

IN BRIEF

2 women arrested for assaulting cop

New Delhi: Eight people, including two women, have been arrested for allegedly assaulting a head constable of the Delhi Police here, officials said on Thursday. The accused have been identified as Rekha Devi (46), Binita (30), Mohan Jha (55), Vikash Jha (24), Pappu Jha (32), Manish Jha (28), Aakash Kumar Jha (20) and Dhanander Pratap Singh (20), they said. On Wednesday, a woman approached the Khayala police station, alleging that she was being harassed and assaulted by her neighbours, police said. Following the complaint, head constable Ramchander along with sub-inspector Chhote Lal reached the spot. The woman told the policeman that a couple — Rekha and Mohan Jha — had assaulted her, a senior police officer said. Police said a quarrel had erupted the previous night between the woman and the couple over the issue of filling a gas cylinder. When the couple saw the woman with the two policemen, they got annoyed, called more people and threatened her as well as the head constable, police said.

Gym owner booked for assaulting police

New Delhi: Delhi Police have registered FIR against a gym owner and his associates a day after a video surfaced online purportedly showing an on-duty policeman being assaulted by them. The policeman was assaulted on April 1 in Uttam Nagar area. Police said that the video purportedly shows the policeman, identified as Sushil, being abused and assaulted by a man along with his accomplice. Another policeman can also seen trying to stop the gym owner in the video. Sushil, presently posted at the Baba Haridas Nagar police station, was earlier posted as the PSO to a person named Sanjay Gupta, a property dealer by profession.

30 shanties gutted in fire in Paschimuri

New Delhi: Around 30 shanties were gutted after a major fire broke out in a slum cluster in Shaheed Bhagat Singh Camp of west Delhi's Paschimuri, a Delhi Fire Services official said on Thursday. No injuries were reported in the incident that occurred on Wednesday night, the official said. According to the fire department official, a call about the blaze was received at around 9.55 pm and 25 fire tenders were pressed into action. The fire engulfed around 30 shanties including pucca structures spread across 1,500 square yards, he said. Two more tenders were rushed to the spot later and the fire was doused while the "cooling process" continued at least till 1:30 am, he added. — *PTI*

'HARYANA NOT TAKING STEPS TO LOWER AMMONIA'

New Delhi: The Delhi government has told the Supreme Court that Haryana has not taken any concrete step to address its grievance over discharge of untreated pollutants causing rise in ammonia level in the Yamuna and release of insufficient water which led to reduction in supply in some areas here. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government has filed its rejoinder affidavit in the apex court in response to the reply of Haryana and its Department of Irrigation and Water Resources. A bench headed by chief Justice S A Bobde, on March 26, had directed the Haryana government and others to continue with the status quo on supply of Yamuna water to Delhi, making it clear that it should not be reduced to the national capital which is facing a shortage. The AAP government, which had moved the top court in January this year, through Delhi Jal Board (DJB), has sought directions to Haryana to cease the discharge of untreated pollutants into the Yamuna and release sufficient water to the national capital which is facing potential crisis. The rejoinder affidavit, filed through DJB's chief engineer M.K. Hans, has termed the entire reply of Haryana and its department concerned as an exercise in obfuscation. — *PTI*

Covid: Delhi surpasses Mumbai as worst-hit city

City sees 16,699 new cases, 112 deaths in 24 hours

Sisodia: Class 9, 11 exams in govt schools cancelled

New Delhi, April 15: Battling the fourth wave of the coronavirus pandemic, Delhi recorded over 16,699 cases of Covid-19 on Thursday to become the worst-affected city in the country, leaving financial capital Mumbai far behind in the daily tally. Mumbai's single-day peak so far is 11,163, registered on April 4, according to official figures. Delhi recorded 17,282 fresh cases of Covid-19 on Wednesday, the highest single-day surge in the national capital since the onset of the pandemic, while over 100 fatalities were reported, according to data shared by the health department.

The unprecedented surge in cases, especially in the last few days, has also left doctors and medical experts baffled with some conjecturing that the virus has mutated and assumed many different strains, some of which are far more transmissible than others. Richa Sareen, a consultant at the Pulmonology and Critical Care Medicine at Fortis hospital here, said, "Given the pace of spread, it definitely seems there is a different variant in circulation and it is more infectious than the previous one."

She said the younger population is getting more infected as the elderly have mostly got vaccinated and also because the older population is more at home but the younger demographic segment is going out and meeting others or socialising, partying, or travelling, which increases the chance of infection. A senior doctor at the Delhi government-run Rajiv Gandhi Super Speciality Hospital, which has been turned into a fully Covid hospital again, said there has been a massive surge in the number of patients at the facility in the last few days.

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, on Thursday, announced sweeping restrictions, including a weekend curfew and the closure of malls, gyms, spas, and auditoriums, in a bid to break the chain of Covid

infections in the city. The 16,699 new cases came out of 82,569 tests done on Wednesday, relatively less than the over 1.08 lakh examinations done on the previous day. As per the latest bulletin, the positivity rate stands at 20.22 per cent, the highest till date in Delhi, while the death toll recorded so far is 11,652. The highest single-day spike in Delhi till the third wave of the pandemic — 8,593 cases — was reported on November 11 in 2020, while on November 18, the city had recorded 131 Covid deaths, the highest single-day fatality count so far. — *PTI*

Asked about class 12 exams, Mr Sisodia said, "I still feel the exams should be cancelled but the CBSE has said that it will review the situation on June 1. I request the students to be patient and not let it affect them". — *PTI*

Woman sets self ablaze after testing +ve in Noida

Noida, April 15: A 52-year-old woman allegedly doused herself with kerosene and self-immolated at her home in Noida on Thursday, four days after testing positive for Covid, police said.

The link between her testing positive for coronavirus and taking the extreme step is inconclusive, a senior police official said, citing interaction with her family.

The woman lived with her husband, a retired air force official, two daughters and a son at their house in a gated society in Badalpur area, the police said.

"Police were alerted this morning that the woman, aged around 52 years, died after immolating herself using kerosene oil around 4 am. She had tested positive for Covid on April 11," additional deputy commissioner of police (Central Noida and Crime) Elamran G. said. "The family told the police that she was upset over her Covid test result but it remains inconclusive if she took the extreme step because of that," the officer told PTI.

The body was disposed by a team of medical experts and no post-mortem examination was done, the police said. — *PTI*



Family members, wearing PPE kits, wait during cremation of a Covid victim at the Nigambodh Ghat in New Delhi on Thursday. — *PTI*

50 people can offer namaz 5 times a day at Nizamuddin: HC

New Delhi, Apr 15: The Delhi High Court on Thursday allowed 50 people to offer namaz five times a day at the Nizamuddin Markaz mosque during Ramadan. Justice Prathiba M. Singh directed the station house officer of Nizamuddin police station to permit entry of 50 people five times a day to offer namaz only on the first floor of the Masjid Bangley Wali.

The court declined to increase the number of people or allow use of other floors of the mosque for offering prayers as sought by senior advocate Ramesh Gupta on behalf of the Delhi Waqf Board, but allowed them to move an application before the SHO for the same.

The court said the SHO may decide any such application moved by the Board in accordance with the law. It also said that its order would be subject to any notification issued by the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) in view of the increasing number of Covid cases in the national capital, which recorded the biggest single-day jump of 17,282 Covid cases. Meanehile, Tablighi Jamaat Thursday welcomed the Delhi High

THE COURT said the SHO may decide any such application moved by the Board in accordance with the law. It also said that its order would be subject to any notification issued by the DDMA in view of the increasing number of Covid cases in Delhi.

Court order granting permission to 50 people to offer namaz five times a day at Nizamuddin Markaz during Ramadan. Tablighi Jamaat spokesman Jishan Ali said they will follow all coronavirus-related guidelines.

"We welcome the court's order. We will follow the guidelines issued regarding the Covid in order to fight and defeat this pandemic," Ali said.

The Delhi High Court Thursday allowed 50 people to offer namaz five times a day at Nizamuddin Markaz during Ramadan, saying there is no direction in the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) notification to close down places of worship.

The court also noted that there was no clear stand of the Central government as to whether religious congregations or gatherings were permitted in other places of worship. — *PTI*

Ghaziabad and Noida extend night curfew hours

Ghaziabad/Noida, April 15: Amid an alarming surge in Covid-19 cases, the Uttar Pradesh government on Thursday extended the night curfew hours in 10 worst-hit districts, including Ghaziabad and Gautam Budh Nagar, and also deferred the state board exams till May 15.

District administrations of Ghaziabad and GB Nagar said that they have extended the timing of night restrictions, which will be now from 8pm to 7am, till further orders.

Earlier, the night restrictions were from 10pm to 5am till April 17 in the two districts.

Gautam Buddh Nagar on Thursday recorded 489 new Covid-19 cases, its highest single-day spike, which pushed the tally to 28,928 in the district, according to official data.

One death linked to Covid-19 took the toll in the district to 98, it stated.

The number of active cases in the district, adjoining Delhi in western Uttar Pradesh, has reached 2,334 from 2,027 the previous day, according to the figures released by the UP health department for a 24-hour period. — *PTI*

Shortage of hospital beds triggers flurry of SOS tweets

New Delhi, April 15: A man desperate to find a hospital bed for his "extremely weak" 60-year-old mother, another looking for anti-viral drug Remdesivir and a woman looking for a plasma donor for a friend's uncle fighting for his life — the grim Covid situation in Delhi triggered a flurry of SOS posts on Twitter on Thursday.

Some claimed that while the Delhi Corona app showed that beds are available in certain hospitals in the city, the situation on the ground is different. Hospitals are not admitting patients as they have run out of beds, they said.

Many even tagged Arvind Kejriwal and his Manish Sisodia in their tweets to draw attention to their plight. The Delhi Corona app allows people to check the availability of beds in hospitals in the Delhi.

"Any hospitals in #Delhi where beds are available? Asking for a friend. His wife has been calling up hospitals and even though the apps/website show available beds, the hospitals are saying no vacancy" tweeted @vibhurishi.

These frantic messages for help came a day after the Delhi government released a list of banquet halls, schools and sports complexes attached to different hospitals to increase the number of beds for coronavirus patients. — *PTI*

Couples, wedding planners, brace to tackle city curfew

New Delhi, April 15: The restrictions announced by the Delhi government, including issuing passes to those attending marriages, amid a surge in Covid cases evoked a mixed response from wedding planners and to-be married couples, with some saying their job will become "trickier".

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal on Thursday announced sweeping restrictions, including a weekend curfew and the closure of malls, gymnasiums, spas and auditoriums, in a bid to break the chain of the Covid infection in city.

The city government said essential services and weddings will not be affected

CM ON Thursday announced sweeping restrictions, including a weekend curfew and the closure of malls, gymnasiums, spas and auditoriums, in a bid to break the chain of the coronavirus infection

by the weekend curfew and passes will be provided to those attending weddings.

The government's curbs come after the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) on April 10 ordered the prohibition of all types of gatherings, a maximum of 50 people at weddings and 20 at funerals, running of public transport at half of their seating capacity and

a scaled down presence in government offices.

Wedding planners and hotel owners said with the restrictions and guidelines in place, their jobs have become "trickier".

Shakti Singh of Madam Planners said a cap of 50 people, which included the staff and the guests, was already a difficult situation to begin with.

"We don't think e-passes are the best solution to it, unless they are being managed on priority and at the micro-level.

"As wedding planners, our job only gets trickier to keep everyone safe and sound and follow government guidelines without anyone being hassled," Mr Singh said. — *PTI*

Umar Khalid gets bail in riots case

New Delhi, April 15: A Delhi court on Thursday granted bail to former JNU student Umar Khalid in a case related to the communal violence in northeast Delhi in February last year saying he was not physically present at the scene of crime on the date of incident.



Umar Khalid

"The applicant (Khalid) is not visible in any CCTV footage/viral video(s) pertaining to the scene of crime on the date of incident. There is no identification of the applicant either through independent public witness or any police witness of he being present at the scene of

crime on the date of incident," additional sessions judge Vinod Yadav noted in the order.

The court further said that even the CDR location of the mobile phone of applicant was not found at the scene of crime on the

date of incident.

The applicant has merely been roped in the matter on basis of his own disclosure statement, fourth disclosure statement of co-accused Tahir Hussain and disclosure statement of co-accused Khalid Saifi, it said, adding that no recovery of any sort has been effected from the applicant pursuant to his disclosure statement.

The court rejected prosecution's argument that Khalid had been in regular contact/touch with co-accused Tahir Hussain and Khalid Saifi over mobile phone and said that "prima facie that does not in any way go on to

establish the criminal conspiracy alleged against the applicant in the matter."

The FIR in the present case was registered on the statement of constable Sangram Singh, where he stated that on February 24, 2020 at about 2 pm, a large crowd gathered on the road in a locality in the northeast Delhi and started pelting stones in which he and other police officials got injured as they were thrashed by the mob. They set the vehicles in a parking area nearby on fire, including his motorcycle of the complainant was also burnt by the rioters, he said said. — *PTI*

HC dismisses bail plea of man who pointed gun at policeman

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, APRIL 15

The Delhi High Court Thursday dismissed the bail plea of the accused who allegedly pointed a pistol at a police head constable during the communal violence in the north-east area here in February last year, saying the video clips have shaken the court's conscience that how could he take law and order in his hands.

Justice Suresh Kumar Kait said whether or not the accused Shahrukh Pathan had the intention to kill the complainant

police official or any person present in the public with his open-air pistol shots, it is hard to believe that he had no knowledge that his act may harm anyone present at the spot.

Moreover, it is not the case of the petitioner (Pathan) that he was not involved in the alleged incident, the high court said. The high court also added that in their opinion, the trial court has rightly held that the petitioner is alleged to have participated in riots and his picture speaks a volume about his involvement.

Vehicle scrapping guidelines of AAP govt challenged in HC

New Delhi, April 15: A PIL in the Delhi High Court has challenged the AAP government's guidelines for scrapping motor vehicles claiming the requirements for a license under these norms would oust small and marginal scrap dealers.

"The impugned guidelines are heavily tilted against small and semi-formal automobile scrapers who have been engaged in the business for generations," the petition has contended.

The plea by Delhi residentINDERJIT Singh has claimed that such small time scrap dealers were not heard before issuing the guidelines for scrapping of Motor Vehicles of

Delhi, 2018.

The petition, filed through advocates Sahil Bhalaik, Tushar Giri and Sewa Singh, has claimed that the scrap industry created plenty of job opportunities and the guidelines were issued without considering the feasibility and practicality of organising this sector and without seeking public opinion.

The plea has also contended that the 2018 guidelines are "unconstitutional, arbitrary and unfair" and also contrary to the Motor Vehicles Act as only the Centre has the power to make rules prescribing the manner of recycling of vehicles and parts thereof. — *PTI*

Centre steps in as states gasp to fill oxygen stock

■ Continued from Page 1 in a certain number of people but we know that these particular mutations have (also) got physiological effects on our context," Principal scientific adviser to Prime Minister Mr K. Vijay Raghavan told a media house in an interview.

The maximum consumption of medical oxygen is by Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, followed by Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Rajasthan. These states are also reporting a large number of daily cases. According to officials, India's daily production capacity of medical Oxygen (7127 MT) and stock (50,000 MT) is "comfortably more" than the daily consumption (3842

THE MAXIMUM consumption of medical oxygen is by Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, followed by Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Rajasthan.

MT) at present.

Union health ministry officials said with increasing cases, the medical Oxygen consumption will need to keep pace with the requirements of the states. For this, the current Oxygen stocks in the country, including the industrial Oxygen stocks with the manufacturing plants, is more than 50,000 MTs. Along with the ramped up production of the Oxygen manufacturing units and the surplus stocks avail-

able, the present availability of Oxygen is sufficient. At the same time, States have also been asked to make rational use of medical Oxygen and ensure there is no wastage of oxygen.

In a bid to help out the distressed Maharashtra government, Mr Mukesh Ambani led Reliance Industries has started sending Oxygen from its petroleum refinery in Gujarat's Jamnagar to help the state government combat the immediate shortage of Oxygen. To begin with Maharashtra will get 100 tons of Oxygen gas from Reliance free of cost as the company is diverting some of its Oxygen streams meant for petroleum coke gasification units after making it suitable for medical use. Besides Bharat

Petroleum Corporation Limited has built up a stockpile of 20 tons of Oxygen at its Kochi refinery in Kerala which it is supplying to government hospitals free of cost.

Officials said the challenge presently is to move oxygen from States with less necessity to states with increased necessity. "Mapping of the surplus sources with States that have greater need for oxygen, such as Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Chhattisgarh, etc is being finalised, in consultation with the manufacturers, States and other stakeholders. This has been undertaken through coordinated planning between the Government of India and State Governments to map their requirements up to

30th April 2021 with the available sources and stocks of oxygen in the country," said an official.

Orders have also been given by PESO (Petroleum and Safety Organisation) for conversion of argon and nitrogen tankers for use as oxygen tankers due to which the fleet available for transportation of tankers has been enhanced. Free movement of oxygen tankers interstate has been facilitated.

Union health ministry has also placed orders for purchase of one lakh oxygen cylinders and PSA plants sanctioned under PM-CARES Fund are being closely reviewed for early completion of 100 per cent of the plants to enhance self-generation of oxygen in hospitals especially in remote areas.

SHORT TAKES

Weekend shutdown in 10 dists of Odisha

Bhubaneswar: The Odisha government on Thursday evening decided to clamp stricter restrictions in the form of night curfew across the state and weekend shutdowns in 10 districts bordering Chhattisgarh to contain the Covid-19 spread. As per the latest announcement, the state government decided to clamp night curfew in urban areas of 20 districts including the twin cities of Cuttack and Bhubaneswar which will come into force from Friday.

The restrictions will be clamped from 9 pm to 5 am, informed state chief secretary Suresh Mohapatra in a specialised televised address. According to Mr Mohapatra, the state government revised the timings of night curfew which is already in force in 10 districts of the state sharing borders with Chhattisgarh. At present, night curfew is in force in 10 districts — Sundergarh, Jharsuguda, Sambalpur, Bargarh, Balangir, Nuapada, Kalahandi, Nabarangpur, Koraput and Malkangiri from 10 pm to 5 am.

₹3,000 relief for HP staff on Covid duty

Shimla: Amid the state economy once again taking a hit due to the Covid pandemic, the Himachal Pradesh government on Thursday announced relief measures for the tourism, transport and education sectors. An ex gratia of ₹3,000 each was announced for all government Class III and IV employees, directly involved in the service of Covid patients, an official spokesperson said. Presiding over a Himachal Day function at Padhar in Mandi district on Thursday, CM Jai Ram Thakur said all private schools, hotels, lodges and other tourism units would be exempted from paying demand charges for two months, which could be paid in instalments later without late charges. He also announced a subvention scheme for the tourism industry for three months till June. — PTI

ASI monuments closed till May 15

New Delhi: All Centrally-protected monuments, museums and sites under the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) have been closed with immediate effect till May 15 due to the surge in coronavirus cases in the country, the Union culture ministry said on Thursday. An order to this effect was issued by the ASI and it was tweeted by culture minister Prahlaad Patel on Thursday evening. "Due to the prevailing Covid situation, it has been decided to close all Centrally-protected monuments, sites and museums under the ASI with immediate effect and till May 15 or until further orders," the Archaeological Survey of India said. These include 3,693 monuments and 50 museums. — PTI

MP BYELECTIONS: CONG CANDIDATE TESTS COVID +VE

AGE CORRESPONDENT
BHOPAL, APRIL 15

Campaigning for April 17 byelections to Damoh Assembly constituency in Madhya Pradesh, which has remained low key all through due to the coronavirus pandemic, ended on Thursday afternoon. The usual din and bustle of electioneering was missing in the constituency with the traditional rivals, the ruling BJP and Opposition Congress, seen avoiding big rallies and public meetings to protect their leaders and workers from contracting the virus. Both the parties were seen organising mass contact programmes to drum up support for their respective candidates. The rival parties had to contend with only a couple of election rallies each led by their respective star campaigners. While senior BJP leaders such as chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Union minister Pralhad Patel and Rajya Sabha member Jyotiraditya Scindia held election rallies on different days to canvass for their party candidate Rahul Singh Lodhi, former chief minister Kamal Nath led a rally of Congress on Wednesday in Damoh to seek votes for his party candidate Ajay Tondon. Mr Tondon tested positive for coronavirus on Thursday.

Neet postponed amid spike in Covid cases: Vardhan

Haryana govt cancels Class 10 board exams ■ UP schools shut till May 15

New Delhi/Chandigarh/Lucknow, April 15: In view of a spike in the number of Covid-19 cases, the National Eligibility-Cum-Entrance Test (post-graduate), which was scheduled to be held on April 18, has been postponed, Union health minister Harsh Vardhan said on Thursday.

The decision was taken keeping the well-being of the young medical students in mind, he added.

"In light of the surge in COVID19 cases, GoI has decided to postpone #NEETPG2021 exam which was earlier sched-

uled to be held on Apr 18. Next date to be decided later. Decision has been taken keeping wellbeing of our young medical students in mind," Mr Vardhan said in a tweet.

Neet PG examination is for doctors seeking admission in MS, MD courses. The examination was earlier scheduled to be held in January but was postponed because of the pandemic.

Earlier, a group of doctors moved the Supreme Court seeking the postponement of the examination before the Centre announced its decision. In

their plea, the doctors said that the candidates who would be appearing in the exam are doctors treating Covid-19 patients daily. The petition also mentioned that when the exam in January got cancelled, the pandemic situation of the country was not this perilous.

Meanwhile, the Haryana government has cancelled the Class 10 board exams which were to be conducted by the state board of school education and decided to postpone the exams of Class 12 amid the pandemic.

The state government's

decision comes a day after the CBSE cancelled the Class 10 exam and postponed the Class 12 examination due to the rising number of Covid-19 cases.

The Uttar Pradesh government, too, shut all schools till May 15 and postponed exams for board classes as the state reported its highest single day spike in coronavirus cases since the outbreak of the pandemic last year.

The state on Thursday reported 104 deaths and 22,439 fresh cases, pushing the fatality count to 9,480 and the total infection number to 7,66,360. — PTI



Health workers, wearing protective suits, carry the body of a woman who died of Covid-19 for cremation at Shakti Nagar cremation ground in Jammu on Thursday.

Odisha bypoll adjourned after death of Cong nominee

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO
BHUBANESWAR, APRIL 15

Hours after the returning officer adjourned the election process for Pipili Assembly bypolls following the death of Congress candidate Ajit Mangaraj, state chief electoral officer (CEO) Sushil Lohani on Thursday said the Election Commission of India (ECI) will announce the next poll date.

Byelection for the Pipili constituency was scheduled for April 17. The Congress candidate Ajit Mangaraj, 52, got infected with the Covid-19 during the campaign and succumbed to the disease on Wednesday evening at a private hospital.

"As per section 52 (1), (c) of Representation of People's Act, the returning officer has adjourned the Pipili bypoll yesterday and the matter has been notified to the Election Commission of India (ECI)," said the CEO Mr Lohani.

"The Election Commission of India will issue a fresh notification for the by-polls. As per provision of the law, the Congress party will be given a chance to announce a new candidate. The entire schedule for Pipili bypoll will be announced by ECI," he added.

According to the CEO, the party will get seven days to ensure that their candidate files nomination soon after a fresh notification is issued by ECI. As per past experiences, 15-days' time will be allotted to complete necessary election formalities, he said.

The Jammu and Kashmir authorities have deferred "Darbar" move, the biannual shifting of the civil secretariat or the seat of the government and other offices from winter capital Jammu to summer capital Srinagar, in view of the surge in Covid-19 cases.

The "Darbar" was scheduled to close in Jammu later this month

Man held with 400 vials of 'Remdesivir'

Indore, April 15: A man associated with the pharma industry was arrested on Thursday for allegedly selling fake Remdesivir injections in Madhya Pradesh's Indore city, the police said.

Acting on a tip-off, the police arrested Vinay Trivedi for alleged black marketing of injections labelled as remdesivir, deputy inspector general (DIG) Manish Kapoor told reporters.

At least 16 packets, carrying 25 vials each of the suspected anti-viral drug, were seized from the accused's possession, the official said.

During interrogation, the accused claimed that he had procured the injections from a company in Himachal Pradesh, but failed to produce any documents to support his claim, Mr Kapoor said.

The accused also

claimed that the injections that he had brought were part of a drug trial and were not tested so far on patients, the DIG said.

"We will get these injections tested in a laboratory, but a drug inspector, prima facie, doubted their authenticity," he said.

A criminal case has been registered and a detailed probe will be conducted to trace the source of the drug and ascertain if the accused had sold the injections locally, the official said.

Meanwhile, the crime branch's additional superintendent of police (ASP) Guruprasad Parashar said the police had received information that Trivedi is associated with the pharma industry and also owns a pharma unit in the neighbouring Pithampur industrial town. These facts are being verified. — PTI

MHA orders 50% attendance, staggered timing at its offices

New Delhi, April 15: In view of the "unprecedented rise" in number of Covid-19 cases in Delhi, it has been decided to take measures to prevent its spread," the home ministry said.

The MHA said officers of the level of under secretary or equivalent and below be allowed to work from home and their physical attendance in office be restricted to 50 per cent of the actual overall strength.

Rosters for their attendance will be prepared by concerned divisional or wing heads.

Individual wing heads can, however, call for more than 50 per cent

physical attendance of any of the categories of officials in their wings, if required on administrative grounds.

All officers of the level of deputy secretary, equivalent and above are to attend office on regular basis.

"All officers who attend office can stagger timings with entry into the office spread between 9 am to 10 am with corresponding office exit timings. This will also avoid rush in commuting, as also in lifts and corridors. Roster system by divisional or wing heads to take care of this aspect," the MHA said. — PTI

'Declare Covid as natural calamity'

Uddhav writes to Modi, expresses possibility Maha caseload to double by April-end

BHAGWAN PARAB AND SONU SHRIVASTAVA
MUMBAI, APRIL 15

Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray has demanded that the coronavirus pandemic be announced as a national calamity so that the state can utilise the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) to provide financial assistance to the affected people.

In a letter written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Mr Thackeray has expressed the possibility that the caseload of active Covid-19 patients, which is presently 5.64 lakh in Maharashtra, is likely to double by the end of April by reaching up to 11.9 lakh.

To ensure prompt treatment of these patients, the Centre should allow air transportation of medical oxygen, he said.

Cong seeks special package for dabbawalas, cab drivers

SONU SHRIVASTAVA
MUMBAI, APRIL 15

Maharashtra Congress chief Nana Patole on Thursday sought a relief package for taxi drivers, flower vendors, salon workers and Mumbai's dabbawala among others. Mr Patole wrote a letter in this regard to Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray stating that these sections of the society should be incorporated in the relief package which has been announced by the state

government.

Two days ago, Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray had announced several sops from monetary reliefs to free distribution of food grains for the vulnerable sections including registered auto drivers, construction workers and hawkers. In addition to this, financial assistance will be provided to the economically weaker sections below the poverty line families, women, senior citizens, widows, disabled and tribal communities.

"The medical oxygen requirement in Maharashtra at present is 1,200 metric tonnes, but the

demand is likely to rise by 2,000 MT by April-end. The Centre has allowed to procure oxygen from steel

plants in eastern and southern parts of the country. But to save time, it needs to be airlifted under the national disaster management act," said Mr Thackeray in his letter.

According to state officials, the state needs the permission from the Centre to use the SDRF, which was constituted under the Central Disaster Management Act, 2005. Hence, the State Government has sought the nod from the Centre to use its funds to help the pandemic-hit people.

By notifying the coronavirus pandemic as natural calamity would allow the state to pay a daily grant of ₹100 and ₹60 to adults and children respectively during the lockdown period to those registered under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana and Priority Household ration card holders, said Mr Thackeray.

NEW OKHLA INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY			
noida Administrative Building, Sector-6, Noida G.B. Nagar, (UP) Website : www.noidaauthorityonline.com			
E-TENDER NOTICE			
E-Tender are invited from firms/contractors registered with UPLC Lunknow for the following jobs against which bids can be uploaded and same shall be opened / downloaded as per schedule mentioned. The details and conditions of all tenders are available on Noida Authority's official website: www.noidaauthorityonline.com & http://etender.up.nic.in Please ensure to see these websites for any changes/ amendments & corrigendum etc.			
S. No.	Job No.	Name of Work	Amount
1	19/Manager System/ Kycocera-konica/ AMC/2020-21	A. M. C. of various model of Kycocera Mita and Konica Minolta make photocopier machines	Rs. 19,62,110/-
Which can be uploaded by date 22.04.2021 upto 5.00 PM. Pre-qualification shall be opened/downloaded on date 23.04.2021 at 11.00 AM.			
Manager (System) CLEAN, GREEN, SAFE & SECURE NOIDA			

SEARCH FOR KIDNAPPED	
<p>Subi</p>	General Public is hereby informed that a girl namely Subi, D/o Sh. Hira Lal, R/o H.No. 51, Gali Balhath, Gali No. 6, Rahul Ka Makaan, Old Seelampur Gandhi Nagar, Delhi, Age: 17 years, Height: 5', Complexion: Fair, Built: Thin, Face: Round, Identification Mark: Scar mark on forehead, Wearing: Cream Colour Kurta, Black Pajami, Black Chunnis and Sandals in her feet has been kidnapped from jurisdiction of P.S. Gandhi Nagar since 26.09.2016. In this regard a FIR No. 442/16, u/s 363 IPS dated 26.09.2016, has been registered at P.S. Gandhi Nagar, Delhi.
Sincere efforts have been made by local police to trace out the missing girl but no clue has come to light so far. If any one having any information about this girl please inform undersigned.	
E-mail : cic@cbi.gov.nic.in Ph.: 011-24368638, 24368641 Fax : 011-24368639 SHO PS Gandhi Nagar, Delhi DP/424/SHD/2021 Ph. : 011-22072761, 7065036024	

SHORT TAKES

EC notice to BJP neta for hate speech

New Delhi: The Election Commission issued a notice to West Bengal BJP leader Sayantan Basu for his alleged "inflammatory" remark during a speech and asked him to explain his stand within 24 hours. The notice said the poll panel had received a complaint against Basu over his speech in North 24 Parganas' Baranagar. "(Barely audible) I, Sayantan Basu, am here to tell you that don't try to play too much. We will play the game of Shitalkuchi. They killed 18 years old Ananda Barman...He was the brother of the BJP's Shakti Pramukh. We did not have to wait for long...(Barely audible) Four of them were shown the way to heaven. "There was a dialogue in the film 'Sholay' you know — if you kill one we will kill four of you. Shitalkuchi witnessed it — if you kill one we will kill four of you....," the EC notice said, quoting portions of his speech. — PTI

Boat with 8 Pakis, 30 kg heroin seized

New Delhi: The Indian Coast Guard along with the Gujarat anti-terrorist squad apprehended a fishing boat, carrying eight Pakistani nationals and 30 kg of heroin, near Kutch district's Jakhu coast on Thursday, an official statement said. On Tuesday, an input was received regarding suspected narcotics trafficking by a Pakistani boat off the Indo-Pak notional international maritime boundary line (IMBL), the statement issued by the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) said. "On receipt of input, a coordinated operation was launched swiftly by the ICG in association with ATS (anti-terrorism squad) of Gujarat," it said. The suspected Pakistani boat was sighted inside Indian waters on the intervening night of Wednesday and Thursday, and it was intercepted by the ICG, the statement said. — PTI

Ram temple funds: 15K cheques bounce

Ayodhya: About 15,000 bank cheques with a face value of ₹22 crore, collected by the Vishva Hindu Parishad for the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, have bounced. According to an audit report of Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra, a trust set up by the Centre for the construction of the temple, said the cheques bounced due to lack of funds in bank accounts or some technical error. Trust member Dr Anil Mishra said banks are working to solve the issue of technical errors and they are asking people to make donations again. Among the cheques, around 2,000 were collected from Ayodhya. The VHP had collected donations during a countrywide campaign between January 15 and February 17. — PTI

BJP LEADER'S ELECTION AS MLA REJECTED BY HC

Imphal: The high court of Manipur on Thursday declared the election of BJP leader's Ogram Henry Singh as a member of the state assembly as null and void for submitting an incomplete affidavit during the submission of nomination paper before the poll in 2017. Justice M.V. Muralidaran also declared that Yumkham Erabot Singh, who was defeated by Henry, duly elected from the Wangkhei constituency. Henry had won from Wangkhei in 2017 on Congress ticket by a margin of 4,336 votes defeating Erabot of the BJP. He switched to the saffron party in 2020. Henry, however, currently is not a member of the assembly as he had resigned as MLA while joining the BJP in August 2020 and made a minister the next month. Erabot, in an election petition, had alleged that Henry submitted an incomplete affidavit in 2017, and prayed for declaring his election as null and void. In the verdict, the court said that Henry was supposed to provide in the affidavit details of the name of his spouse and dependents, and those of his pending criminal cases and educational qualification. — PTI

India stood firm in preventing a change of status quo on northern borders, says Gen. Rawat
China felt it could push us with tech advantage: CDS

New Delhi, April 15: India stood firm in preventing a change of status quo on the northern borders and the country proved it will not get pushed under any pressure, Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Bipin Rawat said on Thursday, referring to the border standoff with China in eastern Ladakh.

In his address at the Raisina Dialogue here, Gen. Rawat said China felt that it will be able to compel nations to give in to its demands by doing a little bit of "shove and push" as it has superior armed forces because of technological advantage.

"But, I think India stood firm on the northern borders and we have proven that we will not get pushed," he said at the virtual conference.

tual conference.

The Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) said India was able to get support of the international community by standing firm in preventing the attempt of changing the status quo in the region.

"They tried to ensure that they can change the status quo by the use of disruptive technologies without using force... They thought that India, as a nation, will succumb to the pressures that they have been putting on us because of the technological advantage that they have," he said, adding that did not happen.

Gen. Rawat said the international community came to India's support to say that "yes there is an international base-rule

They (China) have been able to create disruptive technologies which can paralyse systems of the adversary, and therefore, they feel that just by doing a little bit of shove and push, they will be able to compel nations to give in to their demands

— Bipin Rawat, Chief of Defence Staff



order which every nation must follow. That is what we have been able to achieve."

India and China are locked in a military standoff in multiple friction points in eastern Ladakh since early May last year that has significantly strained bilateral ties.

As a result of a series of military and diplomatic talks, India and China com-

pleted withdrawal of troops and weapons from the North and South banks of Pangong lake in February.

The two sides are now engaged in talks to extend the disengagement process to the remaining friction points.

"They feel that they have arrived and they have a superior armed force because of the technologi-

cal advantage that they have," Gen. Rawat said.

"They have been able to create disruptive technologies which can paralyse systems of the adversary, and therefore, they feel that just by doing a little bit of shove and push, they will be able to compel nations to give in to their demands," he said.

Referring to modernisation of the armed forces, Gen. Rawat described the F-35 fighter jets of the US as a state of the art platform but added that he was not sure whether the US will share the technology with India.

"What they have offered us is a lower version in the F-series," he said.

At the conference, Chief of Staff, Joint Staff of Japan Self Defence Forces, Gen. Koji Yamazaki said

China is attempting to unilaterally change the international order, and that it is necessary for cooperation among like-minded countries in areas of disruptive technologies and counter the "grey zone tactics".

He said China does not recognise the legitimate interests of Japan and other countries in the region and such an approach will heighten tension, adding rules-based order is necessary for stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Gen. Yamazaki also noted that any probable contingency in Taiwan directly impacts the defence of Japan.

Chief of Defence Force of Australia General Angus Campbell said the "grey zone tactics" are a way to

nibble away at territory.

"We see this in the South China Sea. It is very challenging to respond without breaching the line that leads to open conflict," he said. Gen. Rawat said geopolitics, coupled with geo-economics, is seeking to reshape the rules that govern the world order and that China is attempting to convey a message that it is "my way or no way."

"There are some nations which follow international order. There are others which depend on their own law and make their own rules and regulations, try and change the status quo. These kinds of things do lead to conflict situations and that is what we are witnessing on our northern borders," he added.

NIA arrests Lashkar recruiter in Kashmir

Srinagar, April 15: A school teacher, who was a recruiter for proscribed Pakistan-based terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT), was arrested from his residence in north Kashmir on Thursday, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) said.

Altaf Ahmad Rather, a resident of Jammu and Kashmir's Bandipora district, was wanted in a case registered in West Bengal last year following the arrest of a woman, Tania Parveen, for her association with the terrorist group, a spokesman of the NIA said.

Investigation has revealed that Rather is a school teacher in Bandipora and was a sympathiser of the LeT. Parveen had come in con-

tact with him over social media platforms and he was instrumental in introducing her to LeT members based in Pakistan, in pursuance of a conspiracy to radicalise, motivate and recruit youths for violent Jihad' (holy war) on India, he said.

The spokesman said Parveen was arrested by the West Bengal Police last year for her association with the LeT.

An FIR was registered against her at the Badurai police station in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas district under various sections of the Indian Penal Code, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and the Information Technology Act, he said.

— PTI



A devotee carries her new born baby as others stand in a queue to enter Kalighat Kali temple in Kolkata on Thursday on the occasion of "Bengali New Year" amid rise in Covid-19 cases across the country.

— PTI

Indo-Pacific is 'epicentre of strategic race': Oz PM

New Delhi, April 15: The Indo-Pacific region has become the epicentre of strategic competition and like-minded nations need to act more consistently and cohesively to protect their shared interests in the face of multiple challenges, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said on Thursday.

In an address at the Raisina Dialogue, he said the coronavirus pandemic has provided a fresh perspective in creating new opportunities to build a durable strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific region.

Without mentioning any country, the Australian prime minister also referred to the growing tensions over territorial claims and the unprecedented pace of military modernisation in the region. "Democratic sov-



Scott Morrison

ereign nations are being threatened and coerced by foreign interference. Cyber attacks are becoming more sophisticated, including from state-sponsored actors," he said at the virtual conference.

"Economic coercion is being employed as a tool of statecraft. Liberal rules and norms are under assault and there is a great polarisation that our world is at risk of moving towards," Mr Morrison said.

He said a polarisation is

taking place between authoritarian regimes and liberal democracies, adding that a liberal democracy and a liberal set of values underpin the global order that has delivered so much to the world.

He said like-minded nations need to act more consistently and cohesively in protecting their shared interests.

"The Indo-Pacific is the region that will shape our prosperity, our security and our destiny, individually and collectively," Morrison said.

"The Indo-Pacific is the epicentre of strategic competition," he added.

The evolving situation in the Indo-Pacific region in the wake of China's increasing military muscle-flexing has become a major talking point among leading global powers. — PTI

Isro espionage case: SC orders CBI probe against Kerala cops

PARMOD KUMAR
NEW DELHI, APRIL 15

The Supreme Court on Thursday ordered the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to probe the involvement of three Kerala police officers in framing Isro scientist Nambi Narayanan in the 1994 espionage case. The Isro scientist had been acquitted and was eventually awarded ₹50 lakh compensation by the top court.

A bench of Justices A.M. Khanwilkar, Dinesh Maheshwari and Krishna Murari asked the acting CBI director to take charge of the case and treat the inquiry report given by the Justice D.K. Jain panel as a preliminary inquiry report for further investigations.

The court directed the investigating agency to file a status report within three months and the report should be kept confidential and not made public.

While the court observed that the police officials involved in the framing of Nambi Narayanan have been identified and the report brings out acts of omission and commission, the CBI told the court that something serious has happened.

On April 5, the Centre moved the top court seeking urgent hearing and consideration of the panel's report terming it as a "national issue".

The espionage case, which had hit the headlines in 1994, pertained to allegations of transfer of certain confidential doc-

uments on India's space programme to foreign countries by two scientists and four others, including two Maldivian women. The scientist was arrested during the Congress regime in Kerala.

Justice Jain committee had one representative each from the Centre and the Kerala government.

The court had appointed the panel on September 14, 2018 while directing the Kerala government to cough up ₹50 lakh compensation for compelling Narayanan to undergo "immense humiliation".

Besides awarding compensation of ₹50 lakhs, the top court in 2018 had said that Nambi Narayanan could proceed with the civil suit he had filed for compensation.

EC: No clubbing of polls

■ **Continued from Page 1** all-party meeting, to be attended by one representative each from 10 political parties, at 2 pm on Friday to discuss the strict compliance of Covid-19 guidelines in light of the fresh wave.

All political parties in West Bengal have been asked to send only one representative each for the meeting. The meeting will discuss matters related to campaigning for the remaining phases of the election.

Among the deceased, was a Congress candidate at Shamshegunj in

Murshidabad: Rejaul Haque Biswas (51), alias Montu, who was infected by Covid-19 two days ago. He was brought from Basumati Hospital in Jangipur of the district on Wednesday night to a private hospital off EM Bypass in Kolkata. He died there at around 5 am on Thursday becoming the first poll candidate to fall prey to the virus.

State Congress chief Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury said, "I spoke to him two days ago. I was scheduled to address a rally in his support in Shamshegunj. But Covid-19 snatched his

life so early." Besides Sanjkuta Morcha candidate from the RSP at Jangipur: Pradip Nandy tested covid positive. Admitted at the Berhampore Covid Hospital, his condition is stated to be critical. In the TMC, Goalkpokhar candidate Golam Rabbani has also been infected by Covid-19.

Mr Chowdhury added, "I request everybody, including the EC, with folded hands to check this pandemic during the polls. The Congress will abide by any decision for the sake of life."

Time has come for woman Chief Justice of India: Bobde

■ **Continued from Page 1** from the Supreme Court as judges of high courts a step to increase the number of women judges.

Telling the advocate Sneha Kalita appearing for SCWLA that they have the best interest of women in mind, CJI Bobde however said that they need "capable candidates".

The hearing also saw CJI Bobde disclosing that some of the complaints

against judges are "shockingly false", pointing out that they have to be given security of tenure and cannot be made vulnerable like this.

Picking from what CJI Bobde said, Justice Kaul said that the complaints crop up only when someone is appointed a judge.

In the matter relating to a PIL by NGO Lok Prabari, attorney-general K.K. Venugopal told the bench

that the decision on the collegium recommending 10 names for appointment as high court judges would be communicated to 5th top court in three months time.

At this, the court asked the Centre to furnish the time line to act on the collegiums recommendations particularly the time taken by the ministry of law and justice to clear the names recommended by the collegium.

Weekend curfew imposed in Delhi

■ **Continued from Page 1** to 50 people) and funeral-related (up to 20 people) gatherings will be allowed. People going to airports, railway stations and ISBTs will be allowed to proceed on the production of valid tickets.

However, those going for vaccination will be required to apply for a curfew pass. Mediapersons have been exempted from the weekend curfew. People dealing in food, groceries, fruits, vegetables and dairy products will also have to seek a curfew pass for their movement.

CM Kejriwal said that the reason behind the weekend curfew was that

on these days, people often indulged in recreation and other such activities that could be "curtailed" and "curbed" without much inconvenience to them. "Therefore, the weekend curfew is being imposed to break the chain (of Covid-19) and prevent contact among people.

"But we will not allow any inconvenience to those involved in essential services like going to hospitals, railway stations or airports and also weddings. We will issue passes for their movement quickly and without harassment," he said.

The DDMA said public transport such as the metro, buses, autorick-

shaws and taxis will be allowed to function within the stipulated time for the transportation of only those who have been exempted from the weekend curfew. The government has already imposed a night curfew in the city from 10 pm to 5 am till April 30 in a bid to check the spread of coronavirus.

Mr Kejriwal also said there is no shortage of hospital beds in Delhi and over 5,000 are still available for Covid-19 patients. Efforts to increase the number of beds on a large scale will be made, he said and appealed to people not to "insist" on beds in particular hospitals.

Only one weekly market

in a zone will be allowed to open per day and steps will be taken to control the crowds in those, Mr Kejriwal said. The government scaled down the occupancy of restaurants and cinema halls to 50 per cent of their seating capacity last week in view of the rising number of Covid-19 cases. Kejriwal said the number of cases is rising every day in Delhi and the restrictions were needed to check the spread of the virus.

The government will also ensure a strict enforcement of Covid-appropriate behaviour such as wearing masks, he said, noting that many people are still not following it.

24-hr campaign ban on Dilip Ghosh

■ **Continued from Page 1** that he "made highly provocative and inciteful remarks which could adversely impact law and order thereby adversely affecting the election process."

Th "sternly warns" Mr Ghosh "and advises him to desist from using such statement while making public utterances during the period when Model Code of Conduct is in force and imposes a ban of 24 hours" from 7 pm on

Thursday to 7 pm on Friday during which he "shall not be allowed to campaign".

Mr Basu has been asked by the EC to explain in the next 24 hours about his threat at a BJP rally in Baranagar of North 24 Parganas. "I, Sayantan Basu, am here to tell you that don't try to play too much. We will play the game of Shitalkuchi. They killed 18-year-old Ananda Burman, a first time voter, in the morning. He was

the brother of the BJP's Shakti Pramukh. We did not have to wait for long... Four of them were shown the way to heaven. There was a dialogue in the film 'Sholay' you know — if you kill one we will kill four of you. Shitalkuchi witnessed it — if you kill one we will kill four of you....," he had said.

Meanwhile Mr Sinha, after the 48-hour ban by the EC on his campaign for his controversial comments on the Shitalkuchi

firing ended, again called for firing by the central paramilitary forces in face of an attack.

He said, "Shooting will follow if the central forces are attacked again. At least that is what the EC representative is saying. Special police observer Vivek Dubey already stated that fire would be opened for attack on the forces. He echoed me only. Firing should be carried out if forces come under attack."

THE ASIAN AGE

16 APRIL 2021

Biden’s Afghan exit will hurt India, aid Pakistan

US president Joe Biden’s decision to go beyond his predecessor Donald Trump’s deadline of May 1 this year for all US forces to pull out of Afghanistan is not unexpected. The Americans people have been long fed up with their longest war which has cost trillions of dollars and 2000 soldiers. The US got Osama bin Laden (hiding in Pakistan with the support of the Army) and that’s when the grudge match really ended.

The nation-building project in Afghanistan, beloved of many US Democrats and just a few Republicans too may be, was not going anywhere. So, there appeared no point hanging in there. There were no strategic dimensions to remaining engaged in Afghanistan either. In the current US assessment, if the Taliban were to once again be back in the saddle in Kabul as is more than likely, there is little chance they will seek to cross the oceans and attack the American mainland as the al-Qaeda under bin-Laden had done. America currently has more pressing strategic concerns than Afghanistan — namely China, Russia, Iran, climate change, the Covid pandemic.

India may be required to do much diplomatic footwork, especially in relation to the Taliban

When Mr Biden was vice-president to President Barack Obama, he was among those whose advice was to retain a small counter-terrorism force in Afghanistan. That advice is now evidently deemed obsolete. But why did the Biden administration not adhere to the Trump deadline? Nothing would have been lost by doing so.

The reasons appear mainly to do with optics. Pulling out a large body of soldiers and rolling up a vast military infrastructure, even when no rearguard fighting may be on the cards, takes time-consuming planning. Besides, sticking to the deadline set by a predecessor who has turned ignominious may not bring credit in domestic politics. Besides, extending the deadline entails no extra costs for America.

From the Taliban perspective, with Pakistan’s help if they have held on for so long after being ousted from power in 2001, what is a few months more? The Taliban know they have nothing to lose. In fact, the extra four months may work to the Taliban’s advantage as it give them more time to launch more vicious attacks, one of whose (intended) outcomes may be to push domestic Afghan factions into submission before the much-touted “interim” government is brought into some kind of shape through talks. That shape is overwhelmingly likely to be the one that the Taliban want.

The US was desperately after a “responsible” withdrawal. Historically, the Americans wanted to look good in comparison to the Soviet Union, the withdrawal of whose troops from Afghanistan in the late 1980s was widely deemed ignominious. But the Afghans aren’t likely to be fooled by appearances. The international community neither.

The US pullout, which hardly offers America any political gains in the region, may be expected to make the position of Pakistan, China and, to some extent, even Russia, firmer than hitherto. India, in contrast, may be required to do much diplomatic footwork, especially in relation to the Taliban. Historically, after the Taliban interregnum India had aligned its position with that of the government in Kabul. It may be obliged to stick to that broad line even after the return of the Taliban, no matter in what form. New Delhi has a difficult task on its hands.

Let all follow CBSE’s example

With the daily caseload of Covid-19 infections crossing two lakhs, an unprecedented and alarming milestone as yet, on Thursday, the country needs to pull up its socks and fight the virus with all available tools. Precious time has already been lost in augmenting the healthcare system or streamlining the inoculation programme by ensuring adequate availability of vaccine. Any fresh move could take time. In the meanwhile, the government must take whatever steps it can, expeditiously. One major step has been taken when the Central Board of Secondary Education put off the Class 12 examinations and scrapped the ones in Class 10. The government must now see to it that the other national and well as state boards follow suit and eliminate the chances of the pandemic spreading through examination halls.

The government must also target the other potential superspreader events such as religious, political and social gatherings. West Bengal has four more phases of the polling, and electioneering is in full swing with mammoth rallies. The government must check with the Election Commission how it may be possible to curtail electioneering. India has some religious festivals every season; the Kumbh Mela in which millions of devotees attend is under way. Healthcare experts have been demanding restrictions on it but none has been imposed yet. The government must, in consultation with the state government in Uttarakhand and the organisers of the festival, explore the possibility of cutting the duration of the festivities short and impose stricter controls on the attendees. The Muslim community has entered into the annual fasting period, which normally ends with a community feast every day and with grand gatherings at the end of the month. The government must consult the community leaders and see how the events do not end up spreading the virus. The absence of a concerted, coordinated and result-oriented approach could land the nation in a larger mess than what it had found itself in when the virus came with the first wave.

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Subhani



Covid: Who’ll pay price for irresponsible netas?



Karan Thapar

As I See It

Nowhere are politicians perfect. They all make mistakes. Though they may atone for them later, usually in defeat, they’re almost always disinclined to apologise. But I’m not put off by that. If you want them to take decisions, some are bound to be wrong. That’s a fact of life. But what irks me is irresponsibility. In particular, refusing to take tough decisions because it does not politically suit them to do so. For this there can be no excuse and little forgiveness.

Faced with the raging second surge of Covid-19, which is relentlessly soaring at nearly 200,000 cases a day, our politicians have behaved irresponsibly. Worse, they continue to do so. Undeterred by criticism from the media and grave warnings from doctors and public health experts, they are now passing the buck.

What am I referring to? The electoral rallies with several lakh people that were held till very recently in Kerala, Assam and Tamil Nadu and which will continue to dominate the political horizon in West Bengal for the rest of this month. But I am also talking of the Shahi Snans, which have started in Haridwar and will continue for another two weeks. Like the political rallies, these religious baths will attract hundreds of thousands of people, if not millions, and there will be no social distancing and precious little mask wearing.

The rallies and snans could easily become super-spreader events. Some perhaps already have. Others are likely to follow. But even if by some miracle that doesn’t happen, is it worth the risk? That may sound like

a rhetorical question but, quite frankly, it is not.

So why are they permitted? Let’s take the political rallies first. They are an easy, simple and time-tested way of attracting large crowds and addressing them at one go. They also attract television attention and newspaper coverage. Therefore, they get talked about and that, it’s hoped, will create political momentum. This is why politicians are so reluctant to abjure them.

In comparison, virtual campaigning is more difficult, the response isn’t easy to assess, and it doesn’t create any buzz. Therefore, citing the excuse of democracy, our politicians have continued to physically campaign as if the Covid-19 pandemic belongs to another and far-off world.

In fact, when questioned they’ve either been defiant, or they have blamed the Election Commission. This is what Hemanta Biswa Sarma said earlier this month: “There is no Covid in Assam ... there is no need to wear a mask in Assam. Why wear masks unnecessarily and create a panic?”. Incidentally, he is the state’s health minister.

Days later, at a press conference in West Bengal, Union home minister Amit Shah was asked how he justified massive political rallies when the virus was surging past 100,000 cases a day. (Since then, it’s crossed a yet higher peak of nearly 200,000 a day.) Without a blush or a moment’s hesitation, he said the question should be asked of the Election Commission. It has set the rules and guidelines and his rallies are fully in accord with them. Sadly, I don’t recall any journalist asking Mr Shah if this is an adequate answer from the nation’s home minister or simply an irresponsible attempt to pass the buck.

A day later the commission spoke out but almost sotto voce and certainly ineffectively. As a national newspaper put it, the commission “will not hesitate in banning rallies and meetings if precautions are not adhered to”. Not surprisingly, they weren’t, and equally unsurprisingly the commission retreated to its earlier convenient silence. And so the irresponsibility continues.

Now, let’s come to the shahi snans. When Tirath Singh Rawat took over as chief minister of Uttarakhand, he dispensed with his predecessor’s insistence on a prior Covid test before participating in a snan. “Nobody will be stopped in the name of Covid-19 as we are sure that faith in God will overcome the fear of the virus”, he glibly though very confidently told another national newspaper. Days later he tested positive.

Meanwhile, one newspaper, quoting government officials, said one crore people were expected to visit Haridwar on April 14, which was Baisakhi, whilst two crore more were anticipated between April 11 and 14.

Photographs and WhatsApp clips showed that in fact happened. I fear they could soon realise the truth of the old cliché “God helps those who help themselves”.

The government will tell you that banning or even restraining the long-awaited and deeply loved

The government will tell you that banning or even restraining the long-awaited and deeply loved religious events is hard to do. Of course it is. It could make governments unpopular. But then who said being PM during the worst crisis of the century is easy?

religious events is hard to do. Of course it is. It could make governments unpopular. In a democracy, no one wants that. But then who said that being Prime Minister or chief minister during the worst health crisis in a century is easy? Yet, if British PM Boris Johnson could enforce stringent curbs over Christmas and Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel during Easter, do Prime Minister Modi and CM Rawat lack the strength to behave similarly? If Mr Johnson and Ms Merkel can take unpopularity on the chin, are our netas made of weaker stuff? Or could it be that our lot have deliberately chosen not to act because not only is it easier not to do so but that they will also ensure that they remain the darling of the masses?

Finally, just one question remains: how heavy a price will we pay for this irresponsibility? We know the damage the rallies and snans could do can only be estimated two weeks later. That’s not too far away. But chances are... it won’t be the politicians who will suffer. It will be the poor people of India. The former will bask in their electoral triumphs or boast of their administrative expertise. The latter could end up infected, with sickness and possibly worse to follow.

And then? Before you answer, remember, this is India. I doubt if anyone will hold the errant politicians to account. They come from all our political parties and they’ll all get away with it. But it’s likely to be very different for the majority, who are poor. If they get infected, fall ill and even die, who will care for and mourn them? They’ve paid the price of political incompetence for generations, possibly centuries. And as they’ve always done, they’ll pick themselves up, place their faith in God and carry on. I doubt if this time will be any different.

The writer is a television commentator and anchor

LETTERS

TEST THE PILGRIMS

Faith and devotion cannot and must not be allowed to endanger public health as it has been done by allowing lakhs of pilgrims to congregate for the Haridwar Kumbh. The government of Uttarakhand must be severely censured for permitting the event to be held in the prevailing conditions. Cutting short the Kumbh will not solve anything now as the damage has already been done. The only thing to be done now is not allow anybody out of the site with a negative test report.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

DON’T SCRAP EXAMS

THIS REFERS TO “CBSE examinations for Class 12 postponed, Class 10 cancelled” (April 15). Undeniably, examinations are not the be all and end all of life. Postponing of Class 12 examinations in the light of a raging pandemic is understandable but calling off the 10th Boards is befuddling. Why two different yardsticks? Students who were nonchalant towards their studies are on cloud nine while students who toiled throughout the year are feeling distraught. According unfair advantage to one set of students and depriving another from reaping dividends of their hard work is unjust.

Deepak Singhal
Noida

TAKE A WALK

THIS IS WITH reference to the recently-published report about the role of brisk walks in fighting Covid-19. Walking 30 minutes a day, five days a week, can reduce severity of the infection. Physical inactivity may land you in ICU and people who regularly exercise had the best chance of beating Covid-19. This is a wake-up call for all of us in terms of understanding the importance of a healthy lifestyle.

Anushka Panwar
Ujjain

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

Kamal Davar



Ramping security or building trust: How best to tame India’s Maoists?

The audacious ambush by Naxals in the Bijapur badlands of the Chhattisgarh state, killing 22 Special Forces policemen and injuring 30 others on April 3, 2021, brought forth the discomforting reality of India’s inadequate preparedness in dealing with its most serious internal security affliction, namely, the Naxal-Maoist challenge. That these avoidable casualties are attributed to an operation which was mounted by our own forces to nab the charismatic young Naxal leader, Madvi Hidma, in the Tekulguda region of Bastar — a hotbed of Naxal activities since decades — makes this tragic incident all the more embarrassing for those who conceived and mounted it.

The video released by the Naxals, of the release ceremony of police commander, Rakeshwar Singh Minhas, captured by them in this botched-up police operation with a large turnout of cheering local villagers should warn the Indian state to streamline its strategy to combat Left Wing Extremism (LWE) — the generic and official name for the Naxal-Maoist insurgency.

Though some in the security establishment have felt that over the years the Maoist-Naxal threat has reduced considerably with the “Red Corridor”

shrinking gradually, the official statistics of India’s ministry of home affairs do not convey the same improvement in the internal security operations to counter LWE. MHA figures reveal that only 46 districts are now seriously affected by LWE while 90 districts over 11 states are covered under the special security-related expenditure scheme of the government. The official MHA website also conveys that between 2004 and 2019, 8,197 civilians have been killed by the Naxals, mostly tribals, after brutal tortures as they were branded as “police informers”. In addition, between 2018 and November 2020, 460 Naxals were eliminated whilst 161 security forces personnel lost their lives in the same period.

During the past 15 years or so, the deadly dimensions of Naxal-related violence have manifested many times, surprising our security forces dealing with the Naxal insurgency, primarily in states like Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Odisha, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Bihar. It cannot be ever forgotten how in one of the largest Naxal attacks on security forces personnel, Maoists had killed 75 CRPF personnel in Dantewada district on April 6, 2010. Similarly, on May 25, 2013,

25 senior Congress leaders including former Union Minister Vidya Charan Shukla were massacred in Darbha Valley in Chhattisgarh. The Naxals have successfully snatched weapons from security personnel after killing them, continue employing high-intensity IEDs at will in various innovative ambushes and even managed to hijack a train! The list of Naxal successes is, unfortunately, rather exhaustive.

It will be prudent for India’s security establishment to factor in the reality that the burgeoning Maoist-Naxal threat has a distinct external dimension with the wily Chinese supplying arms and ammunition to the Naxals through the “Red Corridor” via our North-East and the Nepal border. These insurgents derive their inspiration from the late Chinese Communist supremo, Mao Zedong, who had once declared that “revolutionary warfare is never confined within the bounds of military action because the purpose is to destroy an existing society and its institutions and replace them with a completely new structure”. It is not surprising thus that the Naxal movement, which emerged from the cauldron of agrarian unrest in an unknown West Bengal village of Naxalbari has, over the years, acquired a separatist

and a grave violent orientation.

Though, unquestionably, governments at the Centre and states have brought in some improvements in the fight to counter LWE, yet the recurrence of deadly incidents, occurring off and on, should propel the Centre to conceive and implement a National Strategy. Basic factors, including shameful economic and social disparities that exist in our nation, may give rise to rural and urban unrest but remain largely unaddressed in most of the states. Some well-meaning people have argued that a major root cause of growing Naxalism has been the willful reluctance of the states and the Centre to not promulgate the Ninth and Fifth Schedules of the Constitution which enforces relevant land laws and which will benefit the tribals and poor inhabiting the forests. However, to merely attribute the spread of LWE to poverty and lack of development will be a rather simplistic formulation.

As the Centre and state governments reach out to the poor and hapless to alleviate their sufferings, Naxal leadership must be contacted to give up their armed struggles, embrace the amnesty announced by the governments and join the national mainstream. In the past, unfortunately, it has been experi-

enced that the LWE leadership has not only refused the administration’s peace and rehabilitation efforts, but also deliberately targeted developmental activities of the government in the remote areas. Schools, hospitals, post offices and even the labour force engaged in some construction works have been violently attacked.

With alacrity, the Centre will have to re-energise its security strategies to combat the Naxals. Better training, modern light equipment and weaponry for the police and the central forces earmarked for these operations have to ensue. Above all, ground-level intelligence structure using locals needs to be re-invigorated. High-tech gadgetry including sophisticated communication and monitoring equipment, helicopters and drones need to be extensively fielded. The Indian Army must train police and paramilitary commanders in special operations and leadership skills at the combat levels. Finally, synergy between the Centre and states machinery to effectively combat the highly motivated Naxals is paramount.

The writer, a retired lieutenant-general, was founder of the Defence Intelligence Agency and deputy chief of the Integrated Defence Staff

IN BRIEF

Taiwan transport minister resigns

Taipei, April 15: Taiwan's government on Thursday said it had accepted the resignation of its transport minister following a train crash earlier this month that killed 49 people, the island's deadliest in decades.

The April 2 crash was caused by a railway maintenance truck that slid down an embankment and onto the track moments before a high-speed train passed by.

The accident, which left more than 200 injured, plunged Taiwan into mourning.

Lawmaker caught naked

Ottawa, April 15: A Canadian Parliament member was caught stark naked in a virtual meeting of the House of Commons. William Amos, who has represented the Quebec district of Pontiac since 2015, appeared on the screens of his fellow lawmakers completely naked Wednesday.

A screenshot obtained by *The Canadian Press* shows Amos standing behind a desk between the Quebec and Canadian flags, his private parts hidden by what appears to be a mobile phone in one hand.

Xi to attend climate summit

Beijing, April 15: Chinese President Xi Jinping will join an online French-German climate summit "at the invitation of French President Emmanuel Macron", Beijing's foreign ministry said Thursday.

The virtual discussions with the key European Union nations — to be held on Friday — come as US envoy John Kerry is in China for environment talks.

Kerry is not expected to meet with Xi, on a trip which has so far taken place behind closed doors.

Russia threatens Ukraine: Kiev

Kiev, April 15: Ukraine's foreign minister said Thursday that Russia was flagrantly threatening Ukraine with destruction, as Western countries raise the alarm over an escalation of the separatist conflict.

Foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba said during a press conference that Russian pundits and officials are "openly threatening Ukraine with war and the destruction of Ukrainian statehood." "We condemn Russia's aggravation of the security situation, Moscow's actions and statements aimed at escalating military tensions."

U.S. to sell F-35s to the UAE

Washington, April 15: President Joe Biden's administration indicated Wednesday it was moving forward with a \$23 billion sale of F-35 fighter-jets to the UAE but was considering restrictions and would not deliver them soon. The State Department shortly after Biden's inauguration in January ordered a review of the massive arms package, which was approved by former president Donald Trump.

Responding to a lawsuit seeking to block the sale, the State Department said it planned a "robust and sustained dialogue" with the UAE.

CHAUVIN WON'T TESTIFY AT FLOYD TRIAL

Minneapolis, April 15: The defence at the murder trial of former Officer Derek Chauvin in the death of George Floyd wrapped up its case Thursday without putting Chauvin on the stand, presenting two days of testimony to the prosecution's two weeks.

Chauvin informed the court that he would not testify, saying he would invoke his Fifth Amendment right not to take the stand. "Is this your decision not to testify?" Judge Peter Cahill asked. "It is, your honour," Chauvin said.

Some prosecution rebuttal testimony was expected to follow Thursday. Closing arguments are set for Monday, after which the racially diverse jury will begin deliberating at the barbed-wire-ringed courthouse, with Minneapolis on edge against a repeat of the protests and violence that broke out last spring over Floyd's death.

The question of whether Chauvin would testify was the subject of weeks of speculation. The risks were high: Testifying could have opened him up to devastating cross-examination, with prosecutors replaying the video of the arrest and forcing Chauvin to explain why he kept pressing down on Floyd.

WHO: Europe surpasses 1 million Covid-19 deaths

Geneva, April 15: A top official from the World Health Organisation says Europe has surpassed 1 million deaths from Covid-19 and the situation remains serious, with about 1.6 million new cases reported each week in the region.

Addressing recent concerns about vaccines, Dr Hans Kluge also said the risk of people suffering blood clots is far higher for people with Covid-19 than people who receive AstraZeneca's Coronavirus vaccine.

Speaking to reporters during a visit to Greece, Kluge did point to early signs that transmission may be slowing across several countries and cited declining incidence among the oldest people.

He said the proportion of Covid-19 deaths among people over 80, who have been prioritised for vaccines, had dropped to nearly 30% the lowest level in the pandemic.

For now, the risk of suffering blood clots is much higher for someone with Covid-19 than for someone who has taken the AstraZeneca vaccine, he said.

Let there be no doubt

Novartis, Roche team up on drug

Zurich, April 15: Novartis announced Thursday it will join forces with fellow Swiss pharmaceutical giant Roche to produce tocilizumab, a drug being tested for its effectiveness against Covid-19-linked pneumonia.

It is the third time Novartis has made its production capacities available to a competitor during the Coronavirus pandemic, as several laboratories strike unprecedented partnerships to fight the global crisis.

Novartis is already collaborating with BioNTech and CureVac in producing Covid-19 vaccines.

The new tocilizumab deal will see Roche's manufacturing expertise transferred to the Novartis Drug Substance Singapo-

re production site during the second quarter of 2021.

"Novartis is fully committed to collaborating with Roche in offering our proven biologics production capabilities," said Steffen Lang, the firm's technical operations chief.

"As one of the world's largest producers of medicines, Novartis can mobilise its manufacturing capabilities on multiple fronts." Sold as Actemra or RoActemra depending on the market, tocilizumab is a treatment for rheumatoid arthritis which is also being tested in clinical trials investigating its safety and efficacy against Covid-19-associated pneumonia.

— AFP

about it, the AstraZeneca vaccine is effective in reducing Covid-19 hospitalisation and preventing

deaths, he added, saying WHO recommends its use for all eligible adults.

— AFP

LEATHER LINING IN GANESHA BAG: BRAND SORRY

London, April 15: A global fashion brand known for its bedazzled handbags issued an apology and ceased the production of a Ganesha clutch bag with leather lining after protests by Indian diaspora groups in the United Kingdom.

Judith Leiber said that it would replace the lining with synthetic after concerns were raised about the use of leather alongside the image of a Hindu deity. "We are deeply sorry to hear that our Ganesha bag has caused offence to the Hindu community," said Lela Katsune, President of Judith Leiber Couture.

— PTI

COPS CHARGE MAN WITH AXE NEAR QUEEN RESIDENCE

London, April 15: British police say they have charged a London man who was spotted carrying an axe near Buckingham Palace.

The city's Metropolitan Police force said private security guards working on The Mall, a main road outside the palace, detained a suspect Tuesday evening after they were alerted to reports of a man carrying what appeared to be an axe. Police said 46-year-old Vladyslav Dryhval was charged Thursday with possessing an offensive weapon and possessing a bladed article.

Dryhval was remanded into custody and was due to appear at Westminster Magistrates' Court Thursday. Police said there were no reports of injuries and that it was not being treated as terrorism-related. Buckingham Palace is Queen Elizabeth II's official London residence, though the monarch has stayed at Windsor Castle during the pandemic. — AP

French nationals in Pak told to leave

Islamabad, April 15: The French embassy here on Thursday advised all French nationals in Pakistan to temporarily leave the country after violent protests by a radical religious group that has now been banned by the government.

The Tehreek-i-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) took to streets on Monday to launch violent protests to force the government to expel the French ambassador over blasphemous caricatures published last year. Though no French citizen was reportedly targeted so far but the embassy has urged all the French citizens to leave Pakistan, apparently as a precautionary measure.

Due to the serious threats to French interests in Pakistan, French nationals and French companies are advised to temporarily leave the country, the embassy said in an email message to its citizens in

● **THE TEHREEK-I-LABAIK Pakistan took to streets on Monday to launch violent protests to force the government to expel the French ambassador over blasphemous caricatures published last year.**

Pakistan. It said that the departures will be carried out by existing commercial airlines.

Interior minister Sheikh Rashid announced on Wednesday to ban the TLP and officials said that Prime Minister Imran Khan and his cabinet endorsed the summary by the interior ministry to outlaw the group.

The trouble began after police arrested the TLP chief Saad Rizvi on Monday ahead of the April 20 deadline by the group to expel the French ambassador. — PTI

Time to end the forever war: Biden India, Pak among nations that have stake in stable Afghanistan

Washington, April 15: President Joe Biden said on Wednesday US troops will be withdrawn from Afghanistan starting May 1 to end America's longest war, rejecting calls for them to stay to ensure a peaceful resolution to that nation's grinding internal conflict.

Foreign troops under Nato command will also withdraw from Afghanistan in coordination with the US pull-out, Nato allies agreed. The withdrawal of foreign troops will be completed by September 11.

Around 7,000 non-US forces from mainly Nato countries, also from Australia, New Zealand and Georgia, outnumber the 2,500 US troops in Afghanistan, but they still rely on American air support, planning and leadership. "While our military contribution will reduce, we will continue to support the stability of Afghanistan through our

Washington, April 15: US President Joe Biden has said India, Pakistan, Russia, China, and Turkey have a significant stake in the stable future of Afghanistan and these regional stakeholders should do more to bring peace in this war-torn country, from where he will withdraw all American troops by September 11.

"We will ask other countries in the region to do more to support

bilateral partnership and in concert with our other nations," Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said.

Mr Biden acknowledged that US objectives in Afghanistan had become "increasingly unclear" over



This photo taken and received from an anonymous source via Facebook on Thursday shows protesters marching during a demonstration against the military coup in Mogok in Myanmar. — AFP PHOTO / ANONYMOUS SOURCE

Myanmar troops shoot at health staff, 1 killed

Protesting medicos flee for safety to a nearby mosque

Yangon, April 15: Myanmar's military opened fire on protesting healthcare workers Thursday, killing at least one bystander as the demonstrators fled for safety to a nearby mosque.

The country has been in turmoil since the military seized power from civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi on Feb. 1, triggering a massive uprising that the junta has sought to quell using lethal force.

But protesters have continued taking to the streets, this week using the Myanmar New Year holiday of Thingyan as their latest rallying point as the normal festivities have been cancelled.

In Myanmar's second-largest city Mandalay, a demonstration by medical workers Thursday turned violent when soldiers opened fire, sending them running to the mosque.

"They were shooting everywhere... they were targeting the Sule mosque compound because people in there were hiding protesters," said an eyewitness.

A 30-year-old man who lived in the compound was shot dead, and at least two others were injured, said a doctor who treated the wounded.

Ousted Myanmar envoy appeals for UK govt help

London, April 15: The ousted Myanmar ambassador to Britain has appealed to the British government to help him as he faced eviction from his London residence.

Kyaw Zwar Minn had to spend a night in his car last week after his country's military attaché barred him from the embassy in central London.

He told reporters from behind the padlocked gates of his residence in northwest London on Thursday that he is not going to

go today and intends to stay despite orders from his former staff that he has to move out.

The former diplomat had called for the release of former elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was detained after the military took power in a coup on Feb. 1.

Asked what he would do over the next few days, he replied: Who can tell? The last time they seized the embassy without warning, so I need to be careful.

He did not elaborate on

what kind of help he wanted from the British government.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said last week he condemned the bullying actions of the Myanmar military regime in London.

More than 700 people in Myanmar have been killed in a brutal crackdown against pro-democracy protesters and others opposed to February's coup.

— AP

unded. "The man who died was shot from the back and it penetrated through his chest," he said.

A medic who participated in the protest said he saw the arrest of six nurses and doctors during the crackdown. "We lost contact with some medical team members as well," he said. Myanmar's health-

care workers have been at the forefront of a nationwide civil disobedience movement, refusing to return to work under a military regime. Their absence has left many of the country's hospitals understaffed during the pandemic.

Civil servants from other sectors have followed suit, bringing the operation of

the country's banks, schools, railway operations, and businesses to a halt.

The junta has tried to force people back to work, and on Thursday, state-run media reported that at least 20 doctors participating in the movement will be charged for attempting to "deteriorate peace and stability". — AFP

Blinken in Kabul to sell Biden troop withdrawal plan

Kabul, April 15: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made an unannounced visit to Afghanistan on Thursday to sell Afghan leaders and a wary public on President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw all American troops from the country and end America's longest war.

Blinken sought to assure senior Afghan politicians that the United States remains committed to the country despite Biden's announcement a day earlier that the 2,500 US soldiers remaining in the country would be coming home by the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks that led to the US invasion in 2001.

"I wanted to demonstrate with my visit the ongoing commitment of the United States to the Islamic Republic and the people of Afghanistan," Blinken told Afghan President Ashraf Ghani as they met at the presidential palace in Kabul.

"The partnership is changing, but the partnership itself is enduring." "We respect the decision and are adjusting our priorities," Ghani told Blinken, expressing gratitude for the sacrifices of US troops. Later, in a meeting with Abdullah Abdullah, who heads the National Reconciliation Council, Blinken repeated his message, saying that "we have a new chapter, but it is a new chapter that we're writing together."

"We are grateful to your people, your country, your administration," Abdullah

OZ TO WITHDRAW LAST 80 TROOPS IN SEPTEMBER

Canberra, April 15: Australia would complete its troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in Sep. in line with the United States and other allies, the PM said Thursday.

Australia's contribution to the Nato-led mission had once exceeded 15,000 personnel, but only 80 remain. "In line with the United States and other allies and partners, the last remaining Australian troops will depart Afghanistan in Sep.," PM Scott Morrison said, without nominating a day.

"The decision represents a significant milestone in Australia's military history," he added. President Joe Biden plans to withdraw the last 2,500 US troops from Afghanistan before the 20th anniversary of the Sept 11 terrorist attacks on the US that triggered the campaign. — AP

ah said. Nato immediately followed Biden's lead on Wednesday, saying its roughly 7,000 non-American forces in Afghanistan would be departing within a few months, ending the foreign military presence that had been a fact of life for a generation of Afghans already reeling from more than 40 years of conflict. — AP

COVID | CURBS

Harry lost honorary titles when he gave up royal duties last year

Philip funeral: Seniors to skip uniforms

London, April 15: Senior royals must wear civilian clothes to Prince Philip's funeral, defusing potential tensions over who would be allowed to don military uniforms.

Queen Elizabeth II's decision means Prince Harry won't risk being the only member of the royal family not in uniform during Saturday's funeral for his grandfather, who died last week at the age of 99.

Members of the royal family often wear uniforms to public events by virtue of their honorary

roles with the British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. But Harry lost his honorary military titles when he decided to give up frontline royal duties last year.

As a result, protocol suggests that Harry, an army veteran who served two tours of duty in Afghanistan, may only wear a suit with medals at royal functions, Britain's *Press Association* reported.

The decision also sidesteps another potential controversy after reports that Prince Andrew con-

sidered wearing an admiral's uniform to his father's funeral. Andrew retains his military titles even though he was forced to step away from royal duties after a disastrous interview with the BBC about his acquaintance with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

The funeral is scheduled to take place Saturday at Windsor Castle, with attendance limited to 30 because of Coronavirus restrictions. Philip, also known as the Duke of Edinburgh, served in the

Royal Navy for 12 years and maintained close ties to the armed forces throughout his life. Military personnel will have a large role in honouring him Saturday despite the attendance limit. Members of the Royal Navy, the Royal Marines, the Royal Air Force and the British Army plan to take part in the funeral procession. Philip's coffin will be carried to St. George's Chapel on a specially adapted Land Rover, which he designed himself.

Military personnel rehearsed for the event Wednesday at Army Training Centre Pirbright, near London. One of the four Royal Marine buglers who will play "The Last Post" at the service said it was an "honour and privilege" to perform the role. "It's incredibly important. We feel nervous," Sgt Bugler Jamie Ritchie. "We feel the pressure, but we're channelling that and we're going to deliver an outstanding performance."

— AP

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	48,803.68	0.53
Nifty 50	14,581.50	0.53
S&P 500*	4,160.59	0.87
Dollar (₹)	74.91	0.21
Pound Sterling (₹)	103.34	0.12
Euro (₹)	89.76	0.09
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	46,301▲159	0.003
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	66.62	0.06
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.126	-0.03
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.588	-0.048

* As of 8:30 PM IST

WPI inflation spikes to 7.39% in March

The wholesale price-based inflation shot up to over 8-year high of 7.39 per cent in March on rising crude oil and metal prices. The low base of March last year, when the data was computed with a low response rate due to the lockdown, contributed to the spike in inflation in March 2021. The WPI inflation was 4.17 per cent in February 2021 and 0.42 per cent in March 2020. This is the third month of up-tick seen in Wholesale Price Index-based inflation.

UAE Exchange, Repco among applicants 8 apply for SFBs, universal banks

FALAKNAAZ SYED
MUMBAI, APRIL 15

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Thursday said that four applicants each have applied for 'on-tap' licences to start universal banks and small finance banks under the private sector. The four that have applied for universal bank licences are Abu Dhabi-based remittance house UAE Exchange, government-owned multi state co-operative named Repco Bank, Flipkart co-founder Sachin Bansal-led NBFC MPI called Chaitanya India Fin Credit Pvt Ltd and ex-Citi Banker Pankaj Vaish & others.

This is not the first time that UAE Exchange is attempting a banking foray. It had applied for a universal banking licence in June 2017 as well.

Applicants for small finance banks are VSoft Technologies Private Limited—a provider of banking and payment solutions to financial institutions—Calicut City Service Co-operative Bank Limited, Akhil Kumar Gupta and Dvara Kshetriya Gramin



Financial Services Private Limited.

Set up in 2002, Calicut City Service Co-operative Bank caters to customers in the city of Kozhikode in Kerala. In March 31, 2019, the cooperative bank had 1.48 lakh members. It has 24 branches across the city. Dvara Kshetriya Gramin Financial Services, incorporated in 2008, by Dvara Trust provides financial services in rural areas. Details about Akhil Kumar Gupta were not available.

The applications will now be evaluated by the standing external advisory committee, set up by the RBI last month, under former deputy governor Shyamala Gopinath.

In the last round, the RBI gave two universal banking licences in April 2014 to

IDFC First Bank and Bandhan Bank. It gave 10 SFB licences in 2018, including to Janalakshmi, Ujjivan, RGVN (North East), among others.

The RBI had issued guidelines for on-tap licensing of universal banks in the private sector on August 1, 2016 and of SFBs on December 5, 2019.

By the 2016 guidelines, entities seeking universal bank licences must be individuals/entities with at least 10 years senior-level experience in banking and finance, private companies or groups with at least 10 years of good track record. Groups or companies seeking licences must have assets of Rs 5,000 crore and their non-financial businesses don't account for 40 per cent of these assets.

Farm jobs increase by 9 mn in FY21

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, APRIL 15

Employment in agriculture went up by 9 million in March 2021, a year after the pandemic struck the nation. Rural India has seen a churn as people who lost non-farm jobs have gone for farm jobs, finds private think-tank CMIE.

As people lost jobs, they moved from one kind of job to another in hunt for a new occupation. Large numbers eventually migrated to agriculture. As a result, employment in agriculture at the last count, in March 2021, was higher by 8 per cent compared to year-ago numbers.

Over 6 million salaried jobs were lost in rural India in 2020-21 and most of these would have migrated to farming. Rural India also saw nearly 3 million business persons being rendered unemployed.

However, productivity of this additional employment is low. Agricultural output is estimated to have increased by 2.3 per cent in almost each of the four quarters of 2020-21. The 8 per cent increase in labour implies a sharp fall in labour productivity.

"We believe that this huge influx of labour into agriculture during 2020-21 is largely disguised unemployment. It hides the greater employment challenge in March 2021 than the 5.4 million net jobs lost at the end of March 2021," said Mahesh Vyas, CEO, CMIE.

Travel M&A begins: Flipkart to buy Cleartrip in distress sale

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, APRIL 15

Marking the beginning of mergers & acquisitions in the pandemic-hit travel sector, Flipkart is acquiring online travel aggregator Cleartrip in a distress sale.

The e-commerce major on Thursday announced its decision to buy 100 per cent of Cleartrip's shareholding. The deal could be a mix of cash and equity and will see Cleartrip valued at \$40 million.

Cleartrip had raised \$75 million so far and was reportedly valued at \$300 million in 2016. Concur Technologies, DAG Ventures and Gund Investment are the key investors of



Cleartrip, which reported revenues of Rs 319 crore and loss of Rs 14 crore in FY20, according to Tofler.

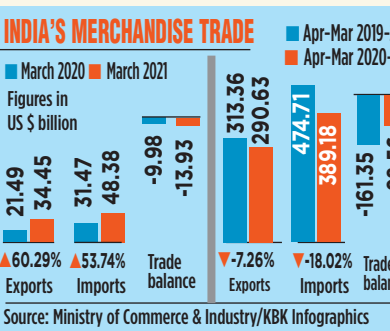
Cleartrip will continue to operate as a separate brand, retaining all employees while working closely with Flipkart to further develop technology solutions to make travel simple for customers.

Cleartrip, founded in 2006, has been competing with MakeMyTrip, Yatra,

Ebiz, and Booking.com. Most of the online travel aggregators have been suffering losses even before pandemic due to heavy competition and thin margins. The pandemic further hit the travel as well as hospitality industry badly. According to HVS Anarock, these industries will increasingly witness mergers and acquisition in 2021 owing to the financial stress.

"The Flipkart Group is committed to transforming customer experiences through digital commerce. This investment will help strengthen our wide range of offerings for customers," said Kalyan Krishnamurthy, CEO, Flipkart Group.

BUSINESS BRIEFS



WIPRO Q4 NET PROFIT UP 27.7%

New Delhi, April 15: Wipro on Thursday posted a 27.7 per cent jump in consolidated net profit at Rs 2,972 crore for the March 2021 quarter, and exuded confidence of sustaining strong growth momentum in the coming quarters. Wipro had posted a net profit (attributable to equity holders) of Rs 2,326.1 crore a year ago, as per Ind-AS.

Its revenue from operations rose by 3.4 per cent to Rs 16,245.4 crore from Rs 15,711 crore in the same period last fiscal. Wipro—which gets a bulk of its topline from IT services—said it expects revenues from that unit to be in the range of \$2,195 to \$2,238 million in the June 2021 quarter. This translates into a sequential growth of 2-4 per cent. —PTI

AMBANI SENDS OXYGEN TO MAHA



Mukesh Ambani

April 15: Mukesh Ambani is diverting oxygen produced at his refineries to help India battle a savage coronavirus outbreak that's paralysed the commercial capital. Reliance Industries Ltd, has started supplying oxygen from Jamnagar to Maharashtra at no cost, a company official said. Maharashtra will get 100 tonnes of the gas from Reliance, Eknath Shinde, urban development minister, said in a tweet. RIL is diverting some oxygen streams meant for its petcoke gasification units after making it suitable for medical use, the official said.

—Debjit Chakraborty/Bloomberg

GAMES

SHORT TAKES

Chess wizard Anand bereaved

Chennai: Five-time world chess champion Viswanathan Anand's father, K Viswanathan, died here on Thursday following brief illness. He was 92 and breathed his last at a city hospital, family sources said.

A former General Manager of the Southern Railway, Viswanathan is survived by two sons and a daughter.

Anand's wife Aruna described him as a great support to the celebrated chess player.

"He was a great support to Anand. He witnessed all of Anand's world championship victories," Aruna said.

"A simple man, he made sure his son had the right values. He took great pride in his achievements," she added. —PTI

Djokovic bows out of Monte Carlo

Monte Carlo: World number one Novak Djokovic crashed out of the Monte Carlo Masters in the last 16 on Thursday following a shock 6-4, 7-5 defeat by Britain's Dan Evans. Djokovic, the Monte Carlo champion in 2013 and 2015, was broken five times by the 33rd-ranked Evans and suffered his first loss of the year, having won the Australian Open for the ninth time in February. "To be honest this has been one of the worst matches from my side I can recall in the last few years," said Djokovic. "I felt awful on the court overall. Nothing worked. Just one of those days." —AFP

Aditi gets off to season's best start

Kapolei, US: Indian golfer Aditi Ashok carded three birdies in her first five holes to get off to her best start of the 2021 LPGA season with a 3-under 69 in the first round of the Lotte Championship. Aditi, playing her fifth event of the year, was under 70 for the first time this year and that should augur well for the 23-year-old from Bengaluru, who has made the cut in all four previous starts this year. Teeing off from the tenth, she birdied the 10th, 13th and 14th and turned in 3-under. Aditi was four shots behind co-leader Britanny Altomare and Filipina Yuka Saso (64). —PTI

Olympics could be cancelled

Tokyo, April 15: A senior Japanese politician said cancelling the Tokyo Olympics over the coronavirus remains a possibility on Thursday, as a surge in cases renews concerns about the Games with less than 100 days to go.

Toshiro Nikai, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's number two, said the Olympics must be cancelled "without hesitation" if the virus situation is too severe.

A year after their historic postponement, the 2020 Olympics remain beset by pandemic problems, with parts of the torch relay forced behind closed doors and public support consistently low.

Organisers and Olympic officials insist the Games

will go ahead safely, but Nikai said Thursday that all options were on the table. "We need to make a decision depending on the situation at the time," he told the private TBS television network.

"We need to cancel it without hesitation if they're no longer possible," added Nikai, who is the LDP's secretary general.

Asked if he considered cancellation an option, Nikai said: "Yes of course. If infection spreads because of the Olympics, I don't know what the Olympics is for."

He added however that he sees the Games as an "opportunity", and it was "important for Japan to foster excitement with

● **Toshiro Nikai, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's number two, said the Olympics must be cancelled "without hesitation" if the virus situation is too severe.**

support from the public". "We definitely want to make a success. In order to do so, there are various issues to solve. It's important to solve them one by one."

'MIGHT BE NO SPECTATORS'

The comments were quickly dismissed by an unnamed LDP official, who told the Jiji news

agency: "The Games will not be cancelled."

Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike said she had "been told that the comment meant it is an option".

"I take it as a message of strong encouragement that we contain the coronavirus by all means," she said.

Japan's vaccine minister meanwhile mooted the possibility of a total bar on spectators at the Games.

"We'll hold the Olympics in a form that is feasible," the *Asahi* newspaper quoted Taro Kono as saying.

"There might be no spectators."

Nikai's remarks come with fresh worries in Japan about what experts have called a fourth wave of infections.

Record numbers of cases have been reported in Osaka in recent days, and the government has been forced to authorise new restrictions just weeks after lifting a virus state of emergency.

Compounding the problem is the comparatively slow roll-out of the vaccine in Japan, which has so far only approved the Pfizer/BioNTech version.

Around 1.1 million people in the country of 126 million have received a first dose of vaccine so far, with the roll-out only expanding to the elderly this week. Despite the problems, Olympic organisers insist the Games can be held safely and have released virus rulebooks to allay public fears. —AFP

Foden fires Man City into semis

Dortmund (Germany), April 15: Manchester City set up a blockbuster Champions League semi-final against Paris Saint-Germain as Phil Foden's second-half winner sealed a 2-1 victory at Borussia Dortmund on Wednesday to send the Premier League leaders through 4-2 on aggregate.

England midfielder Jude Bellingham gave Dortmund an early lead, but a second-half Riyad Mahrez penalty and Foden's powerful strike moved City into the last four of Europe's top club competition for the second time.

Having also scored the 90th-minute winner to give City a 2-1 victory in last week's first leg in Manchester, England international Foden again broke Dortmund hearts.

"We are finally in the semi-finals and we're really happy," Guardiola told Sky with his team bidding to win four titles this season.

"The guys deserve it because what they have achieved this season is incredible."

Guardiola was full of praise for Mauricio Pochettino's PSG after they reached the last four by squeezing past holders Bayern Munich on away

THE RESULTS	
Borussia Dortmund (Bellingham 15)	1
Manchester City (Mahrez 55-pen, Foden 75)	2
(Manchester City win 4-2 on aggregate)	
Liverpool	0
Real Madrid	0
(Real Madrid win 3-1 on aggregate)	

goals.

"We saw yesterday how strong they (PSG) are, Neymar is an excellent player and they have eliminated the world's best team," said Guardiola.

"It's time to celebrate and drink a lot of wine, then prepare to face Chelsea (in the FA Cup semi-finals on Saturday)."

City had bowed out at the quarter-final stage in each of the last three seasons, and had to come from behind at Signal Iduna Park as Dortmund shrugged off their indifferent Bundesliga form to take the lead on 15 minutes.

Four days after scoring his first Bundesliga goal, Bellingham also hit the back of the net for the first time in the Champions League. —AFP



Manchester City's Phil Foden (right) celebrates after scoring against Borussia Dortmund in their Champions League quarterfinal second leg match in Dortmund, western Germany, on Wednesday. —AFP

SARITA FIGHTS BACK TO KEEP ASIAN TITLE

Almaty, April 15: Scripting a sensational comeback, an aggressive Sarita Mor reeled off nine straight points in the summit clash to retain her Asian Championship title in 59kg while Seema Bisla (50kg) and Pooja (76kg) settled for bronze medals here on Thursday. Sarita, who won gold at the 2020 championship, lagged 1-7 after a botched up challenge but turned it around with a tremendous fight back against Mongolian's Shoovdor Baatarjav.

Attempting a move at 1-3 on the edge of the mat, Sarita lost her balance, allowing her rival to get one point. However, the Mongolian's coach challenged the call to get her ward four points.

From there on, there was no stopping Sarita. She effected a take-down, following it up with an expose and then one more take down on the edge of the circle to make it 7-7.

At that juncture, time running out fast, the Mongolian camp challenged the call and lost that to give an extra point to Sarita, who won 10-7. —PTI

Hardik promoted in BCCI contracts

LIST OF BCCI'S ANNUAL CONTRACTS

GRADE A+ (₹7 crore): Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma, Jasprit Bumrah.

GRADE A (₹5 crore): R Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ajinkya Rahane, Shikhar Dhawan, K.L. Rahul, Mohammed Shami, Ishant Sharma, Rishabh Pant, Hardik Pandya.

GRADE B (₹3 crore): Wriddhiman Saha, Umesh Yadav, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Shardul Thakur, Mayank Agarwal.

GRADE C (₹1 crore): Kuldeep Yadav, Navdeep Saini, Deepak Chahar, Shubman Gill, Hanuma Vihari, Axar Patel, Shreyas Iyer, Washington Sundar, Yuzvendra Chahal, Mohammed Siraj.

Rookies Shubman Gill and Mohammed Siraj have got their maiden central contracts worth ₹1 crore in Grade C while Shardul Thakur has been elevated to group B. The trio has been rewarded for lion-hearted performances during India's historic Test triumph in Australia this year.

Among the demotions, pacer Bhuvneshwar Kumar has dropped to Grade B, which is worth ₹3 crore, while Kedar Jadhav has been dropped for good. —PTI

ALL-WIN DAY FOR INDIAN BOXERS AT YOUTH WORLDS

New Delhi, April 15: It was a second successive all-win day for Indian boxers at the youth world championships in Kielce, Poland with two from the women's contingent advancing to the quarterfinals after clinching dominating triumphs.

Poonam (57kg) and Vinka (60kg) won their bouts comprehensively to make the last-eight stage on Wednesday. While Poonam defeated Hungary's Beata Varga, Vinka sailed past Bosnia and Herzegovina's Tara Bohatjuk.

In the men's draw, Asian youth silver-medallist Ankit Narwal (64kg) advanced to the second round after a comprehensive 5-0 win over Slovakia's Miroslav Herceg.

In the 91kg category, Vishal Gupta notched up a comfortable unanimous victory over Bulgaria's Georgi Stoev to enter the round of 16. Also entering the pre-quarters was Vikas (52kg) after getting the better of Bulgaria's Yasen Radev 5-0. —PTI

