms came before Biden even gave his speech, some of it from the progressive wing of his party.

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said the package "needs to be way bigger." At the other end of the spectrum Republican Senator John Barasso dismissed the plan as "a Trojan horse for more liberal spending & higher taxes." The coming months will test the negotiating skills of the Democratic president, a veteran of Washington deal-making, and the chances of his infrastructure plan passing into law remain uncertain.

"It's an important initiative to start the process with the president being very clear that he's got a plan, and that he's open to hearing what others think," the administration official said.

"But what he is uncompromising about is the urgency of the moment and the need to really deliver for the American people and make good on building back better in this moment." The plan also vows to "spark the electric vehicle revolution" by building a network of 500,000 EV chargers, replacing 50,000 diesel transit vehicles and electrifying 20 percent of the famous yellow school buses.

Described by the White House as a "once-in-a-century capital investment," the plan aims to accelerate the move towards a greener economy. — AFP

H-1B electronic
registration
selection done

Washington, March 31: The US has received enough electronic applications during the initial registration period to reach the 2022 fiscal year cap for the H-1B foreign workers visa, the most sought-after work visa among Indian professionals.

The US Citizenship and Immigration Services, the federal agency which screens and allocates H-1B applications, said it was randomly selected from among the registrations properly submitted to reach the cap.

The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows the US companies to employ foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise. The technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China. The USCIS has notified all prospective petitioners with selected registrations that they are eligible to file an H-1B cap-subject petition for the beneficiary named in the applicable selected registration.

The federal agency said

that H-1B cap-subject petitions for fiscal 2022, including those petitions eligible for the advanced degree exemption, may be filed with the USCIS beginning April 1, if based on a valid, selected registration.

Last month, the USCIS said it received a sufficient number of petitions needed to reach the Congressionally mandated 65,000 H-1B visa regular cap and the 20,000 H-1B visa US advanced degree exemption, known as the master's cap, for fiscal year (FY) 2021.

The Biden administration in Feb. announced that it was delaying the H-1B policy of the previous Trump administration on the allocation of the popular foreign work visas by continuing with the lottery system until Dec. 31, 2021, to give the immigration agency more time to develop, test and implement the modifications to the registration system.

On January 7, the USCIS announced to do away with the traditional lottery system in deciding the successful applicants for the H-1B visas. — PTI

— PTI

Pfizer says its Coronavirus
vax protects younger teens

Vaccinating children will help schools look normal after months of disruption

Washington, March 31: Pfizer announced Wednesday that its Covid-19 vaccine is safe and strongly protective in kids as young as 12, a step toward possibly beginning shots in this age group before they head back to school in the fall.

Most Covid-19 vaccines being rolled out worldwide are for adults, who are at higher risk from the coronavirus. Pfizer's vaccine is authorised for ages 16 and older. But vaccinating children of all ages will be critical to stopping the pandemic — and helping schools, at least the upper grades, start to look a little more normal after months of disruption.

In a study of 2,260 US volunteers ages 12 to 15, preliminary data showed there were no cases of Covid-19 among fully vaccinated adolescents compared to 18 among those given dummy shots, Pfizer reported. It's a small study, that hasn't yet been published, so another important piece of evidence is how well the shots revved up the kids' immune systems.

Researchers reported high levels of virus-fighting antibodies, somewhat higher than were seen in studies of young adults. Kids had side effects similar to young adults, the company said. The main side effects are pain, fever, chills and fatigue, particularly after the second dose.

The study will continue to track participants for two years for more information about long-term protection and safety. Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech in the coming weeks plan to ask the US Food and Drug Administration and European regulators to allow emergency use of the shots starting at age 12.

"We share the urgency to expand the use of our vaccine," Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla said in a statement. He expressed "the hope of starting to vaccinate this age group before the start of the next school year" in the United States. Pfizer isn't the only company seeking to lower the age limit for its vaccine.

Results also are expected soon from a US study of Moderna's vaccine in 12- to 17-year-olds. But in a sign

that the findings were promising, the FDA already allowed both companies to begin US studies in children 11 and younger, working their way to as young as 6-month-olds.

AstraZeneca last month began a study of its vaccine among 6- to 17-year-olds

in Britain. Johnson & Johnson is planning its own pediatric studies. And in China, Sinovac recently announced it has submitted preliminary data to Chinese regulators showing its vaccine is safe in children as young as 3. While most Covid-19 vaccines be-



People receive a dose of the BioNTech/Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine at a vaccination clinic set up inside the Derby Arena at Pride Park in Derby, Derbyshire on Wednesday. — AFP

Chinese jabs show 'safety'
but data lacking: WHO

Geneva, March 31: WHO vaccine experts said Wednesday that an interim analysis of clinical trial data from two Chinese Covid-19 vaccines showed they demonstrated "safety and good efficacy", but that more data was needed. The Chinese firms Sinovac and Sinopharm, whose Covid jabs are already being used in several countries, have submitted data in applications for the World Health Organisation's emergency use listing (EUL) green light.

The UN health agency's Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunisation

(SAGE) said it had reviewed the data provided so far, and that both vaccines "demonstrated safety and good efficacy against symptomatic Covid-19 disease". However, it warned, "both vaccines lacked data in older age groups and in persons with co-morbidities," meaning other medical conditions.

"Post-introduction vaccine effectiveness and safety studies will be needed to address the impact on those sub-populations," SAGE said in a list of highlights published after a meeting last week to discuss developments on vac-

ines against a range of diseases. The two vaccines are among four homegrown jabs that have been approved by Chinese regulators so far, but SAGE pointed out that neither had yet received authorisation by what the WHO considers "a stringent regulatory authority".

SAGE, which advises the WHO on immunisation policies, said it would hold off on issuing recommendations for how the two Chinese vaccines should best be used until after another expert panel rules on their EUL applications. — AFP

ing used globally were first tested in tens of thousands of adults, pediatric studies won't need to be nearly as large.

Scientists have safety information from those studies and from subsequent vaccinations in millions more adults. — AP

Experts examine ship bottom
Egypt leader says Nile
water is 'untouchable'

Cairo, March 31: Experts dived under a colossal container ship that had been stuck for nearly a week in the Suez Canal before it was freed, to examine the vessel's underside, officials said Wednesday. The dives were part of a continuing investigation into what caused the grounding of the Ever Given, now anchored in the Great Bitter Lake, a wide stretch of water halfway between the north and south ends of the canal.

Salvage teams succeeded in finally freeing the skyscraper-size vessel on Monday afternoon. The ship got stuck sideways in a narrow stretch of the canal, shaking the global shipping industry when it halted billions of dollars a day in maritime commerce for around a week.

Two senior canal officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to talk to reporters, said "slight to medium" damage was found at the ves-

Ismailia, March 31: Egypt's president has said his country's share of the Nile River's waters are "untouchable" in a stark warning to Ethiopia, which is building a giant dam on the Nile's main tributary.

The comment from President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi comes amid a deadlock in the years-long talks over the dam between the Nile Basin countries, which also includes Sud-

an. In a news conference on Tuesday, el-Sissi warned of "instability that no one can imagine" in the region if the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is filled and operated without a legally binding agreement. "No one can take a single drop of water from Egypt, and whoever wants to try it, let him try," he said. "No one imagines that it will be far from our capabilities."

A media officer at the

the Ethiopian Embassy in Cairo declined to comment on el-Sissi's remarks. El-Sissi was firm while discussing the dam dispute at a news conference in the Suez Canal city of Ismailia. He visited the crucial, east-west waterway following its reopening on Monday. "I repeat that the waters of Egypt are untouchable, and touching them is a red line," he said. — AP

AVOIDING | COLLISION

Previously the US, Russia, EU, India have succeeded in sending spacecraft to Mars

Nasa shares Mars mission data with India, China, UAE, ESA

Beijing, March 31: The US space agency Nasa has exchanged data of its current Mars mission with its counterparts in China, India, the UAE and the European Space Agency to lower the risk of a collision as their spacecraft were also currently hovering the red planet, a media report said on Wednesday.

The purpose of exchanges was to lower the risk of a collision, as their spacecraft are orbiting the red planet, Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post*

THIS LIMITED exchange of info is consistent with customary good practices used to ensure effective communication among satellite operators.

reported, quoting a NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) statement as saying.

To assure the safety of our respective missions, Nasa is coordinating with the UAE, European Space Agency, Indian Space Rese-

arch Organisation and the China National Space Administration, all of which have spacecraft in orbit around Mars, to exchange information on our respective Mars missions to ensure the safety of our respective spacecraft, Nasa's statement said.

This limited exchange of information is consistent with customary good practices used to ensure effective communication among satellite operators and spacecraft safety in orbit, the report said.

Isro's Mars Orbiter Mission, Mangalyaan, spacecraft remained in Mars orbit since it entered there in 2014. India is the first Asian country to successfully send a spacecraft to Mars.

Nasa's Perseverance has landed on Mars last month and its rover is currently exploring its surface, while China's Tianwen-1 consisting of an orbiter, a lander and a rover, entered the parking lot of orbit around Mars on February 24 and expected to land there in the next few months.

United Arab Emirates (UAE) spacecraft, Hope, is also orbiting the Mars planet. There are two spacecraft from the European Space Agency in the Martian orbit, the report said.

For information exchange cooperation with China Nasa had sought approval from US Congress and spoke to CNSA, the US space agency confirmed on Monday, the *Post* report said.

Previously the US, Russia, EU besides India have succeeded in sending spacecraft to Mars. — PTI

SpaceX rocket breaks
apart before landing

Cape Canaveral, March 31: SpaceX chalked up another failed landing Tuesday for its futuristic, bullet-shaped Starship, as the prototype Mars rocket broke apart right before touchdown.

A camera on the rocket froze not quite six minutes into the test flight, and

dense fog in South Texas obscured views of the ruptured rocket. Other video showed debris raining down and explosions could be heard.

"At least the crater is in the right place!" SpaceX chief executive Elon Musk tweeted. — AP

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	49509.15	-1.25
Nifty 50	14690.70	-1.04
S&P 500*	3,986.92	0.72
Dollar (₹)	73.11	0.38
Pound Sterling (₹)	100.76	0.22
Euro (₹)	85.77	0.42
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	43,925▼49	0.11
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	63.89	-0.39
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.177	0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.723	-0.003

* As of 8:30 PM IST

RBI asked to ensure retail inflation at 4%

The government asked the Reserve Bank to maintain retail inflation at 4 per cent with a margin of 2 per cent on either side for another five-year period ending March 2026, economic affairs secretary Tarun Bajaj said. To control the price rise, the government in 2016 gave a mandate to the RBI to keep the retail inflation at 4 per cent with a margin of 2 per cent on either side for a five-year period ending March 31, 2021.

Pakistan set to import sugar, cotton from India



Pakistan will import sugar and cotton from India, newly appointed finance minister Hammad Azhar announced, lifting a nearly two-year old ban on the commodities' import from the neighbour. The economic coordination committee allowed the private sector to import five lakh tonnes of white sugar from India, Azhar said. He also said that Pakistan will import cotton from India starting June this year.

Govt pegs H1 mkt borrowing at ₹7.24 lakh cr

The government will borrow Rs 7.24 lakh crore in the first half of 2021-22 fiscal to meet resources to perk up the economy. According to the Budget for 2021-22, the government's gross borrowing was estimated at Rs 12.05 lakh crore in the financial year beginning April 1. "In the first half of 2021-22, we would be borrowing Rs 7.24 lakh crore, which is 60.06 per cent of the gross issuances," secretary Tarun Bajaj said.

₹32,835 cr raised via disinvestment in fiscal 2020-21

The government has mopped up Rs 32,835 crore from CPSE share sale and buybacks, thus, exceeding the disinvestment target set in the revised estimates (RE) for current fiscal. The realisation is, however, lower than the record Rs 2.10 lakh crore originally budgeted. In the RE, the target was scaled down to Rs 32,000 crore as the pandemic delayed planned big ticket disinvestments.

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■ Purchase assurance also part of package Govt to offer \$1 bn each to chip units

SANKALP PHARTIYAL & ADITI SHAH
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

India is offering more than \$1 billion in cash to each semiconductor company that sets up manufacturing units in the country as it seeks to build on its smartphone assembly industry and strengthen its electronics supply chain, two officials said. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Make in India' drive has helped to turn India into the world's second-biggest mobile manufacturer after China. New Delhi believes it is time for chip companies to set up in the country.

"The government will give cash incentives of more than \$1 billion to each company which will set up chip fabrication units," a senior government official told Reuters, declining to be named as he was not authorised to speak with the media. "We're assuring them that the government will be a buyer and there will also be mandates in the private market (for companies to buy locally made chips)."

How to disburse the cash incentives has yet to be decided and the government has asked the industry for feedback, said a second government source. Governments across the world are subsidising the construction of semiconductor plants as chip shortages hobble the auto and electronics industries and highlight the world's dependence on Taiwan for

CHINESE FIRMS JOIN SEMICONDUCTOR RUSH

JOSH HORWITZ
SHANGHAI, MARCH 31

Xiaomi has joined a rush of Chinese tech companies venturing into the semiconductor sector, announcing on Wednesday a new chip to help smartphone cameras process images. Xiaomi's Surge C1 chip was developed after an earlier unsuccessful attempt at producing a smartphone processor and comes as Chinese internet giants, automakers, and even home appliances

supplies. India also wants to establish reliable suppliers for its electronics and telecom industry to cut dependence on China. Chips made locally will be designated as "trusted sources" and can be used in electronic equipment, the first source said. But the sources did not say whether particular semiconductor companies have shown interest in setting up units in India. India has previously tried to woo semiconductor players but the firms were deterred by India's wobbly infrastructure, unstable power supply, bureaucracy and poor planning. The renewed government push to lure chipmakers is more likely to succeed, after the success of the smartphone industry, industry insiders say. Moreover, Indian con-

glomerates, such as the Tata Group, have also expressed interest in moving into electronics and high-tech manufacturing. India in December invited an "expression of interest" from chipmakers for setting up fabrication units in the country or for the acquisition of such manufacturing units overseas by an Indian company or consortium. The government estimates it would cost roughly \$5-\$7 billion to set up a chip fabrication unit in India and take two-three years after all the approvals are in place, one of the auto industry sources said. The source added that New Delhi is willing to offer companies concessions, including waivers on customs duty, R&D expenses and interest free loans. —Reuters

India's first unicorn InMobi plans US IPO, seeks \$15 bn valuation

SARITHA RAI
MARCH 31

InMobi Pte, which provides mobile-advertising services globally, is planning to list in the US by the end of the year, according to a person familiar with the plan, potentially the first among a slew of Indian startups targeting initial public offerings. The tech upstart, India's first private company to reach unicorn status with venture funding, could kick off the IPO process in a few weeks, when its board is set to meet to consider a listing, said the person, who asked not to be identified talking about a confidential matter. The offering size could be as large as \$1 billion, valuing InMobi at \$12 billion to \$15 billion, the person said. A successful debut could make InMobi the first of India's unicorns to directly list in a US stock exchange, highlighting the country's shift beyond information technology and outsourcing services.



The sale would be a windfall, at least on paper, for InMobi's biggest backer SoftBank Group Corp, which owns about 40 per cent of the company. InMobi is about three months from filing an S-1 statement, a registration document submitted to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, and plans an IPO roadshow after that, said the person. Among the banks in talks to work on InMobi's listing are JPMorgan Chase & Co., Goldman Sachs Group Inc. and Citigroup Inc., said the person. An InMobi spokesman declined to comment. The pandemic has been a boon for ad-technology companies including InMobi as it has accelerated

a shift to mobile in gaming, video streaming and shopping. Advertisers have been quick to follow and capitalize on the trend. InMobi, which operates in markets including China, the US, South Korea, Australia and India, uses algorithms to deliver targeted advertising to users' phones. The company also helps advertisers create ads and monetise site traffic, providing real-time reports on campaign performance. Harvard Business School alum Naveen Tewari, now 43, co-founded InMobi in 2007 with fellow engineering and business-school peers after a brief stint as a consultant at McKinsey & Co. It became India's first unicorn in 2011. Dozens of other Indian tech startups have reached \$1 billion in valuation since. Of these, several including Flipkart Online Services and Zomato are said to plan listings in India or the US. —Bloomberg

PLI scheme for food processing cleared

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, MARCH 31

The Union Cabinet has approved the Rs 10,900 crore production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme for the food processing sector, which is expected to increase output of the industry by around Rs 33,500 crore and create employment for 2.5 lakh persons by 2026-27. The scheme will support food manufacturing entities which have stipulated minimum sales and willingness to make stipulated investment for expansion of processing capacity and branding abroad. The scheme will provide incentives for six years from 2021-22 till 2026-27. As per the segment-wise incentive data provided by the government, ready-to-cook and ready-to-eat brands will receive a total incentive of Rs 4,181 crore in these six years and processed fruit and vegetables will get a total of Rs 3,582 crore. Marine products will get Rs 993 crore and mozzarella cheese Rs 283 crore, which adds up to a total of Rs 9,039 crore. Innovative and organic products of SMEs, including free range eggs, poultry meat, egg products, also are covered under the scheme. Further, Rs 9,040 crore will be provided as an incentive for sales and Rs 1,500 crore for branding and marketing. —PTI

Implementation of labour codes deferred

New Delhi, March 31: The four labour codes will not come into effect from April 1 as states are yet to finalise the relevant rules, which means that there will be no change in take home pay of employees and provident fund liability of companies for now. Once the wages code comes into force, there will be significant changes in the way basic pay and provident fund of employees are calculated. The labour ministry had envisaged implementing the four codes on industrial relations, wages, social security and occupational health safety & working conditions from April 1, 2021. The ministry had even finalised the rules under the four codes. "Since the states have not finalised the rules under four codes, the implementation of these laws are deferred for the time being," an official source told PTI.

According to the source, only a few states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Uttarakhand had circulated the draft rules. Since labour is a concurrent subject under the Constitution of India, both the Centre and the states would have to notify rules under the codes to bring those into force in their respective jurisdictions. Under the new wages code, allowances are capped at 50 per cent. This means half of the gross pay of an employee would be basic wages. PF contribution is calculated as a percentage of basic wage, which includes basic pay and dearness allowance. —PTI

EMERGENCY CREDIT LINE TILL JUNE 30

New Delhi, March 31: The government on Wednesday extended the Rs 3-lakh-crore emergency credit line guarantee scheme by another three months till June 30 and also widened its scope to new sectors, including hospitality, travel and tourism. ECLGS 3.0 would involve extending credit of up to 40 per cent of total credit outstanding across all lending institutions as on February 29, 2020, the finance ministry said. The tenor of loans granted under ECLGS 3.0 would be six years, including a moratorium period of two years. —PTI

QR CODE ON B2C INVOICE MUST ONLY FROM JULY

New Delhi, March 31: The government has deferred by three months till July 1 the requirement of printing dynamic QR code on B2C invoices generated by businesses. In a notification, the CBIC waived the amount of penalty payable by a registered person for non-compliance of provisions of dynamic QR code in B2C invoices till June 30. —PTI

6-DIGIT HSN CODE MUST FOR ₹5 CR TURNOVER

New Delhi, March 31: Businesses with turnover of more than Rs 5 crore will have to furnish six-digit HSN or tariff code on the invoices issued for supplies of taxable goods and services from April 1. Those with turnover of up to Rs 5 crore in the preceding financial year would be required to furnish four-digit HSN code on B2B invoices. —PTI

FTP to run till Sept. end

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, MARCH 31

The government has further extended the Foreign Trade Policy by six months till September 30, 2021. The basic customs duty and IGST exemption for export units also have been extended for one year. The foreign trade policy for 2015-20, which was due to expire on March 31, 2020 was earlier extended by one year till March 31, 2021 in the event of the

pandemic. Now the policy has been further extended till September 30, 2021, the Directorate General of Foreign Trade said on Wednesday, without providing any reason. The government has also extended the basic customs duty and IGST exemption benefit for Export Oriented Units till March 31, 2022. The government said in Parliament that it is in the process of preparing Foreign Trade Policy 2021-26.

Auto debit extended till Sept. 30

FALAKNAAZ SYED
MUMBAI, MARCH 31

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Wednesday extended the timeline for lenders, financial institutions and payment gateways to comply with its guidelines related to recurring online transactions with Additional Factor of Authentication (AFA) by six months till September 30. This is the second time that regulator has extended the deadline, as several players have failed to implement the framework.

This could have impacted customers' recurring payments such as of utility bills, recharge of phone, DTH among others, from April and led to large-scale defaults. To make digital payments in India "safe and secure", the banking regulator introduced AFA and directed all banks, including regional rural banks, non-banking finance companies (NBFCs) and payment gateways to comply with AFA for automatic recurring payment by March 31, 2021. However,

some of the players failed to meet the deadline and approached the RBI seeking extension of the deadline. "It is, however, noted that the framework has not been fully implemented even after the extended timeline. This non-compliance is noted with serious concern and will be dealt with separately. The delay in implementation by some stakeholders has given rise to a situation of possible large-scale customer inconvenience and default," the RBI said.

₹14,500 cr to be infused in 4 PSBs

FALAKNAAZ SYED
MUMBAI, MARCH 31

The government on Wednesday announced a capital infusion of Rs 14,500 crore in four state-owned banks, namely Central Bank of India (CBI), Indian Overseas Bank (IOB), Bank of India (BOI), and UCO Bank by issuing zero coupon bonds. According to experts the capital infusion will help CBI, IOB and UCO Bank that are under the RBI's prompt corrective action

framework to come out of the PCA restrictions in the new financial year. The government will infuse Rs 4,800 crore in CBI, Rs 4,100 crore in IOB, Rs 3,000 crore in BOI and Rs 2,600 crore in UCO Bank. Anil Gupta, vice president-financial sector ratings, Icrs, said, "With GoI deciding to infuse substantial capital in all the three public banks which were in PCA framework, we expect these banks to come out of PCA in FY2022. "However, given the capi-

tal infusion is through zero coupon recapitalisation bonds, the earning profile of these banks may not improve on account of this transaction as their capital position improves." Recapitalisation bonds will be issued with six different maturities and the special securities would be "at par" for the amount applied for. With this infusion, the government has completed capital infusion of Rs 20,000 crore in public sector banks in FY21.

ROLLERCOASTER | RUN Sensex gains over 68% in last one-year

Market gives decade high return in FY21

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, MARCH 31

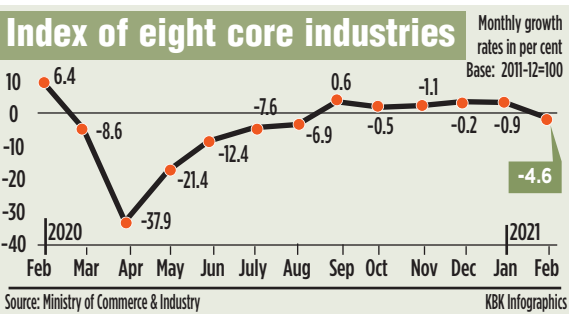
The stock market's FY20-21 return turned out to be one of the best in the last decade, with the Sensex giving a return of 68 per cent and Nifty-50 77.4 per cent while IT, pharmaceutical and bank stocks were the top sectoral performers. The Sensex closed the financial year at 49,509.15 points compared to the March 31, 2020 closing at 29,468.49, gaining 20,040.66 points or 68 per cent over the last one-year period. The Nifty-50 closed at 14,690.70, gaining 77.4 per cent compared to last fiscal close at 8,281. "The markets have rallied by close to 80 per cent,

INVESTORS' WEALTH UP BY ₹90.82 L CR

New Delhi, March 31: Investors' wealth grew massively by Rs 90,82,057.95 crore in 2020-21 driven by an extraordinary rally in the equity market. Market analysts termed 2020-21 a roller coaster ride for not only Indian markets but also for equity indices globally due to the pandemic. Thanks to the improved investor sentiment, the market capitalisa-

tion of BSE-listed companies zoomed Rs 90,82,057.95 crore to reach Rs 2,04,30,814.54 crore in 2020-21. On March 3 this year, the market cap of BSE-listed companies had reached its lifetime high of Rs 2,10,22,227.15 crore. From witnessing massive losses to record-breaking gains, investors witnessed a wide array of emotions in 2020-21. —PTI

returns to the tune of 30 per cent. This is quite similar to the base that was created in FY09 when markets corrected by 40 per cent due to the global financial crisis. But that was swiftly followed by close to 80 per cent returns for FY10," said Joseph Thomas, head of research, Emkay Wealth Management. "The fall in market due to severe economic distress proved to be the best investment opportunities. The star performers among individual sectors were IT, Pharma and Banking," Thomas said. The Nifty IT index gave a return of 109.88 per cent, followed by Pharma (77.96 per cent) and Banks (77.31 per cent).



Mumbai, March 31: The Reserve Bank has asked troubled digital wallet firm Mobikwik, which is facing data breach allegations, to get a forensic audit done without any delay.

said that they accessed personal and financial data of nearly 10 crore Mobikwik customers. On Wednesday, sources told PTI that the RBI has ordered an immediate forensic audit of the company's systems by a certified auditor. When contacted, an RBI spokesperson refused to comment. Mobikwik refused to give a direct answer to a query

on whether the RBI has ordered a forensic audit. "We take privacy and security of our user data seriously and are working with authorities to conduct an independent forensic audit," it said. However, the sources said the RBI has asked Mobikwik to get the forensic audit done without delay to ascertain whether there was a data breach or not. —PTI

SHORT TAKES

Virat retains No.1 ranking in ODIs

Dubai: India captain Virat Kohli retained his top spot in the ICC rankings for ODI batsmen, while pacer Jasprit Bumrah slipped a place to fourth position in the bowler's list released on Wednesday. Kohli, who had scores of 56 and 66 in the first and second ODIs against England, has 870 points in his kitty. Bumrah, who was rested from white-ball series against England, slipped a place to fourth among bowlers and has 690 points. India limited overs vice-captain Rohit Sharma is ranked third, behind Pakistan's Babar Azam, while KL Rahul has moved up from 31st to 27th spot. All-rounder Hardik Pandya has achieved a career-best 42nd position among batsmen after scores of 35 and 64, and Rishabh Pant has entered the top 100. Seam bowler Bhuvneshwar Kumar, who took three for 42 in the final match, has gained nine slots to reach the 11th position, which is his best since being 10th in September 2017. Shardul Thakur's haul of four for 67 in the same match has enabled him to move up to 80th spot from 93rd. For England, all-rounder Ben Stokes has advanced four places. — PTI

Junior hockey nationals put off

New Delhi: The upcoming 11th junior women's hockey nationals has been postponed until further notice due to a surge in COVID-19 cases, the sport's governing body said on Wednesday. The tournament was scheduled to be held from April 3 to 12 in Simdega, Jharkhand. Following instructions and protocols from the district commissioner, Simdega and state authorities, the decision to postpone the championship was taken by Hockey India. "In light of the rising number of COVID-19 cases and after advice from the local state authorities, Hockey India in consultation with the host Hockey Jharkhand arrived at the decision to postpone the 11th Hockey India Junior Women National Championship 2021..." HI president Gyanendra Ningombam said in a statement. "Hockey Jharkhand received tremendous support from the state government to host the recently concluded Sub Junior Women National Championship 2021..." — PTI

Karate champ 'bullied' by coach

Tokyo: A Japanese karate champion who will compete at the Tokyo Olympics testified before an ethics commission on Wednesday, alleging that a federation official hit her in the face with a bamboo sword. Ayumi Uekusa, who will compete in the women's over 61kg kumite category as karate makes its Olympic debut this summer, said she was the victim of a bullying campaign by Masao Kagawa, the technical director of the Japan Karatedo Federation. It is the latest "power harassment" scandal to hit Japanese sport, with the country's wrestling federation apologising to four-time Olympic champion Kaori Icho in 2018 over bullying claims. Uekusa, a world champion in 2016, claimed in a blog post on Sunday that Kagawa began using a bamboo sword as part of her training, with the aim of forcing her to dodge his swings and thrusts. But Uekusa says she and other athletes suffered bruised eyes after Kagawa hit them in the face with the sword while training without protective headgear. Kagawa has denied the allegations. — AFP

Nuggets too hot for sluggish 76ers

Los Angeles: Jamal Murray scored 30 points as the Denver Nuggets put on a show for returning fans on Tuesday with a 104-95 defeat of the Eastern Conference-leading Philadelphia 76ers. Murray's haul included five-of-11 three-pointers in a one-sided victory for the Nuggets, who roared into a 44-22 first quarter lead at Denver's Ball Arena and never looked back. Murray added six rebounds, four assists and three steals while Nikola Jokic delivered a towering all-round display, with 21 points, 10 rebounds and five assists. — AFP

PUNTER'S POINT

Ponting says captaincy will make Pant a better player

Mumbai, March 31: Delhi Capitals head coach Ricky Ponting is convinced that leading the side in the upcoming season of the Indian Premier League will make swashbuckling wicketkeeper-batsman Rishabh Pant an even better player.

Pant was named the captain of Delhi Capitals for the upcoming IPL after regular skipper Shreyas Iyer was ruled out of the tournament after he injured his left shoulder during the recently-concluded England's tour of India.

"Unfortunately that Shreyas will miss the tournament, but looking forward to seeing @RishabhPant17 grab his opportunity. It's well deserved for his recent performances and he's coming in with a lot of confidence. I'm convinced captaincy will make him an even better player," Ponting tweeted.

The highly-rated Pant has been in sensational form across formats this year. He played match-winning knocks of 97 and unbeaten 89 in the third and the fourth Test against Australia to help India clinch the Border Gavaskar Trophy Down Under.

This season will mark the wicketkeeper-batsman's debut as IPL captain. Pant has led Delhi's state team in the past.

Mishra works on his batting

Delhi Capitals' seasoned leg-spinner Amit Mishra on Wednesday said he is working on improving his batting ahead of the upcoming IPL, preparing himself for situations where he might be required to use the willow to good effect.

The 38-year-old says that apart from honing his bowling prowess, he is focussing on improving his batting as well.

"I am working on my batting. The coaches have also told me to keep practicing my batting as there might be situations in matches when I will have to string partnerships of 25-30 runs." — PTI



A file photo of Delhi Capitals coach Ricky Ponting (right) with Rishabh Pant.

Moeen in awe of MS captaincy

Chennai, March 31: Chennai Super Kings all-rounder Moeen Ali on Wednesday vouched for Mahendra Singh Dhoni's captaincy and said most cricketers look forward to play under him as he helps them improve their game.

Dhoni is gearing up to lead the CSK franchise in the upcoming edition of the IPL starting April 9.

"I've spoken to players who have played under MS and they tell me how he improves their game. I believe a great captain does that," the England

I've spoken to players who have played under MS and they tell me how he improves their game. I believe a great captain does that.

— MOEEN ALI
CSK allrounder

all-rounder was quoted as saying by the CSK website.

"I think it's something on every player's wish list to play under MS. I think it's the confidence and the clarity he gives people. It's exciting," he added.

Moeen, who said he was looking forward to playing under Dhoni, said it is

very important to have strong leadership and coaches who stay calm.

"It's very important to have strong leadership and coaches who stay calm, who take the pressure off the players as much as they can and are consistent. We are very lucky we have that," he added.

HAVE NOTHING TO PROVE, SAYS HARBHAJAN

New Delhi, March 31: Harbhajan Singh is still playing because he "wants to" and he "will", asserts the veteran off-spinner, as combative at 40 as he was in his heydays and least bothered by the people questioning his willingness to carry on.

He is back in IPL this year with the Kolkata Knight Riders after skipping the last season for CSK in the UAE and wants to now "enjoy every moment of whatever cricket is left" in him.

"Lot of people think 'Bhai yeh kyun khel raha hai?'" Arrey bhai yeh unki soch hai, meri naahi. Meri soch hai ki main abhi khel sakta hoon, toh main khelunga (People think 'why is he playing' but that's your opinion. From where I see myself, I want to play and I will play)," Harbhajan said.

"I have got nothing to prove to anyone. My intention is to play well, enjoy my stint out there in the middle and playing cricket still gives me that satisfaction." — PTI

"At CSK I feel the reality is there for us to win the competition. I'm excited about playing with the players we have here," the 33-year-old left-hand batsman cum off-spinner, who was picked up at the IPL auction in February, further said.

Moeen, who previously turned out for Royal Challengers Bangalore, said, "I think what differentiates CSK from other teams is actually how they structure everything, from the squad they have to the way they do things." — PTI

SHAMI PRAISES INDIA'S STRONG SUPPLY CHAIN

New Delhi, March 31: Senior India pacer Mohammad Shami says the performance of the team's "net" bowlers in the historic triumph in Australia has shown that the transition will be smooth when the current attack walks into the sunset. The pace quartet of Shami, Ishant Sharma, Jasprit Bumrah and Umesh Yadav, arguably India's best ever, has been instrumental in the team's success overseas.

"The youngsters will be ready to take over from us when our time to retire comes. The more they play, the better they will get. I think the transition will be very smooth," Shamisaid.

"The team won't suffer even if one big name retires. The bench is ready. Experience is always required and the youngsters will have that in due time. The trend of carrying net bowlers in the bubble has helped them massively and given them valuable exposure," he added. — PTI

Barty, Medvedev cruise into semis

Miami, March 31: World number one Ashleigh Barty advanced to the semi-finals of the Miami Open on Tuesday as Russian top seed Daniil Medvedev booked his place in the quarter-finals of the men's tournament.

Barty battled through her third three-setter of the fortnight to oust seventh seeded Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus in 2hr 16min on the Grandstand Court.

The Australian will face Elna Svitolina of Ukraine in the semi-finals following her gruelling 6-4, 6-7 (5/7), 6-3 win.

Fifth seed Svitolina advanced to the last four after defeating Latvia's Anastasija Sevastova 6-3, 6-2 later Tuesday.

After taking a close first set, Barty appeared to be on the brink of victory after grabbing a 3-1 lead in the second set tie-break.

Sabalenka staged a superb recovery however to snatch the tie-break 7-5, forcing a decisive third set.

Barty regrouped in the third though and with Sabalenka clearly in pain clutching her stomach, rammed home her advantage to complete a deserved win.

The victory leaves Barty one semi-final win away

from retaining her world number one ranking, though the Australian insisted she was not preoccupied with holding on to top spot.

"It's an amazing thing to be No. 1 in the world at the moment, but I promise you that's not what makes me happy," Barty said afterwards.

"It's a focus of course. I want to try to do the best that I can, but it's not a distraction or a pressure in any way."

Medvedev, meanwhile, had an easier ride in the men's tournament, easing past Frances Tiafoe of the United States in straight sets, 6-4, 6-3.

Medvedev hammered down 11 aces in the win, breaking Tiafoe three times en route to victory.

Medvedev will face Roberto Bautista Agut in the last eight after the Spaniard eliminated John Isner in three sets to avenge his 2019 quarter-final loss in Miami.

Bautista Agut saved a match point at 5-6 down in the third set tie-break to claim a 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (9/7) win. "I think I played a brilliant set the first set, and then with John you feel always under pressure," Agut said. — AFP

26 SPORTSPERSONS TEST POSITIVE AT NIS-PATIALA

New Delhi, March 31: Twenty six sportspersons and support staff across disciplines were found to be COVID-19 positive after around 380 campers were subjected to tests for the dreaded infection at the National Institute of Sports in Patiala, a Sports Authority of India source said on Wednesday.

However, the 26 positive results do not include any Tokyo Olympic-bound athlete. India's men's boxing chief coach CA Kuttappa and shot put coach Mohinder Singh Dhillon are among those who have tested positive for the virus in the recent drive, the SAI source confirmed.

"Around 380 athletes at the NIS Patiala were tested for COVID recently. The tests were conducted across the board and were not random," the SAI source said. It is learnt that 10 of the 26 positive cases are from the track and field group training at the institute.

"Out of 380, 26 athletes have tested positive for the virus but the good thing is that they are not Olympic-bound athletes. The positive athletes have been isolated and the entire campus has been sanitised."

However, all weightlifters housed at the institute have returned negative for the virus. — PTI



Portugal striker Cristiano Ronaldo (right) is challenged by Luxembourg's Lars Gerson during the World Cup 2022 group A qualifying match at the Josy Barthel Stadium in Luxembourg on Tuesday. — AP

Ronaldo rocks in Portugal victory

Paris, March 31: Cristiano Ronaldo helped Portugal to a hard-fought 3-1 win over Luxembourg on Tuesday with his first goal of the 2022 World Cup qualifying campaign, while Belgium became the latest team to join the protests over human rights in Qatar before hitting eight past Belarus.

Juventus forward Ronaldo bagged his 103rd international goal five minutes after the break to stop his side falling foul of a Luxembourg team whose recent performances have defied their small status and tiny population.

Ronaldo had been controversially denied what looked to have been an added-time winner in Saturday's draw against Serbia in Belgrade, but he was not to be denied when he tapped home Joao Cancelo's cross.

Belgium join Qatar protests

Belgium's players donned t-shirts in support of migrant workers building the stadiums for next year's finals in the Gulf state and then smashed Belarus 8-0 to move top of Group E despite coach

Roberto Martinez playing a second-string side.

Germany, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands have recently staged similar protests, and the Belgian gesture mirrors the one made by their Dutch neighbours with t-shirts emblazoned with the message 'Football supports change'.

Human rights groups have been critical of the treatment of migrant workers, claims Qatar disputes.

On the field in Leuven Belgium made easy work of their opponents, Michy Batshuayi starting a deluge of goals in the 14th minute.

Dutch close in on Turkey

The Netherlands closed the gap on Group G leaders Turkey to one point after they won 7-0 in Gibraltar.

Frank de Boer's team were far from their best but got maximum points after taking a long time to break down their minnow opponents, who were playing in front of a home crowd thanks to Gibraltar's successful coronavirus vaccine programme. — AFP

JOFRA BEGINS 2-WEEK REHAB AFTER SURGERY

London, March 31: England's Jofra Archer will begin two weeks of rehabilitation after undergoing surgery on his finger and can only start his net sessions after that effectively ruling him out of Indian Premier League. The 25-year-old, who plays for the Rajasthan Royals in the IPL, had surgery to remove a fragment of glass from the middle finger on his right hand on Monday.

"England pace bowler Jofra Archer underwent successful surgery to his right hand on Monday. A fragment of glass was removed during the operation to his middle finger on his right hand," the English and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) said in a statement. "He will now commence two weeks of rehabilitation. The Consultant will review him before returning to training," it added.

Archer had returned home midway from India to get treated for worsening elbow injury. — PTI