

SHORT TAKES

98 school teachers, principals in Delhi honoured

New Delhi: The Delhi government on Friday honoured 98 teachers and principals from government and private schools here for their contribution to school education. "We are here exactly a year after the complete lockdown was imposed for the first time in our country. Our education system was badly hit by the pandemic as school closures left everyone clueless about the teaching-learning during the COVID times," Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia said at the award ceremony. "But, our teachers and school principals really stepped up to the occasion and showed unparalleled grit and determination in responding to this situation," he added.

"They ensured learning never stops by reaching out to their students through innovative means. Teachers who did not know how to use a smartphone equipped themselves with the knowledge of how to use it. Teachers went above and beyond to ensure that children were learning daily. Their efforts are really praiseworthy," the deputy chief minister said.

Imploring teachers to rethink strategies on assessment and learning, Sisodia said, "We need to build correct approaches and develop 360-degree assessments for our students. The premise of rote-learning evaluated through an end-of-year three-hour exam is an injustice to our students and teachers." "The challenge is to eliminate rote-learning practices and this is why we are at the juncture of establishing the Delhi Education Board," he added. Of all the teachers and school principals who were honoured, 69 awardees were from Delhi government schools, 18 from private schools and 11 from Municipal Corporations of Delhi schools. The awardees comprised special educators, arts and music teachers, librarians, mentor teachers, sports teachers, and vocational teachers. In addition, the Delhi government also awarded 11 teachers and officers for their exemplary commitment in executing semi-online teaching-learning activities and Covid relief work. Continuing the tradition from previous years, two special awards were given to teachers doing exemplary work based on the observations of deputy CM Sisodia during his school visits. — PTI

12-hour Bharat Bandh has minimal impact in Delhi

Metro, road transport services run as usual, markets remain open

New Delhi, Mar. 26: A 12-hour 'Bharat Bandh' called by farmer Unions protesting against the three agriculture laws had a minimal impact in Delhi on Friday with no report of disturbance in the Metro and road transport services while the major markets of the city also remained open even as the police made adequate security arrangements to deal with any situation.

The "Bharat Bandh" called by the farmer Unions began at 6.00 am. The situation was normal at the New Delhi railway station. Markets at Connaught Place, Karol Bagh, Kashmir Gate, Chandni Chowk, and Sadar remained open. Shops in Khan Market were also open.

A senior Delhi police officer said the situation was peaceful and remained under control, adding that no report of any untoward incident had been received so far.

Farmers camping at the

Ghaziipur border blocked a carriageway of National Highway-9 from Delhi to Ghaziabad in the morning, but there was not much activity by the protesters in the city till afternoon.

The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) had to briefly close the entry and exit gates of the Tikri Border, Bahadurgarh city, and Brigadier Hoshiar Singh stations, but after a few minutes the stations were opened for passengers.

A farmer leader claimed that there were protests in Mayapuri and some other areas where people peacefully staged demonstrations.

The Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM), an umbrella body of the protesting Unions, claimed that various farmer organisations, trade Unions, student bodies, bar associations, political parties, and representatives of state governments have supported the 'Bharat Bandh' call.

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On Thursday, the SKM had said that the 'Bharat Bandh' would also be observed in the national capital.

It had appealed to people to make its nationwide shutdown successful.

"All shops, malls, markets, and institutions will

remain closed under the complete Bharat Bandh. All minor and big roads and trains will be blocked.

"All services will remain suspended except for ambulance and other essential services. The effect of the Bharat Bandh will be observed inside Delhi as well," the SKM had said in a statement.

Thousands of farmers, mainly from Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh, have been camping at Singhu, Tikri, and Ghaziipur demanding a complete repeal of the three farm laws and a legal guarantee to the minimum support price (MSP) on their crops.

So far, there have been 11 rounds of talks between the protesting Unions and the government, but the deadlock continues as both sides stick to their stands. In January, the government had offered to suspend the farm laws for 12-18 months, which was rejected by the farmer Unions. — PTI



Members of Delhi Pradesh Mahila Congress protest outside Delhi deputy CM Manish Sisodia's residence against the liquor policy in New Delhi on Friday. — G.N. Jha

2 die while cleaning septic tank in east Delhi: Police

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 26

Two men died allegedly after inhaling toxic gases while cleaning a septic tank of a banquet hall in east Delhi's Ghaziipur, police said on Friday.

Lokesh (35) and Prem Chand (40), residents of Trilokpur, entered the tank to clean it on Thursday evening and were found dead inside it subsequently, the police said, adding that the deceased were not given any protective gear and were offered ₹3,000 for the work.

The bodies have been sent for post-mortem, they said.

"The housekeeping staff of the banquet hall called the two men for cleaning

the tank at 7.30 pm and around 10 pm, they were found dead," deputy commissioner of police (East) Deepak Yadav said.

Teams from the fire department, Delhi Disaster Management Authority and MCD visited the spot, he said, adding that the two men were taken to a hospital, where they were declared brought dead.

A case under section 304A (causing death by negligence) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and section 9 of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act has been registered, the DCP said.

Further investigation is underway, the police said.

40-yr-old stabbed by 2 in Jamia Nagar, in hospital

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 26

A 40-year-old man was stabbed by two people in southeast Delhi's Jamia Nagar area on Thursday. Police said that they have arrested two men for the crime while the victim is still undergoing treatment at the hospital.

The accused have been identified as Ajeem Khan alias Naved, a resident of Zakir Nagar.

According to R P Meena, the deputy commissioner of police (DCP), Southeast district, on March 25, Ajeem was having tea at a local hotel when a quarrel broke out between some people in which he interfered.

"Sometime later, two men came and stabbed him in his thigh and waist. The accused have been identified as Danish and Riyazuddin, both residents of Azeem Dairy area" said the DCP.

► **A CASE** has been registered at Jamia Nagar police station and both the accused have been arrested. The victim has been admitted to the AIIMS Trauma Centre and his condition is stable.

There were 888 cases on Monday, 823 on Sunday, 813 on Saturday, 716 on Friday, 607 on Thursday, and 536 on Wednesday last week, according to official data.

Nine more people died from the pathogen on Friday, taking the number of fatalities to 10,987. A total of 85,092 tests, including 53,044 RT-PCR tests, were conducted a day ago, the bulletin said. — PTI

■ Annual level of particulate matter in city declines

Delhi has bent pollution curve downward: Report

New Delhi, March 26: Long-term trend shows Delhi has already bent the pollution curve downwards and the annual level of particulate matter, PM2.5, is declining every year, a new report by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) claimed.

The report titled "Capital Gains-Clean Air Action in Delhi NCR: What next?" lays down a roadmap on what the national capital and NCR towns should be doing to curb air pollution in the region. The measures to be taken range from changes in cropping patterns to reduce cultivation of paddy to reduce stubble burning to scaling up pedestrianisation in high footfall areas to create low emissions zones.

"The rolling three-year averages, a firmer indicator of change, have reduced by about a quarter since 2014-15. However, even after that decline, Delhi needs more than 60 per cent cut in annual PM2.5 concentration to meet the

national ambient air quality standards," the report said. Multi-sector action has to gather speed, scale, and urgency. This requires strategic shifts to achieve mobility transition, clean energy transition, circular economy at a scale, and clean energy access at a regional scale, the green advocacy group said.

After the ban on furnace oil and petcoke in the industrial sector, coal will also have to be replaced with clean fuels.

Delhi has implemented the most ambitious clean fuel policy that has also outlawed coal. But the airshed cannot clean up if coal combustion remains dominant in industrial clusters of the NCR, the report said.

"The implementation of 2015 emissions standards for coal-based thermal power plants has to be done in a time-bound manner by 2022. The plants are already capable of meeting the particulate standards," it said. "While scaling up action for the entire region,

there is urgent need for the hyper local action agenda in the targeted polluted hotspots so that the local solutions for solid waste, construction and demolition waste, industrial waste, plastics, and unpaved roads and vehicular movement can be implemented," the CSE report read.

It said Delhi has closed down all its coal power plants, but it has to ensure that it procures only clean or cleaner electricity from plants that are meeting the standards or are close to meeting the standards. "Currently, Delhi is procuring electricity from some of the dirtier power plants in the country," the report said. Stating that Delhi has done well in restricting the entry of diesel trucks, the report said,

On vehicular pollution, it said that the government should strengthen periodic auditing of Pollution Under Control (PUC) centres and calibration of equipment and third-party checks. — PTI

SC: Status quo on supply of Yamuna water to Delhi extended

New Delhi, March 26: The Supreme Court Friday directed the governments of Punjab, Haryana and others to continue with the status quo on supply of Yamuna water to Delhi till April 6, making it clear that the supply should not be reduced to the national capital which is facing a shortage.

A bench headed by Chief Justice S A Bobde said it will take up the matter after the Holi break on April 6.

We had passed order of status quo yesterday. We would like it to continue. Supply of water to Delhi should not be reduced. We will take it up on Tuesday on reopening, said the bench also comprising Justices A S Bopanna and Ramasubramanian.

Senior advocate Shyam Divan, appearing for Haryana, submitted that they have not reduced the supply of water. — PTI

PARTIAL CANCELLATION/DIVERSION/REGULATION OF TRAINS DUE TO NON-INTERLOCKING WORK

In order to upgrade the infrastructure, Railways will undertake the non-interlocking work for yard remodelling at Mau Jn. station. To execute this work, Railways will take suitable traffic block between 02.04.2021 to 05.04.2021. During this period following trains will temporarily be effected as under :-

SHORT TERMINATION/ PARTIALLY CANCELLATION OF TRAINS			
Train No. & Name	Short Terminated at/Originated from	Partially Cancelled between Stations	Date (from the Originating Station)
05008 Lucknow Jn. - Varanasi City Special Express	at Bhatni Jn.	Bhatni Jn. - Varanasi City	01.04.2021 to 04.04.2021
05007 Varanasi City - Lucknow Jn. Special Express	from Bhatni Jn.	Varanasi City - Bhatni Jn.	02.04.2021 to 05.04.2021
05138 Prayagraj Rambag - Mau Jn. Special MEMU	at Aunrihar Jn.	Aunrihar Jn. - Mau Jn.	02.04.2021 to 05.04.2021
05137 Mau Jn. - Prayagraj Rambag Special MEMU	from Aunrihar Jn.	Mau Jn. - Aunrihar Jn.	02.04.2021 to 05.04.2021

DIVERSION OF TRAINS		
Train No. & Name	Diverted via	Date (from the Originating Station)
04006 Anand Vihar (T) - Sitamarhi Special Express	Aunrihar Jn. - Ballia - Chhapra	02.04.2021 to 04.04.2021
04651 Jaynagar - Amritsar Jn. Special Express	Chhapra - Ballia - Phephna Jn. - Ghaziipur City - Aunrihar Jn. - Jaunpur Jn.	02.04.2021 to 04.04.2021
04652 Amritsar Jn. - Jaynagar Special Express	Jaunpur Jn. - Aunrihar Jn. - Ghaziipur City - Phephna Jn. - Chhapra	04.04.2021
09165 Ahmedabad Jn. - Darbhanga Jn. Special Express	Varanasi Jn. - Aunrihar Jn. - Ghaziipur City - Ballia - Chhapra	02.04.2021

REGULATION OF TRAINS		
Train No. & Name	Regulation	Date (from the Originating Station)
04005 Sitamarhi - Anand Vihar (T) Special Express	will be regulated for 60 Minutes in Varanasi Division	05.04.2021
09166 Darbhanga Jn. - Ahmedabad Jn. Special Express	will be regulated for 40 Minutes in Varanasi Division	05.04.2021

Note: All norms of the State and Central Government regarding COVID-19 including social distancing, sanitization etc., may be followed in the trains and at the Railway stations. All other precautions associated with COVID-19 should also be ensured.

For any kind information such as detailed Time-Table and stations enroute etc., passengers are requested to contact RailMadad Helpline No. 139 or may visit Indian Railways website <https://enquiry.indianrail.gov.in> or NTES App.

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FILM REVIEW RATING

Outstanding ★★★★★ | Great ★★★★ | Good ★★★ | Okay ★★ | Poor ★ | Truly Terrible TT

There is life after some deaths

Pagglait

CAST: Sanya Malhotra, Ashutosh Rana, Sheeba Chaddha, Raghubir Yadav, Rajesh Tailang, Ananya Khare, Yamini Singh, Jameel Khan, Natasha Rastogi, Sayani Gupta
DIRECTOR: Umesh Bist
RATING: ★★★
Streaming on Netflix

SUPARNA SHARMA

All deaths are not equal, not even of our loved ones. Some are devastating, debilitating, and they stalk us for the entirety of our lives.

But some deaths, even terribly tragic ones of our dearly beloved, can be liberating. They can set us free in ways we hadn't even thought of.

Bollywood likes happy unions. That's why many Bollywood films either open or close with a wide smile — boisterous, chaotic wedding scenes and *baraatis* dancing to *bhol-baja*.

Pagglait, written and directed by Umesh Bist, opens with death but on a naughty, slightly indecent note not befitting *matam ka mahaul*.

Sandhya (Sanya Malhotra) is the recently-wedded wife of Aksit Giri, the executive who earned Rs 70,000 per month. She is the top floor resident of Shanti Kunj in Lucknow.

Pagglait opens on the day of Aksit's cremation, and then stays on, like a significant relative, till the *terahvin* — the 13th day when the soul, as per Hindu beliefs, takes off heaven-wards.

Bist has a firm grip on how the rituals of bereavement are played out by relatives in Indian fami-



lies. Sitting immediately around the dead are the main mourners, and as this circle makes several concentric circles around them, it enlarges with progressively reducing grief. But Bist curdles the sanctum sanctorum of grief with Sandhya and her inability to feel sad.

Young Aksit's father, Shailendra (Ashutosh Rana), and mother Usha (Sheeba), are stunned by the tragic loss of their son, but Sandhya is not even able to feign tears. Out of respect for others, she keeps her craving for chips and Pepsi to those who understand, Parchun (Aasif Khan) and her best friend, Nazia (Shruti Sharma).

Since Bollywood has been travelling out of the metros, it has acquired confidence and a joyous cadence to tell the stories of close-knit families in small towns, making their small concerns, *paise ke tanggi*, routine bigotry and gener-

al small-mindedness endearing. Bist uses the usual and adds a few new things to make the *Giri parivaar* real and believable.

There's the aggrieved father discussing *gadda* (mattresses) *ka rate*, an elderly relative (Raghubir Yadav) simmering at the raunchy, inappropriate door bell, Nazia Zaidi being served tea in special, separate cups, gossip, snide remarks, old grouses, a bed-ridden Daadi, one know-all government-servant relative.

A few of these strike discordant notes, but as a family living in a house with an Indian-style toilet, Bist's look at the function of Indian dysfunctional families is wholesome and cuts close to the bone.

Pagglait's setting, its characters, their sadness, banter, rituals, hypocrisy, everything rings true and has familiar familial warmth. It's when Bist has to take

the story forward that the plotting gets weak and clichéd.

Sandhya's lack of grief is nice, fresh, different. It also seems honest, appropriate. It's a five-month-old arranged marriage, after all.

But Bist feels the need to give her indifference some moral underpinning — to justify it, so that she doesn't seem totally heartless, but also for plotting reasons.

Pagglait feels lived-in when it is in the house. The life insurance bit adds a nice twist to the story, but when Sandhya meets Aakanksha (Sayani Gupta) and sets out with her in search of truth that the film feels dishonest, like regular filmy fare.

We never meet Aksit. We don't even know how he died and yet Umesh Bist creates a lovely world of Amma, Bapuji, Daadi, Parchun and the relatives who have arrived to partake in the grief, settle grouses, take a piece of the pie. Shanti Kunj is so warm and entertaining that when Sandhya takes flight, you wonder what is wrong with her.

Sanya Malhotra is at the centre of **Pagglait**, and she is surrounded by a daunting ensemble of powerful, towering actors. And yet, in the midst of them all, she is able to hold her own.

Ashutosh Rana has the sort of screen presence that is rare. It's impossible to take your eyes off him when he is on screen. Usually he is very high voltage. Here he is subtle, and there is both dignity and intensity in his grief.

Sheeba Chaddha as Usha, and Natasha Rastogi who plays Sandhya's mother are both excellent. These three characters, along with Aasif Khan and Daadi, turn **Pagglait** into a welcoming home one can go to, just to get lost from the world for a bit.

SHORT TAKES

Cong alleges voters' list 'fraud' in Kerala

New Delhi: The Congress on Friday alleged that the LDF government in Kerala was committing electoral "fraud" in cahoots with the state election machinery by enrolling bogus voters, and moved the Election Commission seeking corrective measures for ensuring "free and fair" polls. Kerala goes to polls on April 6. Counting of votes will take place on May 2 along with Tamil Nadu, Assam, West Bengal and Puducherry. A delegation of Congress leaders met with the election commissioners in the central election commission and alleged that the Pinarayi Vijayan-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) government was "committing a fraud" in collusion with officials of the state election machinery by inducting "dubious voters, double voters and voters with fraudulent identities". — PTI

UP panchayat polls to be held on April 15

Lucknow: The Uttar Pradesh State Election Commission on Friday issued the notification for the three-tier panchayat polls in the state, which will be held in four phases. Polling for all the gram panchayats, kshetra panchayats and zila panchayats will be held on April 15, 19, 26 and 29 and the counting of votes will be taken up from 8 am on May 2, the notification issued here by state election commissioner Manoj Kumar said. According to the notification, there will be a general election for the posts of pradhans and members of all gram panchayats, members of all the kshetra panchayats and members of zila panchayats. The commission has made it clear that polling will not be held in the constituencies affected by a stay order issued by a court and where the local body has more than six months of its tenure left. — PTI

Mufti: Govt trying to dismantle PDP

Srinagar: PDP president Mehbooba Mufti on Friday accused the Centre of trying to dismantle her party by luring and threatening its members. Her remarks come a day after she was grilled for five hours by the Enforcement Directorate at its Srinagar office in connection with a money laundering case. In a tweet, the former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister charged, "GOI (government of India) is trying to dismantle PDP by luring & threatening its members. Investigative agencies like ED are being used to intimidate me." Accusing the government of trying to subject her to political vendetta, she said, "To make matters worse, IM being denied of my fundamental right to a passport. If this isn't political vendetta then what is?". — PTI

'TMC'S VICTORY WILL HERALD CHANGE IN 2024'

Kolkata: Former Union minister and newly appointed TMC vice president Yashwant Sinha feels the BJP has become "Borrowed Janata Party" which is fighting elections with the hired leaders of other parties and said victory of Trinamool Congress in the West Bengal assembly polls will trigger a change in 2024 general election. Noting that BJP doesn't have a credible face to counter Mamata Banerjee in Bengal and is dependent on outsiders "Shah-Modi", Mr Sinha said the desperation to win Bengal is driven by the fact that it has slim chances of winning polls in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Union Territory Puducherry and a victory in Assam, where it is in power, won't be a big prize. He despised thinking that he joined TMC for the sake of getting Rajya Sabha membership, saying "it is a very cheap way to look at my decision". Mr Sinha, who served as finance and external affairs minister in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee cabinet, commented the present-day BJP is controlled by "two-people", who call the shots. "The BJP has turned itself into a Borrowed Janata Party in Bengal. They are fighting elections with leaders and workers from other parties. They don't have their own leaders to match Mamata Banerjee in Bengal," he told PTI in an interview. — PTI

In Kerala, govt orders probe into Central agencies

Politically-motivated actions of agencies under judicial panel's lens

GILVESTER ASSARY
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM,
MARCH 26

In an unprecedented action just ten days before the assembly polls, the Kerala government on Friday announced a judicial probe into the actions of central investigation agencies including ED, NIA, CBI, IT, Customs which are probing various cases pertaining to gold, dollar smuggling and money laundering in the state.

Retired judge of the high court V.K. Mohan Kumar has been appointed as the one-man judicial commission to probe the actions of central agencies which the ruling front alleged were deliberating trying to sabotage the day to day functioning of the democratically elected state government. The decision was taken in the

Cabinet meeting held earlier in the day. The ruling front suspected the real intentions behind the actions of the central agencies. There seems to be a deliberate attempt to derail the development projects being implemented by the state, said finance minister Thomas Isaac. Since the decision has been announced in the midst of the election process and at a time when model code of conduct is in vogue, further action on the matter will be subject to the approval of the Election Commission.

Earlier the Crime Branch had registered a case against Enforcement Directorate officials alleging that the agency was trying to pressurize the accused to name the chief minister. The ED has moved the court against the crime branch probe.

Manmohan urges people of Assam to 'vote wisely'

New Delhi/Guwahati, March 26: Ahead of the Assam Assembly polls, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Friday alleged that the society is being divided on the basis of religion, culture and language, and asked people to elect a government that upholds the constitution and the principles of democracy. He assured the people that if the Congress is voted to power, the Citizenship Amendment Act will not be implemented.

In a video message, a day before the first phase of polling on March 27, Mr Singh urged the people of Assam to vote for the Congress. "Today, I am speaking as one of you. Once again, the time has come to cast your ballot in the Vidhan Sabha election. You must vote wisely," he said. — PTI

BJP manifesto for Pondy polls focuses on women

Puducherry, March 26: Free education for girls from kindergarten to higher education, 50 per cent quota for women in local bodies, re-opening of textile mills and setting up of textile parks were some of the proposals made in the BJP's poll manifesto unveiled here on Friday. Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman released the manifesto titled "BEST Puducherry" which meant Puducherry should become a "business hub (B), education hub (E), spiritual hub (S) and tourism hub (T)". Some other proposals were: a 150-foot tall statue of Tamil poet Subramanian Bharathi, holding of world investors meet to attract investments for industrial development, steps to ameliorate the lot of poor fishermen,

and development of ports and augmenting infrastructure.

Ms Sitharaman said all the schemes that had not seen the light of the day all these years would be implemented with full speed if the BJP formed the government here after the April 6 Assembly election. She said Prime Minister Narendra Modi is keen that the Union Territory of Puducherry should develop and progress in every sector.

"The manifesto has been prepared after enlisting the views of a cross-section of the people," she said. She said just like the farmers producers organisations ensuring reasonable remuneration to the ryots for their produce, a fishermen's producers organisation would be set up in Puducherry. — PTI

Akhil Gogoi, Pranab Doley to contest Assam polls

Guwahati, March 26: Amidst the hullabaloo of crorepati candidates pulling all the cards in this election season in Assam, activists Akhil Gogoi and Pranab Doley are trying their luck for the first time in electoral politics with just a few thousand rupees in their pockets. While jailed anti-CAA activist Akhil Gogoi has no cash in hand, Doley has only ₹10,000 cash in his pocket. Mr Gogoi is the adviser of the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, while Doley is a senior leader of the Jeepal

Krishak Sramik Sangha, which is active mostly in Golaghat district. Gogoi is contesting from Sivasagar seat on the ticket of his newly floated political outfit Rajior Dal, while Doley is a candidate of the Anchalik Gana Morcha (AGM), a part of the Congress-led "Grand Alliance", in Bokakhat seat. As per Mr Gogoi's affidavit submitted along with his nomination paper, he does not have any cash in hand and has deposits of ₹60,497 in two bank accounts. — PTI

'Cong out to destroy Assamese identity'

MANOJ ANAND
GUWAHATI, MARCH 26

Bogged down by polarisation of minority votes, union home minister Amit Shah on Friday raised the Assamese identity issue and targeted Congress-led alliance accusing them of promoting Maulana Badurddin Ajmal as part of Assam's identity. Starting campaign for the

second and third phase of polling at Kamalpur Mr Shah said, "Congress leader Rahul Gandhi says Badruddin Ajmal is part of Assam's identity. But the NDA government will never allow this to happen. We will not let Congress and Ajmal diminish the stature of Bir Lachit Barphukan and Srimanta Sankardev who are the real identity of Assam."



Amit Shah

He said that the BJP has always worked to defend Assam's pride. "Then it was Atal Ji's government

which gave Bharat Ratna to Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi. Now, it is Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, which honoured Sudhakantha Bhupen Hazarika."

Mr Shah who also addressed public meetings at Jagir Road, Patharkandi, and Silchar during the day-long programme also laughed at the five guarantees by the Congress, and

said that the Congress's manifesto is for election purposes and the BJP's manifesto is for execution. "Post Class VIII, every girl child will be given cycles. Every college female student will be given scooty free of cost for women empowerment," said Mr Shah while asserting that BJP was committed to all-round development of the state.

Biman mocks Mamata, says she's a 65-yr-old girl

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, MARCH 26

Left Front chairman Biman Bose, on Friday, took potshots at Trinamul Congress supremo Mamata Banerjee over her projection in her party's campaign: *Bangla nijer meyekei chay* (Bengal wants her own daughter), and the chief minister's pride in her ability to kick a ball in one shot from her wheelchair in the Assembly election. Interpreting the word

"meye," which also means girl apart from daughter, the CPI(M) veteran wondered at a party rally in North Bengal, "Can someone be a girl if her age is 65? My age is 81 now. Am I a *chhele* (boy) then? I am nothing but a *bu* (old)."

"It is not only the CM who is contesting from Nandigram, there is another candidate also. She is Meenakshi Mukherjee of the CPI(M) supported by Sanjukta Morcha. She is *Banglar Meye*," he

said. Slamming Ms Banerjee, Mr Bose alleged, "One has to understand the trick to hypnotise the people through various ways. Election is a political struggle to move towards the creation of history in Bengal. To belittle it, the CM is asking for *Khela Hobe* (Game On)! Why is she talking about it this time? Does she not have the guts to do politics? Someone who does not have the guts to do politics talks nonsense."

CANCELLATION OF TRAINS

It is notified for the information of passengers that the services of following Special Express trains will be discontinued due to operational reasons from the dates shown against each:-

Train No. & Name	Date of Cancellation
04421 Lucknow NR - Anand Vihar (T) AC Special Express	From 27.03.2021 till further advice
04422 Anand Vihar (T) - Lucknow NR AC Special Express	From 27.03.2021 till further advice
04423 Lucknow NR - Hazrat Nizamuddin Special Express	From 27.03.2021 till further advice
04424 Hazrat Nizamuddin - Lucknow NR Special Express	From 27.03.2021 till further advice
04425 Pune - Hazrat Nizamuddin Special Express	From 27.03.2021 till further advice
04426 Hazrat Nizamuddin - Pune Special Express	From 27.03.2021 till further advice

Note: All norms of the State and Central Government regarding COVID-19 including Social distancing, sanitization etc., may be followed in the trains and at the Railway stations. All other precautions associated with COVID-19 should also be ensured. For any kind information, passengers are requested to contact RailMadad Helpline No. 139 or may visit Indian Railways website <https://enquiry.indianrail.gov.in> or NTES App.

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EXAM SPECIAL TRAINS

It is notified for the information of all concerned that following Exam Express Special trains will be run by Railway to facilitate the candidates appearing in NTPC Exams as per following schedule :-

03297/03298 Patna-Anand Vihar (T)-Patna Exam Special Express Train (Via Gaya) Fully Reserved					
Train No. 03297	ARR.	DEP.	STATIONS	Train No. 03298	ARR.
---	21:00		PATNA	17:00	---
21:30	21:32		TAREGANA	15:40	15:42
21:50	21:52		JEHANABAD	15:20	15:22
23:30	23:40		GAYA JN.	14:30	14:40
00:30	00:32		ANUGRAH NARAYAN ROAD	12:51	12:53
00:50	00:52		DEHRI-ON-SONE	12:35	12:37
01:10	01:12		SASARAM	12:18	12:20
01:42	01:44		BHABHUA ROAD	11:45	11:47
03:20	03:30		PT. DEEN DAYAL UPADHYAYA	10:40	10:50
06:30	06:40		PRAYAGRAJ	07:40	07:50
09:30	09:40		KANPUR CENTRAL	05:00	05:10
18:00	---		ANAND VIHAR (T)	---	21:30

DAYS OF RUN: 03297 Ex Patna Daily from 30.03.2021 to 07.04.2021 and 03298 Ex Anand Vihar (T) Daily from 31.03.2021 to 08.04.2021

ACCOMMODATION: Second Seating (Reserved)

All norms of the State and Central Government regarding COVID-19 including Social distancing, sanitization etc., must be followed in the trains and at the Railway stations. All other precautions associated with COVID-19 should also be ensured.

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PUBLIC NOTICE



General Public of Delhi is hereby informed that in case of a missing/kidnapping of a child, the first few hours are crucial for the police to trace the missing child. Parents often do not inform the police about missing of their child immediately and let go the benefits of the initial crucial hours. Later, it becomes difficult for the police to trace the child.

In view of above, Delhi Police appeals to the citizens of Delhi to inform/report about their missing/kidnapped child at the earliest to local police so that necessary steps to recover the child are initiated expeditiously.

Commissioner of Police
DP/9273/2021
Delhi

SHORT TAKES

EC vehicle burnt hrs before Bengal polls

Purulia, West Bengal: A vehicle hired for poll duty was set ablaze at Bandwan in Purulia district on Friday night, hours before the first phase of assembly elections get underway, official sources said. The vehicle was reportedly on its way back after dropping election officials at a polling station, when it was set on fire at Tulsidi village in the once-Maoist-affected “Jangalmahal” belt of the state, they said. According to eyewitnesses, the vehicle was stopped by a few persons who emerged out of the forests all of a sudden and allegedly threw a petrol-soaked material on it, before fleeing. No one was injured in the incident, the sources said. The vehicle was reduced to ashes by the time fire brigade officials could douse the blaze, they added. Investigation is underway. All the nine seats in Purulia will go for polls on Saturday in the first phase. — PTI

Didi mocks PM

■ Continued from Page 1
being the grandfather of dacoits, call others thieves.” Her stinging remarks on the PM triggered applause in the crowd. Throwing a challenge to the PM, the TMC chief also threatened to sit on a dharna outside the Prime Minister’s Office for the implementation of a state government project, Ghatat Master Plan in West Midnapore, which she alleged is being stalled by the Centre. “Once the Ghatat Master Plan is done, this area will not be flooded. If it is not done by Mr Modi, I will sit at dharna at his office in the coming days,” she said. She also declared that she would camp in Nandigram, the hot seat she is contesting from against her nemesis Shuvendu Adhikari of the BJP and which is going to polls on April 1 in the second phase, for five days including Holi, till polls end there. “I will be in Midnapore from March 28 till April 1. I will be in Nandigram for five days to keep an eye on everything. I will leave after the polls there. Some big goons have been sent to Nandigram from Haldia. I have their names. If they chase you with guns, you also confront them with crockery items... whatever is available, at hand. But I will not open fire to counter firing. Use of guns against guns is not my politics,” Ms Banerjee told another rally at Daspur of the district. During the day a group of women in Nandigram burst into a protest with sticks, brooms and black flags when Mr Adhikari visited them to campaign. They asked him why he had betrayed them by joining the BJP.

11 dead in fire

■ Continued from Page 1
We will give compensation but it is more important to make sure that such incidents do not happen. I had already instructed authorities to ensure fire audits of hospitals are done,” Mr Thackeray said. He further explained that the fire started in some office or shop on the floor below and spread to the upper floor where the hospital is situated. Mr Thackeray said, “Appropriate action will be taken against those responsible for the incident.” A senior police officer, who was present with the chief minister, said that on Thursday there were a total of 84 patients in the hospital, including 34 women. “Of them 11 died, while the rest have either moved to their homes or to some other hospitals. There are seven to eight patients about whom confirmation is being done,” he added. According to Mumbai mayor Kishori Pednekar, the cause of the fire is being ascertained and at least 70 patients, including those infected with Covid-19, have been shifted to another hospital. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a tweet, said: “Pained by the loss of lives due to a fire at a hospital in Mumbai. I pray that the injured recover soon: PM @narendramodi.” Sunrise Hospital, in a statement, said, “There was a fire in first floor of Dreams Mall, Bhandup, and the smoke reached up to the hospital located at the top floor. All fire alarms beeped and hence all patients were safely evacuated due to the smoke to the fire refuge area.” It had initially said that there were no casualties, but later confirmed the death of patients. In the meantime, Maharashtra scaled a fresh single-day record with 35,952 cases, which is almost 62 per cent of the cases in India.

SC tells Punjab govt to hand Mukhtar Ansari to UP police

Rejects Mukhtar’s plea to transfer cases in UP to some other place

New Delhi, March 26: The Supreme Court Friday directed the Punjab government to hand over the custody of gangster-turned-politician Mukhtar Ansari, who is lodged in Rupnagar jail there, to Uttar Pradesh police. A bench of Justices Ashok Bhushan and R.S. Reddy said that the custody of Ansari, an MLA from Mau constituency, be handed over to the state of Uttar Pradesh within two weeks. The top court also dismissed a plea by Ansari seeking transfer of cases lodged against him in Uttar Pradesh to some other place outside the state. The top court delivered the verdict on the plea of Uttar Pradesh government seeking a direction to the Punjab government and Rupnagar jail authority to immediately hand over the



Mukhtar Ansari

► **ANSARI IS** lodged in district jail Rupnagar in Punjab in connection with an alleged extortion case since January 2019.
► **THE COURT** said that the custody of Ansari, an MLA from Mau constituency, be handed over to the state of UP within two weeks

custody of Ansari, to the district jail Banda. On March 4, the top court was informed by Punjab government that Yogi Adityanath-led government has got no fundamental right to seek Ansari’s transfer from Rupnagar jail to a district jail in Banda in Uttar Pradesh. Ansari is lodged in district jail Rupnagar in Punjab in connection with an alleged extortion case since January 2019. He is also accused in several cases of heinous crimes lodged in Uttar Pradesh.

The UP government has earlier contended that Ansari has been dodging the judicial system and is running his alleged illegal activities from Rupnagar district jail in Punjab. While Uttar Pradesh had alleged in the apex court that there is collusion between Ansari and Punjab police, the Amarinder Singh government has refuted these claims and raised questions over the maintainability of plea filed by the Yogi Adityanath government. The UP government has

referred to the prison rules and said that though the state itself does not have fundamental rights, it can espouse the cause and the fundamental rights of the victims and it may assume the position of the victim. It said Ansari had flouted the jail manual rules and rights of the victim and the State at large cannot be overlooked and the accused cannot be allowed to jettison the fair trial. It had said that the top court under Article 142 can order transfer of Ansari from Punjab jail to a jail in Uttar Pradesh as around 14 and 15 cases are at final stages. Ansari who has also filed petition seeking transfer of his cases in UP to outside the state, had submitted that because of his political affiliation to a party in opposition, he is being targeted. — PTI

Woman forest ranger kills self, senior arrested

SONU SHRIVASTAVA
MUMBAI, MARCH 26

A 28 year old woman range forest officer (RFO) committed suicide Friday in Amravati district of Maharashtra. The RFO has left a suicide note in which she stated that she has been harassed and not given leave even though she was pregnant. Amravati police has arrested a forest officer who has been named in the suicide note by the RFO. The woman officer shot herself with a service revolver at her home in Harisal village of Amravati on Thursday. The woman officer has been identified as Deepali Chavan. Amravati superintendent of police (rural) Dr Hari Balaji N. confirmed to *The Asian Age* that they nabbed Vinod Shivkumar, deputy conservator of forest, Googamal wildlife division of Melghat Tiger Reserve, from Nagpur Railway station in the morning hours of Friday.



A firefighter attempts to douse a blaze in Sunrise Hospital in the Dreams Mall building in Mumbai. — PTI

Those from the BMC, who are responsible for the incident, should face action,” the Leader of Opposition in the state Assembly said while talking to reporters here. The state government had given assurance of carrying out safety audit of all the hospitals in the state, he said. “Yet this incident occurred today. It means the government is not serious about public health and safety,” he said. The Shiv Sena currently rules the Mumbai civic

body and also heads the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government in the state by sharing power with the NCP and the Congress. Another BJP leader Kirit Somaiya said he would file a complaint of criminal negligence against the BMC in connection with the fire, while the MNS also sought to know how a Covid care centre was given permission to operate in a mall. Mr Somaiya said the mall is an “epitome of corruption”. — PTI

BJP blames corruption for BMC Mumbai hospital fire

Mumbai, March 26: BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis on Friday alleged that corruption in the B r i h a n m u m b a i Municipal Corporation (BMC) was responsible for the fire at a hospital in a Mumbai mall, which killed 10 patients. The incident of fire occurred in Sunrise Hospital in the Dreams Mall building in Bhandup area shortly after Thursday midnight. The hospital is located on the top floor of the four-storey mall building and there were 76 patients, most of them being treated for COVID-19, when the fire broke out, officials said. “It is the corrupt practices in the BMC that could have led to the fire incident in Bhandup mall. Why no fire audit was performed before sa Covid Care Centre was set up there?” Mr Fadnavis asked. “I would say that the Bombay High Court should take suo moto cognisance of the incident and probe the matter.

India and Pakistan hold brigadier-level meet

PAWAN BALI
NEW DELHI, MARCH 26

Indian and Pakistan armies brigade commanders met on Friday to discuss the ongoing ceasefire at the line of control (LoC) as part of the confidence-building measure. A brigade commander level flag meeting was held between Indian and Pakistan Army at Poonch Rawalkot Crossing Point on March 26, 2021 to discuss implementation mechanism as per the understanding,” said Indian Army on Friday. Last month Indian and Pakistan armies DGMOS had agreed to strictly implement the ceasefire agreement of 2003. India and Pakistan had announced ceasefire at a time when 2020 had witnessed nearly 18 years record high ceasefire violations of 5,133 at LoC and international border in Jammu and Kashmir. Indian Army Chief M.M. Naravane had said on Thursday that a ceasefire with Pakistan at LoC has held in March barring one odd incident and he

► **TENSIONS AT** the LoC had risen after the terror attack on a CRPF convoy in Pulwama in February 2019 and revoking of article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019. There were nearly 600 ceasefire violations in the first two months of 2021.

was optimistic since the Pakistan Army is “on board” on ceasefire. The Army Chief had said that it was for the first time in about 5-6 years that LoC has been silent and this bodes well for the future. “In the whole month of March we had not a single shot being fired at LoC barring an odd incident,” he had said. But, he had warned that terror infrastructure across the LoC remains intact, launch pads still exist and terrorists are still there. Gen Naravane said one will have to wait and watch till snow melts and passes open to see if the ceasefire holds. However, Gen Naravane had said he was optimistic about the ceasefire due to the comments which have been

made from Pakistan and also because this agreement is between the DG of Military Operations of both sides. “So obviously Pakistani army is on-board and if Pakistani army is on board then there is every reason to be quite optimistic of the outcome,” he added. Gen. Naravane said that Pakistan would have realised that the strategy it was following for many years was not paying any dividend and it was time to make a change. “That would have prompted them to extend the olive branch.” The tensions at the LoC had risen after the terror attack on a CRPF convoy in Pulwama in February 2019 and revoking of article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019. There were nearly 600 ceasefire violations in the first two months of 2021 before both armies agreed to strictly follow the ceasefire. Some 24 security personnel were killed in these ceasefire violations by Pakistan and another 126 injured in 2020.

CM Shivraj hints at total lockdown in MP

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY
BHOPAL, MARCH 26

Amid resurgence of coronavirus cases, Madhya Pradesh government on Friday imposed fresh curbs to tackle the pandemic situation in the state. The state government has ordered the closure of hotels and restaurants, cinema halls, religious places, gyms, and swimming pools while imposing night curfew in 11 cities including Bhopal and Indore. Chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has also hinted at the possibility of imposing a total lockdown in some cities if the pandemic situation worsens. “I may take very tough measures in three to four day if the pandemic situation worsens,” he said. Mr Chouhan reviewed the pandemic situation at a high-level official meet-



Shivraj Chouhan

ing here in the evening. The state government has also barred celebrations of Holi, falling on Monday, in public. Similarly, celebrations of any kind of religious and other festivals in public are banned in the state. MP reported 2091 fresh coronavirus positive cases on Friday, a record single-day spike in Covid-19 cases in the last 4 months, taking the tally of cases to 2,84,265. The state recorded 9 deaths on Friday, the highest single-day casualty recorded in the last two months. While Indore reported 612 positive cases on Friday, Bhopal recorded 425 positive cases on the day. The state has so far recorded 3937 deaths.

Maha: Night curfew from Sunday after Covid spike

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 26

India on Friday reported 59,118 new daily cases reported in the last 24 hours. Maharashtra, Punjab, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh and Gujarat are reporting a surge in daily new cases. Night curfew has been imposed in Maharashtra from Sunday night and all malls have been directed to remain shut from 8 pm to 7 am. The Maharashtra government has hinted that a lockdown in Pune can be imposed by April 2 if the coronavirus situation does not improve. “I want to tell the people that the situation is worsening. If the situation remains unchanged, we might have to take strict action by April 2. I urge everyone to please follow rules. Wear masks, maintain social distance,” Maharashtra deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar said. Union home secretary Ajay Bhalla has once again written to all states and Union Territories to take necessary measures to regulate crowds and follow standard operating procedures in view of upcoming festivals. The Centre has rushed two high-level multidisciplinary teams to Chhattisgarh and Chandigarh in view of the surge in the number of Covid-19 cases being reported from the state and the Union Territory. These teams will work with the respective state/UT government to ascertain the reasons for surge, assist in undertaking gap analysis and recommend requisite Covid-19 control and containment measures.

Farmers block roads in Punjab, Haryana; trains hit

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 26

Road and rail traffic was disrupted in several parts of Punjab and Haryana during the Bharat bandh called by farmers on Friday as part of their nationwide protest against the three contentious agriculture laws, though there was a partial response to it in other parts of the country. Protesters blocked national highways and other key roads at many places in Punjab and Haryana and squatted on railway tracks at several locations. The Samkyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), which is spearheading the farmers’ agitation, had called for the 12-hour bandh from 6 am to mark four months of

the agitation at Delhi’s three borders — Singhu, Ghazipur and Tikri. Thousands of farmers, mainly from Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, have been camping at Delhi borders against the agri laws. So far, there have been 11 rounds of talks between the protesting unions and government, but the deadlock has continued as both sides have stuck to their stand. In January, the government had offered to suspend the farm laws for 12-18 months, which was rejected by the farmer unions. A railway spokesperson said four Shatabdi trains were cancelled, 35 other passenger trains were detained and the movement of 40 goods trains



A national highway wears a deserted look during a nationwide strike, called by farmers unions against the farm laws, in Punjab’s Rupnagar district on Friday. — PTI

was affected by the protests. Train movement was disrupted at 44 locations that fall under the Delhi, Ambala and Ferozepur divisions of the railways. In Uttar Pradesh’s Ballia, as many as 20 activists of CPI (ML), protesting in Sikandarpur township of the district, were taken

into custody. The bandh had a minimal impact in Delhi. Though there were protests in Mayapuri and some other areas, the markets at Connaught Place, Karol Bagh, Kashmiri Gate, Chandni Chowk and Sadar remained open. The SKM claimed that various farmer organisations, trade unions, student bodies, bar associations, political parties and representatives of state governments supported the bandh call. In other parts of the country, there was a partial response to the bandh. In Punjab, shops remained closed at several places. The business establishments remained shut at a few places in Haryana, too, in support of the bandh.

Public and private transport remained off the roads in Punjab. Since morning, farmers in the two states had gathered at several highways and roads, including in Bathinda, Ludhiana, Amritsar, Patiala, Mohali, Rohtak, Ferozepur, Pathankot, Jhajjar, Jind, Panchkula, Kaithal, Yamunanagar and Bhiwani districts. The protesters, however, ensured there was no disruption to an ambulance and other emergency vehicles. In view of the “Holla Mohalla” festival at Sri Anandpur Sahib, vehicles carrying devotees were allowed to commute. The protesters had even arranged ‘langar’ for devotees at protest sites.

Went to jail for doing satyagrah...

■ Continued from Page 1
partnership and support during the Covid pandemic and recalled India’s historic support for the liberation of Bangladesh. She also recalled the horrific assassination nearly 46 years ago of her father and founder of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujib on August 15, 1975, and the killing of several of her family members on that day. Sheikh Hasina was abroad at that time. Soon after his arrival in Dhaka, PM Modi visited the National Martyrs’ Memorial (Jatiyo Sriti Shoudho), the national monument of Bangladesh, at Savar, about 35 km north-west of Dhaka, to pay tributes to the valour and sacrifice of those who gave their lives in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. In the visitor’s book, he wrote, “I pray that the eternal flame at Savar remains a lasting reminder of the noble vic-

tory of truth and courage over deceit and oppression.” Bangladesh is celebrating 50 years of its existence this year and both countries are also celebrating 50 years of establishment of diplomatic relations this year. The Indian armed forces’ victory over Pakistan in the war in December 1971 had led to the liberation of the erstwhile East Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh as an independent nation. The Pakistani Army’s crackdown began in March 1971, and officially three million people were killed during the nine-month-long war. While paying homage to the martyrs of the freedom struggle, PM Modi said, “We will not forget those who secured independence for Bangladesh by sacrificing oceans of blood. We will not forget (their sacrifice). ...

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman emerged as a ray of hope for the people both here and in India.” PM Modi added, “I must have been 20-22 years of age when I along with several of my colleagues offered a satyagraha in support of Bangladesh’s struggle for independence. I courted arrest while supporting the struggle for Bangladesh’s Independence and went to jail.” PM Modi also recalled the efforts of the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi during the Bangladesh liberation war. PM Modi further said, “I salute the brave soldiers of the Indian Army who stood with the brothers and sisters of Bangladesh in Muktiyuddo (liberation war). Those who gave their blood in ‘Muktijuddo’, sacrificed themselves, and played a very big role in realising

the dream of independent Bangladesh. This is one of the most memorable days of my life. I am grateful that Bangladesh has included me in this event. I am grateful that Bangladesh has invited India to take part in this function. It is a matter of our pride that we got the opportunity to honour Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with the Gandhi Peace Prize.” India had conferred the prestigious award posthumously on Sheikh Mujib for the year 2020 just ahead of the visit. PM Modi also praised the leadership of Sheikh Hasina and mentioned the rapid strides in development made by Bangladesh under her leadership. During the day, he also met political leaders from Bangladesh’s ruling 14 Party Alliance and interacted with Opposition leaders from various political parties of Bangladesh.

Foreign minister of Bangladesh, Dr A.K. Abdul Momen, also called on PM Modi. Meanwhile, Bangladesh police said four bodies of members of Hefazat-e-Islam, a headline Islamist group, were brought to Chittagong Medical College Hospital after violence erupted at Hathazari, a rural town where the group’s main leaders are based. “We got four bodies here. They are all hit with bullets. Three of them are madrasa students and another a tailor,” Alauddin Talukder, a police inspector at the hospital, told news agency AFP. He said at least four other demonstrators were critically injured but did not say who opened fire. Ruhul Amin, the government administrator of Hathazari town, said upto 1,500 supporters of Hefazat attacked a police station chanting anti-Modi slogans.

SC upholds Mistry’s sacking

■ Continued from Page 1
the stake of Tata Sons in listed equities, unlisted equities, immovable assets etc., and also perhaps the funds raised by SP group on the security/pledge of these shares.” Therefore, the court said, “At this stage and in this court, we cannot adjudicate on the fair compensation. We will leave it to the parties to take the Article 75 route or any other legally available route in this regard.” Giving reasons for not dealing with the plea for fair value compensation by the S.P. Group, the court said, that as “a matter of fact, S.P. Group should have sought such a relief from the Tribunal even at the beginning itself.” Pointing out that a divorce without acrimony is what is encouraged both in England and in India under the statutory regime, the court said,

“In an appeal under Section 423 of the Companies Act, 2013, this court is concerned with questions of law arising out of the order of NCLAT. Therefore, we will not decide this prayer.” The top court further said that Article 75 of the Articles of Association is nothing but a provision for an exit option and after attacking Article 75 before NCLT, the SP Group cannot ask this Court to go into the question of fixation of fair value compensation for exercising an exit option. It may be recalled that Tata group had offered to buy out all its shares held by the SP Group but the latter disputed the valuation offered. The tussle between the two groups was going on since 2016 when Ratan Tata asked Mr Mistry to step down as the chairman since he had lost the faith of the board.

THE ASIAN AGE

27 MARCH 2021

Army's male bias: Slap on the wrist for now from SC

The Supreme Court's verdict on petitions filed by women officers seeking permanent commission in the Indian Army and Navy goes beyond the direction to grant the commission to eligible Short service Commission (SSC) officers. The judgment is an indictment of male-dominated society in which women are discriminated against in almost all spheres of competitive human activity. The clarion call for change as "structures of our society are created by males for males" is based on sharp insights into outright gender bias. It would serve society best if the armed forces, traditionally served by men, could be made to reform and present a level playing field and set a great example of the equality of the sexes.

An entrenched mindset shaped by history should not come in the way now of disbanding systematic and structural inequality. Men may freely acknowledge the heroic deeds of the great fighting women of history like Jhansi Rani but they would do nothing to give aspiring women warriors their due place in the modern forces. The traditional view that women are unsuited to combat roles may have caused these deep-seated inhibitions about promoting women even when they are otherwise as qualified as men who take up a career in the armed forces. The glass ceiling may have been broken by the likes of Gunjan Saxena, who became an IAF fighter pilot, but it is the systemic discrimination that works against women in the Army and Navy that must be dismantled.

The methodology of discrimination whereby evaluation criteria adapted by the Army to benchmark women officers with the lowest credentials of their male counterparts and to freeze their ACR evaluation at the fifth or tenth year of their service was found to be as "irrational and arbitrary" as the insidious patriarchal system of mankind down the ages. The Army was also pulled up for its attitude in not considering the women's eligibility despite an order of the Delhi high court. The heart of the matter, however, transcends the blame game situation. Equality should be upheld as a foundational principle governing modern life rather than just systemic correction in the forces. This is a transformational verdict and not mere rendering of justice in the specific cases of about 80 women who sued.

The professional environment is what has made the Indian military one of the most powerful forces in the world. A structural correction now would go some way towards enhancing the framework. Incidentally, the MoD decision to allow retired short service commission officers to use their ranks after leaving the Army may have been late by a few decades. It represents a change of thinking in recognising the contribution of SSC officers who could serve as long as 14 years these days. The continued use of their rank could make "service" more attractive to the youth even as it corrects another historical wrong of discrimination against a section of officers who serve in the same conditions as those permanently commissioned. It is a great sign that the Army is modernising in more ways than one.

Free speech: A morality tale

It was refreshing to find the Supreme Court last Thursday quash an FIR against *Shillong Times* editor Patricia Mukhim who had spoken out against the physical attack on non-tribal people, a small minority, by local tribal youth in a Facebook post last July.

In a judgment that will be remembered for long, the bench of Justice L. Nageswara Rao and S. Ravindra Bhat said, "Free speech of the citizens of this country cannot be stifled by implicating them in criminal cases." The judgment written by Justice Rao also pointed out, "Disapprobation of governmental inaction can't be branded as an attempt to promote hatred between different communities."

The SC said the Facebook post would indicate that the editor's agony was directed against the apathy shown by the Meghalaya CM, the DGP and the Dornal Shmong (the local tribal council) in not taking action against the culprits.

Last November, the Meghalaya high court had turned down Ms Mukhim's petition to quash the criminal proceedings. The high court had had appeared to fail to grasp a simple matter when it declared, even in an open and shut case such as this, that the investigating agency should be given a "free hand". The bench had basically ducked the issue. The stinging rebuke of the top court evidently applies to the high court as well.

It will be in the fitness of things if the civil society and political parties quote the apex court judgment in the Mukhim case and ask the executive, the police and elements in the higher judiciary some questions.

In countless cases against respected social activists, university students, journalists and editors, and political opponents of the establishment, the judiciary has looked the other way, offering no relief in citizen versus State matters and in matters concerning upright citizens versus lumpen gangs owing allegiance to the establishment. In practically each case, among other criminal provisions these entities were also charged with Section 153-A (promoting enmity between different classes of people) of the Indian Penal Code, a key provision under which Ms Mukhim was charged. This is why the Thursday judgment is a wider morality tale.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Subhani



National interests hurt if politics, diplomacy mixed



K.C. Singh

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, of course, has no inhibitions about electioneering from any platform, in India or abroad

After an entire year marred by the Covid-19 pandemic, Indian diplomacy appears to be back in high gear. The "Quad" leadership-level summit of Australia, India, Japan and the United States was hosted by freshly inaugurated US President Joe Biden. It crystallised a fresh paradigm for relations among the democracies of the Indo-Pacific, driven by the China challenge. But India's attention was drawn by its immediate neighbourhood. And, unsurprisingly, the interplay between diplomacy and domestic politics has commenced.

The de-escalation with Pakistan and the revived ceasefire at the Line of Control has begun the episodic thawing of bilateral relations. The Indus Water Commission met. Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa continued to publicly advocate better India-Pakistan relations, albeit simultaneously insisting on the centrality of the Kashmir dispute. The process is still a work in progress. In any case, the BJP's Pakistan bashing carries no benefit in the Assembly polls now underway. The BJP is fixated on winning West Bengal and retaining Assam. Tamil Nadu is also critical, as the BJP sheltered the politically orphaned AIADMK following founder J. Jayalalithaa's death. It would want its ally to retain power in a major southern state.

But the interplay between domestic politics and foreign relations can be best traced in India-Sri Lanka and India-Bangladesh relations. Indian Tamil public opinion is sensitive to the ill-treatment of Tamils across the Palk Strait. Similarly, India-Bangladesh relations get impacted by the BJP's divisive and majoritarian politics, over illegal

immigrants and citizenship, in Assam and West Bengal. While no Prime Minister can afford to put diplomacy on hold while crucial state elections are underway, it is an altogether different matter when the Election Commission announces an election schedule which ties in rather conveniently with BJP's poll strategy. On the other hand, international developments involving Sri Lanka are working to the BJP's disadvantage.

Take the case of Bangladesh. The fiftieth anniversary of its liberation fell on March 26, for which Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the chief guest. The leaders of the other Saarc nations were also invited other than those of Pakistan, for obvious reasons, and Afghanistan, perhaps due to its preoccupation with the intra-Afghan talks. But Mr Modi is sharing the main stage with Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina. This is to recognise the critical role of Indian military intervention in ejecting the Pakistani Army that had committed genocide to retain control of Pakistan's eastern wing. India did not then realise that US President Richard Nixon was using Pakistan for his historic opening to China. In fact, as India prepared for war in 1971, after the rainy season, President Nixon's then national security adviser Henry Kissinger secretly flew to China in July via Pakistan. India, meanwhile, stymied any possible US intervention by signing a 20-year Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union.

In Bangladesh this weekend, Prime Minister Modi's programmes have been choreographed to play well in West Bengal as polling begins there on March 27, when he would visit temples, including one at Orakandi, the birth-

place of Harichand Thakur, the founder of the Matua sect, numbering 1.8 crore. They may affect the outcome in about 50 Assembly seats, that were critical to the BJP's success in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, where it stunned everyone by winning 18 of West Bengal's 42 seats. It is difficult to believe that the election dates have not been tailored to the PM's needs. For the golden jubilee celebrations on Day 1, a different point arises. Should not the Prime Minister have gone with an all-party delegation, especially representatives of the Congress, as the 1971 victory was the culmination of a national endeavour led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. That way the visit could have been insulated from the charge of gross partisanship and misuse of diplomacy for domestic electoral benefit.

The Bangladesh visit also brings the focus on the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act, that has raised disparate concerns in Assam and West Bengal due to its discriminatory criteria. In Assam, the BJP is downplaying the law as local groups resent the cut-off date getting moved from 1971, as laid down in the Assam Accords, to December 31, 2014. In West Bengal, it is being paraded with enthusiasm as relief to Hindu immigrants who fled Bangladesh, and are a sought-after vote bank, especially the Matua community. In any case, Mr Modi's visit has provoked right-wing groups ranging from the Opposition BNP and de-registered Jamaat-e-Islami to totally radical groups like the Hefazet-e-Islam and Khilafat-e-Majlis.

Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina has been a pillar of moderate Islam, putting down radical elements with a heavy hand. Attacks on Hindu villages are an ongoing issue. In 2017, before her India visit,

the BJP's West Bengal unit held a function where her failure to protect Hindus was decried. She can influence public opinion in West Bengal by a more forthright denunciation or even action during Mr Modi's visit. This would be a classic case, if it happens, of a foreign role in India's domestic politics. Prime Minister Modi, of course, has no inhibitions about electioneering from any platform, in India or abroad.

On the other hand, India's abstention during a vote on a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council on Sri Lankan accountability for human rights abuses against Tamils is resonating in the Tamil Nadu polls. Bangladesh, Pakistan and China opposed the resolution, which seeks "to ensure prompt, thorough and impartial investigation, and if warranted, prosecution of all alleged crimes relating to human rights violations and serious violations of human rights law". The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a grouping of Sri Lankan Tamils, hoped before the vote that India would vote for it. India on the other hand had said it would balance the rights of Tamils and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka. This reasoning is flawed as giving closure to Tamils by punishing the guilty would actually begin the healing and open the path to reconciliation. Making it murkier is Sri Lanka suddenly handing a port terminal development project in Colombo to the Adani Group. It could be seen as Sri Lanka balancing Indian and Chinese interests. It could equally be considered as cynical subterfuge by India to not openly offend Sri Lanka by supporting the resolution, knowing it was likely to be passed anyway.

Whether people and voters will see through the BJP's cynical use of diplomacy for electoral gain or lap it up as realpolitik will be known only on May 2. But national interests suffer when politics and diplomacy are mixed.

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

LETTERS

PANDEMIC SOLUTION

Never seen a more gentle and down-to-earth virus than the coronavirus. It has decided to keep out of the election-bound states till the first week of May. Candidates are holding massive rallies and the PM HM and senior ministers are visiting and carrying out roadshows and rallies. All the fury seems to be left for those who are busy with those who must leave their homes to earn their daily bread. Shouldn't we take advantage of its leniency and go in for general elections? It would at once render the virus irrelevant and there won't be the need anymore to manage logistics, which in itself is such an uphill task, so that all people receive vaccination.

Syed Abdul Monim
Navi Mumbai

COVID: CRACK WHIP

THE BENGALURU civic body's move to tighten protocols for people entering the city from other parts of the country is a step in the right direction. From April 1, travellers from other states must carry a recent RT-PCR negative report for Covid-19. The rule had so far been limited to people from Maharashtra, Kerala, Punjab and Chandigarh. The BBMP will also resume stamping the hands of Covid-19 patients to prevent them from roaming around. These steps could limit the spike in cases.

N.J. Ravi Chander
Bengaluru

MAMATA POWER

THE MARATHA strongman, Sharad Pawar, is reportedly going to campaign for Mamata Banerjee during the canvassing for elections to the West Bengal Assembly. If Ms Banerjee succeeds in halting the BJP juggernaut, she will become a strong contender for the leadership of the 24 parties' anti-BJP Mahagathabandhan; a possibility Mr Pawar has to factor in before embarking upon the campaign trail. As a result, the claims of other aspirants like Rahul Gandhi, Arvind Kejriwal, Mayawati and Pawar himself will automatically be swept aside.

Arun Malankar
Mumbai

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

Farrukh Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings



"The verses say that I shall know Even as I am known. But in the confusion of days Into which we're thrown

There is no fate, no written plan — We all do exactly what we can With no thought to a future karma Though trees whisper and rivers murmur."

— From **KeyGul The Seagull**, by Bachchoo

BoJo facing flak over 'legal' graft, dodging of tax & the 'nanny state'

Suppose defiance is as ugly a word as mutiny and both come to mind this week in lockdown Albion as hundreds of protesters march and gather to challenge and defy restrictions to their freedom of movement and association.

Some of these protesters, and the pundits who urge them on in the media, are right wing purists who believe that the State shouldn't interfere in people's freedom to work, move, go to pubs and shops or travel, regardless of the fact that thousands have died through doing these things because of Covid-19.

Other protesters are eccentric theorists, some who deny that the Covid-19 virus exists at all, others who see con-

spiracies of all sorts and perhaps some who probably assert that there are giant lizards in the cosmos who control the universe through lizardry using lizardric fields and lizardic microchips hidden in vaccines. And then there are the goons who attend the rallies to fight the police who turn up to arrest those who violate the lockdown.

In Parliament, there are those Tory stalwarts who accuse BoJo's government of being anti-Tory and non-Conservative as it proposes lockdowns and passes legislation to enforce the proposition counting on the volunteered support of the Labour Party.

Commentators on platforms like the *Daily Telegraph* (for which BoJo was until recently a regular columnist!) profess bewilderment at what they characterise as "socialistic" restraints on the freedom of the individual. The term for such governments is "the nanny state", which forbids this and that and punishes you for breaking the rules, however sensible these rules are. They are, BoJo and his advisers insist, directed at saving lives and seeing that the National Health Service is not overwhelmed.

His government has, because of the Covid-19 crisis, done some peculiar

things for a Conservative Party to have contemplated or proposed. Very many of their proposals and actions remain true to the ideological biases and predilections of conservative Conservatism. The Freeport and Deport policies of this government are in line with what one would expect, regardless of the fact that any fool knows that Freeports, though touted as a boost for the economy, will only result in dodgy money-laundering investments and cause the loss of jobs in the country as capital shifts to the provided low-tax enclosures. Freeports are also known all over the world as light regulation conduits for drug trafficking.

As for the new immigration policies, related now to the "deport" agenda, they will deprive several British industries and sectors of vital labour and lead to a decline in these industries worse than that caused by Covid-19.

There are other ways in which BoJo's government behaves in an unsurprising manner. Its ministers have, during the Covid year, handed out several million-pound contracts to friends, relatives and individuals and companies who have gifted the Tory party sums of money. The contracts

are mostly for necessary tasks such as the testing, tracing and tracking of the Covid spread. It is alleged that these have been handed, without being put out to competitive tender, to organisations owned or concocted by cronies who have no experience of the tasks for which they are getting paid millions of taxpayers' money. I say "alleged", gentle reader, because though the media have been tracking and tracing this corruption, it's not a legally proven crime or misdemeanour — yet! It may soon be as there is a public demand for an independent inquiry into the process of handing out these contracts. And guess what? Boris Johnson says no such inquiry is necessary. Everything is above board. Now will there be attempts to bury that board so that everything is above it?

Watch this space. Apart from the lockdowns this government has imposed, it has moved, through its noble chancellor of the exchequer Rishi Sunak, in what again some Tories and commentators see as an anti-Conservative way. He has announced the raising of corporation tax — albeit two years in the future, but with the current budget voted on, it

passes into law. Rishi says this is necessary to make up for the unprecedented loss of revenue that the economy and consequently the treasury has suffered through this plague year.

If I was the chancellor, gentle reader, I would examine several other avenues to put the economy to rights. The first among these would be the tax-dodgers. Notable amongst these are the owners of national right-wing oriented newspapers — the *Daily Telegraph's* owners and Lord Rothemann, the owner of the *Daily Mail* group, are Britons who have registered themselves as citizens of other countries and have used loopholes in British tax laws to avoid paying millions into the British exchequer.

There are other multinational companies who trade here but register themselves abroad and dodge British taxes. And then there are the individuals who register as non-domiciled persons, or "non-doms", who can bring their money from internationally registered earnings and spend it in Britain but pay no tax. If this applied to, say, the wife of a Cabinet minister with imported earnings from abroad, it would be a prime bit of "legal" corruption, wouldn't it?

SHORT TAKES

TRAINS COLLIDE IN EGYPT, 32 PEOPLE KILLED

Cairo: Two trains collided on Friday in southern Egypt, apparently after someone activated the emergency brakes, killing at least 32 people and leaving at least 66 injured, Egyptian authorities said.

Dozens of ambulances rushed to the scene in the southern province of Sohag, according to a statement by Egypt's health ministry. At least 50 wounded were transferred to nearby hospitals. Egypt's Railway Authorities said the accident happened when someone activated the emergency brakes of a passenger train that was headed to the Mediterranean city of Alexandria.

3-VEHICLE CRASH IN BANGLADESH KILLS 17 PEOPLE

Dhaka: A speeding bus collided head on with another car, which hit a third vehicle, in a crash that killed at least 17 people in northwestern Bangladesh, a fire official said on Friday.

The impact of the crash caused a gas cylinder on the second car to explode, burning the car and killing 13 passengers trapped inside it, said Abdur Rouf, a senior station official of the Fire Service and Civil Defence in the northwestern district of Rajshahi. Three of the other four dead were on the bus, he said.

Several others were injured and at least three were taken to a hospital with severe injuries, he said. Police and local people recovered the charred bodies from the vehicles and sent them to the morgue of Rajshahi Medical College Hospital.

SHOOTING AT CHICAGO LEAVES 1 DEAD, 7 HURT

Chicago: A shooting at a gathering on Chicago's South Side early on Friday left one person dead and seven others wounded, police said.

At least two males opened fire and a 26-year-old man was pronounced dead at the scene in the Ashburn neighborhood with a gunshot wound to the head, according to preliminary information from police. Conditions of the wounded ranged from fair to critical. No one was immediately taken into custody, police said, but several weapons were recovered.

The shooting is under investigation. On Thursday in Chicago, a police officer was wounded during a shootout with a suspected shoplifter, according to law enforcement officials.

The suspect was pronounced dead after he was taken to a hospital.

U.S. VARSITY TO PAY OVER \$1 BN IN ABUSE CLAIMS

Los Angeles: A top California university has agreed to pay more than \$1 billion to hundreds of alleged sex abuse victims of a former campus gynecologist, a lawyer representing plaintiffs said on Thursday.

University of Southern California reached a \$842.4 million settlement approved a Los Angeles court, lawyer Gloria Allred said in a statement, on top of \$215 million agreed to in a 2018 federal class action case.

According to Allred, it is the "largest sexual abuse settlement against a university in US history." George Tyndall has been accused of abuse by hundreds of female patients during medical examinations over the course of his 30-year career, in a major scandal that has engulfed the university.

Accusations against Tyndall, ranging from inappropriate touching to rape, date as far back as 1990.

The youngest alleged victim was aged 17.

The doctor, now 74, has been accused of taking photos of patients' genitals, groping their breasts and making lewd remarks about their physiques, as well as racist and homophobic comments.

He allegedly targeted minority students — including many from the university's large Asian student population.

Hundreds of former patients sued the university for failing to adequately respond to the allegations against Tyndall, claiming that the institution was aware of the doctor's actions but continued to allow him access to students.



Circus artistes perform in front of the Duomo gothic cathedral during a demonstration by circus workers demanding more support from the Italian government as their activities are shut down since the start of the Covid-19 outbreak, in Milan, northern Italy, on Friday. — AFP

EU threatens to block AstraZeneca exports

Biden doubles vaccine pledge to 200 mn by end of April

Brussels, March 26: The European Union warned on Thursday it would block certain Coronavirus vaccine exports, while President Joe Biden doubled his goal for doses administered in the US by the end of April to 200 million.

British-Swedish drugmaker AstraZeneca could be among the pharmaceutical companies hit first as EU chief Ursula von der Leyen warned that her bloc would not allow Covid vaccine exports to the UK and other countries until the firms make good on their own promised deliveries.

"I think it is clear that first of all the company (AstraZeneca) has to catch up, has to honour the contract it has with the European member states, before it can engage again in exporting vaccines," von der Leyen told a news conference.

The focus of the latest row is an AstraZeneca plant in the Netherlands, which Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government claims as part of the British vaccine supply chain. As the EU met via videoconference on Thursday, French President Emmanuel Macron aligned himself with von der Leyen,

Covid positive Imran holds in-person meet, draws flak

Islamabad, March 26: Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan has come under severe criticism from both the opposition and the public for holding an in-person meeting with his media team despite being infected with Coronavirus, according to a media report on Friday. Khan, 68, tested positive for the coronavirus on Saturday last, just a couple of days after receiving an anti-Covid vaccine. First Lady Bushra Bibi also tested Coronavirus positive the same day. Khan received the first shot of the Chinese-produced Sinopharm vaccine, the only anti-Covid jab available in Pakistan, on Thursday as part of

the nationwide anti-coronavirus vaccination campaign which is underway in its first phase.

The criticism of the prime minister began soon after a picture of the meeting was posted on social media by Information and Broadcasting minister Shibli Faraz and another lawmaker Faisal Javed, who attended the meeting. The picture showed Khan, clad in a grey tracksuit and joggers, sitting in a room on a sofa at some distance from his media team comprising Faraz, Javed, Yousuf Baig Mirza and Zulfiqar Abbas Bukhari.

According to the *Dawn* newspaper, Khan

presided over the meeting at his Banigala residence on Thursday. The opposition said the prime minister himself violated standard operating procedures despite the third wave of the dreaded disease and called for registration of an FIR against all those people who attended the meeting for violating the standard operating procedures (SOPs).

"Interestingly, none of the government's spokesmen could defend the prime minister adequately on his act of chairing a meeting during the quarantine period and many of them avoided to engage media personnel over the issue," the report said.

despite some countries' — including the Netherlands and Belgium — hesitancy to impose an embargo.

"The supply chains are so intricate, they're so intertwined, so it's not automatically a good thing if this new instru-

ment is to be applied," Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said, citing the example of a Belgian plant making BioNTech/Pfizer vaccines that relies on raw materials from Britain.

Von der Leyen released updated figures on how

many vaccine doses the bloc has exported — 77 million to 33 countries since December. By contrast, 88 million doses will have been delivered in the 27-nation bloc by the end of this week, also since December. — AFP

Firebomb attack at Suu Kyi's party headquarters in Myanmar

Yangon, March 26: A fire from a hurled Molotov cocktail broke out early on Friday at the party headquarters of deposed civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar's largest city, a party official said.

The country has been in uproar since the military ousted the Nobel laureate in a lightning putsch on February 1, triggering an uprising demanding a return to democracy.

Her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), has been in disarray since the coup, with some of its elected MPs in hiding.

At about 4 am Friday, an attacker hurled a Molotov cocktail at its Yangon HQ,



Protesters carrying signs during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon. — AFP

causing a brief fire.

"When the residents nearby knew about the fire, they called the fire service department to put it out... it was under control by around 5 am," Soe Win, an NLD member in

charge of the headquarters, said.

"It seems that someone lit a Molotov cocktail and threw it at the headquarters." Only at the entrance of the office was scorched, and party members were

already inside assessing the damage, he said.

"We have to file a complaint to the police... We do not know who did this, but it is not good at all," Soe Win said, declining to speculate the reason for the attack.

The incident comes on the eve of Armed Forces Day, when the military will put on a show of strength with its annual parade. Fears have been swirling that the day could become a flashpoint.

The building was the site of many demonstrations in the first weeks after the coup, which the junta justified by citing fraud in November elections, which the NLD won. — AFP

Projectile sparks fire at oil terminal in Saudi after hit

Riyadh, March 26: A projectile attack sparked a fire at an oil terminal in southern Saudi Arabia, the country's energy ministry said on Friday, on the sixth anniversary of a Riyadh-led military intervention in Yemen.

The ministry did not say who was behind the strike in Jizan province on Thursday, but it comes as Yemen's Huthi rebels escalate attacks on the kingdom — including its energy facilities — despite Saudi Arabia's offer this week for a ceasefire.

The upsurge in cross-border attacks comes even

as the United States pushes anew for a cessation in hostilities, with Washington's special envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking set to return to the Middle East to press for a ceasefire in the war-torn country.

"A projectile attack on a petroleum products distribution terminal in Jizan... resulted in a fire in one of the terminal's tanks," the energy ministry said in a statement published by the official Saudi Press Agency, adding that no casualties were reported.

Strongly condemning the "cowardly attack", the

ministry said the strike was not just an assault on the kingdom but the world economy and global energy security.

Earlier on Thursday, the Saudi-led coalition said it intercepted several explosives-laden drones fired towards the kingdom by the Iran-aligned rebels, state media reported.

The Huthis also attempted to target universities in Najran and Jizan, southern cities close to the Yemeni border, the coalition said. The insurgents did not immediately claim responsibility for the strikes. — AFP

Maritime traffic jam gets bigger in Suez Canal block

Suez, Egypt, March 26: A maritime traffic jam grew to more than 200 vessels on Friday outside the Suez Canal and some vessels began changing course as dredgers worked frantically to free a giant container ship that is stuck sideways in the waterway and disrupting global shipping.

One salvage expert said freeing the cargo ship, the Ever Given, could take up to a week in the best-case scenario and warned of possible structural problems on the vessel as it remains wedged.

The Suez Canal Authority said it welcomed international offers to help free the vessel, including one from the United States,

although it did not say what kind of assistance was offered.

The EverGiven, owned by the Japanese firm Shoen Kisen KK, got wedged Tuesday in a single-lane stretch of the canal, about 6 kilometers (3.7 miles) north of the southern entrance, near the city of Suez. The vessel remained grounded Friday morning, said Leth Agencies, which services the canal.

Tugboats and a specialized suction dredger were trying to dislodge it, as Egyptian authorities prohibited media access to the site. In addition to the over 200 vessels waiting near the canal, more than 100 ships were en route to the waterway, according

to the data firm Refinitiv.

Apparently anticipating long delays, the owners of the stuck vessel diverted a sister ship, the Ever Greet, to head around Africa instead, according to satellite data.

Others also are being diverted to avoid the canal. The liquid natural gas carrier Pan Americas changed course in the mid-Atlantic, now aiming south to go around the southern tip of Africa, according to satellite data from MarineTraffic.com.

About 10% of world trade flows through the canal, which is particularly crucial for the transport of oil. The closure also could affect oil and gas shipments to Europe from the Middle East. — AP



A backhoe trying to dig out the keel of the Ever Given, a Panama-flagged cargo ship, that is wedged across the Suez Canal and blocking traffic in the vital waterway. — AP

8 tornadoes hit Alabama, kills 5

Montgomery, March 26: A string of deadly tornadoes roared through Alabama on Thursday, toppling trees, demolishing homes and knocking out power to thousands, part of a broad swath of violent weather sweeping across the Deep South. At least five fatalities and an unknown number of injuries were reported.

The confirmed deaths were in Calhoun County, in the eastern part of the state, where one of multiple twisters sprang from a "super cell" of storms that later moved into Georgia, said John De Block, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Birmingham.

Pat Lindsey, a resident of the county's hard-hit town of Ohatchee, told

The Associated Press that a neighbor of his was killed when a twister destroyed his mobile home. "He was good as gold," Lindsey said.

Calhoun County Sheriff Matthew Wade said the twister cut a diagonal path across the county, striking mostly rural areas — something that likely kept the death toll from being higher. "Tonight, five people lost their lives and for those families, it will never be the same," Wade said at an evening briefing. "Our hearts, our thoughts and our prayers go to the families, and we are going to do our best to let them know we love them."

Farther west, vast areas of Shelby County near Birmingham were badly damaged. — AP

BIDEN WARNS PYONGYANG OVER MISSILE TESTS

Washington, March 26: President Joe Biden warned North Korea on Thursday that the United States will "respond accordingly" if it escalates its military testing, after Pyongyang fired two missiles in its first major provocation since he took office.

The nuclear-armed North has a long history of using weapons tests to ramp up tensions, in a carefully calibrated process to try to forward its objectives.

Biden's response demonstrates a change of tone from his predecessor Donald Trump, who engaged in an extraordinary diplomatic bromance with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and last year repeatedly played down similar short-range launches.

Pyongyang had been biding its time since the new administration took office, not even officially acknowledging its existence until last week.

But on Thursday it launched two weapons from its east coast into the Sea of Japan, known as the East Sea in Korea.

It was a violation of UN resolutions and the US was "consulting with our partners and allies," Biden said, warning North Korea that "there will be responses if they choose to escalate."

We will respond accordingly. "I'm also prepared for some form of diplomacy, but it has to be conditioned upon the end result of denuclearization," he told reporters. — AFP

LUCK BY | CHANCE

Beeple sale broke a record for the most expensive NFT ever sold

2 make art history buying a digital work

London, March 26: It took a few minutes for Vignesh Sundaresan and Anand Venkateswaran to realise that they'd parted with \$69.3 million for a digital artwork stored in a JPEG file, coincidentally securing their place in art history. "We weren't sure we won," said Venkateswaran, describing the nerve-wracking final moments of the online auction for a collage of 5,000 images by the artist known as Beeple. "We kept refreshing the page."

The March 11 auction at Christie's in London immediately made Beeple's artwork one of the most expensive pieces ever sold by living artists, joining a well-known swimming pool painting by David Hockney and an iconic stainless steel rabbit sculpture by Jeff Koons.

Venkateswaran said he and his friend and business partner, Sundaresan, both in their 30s, are still coming to terms with their landmark purchase. They've also had to cope

with outside concerns that the transaction could have been a convoluted scheme to inflate the value of the pair's investment portfolio. That's because

Venkateswaran and Sundaresan have invested heavily in a new form of digital collectible with the unwieldy name of non-fungible tokens, or NFTs. Based on cryptocurrency technology known as the blockchain, these digital items function as exclusive certificates of authenticity, making it possible to

turn easily copied digital files into unique collectibles — sometimes ones worth tens of millions of dollars.

The Beeple sale broke a record for the most expensive NFT ever sold and kick-started a global conversation about NFTs, their value and whether they are a lasting addition to the digital landscape. But the eye-popping sum involved drew global headlines and some suspicions that it could have been engineered for the publici-

ty that drew more attention to NFTs, which could boost the value of the pair's existing holdings.

The involvement of Christie's, a centuries-old auction house, should be sufficient to reassure skeptics, Venkateswaran said in a call from his home in southern India. "I think the bigger problem here is that people thought this would be impossible."

That's certainly the case with Beeple himself, who in real life is a digital artist named Mike

Winkelmann. "This whole NFT thing was not something I saw coming, at all," he said. During the auction, the artist was in his living room near Charleston, South Carolina, surrounded by family and a video crew, and said it felt like a "bomb went off in the room" as the bids quickly rose.

Another bidder and cryptocurrency entrepreneur, Justin Sun, lost in the final seconds after the bids exceeded his previously set maximum. — AP

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	49,008.50	1.17
Nifty 50	14,507.30	1.27
S&P 500*	3,943.31	0.86
Dollar (₹)	72.5	0.17
Pound Sterling (₹)	100.00	-0.50
Euro (₹)	85.50	0.31
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	44,081▼147	0.33
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	64.69	4.42
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.123	0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.641	0.027

* As of 8:30 PM IST

BPCL offloads 54.16% stake in NRL to OIL

Privatisation-bound BPCL said it has sold its entire 61.5 per cent stake in Numaligarh Refinery in Assam to a consortium of Oil India Ltd and Engineers India and Government of Assam for Rs 9,876 crore. OIL bought a 54.16 per cent stake to raise its shareholding in the refinery to 80.16 per cent. Its partner, Engineers India Ltd bought a 4.4 per cent stake and the balance 3.2 per cent was acquired by Government of Assam.

Ex-deputy guv of RBI Chakrabarty passes away



Former deputy governor of Reserve Bank K. C. Chakrabarty passed away following a heart attack on Friday. He was 68. Chakrabarty died at his home in Mumbai suburb Chembur. After his stint at Bank of Baroda, Indian Bank and PNB, the outspoken Chakrabarty had joined the RBI as a DG in 2009 and resigned in 2014, three months before his term ended. Chakrabarty had taught at the Banaras Hindu University.

Driving licences, documents valid till June 30

The government extended the validity of vehicle documents like driving licence, registration certificate and permits till June 30, 2021. In an advisory to states, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways said it is extending the validity of fitness, permit, driving licence, registration and other documents whose extension of validity could not be granted due to lockdown and which had expired since February 1, 2020.

₹3,717 cr Jica loan for Bengaluru Metro Phase 2

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (Jica) has signed an agreement with the Government of India, to provide Japanese (ODA) loan amounting to Japanese yen 52,036 million (approx. Rs 3,717 crore) for the development of Phase 2 of 'R6, 2A and 2B' of Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Limited. In March 2006, the first Japanese ODA loan agreement was signed by Jica for BMRCL Phase 1.

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■ Low HNI interest, mkt swing key factors

IPOs make tepid debut this week

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, MARCH 26

High-priced initial public offerings (IPOs) that hit the primary market to take advantage of the bullish share market sentiments have failed to sustain the investors' enthusiasm for such new issues in a market dominated by high net worth, or non-institutional, investors.

On Friday, Kalyan Jewellers and Suryoday Small Finance Bank, which made their stock market debut at 15 per cent and 3.93 per cent discount to their public issue prices.

As the day progressed Kalyan Jewellers, which raised Rs 1,175 crore in the public issue, marginally reduced its losses while Suryoday SFB, which issued shares worth Rs 582 crore, extended the losses. Kalyan Jewellers finally closed at Rs 75.30, down 13.45 per cent from its public issue price of Rs 87 on the BSE while Suryoday SFB closed at Rs 276.20, down 9.44 per cent to its public issue price of Rs 305 on the BSE.

This month, select public offerings have got poor response from high net-worth investors and as a result they have also listed at a discount, as the secondary market has also suddenly turned bearish on the second Covid wave surge, said analysts.

On Thursday, shares of auto component maker Craftsman Automation also made a tepid market



debut and closed with a discount of 5 per cent to the issue price of Rs 1,490 at Rs 1,415 on the NSE.

Similarly, Anupam Rasayan India made a weak market debut on Wednesday, falling over 6 per cent, against its issue price of Rs 555.

While market response was somewhat muted the IPOs of Suryoday Small Finance Bank (subscribed 2.37 times), Kalyan Jewellers (2.61 times) and Craftsman Automation (3.81 times), Anupam Rasayan had a reasonably good response at 44.06 times subscription.

The relatively low subscriptions in these IPOs were compared to other recent public offerings was mainly due to lower high networth investors' participation.

In contrast, a recent listing, MTAR Technologies, which was subscribed over 200 times, listed at

more than 80 per cent premium and has been rising after its listing on March 15.

The market also turned volatile in the second half of March and companies that are not niche players like MTAR but rushed to the market with their public offerings failed to generate enough response from HNI investors, resulting in their tepid listing.

High net worth individual investors participation decides the listing premium of an IPO, said a person familiar with primary market public offerings.

Easy Trip Planners (subscribed 159 times) also saw humble listing gains in a volatile market, Laxmi Organics (subscribed 106 times) with high HNI participation at over 217 times, has managed to do well post-listing.

ADANI GREEN ACQUIRES 75 MW SOLAR PLANTS IN TELANGANA

New Delhi, March 26: Adani Green Energy on Friday said it has acquired 100 per cent stake in two special purpose vehicles (SPVs) that own 75 MW operating solar projects in Telangana from Sterling & Wilson.

The projects, commissioned in 2017, have long-term power purchase agreements (PPA) with the Southern Power Distribution Company of Telangana.

"Adani Green Energy Limited has completed acquisition of 100 per cent of the share capital and all the securities of Surajkiran Solar Technologies Private Limited and Dinkar Technologies Private Limited from Sterling and Wilson Private Limited," it said in a BSE filing.

Earlier this week, Adani Green Energy Ltd (AGEL) had signed definitive agreements with Sterling & Wilson, a Shapoorji Pallonji group company, for the acquisition. The enterprise value of the two SPVs is Rs 446 crore, the company had said.

With this acquisition, AGEL will increase its operating renewable capacity to 3,470 MW with a total renewable portfolio of 15,240 MW, it had said.

Vneet S Jaan, MD and CEO, AGEL, had said, "Strengthening our portfolio through organic and inorganic growth opportunities is an integral part of our vision."

—PTI

No El Nino or La Nina; close to normal monsoon this year

PRATIK PARIJA
MARCH 26

India's all-important monsoon will probably be close to normal this year amid the absence of El Nino or La Nina weather patterns during the four-month wet season, according to AccuWeather Inc.

The monsoon, which typically runs from June to September, is considered normal when total rainfall is between 96 per cent and 104 per cent of the national average of just over 88 centimeters (35 inches), the weather forecaster said.

"It doesn't look like a drought year across India," Jason Nicholls, a senior meteorologist at AccuWeather in Pennsylvania, said in a



response to questions. "We are leaning toward a close to normal monsoon overall for the nation."

The wet season is critical for Indian agriculture as it not only irrigates fields directly, but also fills reservoirs for crops sown in the winter. It shapes the livelihood of millions of rural Indians and influences food prices. Insufficient rainfall in the country, the

world's second-largest producer of rice and wheat, often leads to drinking-water shortages, lower crop output and higher imports of commodities like edible oils.

About 60 to 90 per cent of India's total annual rainfall occurs during the monsoon, except for the state of Tamil Nadu that gets only about 35 per cent of its rainfall during the period, according to the India Meteorological Department.

"There is some concern the Indian Ocean Dipole goes negative in late summer or early autumn, which may mean rainfall comes up short of normal in northwest India with an easing of monsoon rains later in the season," Nicholls said.

—Bloomberg

PALM OIL IMPORT TO SOAR AS USERS SHUN PRICEY OILS

PRATIK PARIJA & ANURADHA RAGHU
MARCH 26

Palm oil purchases by India will probably jump almost 11 per cent this year, with a relatively faster rise in prices of competing cooking oils prompting some users to switch to the tropical oil.

Imports of palm oil by the nation, where consumption of fried foods generally surges during festivals, wedding seasons and long holidays, may climb to 8 million tonne in the year ending in October, according to the median of six estimates in a Bloomberg survey of traders, analysts and importers.

Still, overall edible oil use



is seen little changed at 21.3 million tonne this year, as inbound shipments of expensive sunflower oil and soybean oil will drop, the survey showed. Their prices have surged 28 per cent and 29 per cent respectively so far this quarter, whereas palm oil has gained just 7 per cent.

"We were expecting higher imports of edible oils, but with these super high

prices some demand destruction is happening," said Sandeep Bajoria, chief executive officer of Mumbai-based Sunvin Group.

Soybean oil imports will likely drop to 3.25 million tonne in 2020-21, from 3.38 million tonne a year earlier, while sunflower oil purchases may slump to 1.75 million tonne, from 2.52 million tonne, according to the survey. India may buy 12.6 million tonne of edible oils in 2020-21, Dorab Mistry, director of Godrej International Ltd, said at a seminar this week.

Some consumers may shift to palm oil from other oils, said G.G. Patel, managing partner of GGN Research.

—Bloomberg

Rice exports to B'desh seen rising

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, MARCH 26

The country's non-basmati exports to Bangladesh is expected to move up, going forward, as Dhaka is likely to reduce the import duty on the grain further. Facing a shortage of the staple, Bangladesh, which made a drastic reduction in the import duty late last year, is reportedly planning to further bring down the duty to the 10-15 per cent range.

In December, Bangladesh had cut its import duty on non-basmati rice from 62.5 per cent to 25 per cent, as the nation's stocks diminished and the domestic prices rose. The neighbouring country is planning to further slash duty on rice imports by 10 per cent to 15

per cent in an effort to bolster reserves and cool record local prices.

Bangladesh traditionally is the world's third-biggest rice producer. But in recent times, it has been importing rice as stocks got depleted when floods ravaged its standing crop in many areas.

In the current financial year, between April 2020 and January 2021, India had exported 1.47 lakh tonnes of non-basmati rice to Bangladesh compared to just 0.12 lakh tonnes in the corresponding period of 2019-20. According to minister of commerce and industry Piyush Goyal, the impact of the duty cut had just started reflecting on the shipments in January.

A second round of duty cut is expected to further boost

shipments to that country.

But the government has not made any estimate of the likely demand. "As exports are affected by several factors such as demand, supply and relative prices, both domestic and international prevailing, an estimate of the quantity of export of non-basmati rice to Bangladesh and amount of foreign exchange to be earned, potentially, is difficult to make," the minister said in Parliament on Thursday.

In fiscal 2020-21 till January, the country has exported more than 9462,000 tonnes of non-Basmati rice to different markets and has earned \$3,505 million against \$2,031 million earned from export of 5056,000 tonnes in the last fiscal.

ED raids United Bank ex-CMD Bhargava

New Delhi, March 26: The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Friday said it has searched two premises of former United Bank of India CMD Archana Bhargava in connection with a money laundering investigation.

It said the action against the banker, also a former executive director of Canara Bank, was undertaken in Delhi under provi-

sions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act and is based on a 2018 FIR filed against her by the CBI for alleged possession of disproportionate assets.

"As per the CBI FIR, she had amassed disproportionate assets to the tune of



Archana Bhargava

Rs 3.63 crore during the check period when she was occupying senior positions in various public sector banks," the agency said.

"The searches were carried out by the ED to trace the proceeds of crime and to unearth the documentary evidence showing acquisition, routing, layering and projection (as legitimate assets) of the said proceeds of crime." —PTI

Anish Shah to take over as Mahindra MD & CEO

MICHAEL GONSALVES
PUNE, MARCH 26

Mahindra & Mahindra (M&M) on Friday said its deputy managing director and group CFO Anish Shah will take over as MD & CEO from April 2, exercising oversight over the entire Mahindra Group businesses.

Shah's elevation is a part of the succession plan announced by the company on December 20, 2019.

In November, when Anand Mahindra transitioned to the role of non-executive chairman, Shah will become the first professional managing director and chief executive officer in Mahindra Group's history to have a complete oversight of and responsibility for the Mahindra Group businesses, M&M said in a statement.

In his new role, Shah will oversee all the Mahindra Group businesses, including Tech Mahindra, Mahindra Financial Services, and Mahindra Holidays & Resorts India.

M&M's current MD and CEO Pawan Goenka will



Anish Shah

retire from his present position and as a member of the board of directors of M&M Ltd from April 2.

Goenka, as the MD and CEO, had an oversight of automobile and farm equipment sectors. Rajesh Jejurikar, executive director, will take full charge of these sectors and will report to Shah, the statement said.

Group chairman Anand Mahindra said, "One of the reasons we had succeeded and thrived over the past 75 years was that we were good at introducing change in the right measure at the right time."

He further said, "Anish is the right leader for the Mahindra Group. As the MD and CEO, he will have a complete oversight of all Mahindra Group businesses, including our Global operations, the transformation agenda and, synergizing and driving several strategic programs."

Shah had joined Mahindra from GE Capital India in 2015 as the group president-strategy.

On Friday, the M&M board also gave an in-principle approval for consolidating Mahindra Electric Mobility, a step-down subsidiary of the company, into M&M. With this, M&M's two focused verticals—last mile mobility (LMM) and electric vehicle tech centre received a shot in the arm to speed up electric variants of all its SUVs.

"With the electric vehicles business at an inflection point and poised to grow exponentially, this realignment will help in providing the requisite resources as well as the direction to realizing targeted growth," the Mumbai-based SUV-specialist firm said.

M&M had said in a statement a few weeks ago that it is creating a new structure for its electric vehicle business.

SAUDI MINISTER'S RESPONSE ON OIL 'UNDIPLOMATIC': PRADHAN

New Delhi, March 26: With Saudi Arabia giving cold shoulder to its plea for easing production controls, India on Friday said it will buy oil from any country that will give it at cheaper rates and on favourable business terms.

Refiners in the world's third-biggest oil importer are snapping up more cargoes from outside the Middle East in an attempt to diversify supplies.

The US in February overtook Saudi Arabia to become India's second-biggest supplier but that happened prior to the March 4 decision of the Opec+ alliance to keep a tight rein on output.

Speaking at an event, oil minister Dharmendra Pradhan said India will keep its interests in mind



Dharmendra Pradhan

while deciding on imports.

He termed Saudi energy minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman asking

India to use oil it bought at rock bottom rates last year instead of egging producers to raise output to cool prices as an "undiplomatic answer" by a "close friend".

"India will keep its interest in mind in deciding on its strategic and economic decisions," he said. "We are a consuming nation and we will have to import energy for a long time. So whoever gives us cheap, and easy, we will buy from them."

—PTI

ULTRA-RARE METAL Iridium has climbed to \$6,000 an ounce Iridium beats Bitcoin this year

EDDIE SPENCE
MARCH 26

There's one metal that's leaving all commodities—and even Bitcoin—in the dust this year. The challenge for investors is buying it.

Iridium, one of the rarest precious metals and mined as a byproduct of platinum and palladium, has surged 131 per cent since the start of January, far beating Bitcoin's 85 per cent gain. It has rallied on supply disruptions in the past year and rising demand for use in electronic screens, refiner Heraeus Group said.

With a market much



smaller than its more famous sister metals, production issues can have a big impact on prices. Betting on it is difficult too, as demand is dominated by industrial users. Iridium isn't traded on a bourse or through exchange-traded funds, retail buyers are limited

to ingots from a handful of dealers and the few major investors dealing in it go straight to producers.

"The lead time on the supply side is too long to increase supply in a timely fashion," said Jay Tatum, a portfolio manager at Valent Asset Management. "The only near-term solution is higher prices to get people to sell their existing holdings."

Iridium, which is also used in spark plugs, has climbed to \$6,000 an ounce, according to Johnson Matthey Plc data. That makes it more than three times more expensive than gold.

Part of iridium's appeal comes from the limited investment in production of platinum, which is largely used in autocatalysts to curb emissions, while investors weigh potential increases in platinum demand from new hydrogen technologies against a shift to electric vehicles.

The outlook for tight supply also helped drive up prices of other platinum-group metals. Palladium is about 9 per cent below an all-time high, rhodium reached a record \$29,800 an ounce this week and ruthenium has rallied to an almost 13-year high.

—Bloomberg

TATA STOCKS RISE AFTER SC VERDICT

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, MARCH 26

Tata Group stocks gained sharply, rising by 2 to 6 per cent after a favourable Supreme Court verdict in the matter of NCLAT reinstating Cyrus Mistry as chairman of Tata Group.

The top gainers included Tata Steel (6.04 per cent), Indian Hotel (5.29 per cent), Tata Power (4.87 per cent), Tata Communications (4.24 per cent), Tata Motors (3.8 per cent), Titan Company (3.79 per cent), Voltas (2.18 per cent), Tata Steel BSL (earlier Bhushan Steel) (4.96 per cent) and Nelco (3.76 per cent).

Other gainers included Tata Investment Corporation (2.76 per cent), Tata Chemicals (1.79 per cent) and Tata Consumer (2.19 per cent).

SHORT TAKES

Chess master Leon is Kumani champ

Chennai: Young Indian Grandmaster Leon Luke Mendonca emerged victorious in the 2nd Kumani GM chess tournament in Kisjsszls, Hungary, with a score of 6.5 points from nine rounds. The 15-year-old Goa player, who became India's 67th Grandmaster in December last, remained unbeaten and finished with four wins and five draws in the tournament which concluded on Thursday. "Feeling happy to retain the title despite playing the world school online tournament side by side," Mendonca said, adding that it was a strong event with five other young Grandmasters in the fray. Mendonca, with an Elo rating of 2532, finished equal on points with Slovakia's Milan Pacher but took the top position on the basis of a better tie-break score. — PTI

Arjun, 1st Indian at DTM tour

New Delhi: Young Indian racer Arjun Maini has become the first Indian to secure a full-time racing deal in the Germany-based DTM touring car championship. Maini, who had switched to sports car racing in 2019, will race for the Mercedes-AMG Performance Team GetSpeed in the 2021 DTM season comprising eight rounds with 16 races across Germany and Europe. "I am absolutely delighted to be driving for Mercedes-AMG with GetSpeed in DTM. My first real experience of the championship came in 2015 when I was competing in Formula 3 and we drove on the same weekend as DTM," Maini said on Thursday. "The atmosphere was something I had never experienced before. I feel privileged to finally live out one of my dreams. The series enjoys a fine reputation around the world and is the perfect opportunity for me to test myself against rapid GT3 drivers," he added. — PTI

Venues set for Women's Asia Cup

Kuala Lumpur: Navi Mumbai, Ahmedabad and Bhubaneswar were on Friday finalised as the three venues for the 2022 AFC Women's Asian Cup football tournament to be hosted by India. India is hosting the premier continental tournament from January 20 to February 6 next year. India is also scheduled to host the next edition of the FIFA Women's U-17 World Cup in 2022. Asian Football Confederation (AFC) general secretary Dato' Windsor John, said: "Women's football in Asia is world-class, and the All India Football Federation (AIFF) and the LOC have selected exceptional venues that will deliver a true spectacle befitting the stature of the tournament. The DY Patil Stadium (Navi Mumbai), TransStadia (Ahmedabad) and the Kalinga Stadium (Bhubaneswar) will host the matches. — PTI

Barty toils to down Kristina

Miami: Australian World No.1 Ashleigh Barty saved a match point as she battled back to defeat Slovakia's Kristina Kucova on Thursday and reach the third round of the ATP and WTA Miami Open. Top-seeded Barty, the 2019 Miami champion and French Open winner, dispatched 149th-ranked Kucova 6-3, 4-6, 7-5, advancing to a match with another Grand Slam winner, Latvia's 54th-ranked Jelena Ostapenko who beat Belgian Kirsten Flipkens 6-2, 5-7, 6-3. Barty fired 15 aces, two in a rally from 0-40 down in the final game, to defeat Kucova after two hours and 27 minutes. "There's nothing like coming through a test like that," Barty said. The 24-year-old Aussie avoided her first three-match losing streak since 2014. — AFP

Live on TV

SHOOTING

World Cup: Trap Mixed Team Final from 5 pm on Sony Six

FORMULA ONE

Bahrain Grand Prix: Third Practice from 5.25 pm; Qualifying from 8.25 pm on Star Sports Select 2, HD

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BAIRSTOW BURNS

Jonny, Stokes on fire as England hit back to level series

Pune, March 26: India were left shell-shocked by Jonny Bairstow (124) and Ben Stokes' (99) relentless assault as world champions England chased down a mammoth 337-run target in the second ODI with utmost ease to level the three-match series 1-1 here on Friday.

England did not throw it away like the opening game and capitalised on a flying start provided by Bairstow (124 off 112) and Jason Roy (55 off 52) to gun down the target in just 43.3 overs with six wickets in hand.

Stokes (99 off 62) played a breathtaking knock and missed out on a deserving hundred after a blazing 165-run stand with Bairstow. A mind-boggling 87 runs were scored between the 31st and 35th over. Stokes and Bairstow shared 17 sixes between them.

"We were bitterly disappointed in the first game with the way we played in the chase, but it was pretty clear that we were going out with the same intent as we always do," Stokes said after the game.

"Great chase, really happy that we managed to get over the line easily specially when India set a challenging total," he added.

The third and final game is scheduled here on Sunday.

India amassed 336 for six courtesy K. L. Rahul (108 off 114) and Rishabh Pant (77 off just 40) after England won the toss and opted to field again.

After Roy's dismissal, Stokes hit sixes for fun, 10 in total, to make the seem-



England's Jonny Bairstow celebrates after scoring a century against India during their second One-Day International at the Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium in Pune on Friday. — AFP

Great chase, really happy that we managed to get over the line easily specially when India set a challenging total.

— BEN STOKES

after defeating India by six wickets in second ODI

ingly daunting task a rather comfortable one for the visitors.

Bairstow, who struck his 11th ODI hundred, too was not far behind with seven sixes and 11 fours.

Barring pacers Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Prasidh Krishna, the Indian bowlers had no answer to the onslaught of

by losing three quick wickets in the middle overs, including the set Stokes and Bairstow.

But debutant Liam Livingstone (27 not out off 21) and Dawid Malan (16 not out off 23) held their nerve to take the team home safely. It was England's fifth highest chase in ODI cricket.

Earlier, Skipper Virat Kohli (66 off 79) and Rahul laid the foundation for the big total with their 121-run third wicket stand after being put in to bat at the MCA stadium. — PTI

NUMBERS GAME

INDIA SET RECORD OF MOST SIXES IN AN INNINGS vs ENGLAND

India set a new record of most sixes in an innings against England in one day internationals by hitting 14 sixes during their innings of 336 for six in 50 overs in the second ODI at Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium, Pune on Friday (March 26). Indian batsmen smashed 13 sixes during their innings of 387 for five in 50 overs at Rajkot on November 14, 2008 which was the previous record.

Rishabh Pant set a new record of most sixes in an innings by an Indian batsman against England by hitting seven sixes during his 77-run knock. Yuvraj Singh and M. S. Dhoni shared the previous record of hitting six sixes.

— S. PERVEZ KAISER

SCORECARD

India Innings: Rohit Sharma c Adil Rashid b Sam Curran 25, Shikhar Dhawan c Stokes b R. Topley 4, Virat Kohli c Jos Buttler b Adil Rashid 66, K. L. Rahul c R. Topley b Tom Curran 108, Rishabh Pant c Roy b Tom Curran 77, Hardik Pandya c Roy b R. Topley 35, Krunal Pandya not out 12, Shardul Thakur not out 0. Extras (LB-2, W-7) 9. **Total (for 6 wickets in 50 overs) 336.** FoW: 9-1, 37-2, 158-3, 271-4, 308-5, 334-6. **Bowler:** S. Curran 7-0-47-1, R. Topley 8-0-50-2, T. Curran 10-0-83-2, B. Stokes 5-0-42-0, M. Ali 10-0-47-0, A. Rashid 10-0-65-1. **England:** Jason Roy run out 55, J. Bairstow c Virat b P. Krishna 124, B. Stokes c R. Pant b Bhuvneshwar 99, D. Malan not out 16, J. Buttler b Prasidh Krishna 0, L. Livingstone not out 27. Extras (NB-2, W-8, B-4, LB-2) 16. **Total (for 4 wickets in 43.3 overs) 337.** FoW: 101-1, 285-2, 287-3, 287-4. **Bowler:** Bhuvneshwar 10-0-63-1, P. Krishna 10-0-58-2, S. Thakur 7.3-0-54-0, K. Yadav 10-0-84-0, K. Pandya 6-0-72-0.

STOKES APPLIES SALIVA ON BALL, IS CAUTIONED

Pune, March 26: England allrounder Ben Stokes received another official warning from the on-field officials after he mistakenly applied saliva on the match ball during the Indian innings in the second ODI here on Friday.

The incident occurred in the fourth over, when Stokes was found to have forgetfully applying saliva on the ball and promptly the on-field umpires Nitin Menon and Virender Sharma warned skipper Jos Buttler. Incidentally, he also took a catch in the slips in the same over to dismiss Shikhar Dhawan of Reece Topley.

Applying saliva has been banned by the ICC after matches resumed post Covid-19 forced break. As per the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), the ball was sanitized before proceedings resumed. — PTI

Wellington, March 26:

Maiden centuries to Devon Conway and all-rounder Daryl Mitchell lifted New Zealand to a 164-run win over Bangladesh in the third one-day cricket international Friday and a 3-0 sweep of the series.

South Africa-born Conway made 126, including a century from 95 balls, and shared a record 159-run partnership with Mitchell as New Zealand made 318-6 batting first after winning the toss. Mitchell took 17 runs from the 50th over to complete his century, in 92 balls, from the last delivery of the innings.

Matt Henry then crashed through the Bangladesh top order, taking 3-13 from his first four overs to undermine the tourists' reply.

Bangladesh slumped to 26-3 when Trent Boult pulled off a spectacular catch at third man to dismiss Litton Das, and eventually was all out for 154 in the 43rd over.

BONNER'S TON STEERS WI TO DRAW AGAINST LANKA

North Sound (Antigua and Barbuda), March 25: A patient, unbeaten maiden Test hundred by Nkrumah Bonner anchored a day of West Indies batting resistance against Sri Lanka as the home side ground through the fifth and final day of the first Test to ensure a draw on Thursday.

In just his third Test, the 32-year-old Bonner further enhanced an already burgeoning reputation as a middle-order batsman with considerably more substance than style. He compiled a dogged 113 not out in just over seven hours during which he faced 274 balls, stroking 13 fours and one six.

It ensured his team comfortably saved the match at 236 for four, having been set the unlikely target of 375. It ensures both teams will have everything to play for when the second and final Test starts at the same Sir Vivian Richards Stadium venue on Monday.

Brief scores: Sri Lanka 169 & 476 draw with West Indies 271 & 236/4 (N. Bonner 113 n.o., K. Mayers 52).

Mahmudullah prolonged the innings with an unbeaten 76 for Bangladesh, and Jimmy Neesham returned career-best ODI figures of 5-27 for New Zealand. Earlier, Conway's steady 110-ball

innings led New Zealand's rally after it had been 57-3 in the 11th over.

Mitchell provided the drama at the end with his race against time to reach his hundred.

He came to the last over

on 83 and hit three fours from the first three balls from Mustafizur Rahman, the third from a no ball, to go to 95.

Mitchell and Mitchell Santner scrambled two runs from the ensuing free hit but Mitchell managed only a single to be 98 and off strike with two balls remaining.

Santner hit the next ball deep into the outfield and, taking advantage of the ground's broad boundaries, the pair sprinted through for three runs to bring Mitchell back on strike. He clipped the final ball into the leg side and the pair stretched a single into two, helped by a loose throw from the field.

Conway's century, his first for Kiwis in any format, followed his unbeaten 99 in a Twenty20 international against Australia in February. — AP

Brief scores: New Zealand 318 in 50 overs (D. Conway 126, D. Mitchell 100; R. Hossain 3/70) bt Bangladesh 154 in 42.4 overs (Mahmudullah 76; J. Neesham 5/27).

FOOTBALL OFFICIAL GETS 3-YEAR JAIL

Geneva, March 26: A Croatian football official sentenced to prison in a corruption case linked to a Luka Modric transfer was removed from a committee overseeing the European Championship, UEFA said Friday.

Damir Vrbancovic lost an appeal last week against his conviction and a three-year sentence in a ruling by the Supreme Court of Croatia. Vrbancovic, a former executive at Dinamo Zagreb and the Croatia football federation, had been reappointed by UEFA to its National Team Competitions Committee in 2019 while awaiting his appeal against the conviction.

UEFA also removed former Serbia football president Slavisa Kozeka from its committee overseeing the 55 European member federations. Kozeka resigned as head of Serbian football on Monday after being linked to a fan group with alleged ties to organised crime. — AP



Niraj Kumar (from left), Chain Singh and Swapnil Kusale pose with their guns after winning the Men's 50m rifle 3 positions gold at the Shooting World Cup on Friday.

Niraj, Chain and Kusale shoot gold

New Delhi, March 26: Adding to India's gold rush, the troika of Niraj Kumar, Swapnil Kusale and Chain Singh won the gold medal in the 50m rifle 3 positions men's team event of the ISSF World Cup here on Friday, comfortably beating the USA 47-25 in the final.

Kumar, Kusale and Singh led through the final to easily claim the top prize ahead of the American team of Nickolaus Mowrer, Timothy Sherry and Patrick Sunderman at the Dr Karni Singh Shooting Range. This was India's 12th gold in the marquee event.

The Indians started well with 10.1, 10.5, and 9.5 to the Americans' 9.9, 9.8 and 9.5 in the first series.

The visitors put up an improved show in the next three series but the home team always managed to stay well ahead of its opponents.

Even as the Indians regularly scored mid and high 10s, the marksmen from USA struggled to match the standards of the host nation, often hovering in low nine and eight.

India were originally supposed to play Hungary in the final on Thursday but the visiting team pulled

out of the event following a dispute between its world number one shooter Istvan Peni and the veteran Peter Sidi over the use of a bipod by the latter.

SANJEEV-TEJASWINI DUO TOP IN MIXED EVENT

The seasoned Indian duo of Sanjeev Rajput and Tejaswini Sawant won the gold medal in the 50m rifle 3 positions mixed team event.

The Indians beat Ukraine's Serhiy Kulish and Anna Ilina 31-29 in the gold medal match, using their years of experience to good effect to emerge victorious. The Indian gold count went up to 11 with their top finish. Aishwary Prapat Singh Tomar and Sunidhi Chauhan won the bronze medal after getting the better of USA's Timothy Sherry and Virginia Thrasher 31-15 at the Dr Karni Singh Shooting Range.

Meanwhile, India's Vijayveer Sidhu settled for the silver medal behind Estonia's Peeter Olesk in the men's 25m rapid fire pistol final. The other Indian shooters in the final, Anish Bhanwala and Gurpreet Singh occupied the fifth and sixth places. — PTI

SAINA SURVIVES WANG SCARE TO ENTER SEMIS

Paris, March 26: Indian ace Saina Nehwal eked out a thrilling three-game win over USA's Iris Wang to advance to the women's singles semifinals of the Orleans Masters badminton tournament here on Friday.

It is the first semifinals in two years for world no. 20 Saina, who is desperate to accumulate ranking points to make it to her four Olympics at the Tokyo Games. Her last semifinal appearance was in January 2019 in the Indonesia Masters 500 tournament which she had won.

The fourth seeded Indian, who had withdrawn from the All England Championships last week due to an injury, had to dug deep to script a 21-19, 17-21, 21-19 win over world no. 36 Wang in a gruelling quarterfinals match that lasted exactly an hour.

Commonwealth Games bronze medallists Ashwini Ponnappa and N. Sikki Reddy, seeded eighth, also entered the last four stage of the women's doubles competition after notching up a stunning 21-14, 21-18 win over England's third seeded duo of Chloe Birch and Lauren Smith.

The world no. 25 Indian pair will face top seeded Thailand combination of Jongkolphan Kititharakul and Rawinda Prajongjai. — PTI

Knicks nick past Wizards 106-102

New York, March 26: Alec Burks scored 15 of his 27 points in the fourth quarter and the New York Knicks beat the Washington Wizards 106-102 on Thursday night to sweep the two-game set.

RJ Barrett added 24 points, 10 rebounds and five assists for the Knicks. Immanuel Quickley had 16 points.

Two days after being in control throughout in a 131-113 victory, the Knicks trailed by 17 midway through the third quarter and never led until the fourth.

They won by outscoring the Wizards 39-24 in the final period, with Barrett making a 3-pointer and then a tying three-point play with 4:45 to play. Quickley followed with a 3-pointer and Julius Randle capped an 11-0 run that put

New York ahead 96-91 with 2:54 remaining. Bradley Beal had 26 points and nine assists for the Wizards, but shot just 8 for 23. Russell Westbrook was a dismal 3 for 15 and the poor shooting of their starting guards helped the Knicks surge ahead. Westbrook finished with 13 points, 18 rebounds and nine assists, but had eight turnovers.

Elsewhere, Danny Green hit eight 3-pointers and scored 28 points against his former team and Philadelphia weathered Los Angeles' late rally for its fourth straight victory with a 109-101 scoreline. Seth Curry scored 19 points, and Tobias Harris added 17 for the Eastern Conference-leading Sixers. They have won 10 of 11 overall and seven of eight without injured All-Star Joel Embiid. — AP