

THE ASIAN AGE

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No trade with India under current circumstances: Pakistan PM Imran Khan



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Kanika Kapoor, who made news for her Covid infection last year, is back to singing



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WINDOWS



Tourists try to protect themselves from scorching heat while visiting the Taj Mahal in Agra on Saturday. — PTI

Congress seeks review of CMP of Maha alliance

Mumbai: A delegation led by AICC incharge of Maharashtra Congress H.K. Patil on Saturday met Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray. The Congress leader sought the review of the CMP (Common Minimum Program) which was signed by all three constituents of the MVA government. The Congress delegation also discussed the current political situation and pandemic management in the state. A Congress leader said that the CMP will be reviewed in presence of NCP chief Sharad Pawar. ■ More on Page 3

TMC candidate gets Covid-19, replaced

Kolkata: In yet another candidate reshuffle, West Bengal's ruling Trinamul Congress has changed its face at Murarai assembly constituency in Birbhum, going to the Assembly Election on April 29 in the last phase, after he tested Covid-19 positive. Abdur Rahman has been replaced by Mosarraf Hossain.

Biden lifts Trump era curbs on ICC officials

Washington: President Joe Biden on Friday lifted sanctions that Donald Trump had imposed on two top officials of the International Criminal Court, undoing one of the past administration's more aggressive moves targeting international institutions and officials. ■ More on Page 6

COUNTERPOINT



Happy to hear that our party will get 200 plus seats... but we are contesting only in 120 seats!

WEATHER

Max: 37°C
Min: 21°C
RH: 14%
Rain: 0%
Forecast: Sunny

ASTROGUIDE

Sarvari: Uttarayana
Tithi: Phalguna Bahula
Ashtami till 3 am (Monday)
Star: Poorvashada till 2.07 am (Monday)
Variyam: 12.02 pm to 1.36 pm
Durmuhurtam: 12.02 pm to 1.36 pm
Rahukalam: 4.30 pm to 6 pm
SUNSET TODAY 6.40 PM
SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.06 AM
MOONRISE TOMORROW 1.59 PM
MOONSET TODAY 11.24 AM

C'garh: 5 jawans killed in Naxal strike

A woman Naxal also killed in encounter, 2nd major Naxal attack in C'garh in 10 days

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY
with agency inputs
RAIPUR, APRIL 3

Five security personnel were killed and more than 12 injured in an encounter with Maoists in Sukma district of Chhattisgarh on Saturday. Two of the dead were from the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). At least three Chhattisgarh police personnel are missing, police officers said.

The body of a woman Maoist was also recovered from the encounter spot, they said.

A senior police officer claimed, prima facie, Maoists have suffered a "huge loss" in the gunfight.

The encounter took place near Jonagunda village situated along the Sukma-Bijapur border when a joint team of security forces were out on a counterinsurgency operation, Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of police (Naxal Operation) O.P. Pal said. "Five jawans were killed and 12 others injured in the incident. Body of a



A security personnel is shifted for treatment after he was injured in an encounter with Naxals in Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh on Saturday. — PTI

woman Maoist was also recovered at the encounter site," Mr Pal said.

According to Mr Pal, a joint search party comprising personnel of Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA), Bastaria Battalion of CRPF comprising exclusively of youths of Bastar, district reserve group (DRG) and special task force (STF) of Chhattisgarh police were out on anti-Naxal operation since Friday night fol-

lowing specific intelligence input on gathering of Maoist cadres in large numbers in the area.

Drones spotted the Maoists' movement, sources said.

A senior police officer posted in Bastar told this newspaper that two joint search parties were mobilised from Sukma and Bijapur districts to launch anti-Naxal operation in Terram forest area following intelligence inputs on presence of Maoists' battalion number

► **THE ENCOUNTER** took place near Jonagunda village situated along the Sukma-Bijapur border when a joint team of security forces were out on a counterinsurgency operation

► **ON MARCH 23**, Maoists blew up a bus carrying DRG jawans in Kodanar area under Chhattisgarh's south Bastar district of Narayanpur by detonating improvised explosive device explosion killing 5 jawans and injuring 14 others.

one commander Hidma along with his militiamen in Terram area.

"Maoists laid ambush for one of the two search parties at an open ground on the outskirts of Jonagunda village under Jagargunda police limits at around 12 in the noon. A fierce gun battle ensued between them, leading to killing of a jawan of CoBRA and two security personnel each of DRG and Bastaria Battalion and injuries to 2 others.

"Body of a woman Naxal along with an Insas assault rifle was recovered at the encounter site," the police officer said, unwilling to be quoted since he was not authorised to speak to media.

Two Indian Air Force (IAF) helicopters were pressed into service to evacuate the injured jawans. All the injured jawans were airlifted to Raipur for medical treatment.

Another official said further clarity would emerge by Sunday morning as the area does not have adequate communication facilities.

This was the second major attack on security personnel by Naxals in Bastar in the last 10 days.

On March 23, Maoists blew up a bus carrying DRG jawans in Kodanar area under Chhattisgarh's south Bastar district of Narayanpur by detonating improvised explosive device explosion killing 5 jawans and injuring 14 others.

As many as 14 of the 27 districts in Chhattisgarh are affected by Naxal violence.

Himanta Biswa gets EC relief, 48-hour ban reduced by half

AGE CORRESPONDENT
GUWAHATI, APRIL 3

In what has come as huge relief for the BJP, the Election Commission on Saturday reduced the period of debarment of Assam minister and BJP leader Himanta Biswa Sarma from campaigning from 48 hours to 24 hours.

The commission which had imposed a ban of 48 hours on Mr Sarma on Saturday said, "The Commission having considered your aforesaid unconditional apology and assurance/undertaking in the representation has decided to modify its order dated April 2, 2021 and reduce the period of debarment from election campaigning from 48 hours to 24 hours to the effect that permission may be granted for holding any public meetings, public processions, public rallies, road shows, etc. by the district administration concerned where you are expected or likely to participate."



Himanta Biswa Sarma



Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a public rally ahead of third phase of Assam Assembly Elections 2021 in Baksa district on Saturday. — PTI

Assam for decades. "The 'mahajhooth' of 'mahajot' (grand alliance) has been disclosed. On the basis of my political experience and audience love, I can say that people have decided to form the NDA government in Assam. They can't bear those who insult Assam's identity and propagate violence," he added.

Mr Modi said, "The people of Assam are with vikas, stability, peace, brotherhood and unity. The people of Assam couldn't tolerate those who don't give due respect

to the Assamese pride and identity. In the last five years, the NDA's double engine government has given double benefits to the people."

Pointing out mega development projects completed by the BJP-led alliance government, Prime Minister said, "In the last five years, Bhupen Hazarika Setu, Bogibeel Bridge were built. Besides, construction work of half a dozen bridges is going on in the state. Whenever we make a scheme, we want that

■ Turn to Page 4

Covid rises further: 89K new cases, 714 deaths in 24 hours

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

India on Saturday recorded 89,129 new Covid-19 cases in a day, the highest daily rise in around six-and-a-half-months, taking the nationwide tally of infections to over 1.23 crore, according to the Union health ministry data on Saturday. The death toll increased to 1,64,110 with 714 more fatalities in a day, also the highest since October 21.

The jump in cases reported on Saturday was the highest since September 20 last year when 92,605 new infections were recorded in a span of 24 hours.

Corresponding to the rapid surge in cases, the number of active cases too has registered a steady increase for the 24th day in a row with the tally reaching 6,58,909, which is 5.32 per cent of the total infections. The recovery rate has further dropped to 93.36 per cent, the data stated.

The active caseload was the lowest at 1,35,926 on February 12 and comprised 1.25 per cent of the total infections.

ED attaches assets of TMC MP Roy, Ghosh & Debjani

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 3

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has provisionally attached assets, worth several crores, belonging to Kunal Ghosh, former Rajya Sabha MP from Trinamul Congress (TMC), Lok Sabha MP Satabdi Roy and Debjani Mukherjee as part of its money-laundering probe into the Saradha chit fund case.

In a statement issued here on Saturday, the ED said, "A provisional order for attachment of the movable and immovable properties has been issued under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). Assets belong to Kunal Ghosh, former Rajya Sabha MP from TMC (CEO of Media Group Saradha), Satabdi Roy, Lok Sabha MP from TMC (brand ambassador in Saradha), and Debjani Mukherjee who is a director in Saradha Group of companies in Saradha chit fund case." Assets

SARADHA CASE



worth ₹600 crore have been attached in this case till now. The ED is probing the money-laundering aspect of the alleged ponzi scam since April, 2013.

The Saradha group allegedly cheated thousands of depositors, promising abnormally high returns on investments in its illegal schemes. Mr Ghosh, who is out on bail in the case, was suspended from the TMC in 2013 for alleged anti-party activities. Ghosh had earlier spent 34 months in jail and was in the custody of West Bengal Police and CBI. He was granted bail on October 5, 2016. The former TMC MP headed a TV channel and a daily, which was funded by the

■ Turn to Page 4

Odisha: Bin, shoes hurled at Speaker of Assembly

Anger over passage of bills sans debate, 3 MLAs suspended

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO
BHUBANESWAR, APRIL 3

The Opposition Bharatiya Janata Party members on Saturday allegedly hurled shoes, earphones and dustbins at the Speaker's podium in Odisha Legislative Assembly. BJP members were angry with Speaker Dr Surjya Narayan Patro for passing the Bills without discussions in the House, and "bypassing other legislative norms".

Three lawmakers of the saffron party — Jayanarayan Mishra, Mohan Majhi and Bishnu Sethi — were suspended by Speaker Dr Surjya Narayan Patro for the remaining period of the ongoing Budget Session of the Assembly.

Ruckus broke out after the Speaker refused to allow an adjournment motion on the topic "mining business determining the politics in Odisha" brought out by Congress.

Joining the chorus, BJP MLAs also created pandemonium demanding a discussion on the matter. Later, shoes, headphones and other items were hurled at the Speaker's podium.

"Congress had brought the adjournment motion on mining scam and no discussion was possible after the Speaker rejected the proposal. The government on Saturday passed some Bills which is unfortunate. I came to know that shoes were hurled at the Speaker's podium which is not acceptable and I condemn it," said senior Congress leader Narasingha Mishra.

BJP MLA Jayanarayan Mishra said, "The way the Speaker is managing the function of the Assembly is not appropriate as all the rules and norms are being thrown to wind."

He further alleged that the Speaker was passing the Bills without bringing an order or inviting discussion.

Past of all candidates for public offices will be vetted China to ensure HK has only 'patriotic' officials

Hong Kong, April 3:

Candidates for public office in Hong Kong will have their entire history vetted, its top justice official said Saturday, after China announced a radical overhaul to ensure only "patriots" run the city. Beijing imposed sweeping changes on Hong Kong's electoral system on Tuesday, the latest step in an ongoing crackdown on the city's democracy movement after massive and often violent protests.

The latest amendments to the Basic Law, Hong Kong's mini-constitution, have ensured that a majority of lawmakers will be selected by a reliably pro-Beijing committee, and every candidate will be vetted by national security officers.

Hong Kong's justice secretary Teresa Cheng told pub-



Pro-democracy lawmaker Martin Lee, right, arrives at a court in Hong Kong Thursday. He alongwith 6 others was convicted on Thursday for organising and participating in a march during massive anti-government protests in 2019. — AP

lic broadcaster RTHK that the committee will consider "all the materials related to the candidates," including anything that is "suspected to have affected their loyal-

ty and allegiance."

Ms Cheng said there was no restriction on what could be reviewed. "We can't completely limit ourselves and say we will

only review things from the last three to five years, as we have to review everything in context... Maybe something he or she mentioned 10 years ago connects with what they said yesterday."

China's leaders have moved decisively to tighten their control of the international finance hub, dismantling Hong Kong's limited democratic pillars after massive protests broke out in 2019.

They imposed a national security law last year that outlawed much dissent. Dozens of campaigners have been prosecuted or jailed since, smothering protests in a city that had enjoyed greater political freedoms than the authoritarian mainland under the "One Country, Two Systems" arrangement. — AP

SHORT TAKES

Man held for killing brother-in-law over money dispute

New Delhi: A 57-year-old labourer was arrested for allegedly killing his brother-in-law over a money dispute in north Delhi's Narela, police said on Saturday. The arrest comes after the body of Karan Kumar (36) with his face burnt was found inside a vacant flat in Narela. There were injury marks on Kumar's neck and hands, and his face was burnt to hide his identity. After investigation, police arrested the accused, identified as Panna Ram, from Sector 4 in Bawana Industrial area on Friday, deputy commissioner of police (outer north) Rajeev Ranjan Singh said. During interrogation, Panna Ram revealed that after the death of his wife, he married another woman. Kumar was insisting him to register his property in the name of the accused's son Vikas, police said. The accused had also borrowed ₹29,000 from Kumar and was unable to return the money. Kumar used to insult him in front of his family members and other relatives over the issue, police said. On Wednesday night, the accused consumed liquor with Kumar and when his brother-in-law got drunk, he killed him with an axe. After his death, he burnt the body and fled from the spot, police added.

— PTI

Mewat gang ATM robber arrested

New Delhi: A 24-year-old member of a Mewat-based gang of ATM robbers, who was carrying a reward of ₹50,000 on him, was arrested from Haryana, Delhi Police said on Saturday. The accused Shorab, a resident of Nuh district in Haryana, was wanted in 20 cases of uprooting or breaking ATMs in Delhi and Haryana, and looting ₹2 crore, they said. "Police were informed that Shorab was hiding in Rajasthan and would go to Mewat through Silkho Toll Plaza in Nuh district on Friday between 4 am and 5 am. A police team was deployed near the toll plaza. On seeing police, Shorab got down from a taxi and tried to escape, but was nabbed. Shorab disclosed that he along with six gang members, including kingpin Shahid, had uprooted eight ATMs in Delhi and Haryana in 2019. He was absconding for two years. From December 2020 to January 2021, Shorab along with is brother Liyakat and six others the gang had broken 12 ATMs and looted cash cabins, the police officer said, adding they used to spray black paint on CCTV cameras at ATM booths and broke open the machines with gas cutters.

— PTI

20-yr-old held for robbing hotel staffer

New Delhi: A 20-year-old man was arrested for allegedly robbing a staffer of a luxury hotel in Chanakyapuri area of the national capital, police said on Saturday. The accused has been identified as Ankit, a resident of Bihar Bhawan, Kautilya Marg, Chanakyapuri, they said. On Thursday night, police received information regarding a scuffle near Samrat Hotel and upon reaching the spot, it was found that a man had been injured and taken to RML Hospital, a senior police officer said. The victim, Sita Ram (21), sustained an injury above his right eye and told police that he works as a housekeeping staffer at the Leela Palace Hotel, police said. On Thursday, he left the hotel after completing his shift and when he reached the bus stop near Ashoka Hotel on Vinay Marg at around 10:30 pm, a person suddenly hit him on his forehead with a cricket bat, they said. The attacker took Ram's mobile phone, Aadhaar card, hotel ID card and ₹300 and fled, they added. "During investigation, police got a tip-off and apprehended Ankit. We recovered the mobile phone, Aadhar card, hotel ID of the complainant and the bat used in the crime from Ankit's possession," additional deputy commissioner of police (New Delhi) Vikas Kumar said.

— PTI

St Stephen's campus turns Covid hotspot, 13 students test positive

A group of students including hostellers had gone on an educational trip to Dalhousie in Himachal

New Delhi, April 3: The St Stephen's College campus' "inner perimeter" has been rendered out of bounds after 13 resident students and two staffers tested Covid-19 positive, according to a notice issued by the institute's principal.

The notice, issued on Friday, said necessary and stringent measures have been put in place by the dean's office to ensure isolation and social distancing for "all residents."

The dean of residence-cum-college chaplain and mass steward (security officer), both of whom have tested positive for coronavirus, had taken a group of students including hostellers of the Delhi college for an educational trip to Dalhousie in Himachal Pradesh in the last week of March.

"The inner perimeter of the college is out of bounds for all, unless specific clearance is given by the principal on a case-by-case basis. The outer perimeter of the college may be accessed by those with relevant and regular work after due process at the security counter," the notice read.

Delhi records over 3,500 Covid-19 cases for 2nd day in row, 10 deaths

New Delhi, April 3: Delhi recorded 3,567 coronavirus cases for the second consecutive day on Saturday, while the positivity rate rose to 4.48 percent, according to the health department.

With the new infections, the number of cumulative cases rose to 6,72,381, while 10 more deaths took the toll to 11,060.

The city had reported 3,594 cases on Friday, the highest daily count this year.

The positivity rate rose to 4.48 percent from 4.11 per cent a day before, amid a massive surge in cases recorded over the past few weeks.

On December 3, the city had recorded 3,734 cases

while on December 4 the count was 4,067, according to official data.

Delhi had reported 2,790 cases on Thursday, 1,819 on Wednesday, 992 on Tuesday, 1,904 cases on Monday and 1,881 cases on Sunday.

It had reported 1,558 cases on Saturday, 1,534 cases last Friday, 1,515 cases last Thursday, 1,254 cases a day before that and 1,101 cases last Tuesday, when it had crossed the 1,000-mark for the first time since December 24.

The number of active cases rose to 12,647 from 11,994 a day before.

A total of 79,617 tests, including 57,296 RT-PCR tests, were conducted a

day ago, the bulletin said.

The number of people under home isolation rose to 6,569 from 6,106 a day ago. The containment zones rose to 2,618 from 2,338 on Friday, it said.

The number of cumulative cases as on January 1 had stood at over 6.25 lakh and the total fatalities were 10,557.

The number of daily cases had started to come down in February.

On February 26, the month's highest daily count of 256 cases was recorded.

However, the daily cases began to rise again in March and have been steadily increasing since then.

— PTI



Covid-19 vaccination centre for media persons above 45 years inaugurated at UPHC Daryaganj in New Delhi on Saturday.

— G.N. Jha

2-yr-old succumbs to injuries as hospitals claim no bed available

New Delhi, April 3: A two-year-old boy fell from the roof of his house here and succumbed to head injuries, even as the family alleged that several hospitals in the national capital denied him admission claiming that "beds were full due to the coronavirus pandemic".

Krishna was playing on the roof of his house in Majnu Ka Tila area in North Delhi when he fell at around 2 pm, his father Bhuvinder said.

He said the family took the boy to nearby Shushruta Trauma Centre, which referred him to a prominent central government-run hospital, where authorities allegedly denied him admission claiming that "beds were full due to Covid-19".

"From there, we took our child to two more central government hospitals, which also said the same thing," Bhuvinder claimed.

The family then approached authorities at the Delhi government-run Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Hospital, but "did not get any help".

A senior official at LNJP said the family had come to the trauma centre, "but were sent to another hospital with a doctor as beds were full". "We finally returned to the Shushruta Trauma Centre, where the child was declared dead at around 9 pm," the father said.

— PTI

At 11.7 °C, Delhi records lowest minimum April temperature in 12 years

New Delhi, April 3: Delhi recorded a minimum of 11.7 degrees Celsius on Saturday, which is the lowest in the month of April in at least 12 years, according to the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

Cool, northerly winds led to a sharp dip in the minimum temperature in Delhi, said Mahesh Palawat, vice president (Meteorology and Climate Change) at Skymet Weather, a private weather forecasting agency.

He also said there are no chances of a "heatwave" in Delhi for another week.

The higher reaches of Western Himalayas have been witnessing snowfall and the adjacent areas in the plains are receiving rain intermittently since March last week due to successive Western Disturbances, he said.

"The skies over Delhi have remained mostly clear over the last few days, while strong winds have reduced pollution levels. It allowed the infrared radiation to escape back to space," Palawat said.

The Saffardjung Observatory, which pro-

vides representative data for the city, recorded a minimum of 11.7 degrees Celsius, seven notches below normal.

The weather station at Lodhi Road recorded a low of 10.6 degrees Celsius, which was 7.4 degrees Celsius below normal, the IMD said.

The lowest minimum temperature for the month of April was 14.4 degrees Celsius last year, 16.2 degrees Celsius in 2019 and 17.6 degrees Celsius in 2018.

The city had recorded 10.7 degrees Celsius on April 2, 1965 — the all-time record, according to IMD data. Minimum temperatures fell appreciably in Punjab and Haryana, too.

Chandigarh registered a minimum of 12.3 degrees Celsius, Hissar 10.4 degrees Celsius and Karnal 9.5 degrees Celsius.

The maximum temperature in the capital is likely to increase to 38 degrees Celsius by Monday, the IMD said. On Monday last, maximum temperature shot up to 40.1 degrees Celsius, making it the hottest day in Delhi in March in 76 years.

— PTI

Constable's wife suicide case: Cross cases filed, say cops

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 3

The Delhi Police has registered cross cases in connection of the incident where a constable's wife hanged herself at her house in southwest Delhi's Ghitorni village, officials said on Saturday.

"We have registered cross cases. On the complaint of the deceased's family, case has been registered against constable Sushil for dowry death and on complaint of Sushil, a case of attempt to murder of his children has been registered against his wife," a senior police officer said.

On Thursday, a Delhi Police constable's wife allegedly hanged herself at her house in Ghitorni village.

The couple's two sons, Samarth (3) and Shreshth (3 months), were found unconscious in the bathroom and were rushed to the Fortis Hospital in Vasant Kunj where they are undergoing treatment, the police said.

The couple got married in 2014, the police said.

Top cop bats for capsule courses to sharpen officers' investigative skills

New Delhi, April 3: Delhi Police commissioner S.N. Shrivastava on Saturday stressed on capsule courses for officers to sharpen their investigative skills and to keep them updated with the latest legal and scientific developments.

During a video conference with officers, the commissioner also reviewed the actions taken to implement Covid-19 guidelines, officials said. He also took stock of the law and order situation during the meeting, they said.

Shrivastava reviewed cases related to Covid-19 guideline violations and the status of anti-coron-

avirus vaccination of personnel in different police districts and units, the officials said.

"Cases of crime against women and kidnapping and those related to the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act were analysed along with other cases," Delhi Police additional public relation officer Anil Mittal said.

The Disposal rate of cases was also discussed in the meeting, he said.

The commissioner emphasised conducting capsule courses for station house and investigating officers to sharpen their investigative skills and keep them abreast of lat-



S.N. Shrivastava

est legal and scientific aspects of investigation, police said. Mittal said that appraisal of action plan vis-a-vis targets for each police station was also discussed.

The ongoing process of listing criminals and the strategy to keep a vigil on them were reviewed along with the action plan to

keep a tab on jailed criminals and those out on bail, he said. Shrivastava asked officers to keep an eye on criminals whose bail or parole periods are nearing a close, Mittal said.

The commissioner also examined the status of complaints in the Integrated Complaints Management System and asked officers to ensure speedy disposal. The status of usage of e-beat book was also reviewed, he said.

The action taken to check noise pollution in pursuance of directions of the National Green Tribunal was discussed and Shrivastava directed for strict implementation of norms, police said.

— PTI

Vagabond held for throwing stones at temple

New Delhi, April 3: Holding a grudge against God for giving him a life of vagabond, a 28-year-old man allegedly threw stones and bricks at a temple in west Delhi's Punjabi Bagh on Saturday, police said.

The man, identified as Vicky Mal, has been arrested, they said.

Ranjeet Pathak, the priest at Vaishno Mata Mandir, found that two statues of Lord Shiva, which were kept in an open area of the temple, were broken Saturday morning.

Stones and brick pieces were also found lying inside the temple premises, police said.

During investigation, police analysed CCTV footage and found that Mal, who worked as a ragpicker, was behind the incident.

The accused used to work with his father before the coronavirus-induced lockdown. His father later went back to Motihari in Bihar.

Mal started holding grudge against God for giving him the life of a vagabond, a police officer said.

An FIR was registered against the accused under IPC sections 295A (deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs) and 457 (lurking house-trespass or house-breaking by night in order to commit offence punishable with imprisonment), he said, adding that further investigation is underway.

— PTI



Residents search for their belongings after fire in a slum of Nathupur village in Gurugram on Saturday. Nearly 700 shanties were gutted.

— PTI

SHORT TAKES

BJP leader shot dead in Gorakhpur

Gorakhpur: A 52-year-old local BJP leader, a contestant in the panchayat elections in Narayanpur in Uttar Pradesh, was shot dead while he was returning home after attending a public meeting, police said on Saturday. Three people were detained following the killing of Brijesh Singh on Friday night in the Moghla area. The fourth accused is at large, they said. Singh was shot around 11 pm and was rushed to the BRD Medical College, where doctors declared him dead, police said. Based on a complaint from Singh's family members, a case was registered at the Gulriha police station and Sunil Srivastav, Vinay Srivastav and Ramsamujh were detained on Saturday, they said, adding that teams have been formed to nab Pawan Srivastav. Panchayat elections will be held across Uttar Pradesh in four phases on April 15, April 19, April 26 and April 29. Counting of votes will be done on May 2. On the probe into the case, Gorakhpur Senior superintendent of police Dinesh Kumar P. on Saturday said, "It is very early to say anything, but police have started investigating the matter and are collecting clues, and very soon the case will be solved." — PTI

TN: BJP, AIADMK workers held

Coimbatore: A total of 14 workers of two political parties were arrested for allegedly distributing cash to voters in two areas here on Saturday, police said. Based on information, the police went to an area in Coimbatore south constituency where they caught 12 BJP workers distributing the money to residents. A sum of ₹46,000 was seized from them and six two-wheelers were impounded, the police said. In another incident, two AIADMK workers were held for distributing money in an area coming under Coimbatore north constituency, they said. A total of Rs 24,500 in cash was seized from their possession, they added. — PTI

TMC changes its candidate in Murarai

Kolkata: In yet another candidate reshuffle, West Bengal's ruling Trinamul Congress has changed its face at Murarai Assembly constituency in Birbhum, going to the Assembly Election on April 29 in the last phase, after he tested Covid-19 positive. On Saturday night it informed in a statement that Abdur Rahman, who has been admitted to a hospital since March 26 for getting infected by the virus, has been replaced by Mosarrif Hossain. Chief minister Mamata Banerjee's party earlier replaced at least five candidates in wake of dissent against them. — PTI

74 WOMEN CANDIDATES IN FRAY IN ASSAM

Guwahati: Political parties have made promises galore to woo the 49.35 per cent strong women electorate but only 74 women candidates are in the fray for the three-phase Assam Assembly elections in 2021. The number of women candidates in this year's Assembly election is less compared to the last two state assembly polls. In the 2016 Assam Assembly election, there were 91 women candidates in the fray with eight of them winning while in 2011, 85 women contested and 14 made it to the Assembly, the highest so far elected to the House. The 74 candidates comprise a mere 7.82 per cent of the total 946 candidates in the fray for the 126 member Assembly. Notwithstanding their poor representation, women came out in large numbers, outnumbering men in the first phase with 76.07 per cent of the total 40,32,481 female electorate exercising their franchise while 75.79 per cent of the 40,77,210 male voters and 11.29 per cent of the 124 third gender cast their vote. In the second phase, women were a mere .06 per cent behind men voters with 80.94 of the 36,09,959 women electorate exercising their franchise as against 81 per cent of the total 37,34,537 male electorate and 5.9 per cent of the 135 third gender voters. — PTI

Cong seeks relook at CMP of Maha govt

Delegation raises issue of discrimination regarding the allocation of funds to Congress legislators

SONU SHRIVASTAVA
MUMBAI, APRIL 3

A delegation led by AICC incharge of Maharashtra Congress H.K. Patil on Saturday met Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray. The Congress leader sought the review of the CMP (Common Minimum Program) which was signed by all three constituents of the MVA government. The Congress delegation also discussed the current political situation and pandemic management in the state. A senior Congress leader told this newspaper that

the CMP will be reviewed in presence of NCP chief Sharad Pawar and Mr Thackeray by the party's Central leadership.

The delegation also raised the issue of discrimination regarding the allocation of funds to Congress legislators and how it can be resolved with Mr Thackeray.

After the meeting with the chief minister, Mr Patil said that the departments, which are handled by the Congress party ministers, are facing a shortage of funds. "Mr Thackeray assured that he would look into it. The chief minister has said



H.K. Patil

▶ **THE CONGRESS** delegation also discussed the current political situation and pandemic management in the state

▶ **A SENIOR** Congress leader told this newspaper that the CMP will be reviewed in presence of NCP chief Sharad Pawar and Mr Thackeray

that he would see if there are any lapses, he would resolve it as immediately as possible," he said.

The Congress leader said that there are some objections raised over fund allocations and implementation of CMP by the party leaders.

"We have demanded a

committee to review the CMP implementation. There should be two leaders from each party in the committee," he said.

Maharashtra Congress president Nana Patole, Revenue Minister Balasaheb Thorat and PWD Minister Ashok Chavan were part of the

delegation. The delegation also raised the issue of Congress interim president Sonia Gandhi's letter on the need for having uninterrupted budgetary allocation for the welfare schemes meant for tribals and poor. A section of Congress leaders feel that the Shiv Sena and Nationalist Congress Party have been pushing their own agendas through the government while the issues important for Congress are not given due importance.

Senior Congress leader and state revenue minister Balasaheb Thorat said that a detailed discussion

was held regarding the CMP in the meeting. "It would be reviewed to know what has been achieved so far and what needs to be done," he said.

At present, the MVA government is battling controversies including the allegations of corruption levelled by former Mumbai police chief Param Bir Singh against state home minister and NCP leader Anil Deshmukh. The BJP had accused the MVA government of failing to manage the pandemic effectively and also indulging in corruption in the transfers of policemen.

BJP engineering communal strife to win polls, says Didi

Raidighi, April 3: West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee on Saturday accused the BJP of engineering communal strife in the state to win the Assembly elections.

The TMC chief, while addressing an election rally in Raidighi in South 24 Parganas district, also called upon Muslims not to "fall in the trap of a BJP-aided party from Hyderabad and its Bengal ally that are out to polarise votes."

Her jibe was apparently aimed at Asaduddin Owaisi-led AIMIM and Abbas Siddiqui's ISF. Both Owaisi and Siddiqui had earlier denied the TMC's insinuations. The ISF is fighting the elections in alliance with the CPI(M) and the Congress.

The TMC supremo also urged Hindus to be on the guard against the BJP's attempts to "instigate communal clashes" and called upon them to chase away outsiders sent to foment trouble in their respective localities.

Affirming her Hindu identity, in an apparent attempt to counter the minority appeasement



West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee during an election rally at Howrah district in Bengal on Saturday. — ASIAN AGE

charge against her, Ms Banerjee said, "I am a devout Hindu who recites Chandi mantra every day before leaving home. But I believe in our tradition of giving respect to every religion."

Taking a dig at BJP leaders having lunch at houses of Dalits, she said, "I am a Brahmin woman. But my

all-time associate is a Scheduled Caste woman who takes care of all my needs. She also cooks food for me." "I need not advertise this as those bringing five-star hotel lunch to eat at the courtyard of a Dalit home are anti-Dalit, anti-backward caste and anti-minority in nature," she said. — PTI

■ Accuses Bengal CM of abusing electronic voting machine

PM Modi slams Mamata Banerjee

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, APRIL 3

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday accused West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee of abusing the EVM, the Election Commission (EC), and the Central paramilitary forces over her failure to engineer Chappa Vote (rigging) for her victory in the ongoing Assembly election.

Mr Modi also advised the Trinamul Congress supremo to "accept" her much awaited defeat and warned her to "control" the goons of her party referring to his presence in the state.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi during an election rally in Hooghly district on Saturday. — PTI

"If a player repeatedly raises questions on the umpire, it means there is something wrong in his game. In poll-battle, if someone blames EVM and EC, it means her game is

over. Didi, defeat is in front of you. It is better if you accept it," Mr Modi told the two-time CM, over her allegations of foul play in the polling, from a Bharatiya Janata Party

Why does PM never say 'CPM Mukht Bharat': Rahul Gandhi

Koyilandy, April 3: Attacking Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his 'Congress Mukht Bharat' jibe, Rahul Gandhi on Friday said the BJP leader seems to have issues only with the grand old party and not with the CPI(M).

"Wherever the Prime Ministers go, he keeps saying Congress Mukht Bharat (Congress Free India)."

When he gets up in the morning, he says Congress Mukht Bharat and when he goes to sleep he says 'Congress Mukht Bharat'.

Why does the PM never say 'CPI(M) Mukht Bharat'? Modi never says that.

Somehow he does not have a problem with the Left front and has a problem with the Congress, the Wayanad MP, who reached Kerala on the final phase of campaigning for the April 6 Assembly polls, said at a meeting here.

While the Congress was a unifying force, the Left front was divisive, he said adding "wherever we go, we unify everybody."

We are a unifying force. Wherever we go we identify everybody and unite them and make them strong."

Taking on the RSS, he said they understand that the real threat to them comes from those who unite everybody. "And they understand very well, just like them, the Left front is also a divider of society."

The Left front is also an ideology of violence and anger.

Congress never spreads anger or hatred and only unites".

Any division will weaken the country and the state, he said, adding the Congress' ideologists the belief that all Indians are equal and the country will progress only when it is united. — PTI

Top leaders turn up heat in last leg of Kerala campaign

Amit Shah says Rahul 'Baba' tourist in Wayanad

AGE CORRESPONDENT
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, APRIL 3

With just a day left for the campaigning to end for the Kerala Assembly polls, most top leaders of the BJP, Congress, and Left are crisscrossing the state trying to reach out to maximum voters across 14 districts.

Union home minister Amit Shah addressed election meetings in Rahul Gandhi's constituency, Wayanad. "Rahul was the MP of Amethi for 15 years. But he didn't do anything for the people of Amethi. I have not seen a tourist politician like Rahul 'Baba.' Just look where Amethi is and where Wayanad is. He has come here only for tourism. Nothing is going to happen in Wayanad's development," he said.

At an election meeting in Koyilandy, about 80 km from Mr Shah's venue in Meenangadi in Wayanad, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi attacked Prime Minister Narendra Modi. "The Prime Minister, wherever he goes, says Congress mukt bharat. When he gets up in the morning he says Congress mukt bharat, while going to bed in the night he again says Congress mukt bharat. But he never says CPM mukt bharat. Why does the PM never say CPM



Union home Minister Amit Shah during a roadshow at Thyagaraya Nagar in Chennai on Saturday. — PTI

mukt bharat?" he asked. Mr Gandhi said the Prime Minister somehow does not have a problem with the Left front.

"We are a unifying force. But like BJP-RSS, the CPM is also a divider of society," he said.

Chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who is leading the LDF campaign in neighbouring Kannur district, slammed Mr Modi for allegedly creating a fake picture of Kerala's development model.

The chief minister said that under the present circumstances, the BJP might not even get the vote share that it had received in the 2016 election.

Mr Vijayan said it was the Congress which

UP CM calls for Mamata's ouster

Falta/ Kuituli/Uluberia (WB), April 3: Calling upon people to oust the Mamata Banerjee government, Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath said on Saturday that the BJP, if voted to power in Bengal, will ensure security for all women and create job opportunities for the youth. Adityanath, who addressed two rallies during the day, also said that those who had tried to stop Durga puja and Saraswati puja will be put behind bars, if the saffron party forms government in Bengal. — PTI

helped the BJP open its account in Kerala Assembly in 2016 and alleged that there were reports of underhand dealings between the two parties this time as well.

With the Election Commission (EC) banning the grand finale, the campaign on the last day is going to be low key and less noisy. Usually, the campaign in Kerala ends with a grand finale in almost all main towns and city centres in each Assembly constituency. The campaign reaches a crescendo in the final hours with workers of each political party assembling in large numbers at the junctions.

Tikait accuses BJP cadre for attack on his convoy

Aligarh, April 3: Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader Rakesh Tikait claimed on Saturday that the attack on his convoy of vehicles in Rajasthan's Alwar was "pre-planned by BJP workers" and said it should serve as a reminder to the farmers protesting against three new agriculture laws of the Centre about the travails and challenges they are going to face in the days to come.

Addressing a "kisan mahapanchayat" at Bhaimalkhedha village in this Uttar Pradesh district, Tikait said such attacks "are, in fact, strengthening our resolve to further intensify our struggle, which is a battle for our existence".

Talking to reporters after the "Mahapanchayat", he said, "We are mentally prepared for more such inci-

dents."

Stones were allegedly pelted at the convoy of Tikait, an influential farmer leader, in Rajasthan's Alwar district on Friday, damaging the rear windshield of his car. Police had detained a student leader, who the BKU claimed belonged to the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and accused the saffron party of being behind the attack.

Addressing the "mahapanchayat" here, Tikait issued a call to the protesting farmers to be mentally prepared to continue with their agitation at least till the end of the year, when they would taste victory.

He urged them to be mobile phone savvy so that they can be active on social media.

Tikait, who held a

"mahapanchayat" in Aligarh for the first time after the farmers' agitation was launched in November last year, alleged that corporates had fully entrenched themselves in the present ruling dispensation, including the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).

He said how else can one explain the construction of huge grain depots and godowns in several parts of the country "even before the controversial farm laws came to existence". The BKU leader said this itself provides conclusive evidence of the government's intentions.

He warned the farmers that even more draconian measures are on the anvil as far as the farm laws are concerned, including stringent regulations regarding crop seeds.

— PTI

Goalpara: EC transfers Himanta's cop brother

Guwahati, April 3:

After barring Assam minister Himanta Biswa Sarma from campaigning in the assembly polls for 48 hours, the Election Commission has also transferred his brother and Goalpara Superintendent of Police Sushanta Biswa Sarma from the district.

An order issued by the Commission on Friday said that Sarma shall be transferred to some suitable post in the state headquarters and IPS officer Veera Venakata Rakesh Reddy shall be posted with immediate effect as the new superintendent of police of Goalpara district, which will go to polls in the third and last phase on April 6.

The order, signed by Election Commission under secretary Love Kush Yadav, also stated that the compliance report shall be furnished to the Commission immediately.

— PTI

Magisterial probe ordered into Assam EVM row

Karimganj/Hailakandi,

April 3: A magisterial probe has been ordered to determine why a polling team in Assam carried an EVM in a vehicle owned by the wife of a BJP candidate, officials said on Saturday. Karimganj District Deputy Superintendent Anbamuthan MP issued an order on Friday night to probe the incident, which has snowballed into a huge controversy amid the ongoing Assam assembly elections, the last phase of which is slated for Tuesday.

Additional district magistrate Rajeshan Terang has been asked to conduct the enquiry and submit a detailed report within three days.

"... This incident posed a threat to security of the polled EVMs and has an adverse effect on the law and order situation," the order said.

The probe will also find out the circumstances leading to the

poll party travelling in a private vehicle, and ascertain whether there was any lapse or conspiracy on the part of the authorities.

Violence had broken out on the outskirts of Karimganj town on Thursday night after a crowd spotted a BJP candidate's vehicle being used to transport a polled EVM to the strong room, prompting the police to fire in the air to bring the situation under control.

The poll team from Ratabari constituency claimed that its official vehicle broke down midway, forcing them to ask for a lift from a passing vehicle, which turned out to be that of the wife of BJP's Patharkandi candidate.

Sitting MLA Krishnendu Paul is the BJP candidate from the Patharkandi seat, while Ratabari is currently represented by his party MLA Bijoy Malakar, who is contesting the election as well. — PTI

R'sthan guv names his dog Chintamani

Jaipur, April 3: Rajasthan governor Kalraj Mishra on Saturday adopted a stray dog and named it Chintamani.

Governor Mishra also appealed to the people to sympathise with stray dogs and come forward to look after them, the Rajasthan Bhawan said in a statement.

He also insisted on campaigning to save dogs of Indian species, it added. Viren Sharma of "Protection of Animal and Welfare Society", an organisation working for the protection of animal lovers and stray dogs helped in the adoption, the statement said. PM Modi, had also appealed to the people in the "Mann Ki Baat" some time ago to come forward to protect stray dogs. — PTI

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SHORT TAKES

Water war leaves
2 injured in MP

Bhopal: A video showing clashes between two women over drawing water from a bore well in a village in Panna district under parched Bundelkhand region went viral on Saturday, bringing to focus the acute water crisis facing the belt. The incident took place in the village of Malghan in Panna district on Friday. The war broke out between two women — Rama Bai and Sushila Bai — in the village over jumping the queue to fetch water from the bore well, the only water source in the area. It was a moving sight as the two elderly women were seen in the video clip attacking each other with metal pitchers. Panic has set in among the womenfolk in the village as the water level in the bore well has started shrinking fast and, hence, there was a tussle among women to draw water from the borewell, the police said.

Night curfew in
10 Odisha districts

Bhubaneswar: The Odisha government on Saturday decided to clamp night curfew restrictions in 10 districts which witnessed a surge in Covid-19 cases in the past four days. As per a latest notification issued by the special relief commissioner, the night curfew will be clamped in Sundergarh, Jharsuguda, Sambalpur, Bargarh, Nuapada, Bolangir, Kahalandi, Nabarangpur, Koraput and Malkangiri. The night curfew restrictions will come into effect from April 5 from 10 pm to 5 am. All the shops, commercial establishments, offices, institutions and movement of individuals shall remain closed/ prohibited between 10 PM and 5 AM, except for essential activities in these districts. The district collectors/ municipal commissioners shall issue orders in their respective jurisdictions, under appropriate provisions of law and ensure strict compliance.

In-laws strip woman
naked, beat her up

Kendrapara, Odisha: A 24-year-old woman was on Saturday allegedly stripped naked and beaten up by in-laws in Odisha's Kendrapara district, and the footage of the incident has gone viral on social media, a police officer said. The woman's uncle has filed a complaint with the local police station, following which a probe has been launched in the matter, he said. According to Kabuli Barik, the inspector of Nikirai police station in the district, some locals in Koruk village had tried to intervene to rescue the woman, who was apparently tortured for not being able to fulfil dowry demands. Her family members, however, did not pay heed to any of their requests. The woman's statement has been recorded. — PTI

8 LINKED TO PFI
FACE SEDITION,
OTHER CHARGES

Mathura: Eight people linked to Popular Front of India, including its students' wing leader K A Rauf Sherif and Kerala journalist Siddique Kappan, were charge-sheeted by Uttar Pradesh police's Special Task Force in a court here for sedition, criminal conspiracy, funding of terror activities and other offences. Five of the accused — Campus Front of India's (CFI) national general secretary Sherif, CFI national treasurer Atikur Rahman, Delhi CFI general secretary Masud Ahmed, Kappan and Mohammed Alam, who is a member of the CFI and the PFI — were present in the court of Additional District and Sessions Judge Anil Kumar Pandey. Two other accused — Anshad Badruddin and Firoz Khan — attended the hearing through video conferencing. The STF has also filed a charge sheet against accused Danish," district government counsel Shiv Ram Singh said. Defence counsel Madhuban Dutt said that the 5000-page chargesheet has been filed against the eight accused and they will consider moving the high court after going through it. The court has fixed the next hearing on May 1. Kappan along with Rahman, Masud Ahmed and Alam was arrested in October last year while they were heading to Hathras where a 19-year old dalit girl had allegedly been gangraped and murdered. — PTI

Narrow escape



A sleeper bus, which was en route to Delhi from Bihar's Purnia, caught fire on the Agra-Lucknow expressway in the Usrahara area on Saturday. However, no casualties were reported. As soon as the bus caught fire, the driver and the conductor fled from the spot, leaving the vehicle behind. The passengers leaped off the vehicle in order to save their lives. According to reports, there were around 50-70 passengers in the bus at the time of incident. — PTI



Farooq Abdullah

Farooq in
hospital days
after testing
Covid-19 +veYUSUF JAMEEL
SRINAGAR, APRIL 3

Former J&K chief minister and NC president Farooq Abdullah was admitted to a hospital here on Saturday, days after testing positive for Covid-19.

Sources close to him said that 83-year-old Abdullah was taken to Srinagar's Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences after he showed some health-related signs and symptoms of concern.

However, his son Omar Abdullah said in a tweet, "Based on the advice of doctors to enable them to better monitor my father, he has been admitted to hospital in Srinagar". He also said, "Our family remains grateful to everyone for their messages of support & their prayers."

Senior Abdullah who is a Lok Sabha member representing home constituency Srinagar had tested positive for coronavirus on March 30, four weeks after getting the first Covid-19 vaccine.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi was among the first who wished him a speedy recovery. He had tweeted, "Praying for the good health and speedy recovery of Dr Farooq Abdullahji. Also praying for your and the entire family's good health Omar Abdullahji."

Meanwhile, J&K reported 501 fresh cases, the third-highest single-day count in three days, taking the total infection tally in the UT to 132,439.

J&K Bank ex-chief held
for tender award fraudAGE CORRESPONDENT
SRINAGAR, APRIL 3

Jammu and Kashmir's anti-graft agency on Saturday arrested the former chairman of a semi-state-owned bank for allegedly being involved in tender fraud in house-keeping.

A spokesman of J&K Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) said Parvez Ahmad Nengroo, ex-chairman of J&K Bank Limited, was arrested in connection with the investigation in a case pertaining to the illegal allotment of tenders for housekeeping to a Mumbai-based Company M/S SILA Solutions Pvt. Ltd "by not following proper tendering norms as provided in the contract to the said firm despite not falling into the criteria of any such allotment".

He claimed that due to the improper tendering processes and ATM cleaning, undue addition of the management fee and other omissions and commissions detected during the course of the investigation, the J&K Bank suffered losses to the tune of

over ₹6.29 crores from the date of award of contract. The ACB had earlier filed a chargesheet against Mr Nengroo in connection with alleged illegal appointments in J&K Bank. As per the chargesheet, the bank suffered a loss of more than ₹250 crore on account of salary paid to these "illegally appointed employees over a period of time". The J&K Bank is registered as a private sector bank even though the state has a 59.3 per cent stake in it. The bank is the only listed company of the J&K which has control of the erstwhile state's (now split in Union territories of J&K and Ladakh) 60 per cent loans and deposits.

Sources said that a team of ACB raided the house of Mr Nengroo in Srinagar and arrested him formally.

counterinsurgency special operations group, the Army and CRPF laid siege to Ghat Mohalla locality of Kakapora area of Pulwama early Friday. Soon surging crowds had clashed with the security forces which fired live ammunition to control the situation, leaving eleven residents including a woman injured.

The police on Saturday said that ten persons who indulged in "stone-pelting" during the operation have been arrested.

Three local militants were killed in a firefight that broke out after a joint team of the J&K police's

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10 arrested for holding protests,
stone-pelting near encounter siteAGE CORRESPONDENT
SRINAGAR, APRIL 3

The Jammu and Kashmir police has arrested 10 persons, mainly youth, for allegedly holding protests and pelting security forces with stones in their attempt to disrupt an operation launched by them against militants in southern Pulwama district on Friday.

Three local militants were killed in a firefight that broke out after a joint team of the J&K police's

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Imran Khan: No trade
with India right now

Decision taken after meeting with key Cabinet members

SAJJAD HUSSAIN
ISLAMABAD, APRIL 3

Prime Minister Imran Khan decided that Pakistan cannot go ahead with any trade with India under the current circumstances after holding consultations with key members of his Cabinet on importing cotton and sugar from the neighbouring country, a media report said on Saturday.

The Prime Minister after consultations on Friday instructed the ministry of commerce and his economic team to immediately take steps to facilitate the relevant sectors, value added, apparel and sugar, by finding alternative cheap sources of import of the needed commodities, the Dawn newspaper quoted sources as saying.

Various proposals have been presented to the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) which considers these suggestions from an economic and commercial point of view. After consideration



Imran Khan

by the ECC, its decisions are presented to the Cabinet for ratification and final approval, the report said.

In the present case, a proposal was presented to the ECC to allow the import of cotton, cotton yarn and sugar from India keeping in view domestic requirements, it said.

With regards to the ECC decision to allow import of sugar, cotton and cotton yarn from India, Mr Khan held consultations with key members of his Cabinet Friday and decided that Pakistan could not go ahead with any trade with India under the current circumstances, it said.

The ECC had decided on commercial grounds to

recommend these imports for the Cabinet's consideration.

While the decision was not on the formal agenda of the Cabinet meeting, the issue was brought up by Cabinet members and the PM instructed that the ECC's decision be deferred and immediately reviewed, the report said.

The Cabinet headed on Thursday rejected the proposal of the high-powered committee to import cotton from India, with foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi asserting that there can be no normalisation of ties until New Delhi reverses its decision in 2019 to revoke the special status of J&K.

Pakistan's U-turn came a day after the ECC, under newly-appointed Finance Minister Hammad Azhar, recommended importing cotton and sugar from India, lifting a nearly two-year-long ban on its import from the neighbouring country amidst tensions over the Kashmir issue. — PTI

Girl medico
alleges ragging
by her seniorsAGE CORRESPONDENT
BHUBANESWAR, APRIL 3

A girl student of Odisha Medical College of Homoeopathy and Research (OMCH&R) at Sambalpur has accused five senior students of her college of torturing and harassing her mentally.

The victim also lodged a complaint with the National Anti-Ragging cell, New Delhi, in this regard. Based on the complaint, the cell has directed the authorities of OMCH&R to initiate an enquiry into the matter and submit a report. Following the instructions, the anti-ragging cell of OMCH&R on Friday started inquiry into the incident, said Dr Rajendra Kumar Singh, principal of the college.

The girl had been rushed to the Kanpur hospital for specialised treatment as she had received severe burn injuries on Tuesday, they said.

H a m i r p u r Superintendent of Police Narendra Kumar Singh said the class IX student had set herself on fire on Tuesday over repeated harassment and molestation by a 16-year-old boy.

On the complaint of the victim's family, a case was registered against the minor boy, who was held on Thursday and produced before a juvenile court which sent him to a juvenile home, the SP said.

Following the girl's death, an additional section of murder would be included in the case against him, the SP said.

The girl's family had earlier alleged that the boy often used to tease and harass her and had done the same on Monday.

They had also accused the police of letting the boy go only after warning him.

Disturbed by repeated harassments and molestation, the girl had sprinkled kerosene on herself around 8 am on

Thursday and set herself ablaze, the girl's family members said. — PTI

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Girl sets self ablaze
after repeated
molestation, dies

Hamirpur (UP), April 3:

A 15-year-old girl who had set herself ablaze in a village under Sumerpur police station area after allegedly being molested by a boy, succumbed to her injuries in a Kanpur hospital on Saturday, police said.

The girl had been rushed to the Kanpur hospital for specialised treatment as she had received severe burn injuries on Tuesday, they said.

H a m i r p u r Superintendent of Police Narendra Kumar Singh said the class IX student had set herself on fire on Tuesday over repeated harassment and molestation by a 16-year-old boy.

On the complaint of the victim's family, a case was registered against the minor boy, who was held on Thursday and produced before a juvenile court which sent him to a juvenile home, the SP said.

Following the girl's death, an additional section of murder would be included in the case against him, the SP said.

The girl's family had earlier alleged that the boy often used to tease and harass her and had done the same on Monday.

They had also accused the police of letting the boy go only after warning him.

Disturbed by repeated harassments and molestation, the girl had sprinkled kerosene on herself around 8 am on

Thursday and set herself ablaze, the girl's family members said. — PTI

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PM asks militants
to drop guns

■ **Continued from Page 1** the benefits of schemes to reach every section of the society. Our mantra is 'sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas.' Alleging that the bogey of secular politics has done the immense damage to the nation, he said, "We work for everyone without discrimination but some people divide the country for vote bank, which is unfortunately called secularism. But if we work for everyone, it's called communal. Games of secularism, communalism has caused great damage to the country."

He went on saying, "We work for the people and we work with honesty. Everybody got pakka houses, everyone got toilets, and everyone got gas connection without any bias. Our principle is to provide everything to everyone."

"For the first time, a government is working on 100 districts that had been left behind in the race of development under the 'Aspirational Districts' programme. These districts are now aspiring for development and seven of Assam's districts are under this programme." He further said, "We have worked and already resolved many long-standing problems and we will continue to find solutions for all other issues. Assam has a lot of opportunities to become a 'Tourism Hub', which can generate huge employment in the state."

Appealing the people to vote for the ruling alliance, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "To keep the pace of growth, progress and development, the NDA government is very crucial."

New Covid height

■ Continued from Page 1

October 11, crossed 80 lakh on October 29, 90 lakh on November 20. The one-crore mark was breached on December 19 last year.

According to the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), 24,69,59,192 samples have been tested for Covid-19 up to April 2 with 10,46,605 of them having been tested on Friday.

Meanwhile, the Odisha government imposed night curfew in Sundargarh, Jharsuguda, Sambalpur, Bargarh, Bolangir, Nuapada, Kalahandi, Nawrangpur, Koraput & Malkangiri between 10 pm & 5 am from April 5 in view of rising Covid cases. With Maharashtra recording

over half of the daily coronavirus cases in India, the state government is considering diverting

all industrial use of oxygen supply for medical use, chief minister Uddhav Thackeray said on Saturday. In an online interaction with the newspaper owners, editors and distributors, Mr Thackeray said that a decision on imposing stringent measures to tackle the pandemic will be taken soon but he did not confirm if there will be a statewide lockdown.

Maharashtra on Friday reported 47827 new cases, the highest daily rise in around six-and-a-half-months, and a big chunk of the 89,129 new cases in a day recorded in India.

The national capital Delhi recorded 3,567 fresh Covid-19 cases and 10 new deaths in the last 24 hours.

The positivity rate currently stands at 4.48% in the city.

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Mahar reports maha Covid
spike with 49,447, 277 deaths

Mumbai, April 3:

Maharashtra on Saturday reported 49,447 fresh Covid-19 cases, the highest rise in a day so far, taking the tally to 29,53,523 while 277 fatalities pushed the toll to 55,656, the state health department said.

Mumbai city also registered 9,108 new infections, the highest spike in a single day.

Previously, Maharashtra had recorded the highest number of 24,619 cases in a day on September 17, 2020.

With 1,84,404 new tests, the total number of samples tested so far in Maharashtra rose to 2,03,43,123, the department said.

The case recovery rate in the state now stands at 84.49 per cent while the fatality rate is 1.88 per cent, it said.

Of the 277 fatalities, 132 deaths had occurred in the last 48 hours, the statement said.

A total of 37,821 patients were discharged during the day, taking the count of recoveries in Maharashtra so far to 24,95,315, it said. The state is now left with 4,01,172 active cases.

THE ASIAN AGE

4 APRIL 2021



Shashi Warriar

Off the beaten track

Of ‘everyone’s friends’ & being a public enemy

The other day there was a message on WhatsApp that our MLA would be visiting the nearby Primary Health Centre, or PHC, the next day, and would be available to the public from 9:30 am to 9:45 am. His practice is to announce a time for the meeting to start, and turn up three hours late. In all fairness, he never specifies when he’ll leave, and is usually available until most of the people who’ve come to meet him have had their say, to one of his assistants if not to himself, so this was unusual. Right, I thought hopefully, maybe we can get some of our problems solved. They made a formidable list: bad roads, a defunct sewage treatment plant, blocked gutters, missing street lamps, an unauthorised temple that plays painfully loud bhajans, and hillocks of garbage left by people who party on the beach nearby.

I arrived at the PHC a few minutes early to find some hopeful neighbours waiting. We were wondering when the MLA would arrive, given his habit of unpunctuality, when a police jeep with flashing lights turned into the PHC’s gate. It was his escort, closely followed by a large white SUV. The doors of the vehicles opened, and, to our immense surprise, there he was, our MLA in person, only a couple of minutes behind time!

Within moments the compound was swarming with his henchmen, and visitors waiting to see him. The henchmen were swaggering young men with strange haircuts, shiny shirts, and flashy cellphones, all clouded in *attar*. The visitors came in all shapes and sizes and ages, all clearly supplicants. As we watched, the MLA and his retinue, instead of heading for the entrance and the staircase to the first floor, where the meeting was supposed to be held, started walking towards the PHC’s backyard, to the accompaniment of clicking cameras.

When we followed, we saw a little hole dug in the ground near a tree, a few large stones laid out by it, and, beside them, the ingredients of a puja: flowers and such. My friend spoke to one of the henchmen, it emerged that the MLA had come to inaugurate an extension of the PHC. By now it was clear that we had been suckered into supporting a photo-op for the MLA, so that anyone who reported the event could claim with some truth that several hundred people attended it.

By dint of some vigorous pushing, my friend managed to get within earshot of the MLA, with me following closely. “Good morning,” he said. “The last time we met you promised to visit my neighbourhood after three days, and that was more than two years ago.”

The MLA smiled. “But I never asked you for votes, did I?” he asked. I could sense that my friend was close to an explosion, and so did some of the henchmen, who moved smoothly into position between their master and my friend, averting what might have been an unseemly shouting match. As we walked away, my friend said in disgust, “I wanted to ask him whether he’s MLA only for people who voted for him!”

Another neighbour joined us as we stood wondering what to do next. “Good you didn’t,” he said. “I’ve just spoken to his PA. He’ll make sure I get a couple of minutes to speak to the boss.” Very sensible, no doubt, but it left a bad taste in the mouth, and I was about to say so when he continued, “Thanks for being here. I’ll take this onward. You don’t have to wait.”

My angry friend and I went home to stew, and, as the hours passed, I moved on to some of the other trivialities that fill in my hours. And then, towards half past four in the afternoon, there was another message on WhatsApp: The MLA will be in your area at 4:45pm.

A few minutes short of 4:45, I was on the road to the beach, as were the neighbours who turned up for the morning’s meeting. “He’s already here,” one of them said. “He’s at the beach, inspecting the garbage recycling plant.”

A good beach seems a strange spot in which to build a garbage recycling plant but then the ways of government are mysterious. I used to get worked up about it until I saw that the beach is in danger of disappearing thanks to erosion but no one else seems to bother about it and there are always more pressing issues to deal with so it had slipped to the back of my mind. I decided now to bring it up if I got the chance.

At ten to five, he turned up with his retinue of youngsters with strange haircuts, and some new men, older and rougher and far more obsequious. One of them I recognised: a contractor who built a kilometre of road nearby last year that disappeared with the first spell of heavy rain.

To my surprise, the MLA approached our group. “What can I do for you?” he asked.

I poured out my litany of problems, starting with the beach. He heard me out, then said, “The garbage plant is already there. We can do nothing about it. About your other problems, we will deal with them one by one, starting with roads.” He turned to the contractor I’d recognised, saying, “How much?”

So now it was clear we’d been suckered again. As I prepared to leave, one of the henchmen, misreading my mood, said, “See? He does what he can. He’s everyone’s friend.”

As I trudged home, I couldn’t but think of the old cliché: With friends like these, who needs enemies?

Shashi Warriar has written fairy tales, thrillers, a semi-fictional biography, satires, and a love story. Besides writing, he teaches strategic communication at a business school.

Subhani



If only BJP were as good at vaccination as it’s at election



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya’s View

The writing is writ large on the wall: vaccinate, vaccinate, vaccinate. We know now that the Covid virus is likely to attack in several waves. This has been seen in many countries, and is in evidence in ours too. To contain successive surges, we should, of course, retain our vigil on all health and social distancing protocols, but the real solution is to universalise vaccination and ensure its delivery in the shortest possible time.

The government I am sure is doing its best, but its best falls short, I am sorry to say, of the optimum. The first in the line to get the shot were health workers, and rightly so. However, a great number of these still remain vulnerable. There are around three crore healthcare and frontline workers. Of these, less than one-third have as yet received both the shots; and a little more than half have got the first shot. This is woefully short of target.

Senior citizens and those with co-morbidities were next in line. Here too performance is far below targets. It is estimated that there are 27 crore senior citizens and those with co-morbidities. But only three crore of these have been vaccinated, including some 78 lakh with co-morbidities. This is really slow going.

It is true that there could have been some vaccine hesitancy in the initial phase. Yet, this is hardly likely to have been that high in vulnerable senior citizens eager to get some protection, and in health workers who know that it is essen-

tial in their own self-interest to get the jab. One can understand greater reticence in rural areas, but a great many have still not been covered even in urban centres.

We need to know the reasons for this tardy pace. India, we are continuously told is not short of vaccines. Government spokespersons loudly proclaim with justifiable pride that we are the vaccine capital, producing 60 per cent of vaccines in the world. Nor do we lack experience in public health campaigns for mass vaccination. Our Universal Immunisation Program, which began in 1985, is today one of the largest and most successful programs in the world. We have the systems in place for such a campaign — Electronic Vaccine Intelligence Network (eVIN), National Cold Chain Management Inventory System (NCCMIC), and the National Cold Chain Training Centre (NCCTS). Thousands have by now been trained in managing stocks of vaccines at the right temperatures and monitoring their safe delivery across the country. Why then are we lagging behind in this highly critical vaccination drive, on which not only the health but the economy of our country is dependent?

In the absence of a ramped up vaccine campaign, several of the worst effected state governments are threatening lockdowns. As many doctors and health specialists have emphasised, lockdowns are hardly a solution, quite

apart from being impractical. We have seen the disastrous consequences of the first nationwide lockdown announced at a notice of four hours, which left millions of migrant workers on the streets walking hundreds and thousands of miles to their villages and hometowns without food, water, transport, money or health support. That lockdown, and the manner in which it was implemented, far from containing the spread of the disease, ensured that it spread with impunity.

Today, when the economy is just showing signs of a revival, a lockdown would be a fatal dampener to these green shoots of resurgence. It would also further aggravate the huge unemployment problem, the highest in years. As one worker said on national television, I would rather die of the virus than out of hunger for lack of a job. Undoubtedly, containment zones cannot be ruled out as a temporary measure, but generically spread out lockdowns, misinterpreted as a decisive response by panicky state governments, is hardly a solution. Even if lockdowns are announced, their efficacious implementation in a country like ours where people live cheek by jowl and in porous habitations, is virtually impossible. All lockdowns do is to give disproportionate powers to state agencies like the police.

The answer, therefore, is to put an expedited and effective vaccination

Even if lockdowns are announced, their efficacious implementation in a country like ours where people live cheek by jowl and in porous habitations, is virtually impossible

campaign in mission mode. For this, the government must get over its own vaccine hesitancy. The imperative is to universalise and go beyond this reticent step by step approach. Secondly, distribution problems must be urgently sorted out, since some states have complained that they are not getting an adequate supply of vaccines, while six per cent of vaccines are being wasted for lack of use. Thirdly, we need to approve more vaccines at the speed of light. Those global vaccines that have emerged as its priorities. While the Kashmir issue is non-negotiable and withdrawal of Article 370 purely an internal matter, India hopes that good counsel shall ultimately prevail leading to restoration of ties.

The writer, an author and a former diplomat, is in politics

LETTERS

SHOBHAA IS WRONG

This is in response to Shobhaa De’s article titled “Will Didi’s ‘dada-giri’ or BJP’s ‘dhanda’ win Bong hearts?” (April 3). Why doesn’t Ms De care to engage in a bit of homework before commenting on the West Bengal poll scene? For, the fight here wouldn’t be between “Dadagiri” and “Dhanda”; but secular and communal forces. If Bengalis are such a proud community, as she writes, why would they dance to the tunes of an alien ideology? And if the state is in such a “monumental mess” as the author asserts, people from north Indian states would not be coming here for business and work options.

Kajal Chatterjee
Kolkata

BAD DIPLOMACY

PAKISTAN’S RECENT overtures to mend fences with India was perceived as a welcome development. However, political compulsions of Imran Khan’s party have ensured that the move was scuttled. It does not come as a surprise for India. Reeling under an unfavourable economic climate, Pakistan saw reason in importing cotton and sugar from India. But far from providing relief to its beleaguered people which resumption of trade with India might have ensured, Pakistan’s insistence on resolution of the Kashmir tangle and restoration of Article 370 have emerged as its priorities. While the Kashmir issue is non-negotiable and withdrawal of Article 370 purely an internal matter, India hopes that good counsel shall ultimately prevail leading to restoration of ties.

Bhaskar Roy
New Delhi

SINISTER BJP PLOY

THERE APPEARS to be a sinister plot behind the income tax raids on the residence of V. Sabareesan, the son-in-law of DMK president M.K. Stalin, a few of his associates and former transport minister Senthil Balaji. The raids conducted across Tamil Nadu comes a few days before the state heads for the Assembly polls. While the CBDT officials confirmed having found several incriminating materials on tax evasion, the DMK and Congress lashed out at the BJP for adopting dubious tactics to settle scores with their adversaries.

N.J. Ravi Chander
Bengaluru

NO HOLI LOCKDOWN

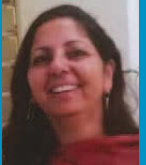
THE CENTRE HAS asked the states to vaccinate those above 45 years within two weeks in view of the massive second wave of the coronavirus. My question here is two-fold. Granted that a full lockdown will be inimical to the economy, why did the Narendra Modi government, which is known for its putatively bold policymaking and, moreover, has massive support to boot, not call a single day’s lockdown on the occasion of a superspreader event like Holi? Now wait and watch.

Priyanka Mathur
New Delhi

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

Anita Katyal

Political Gup-Shup



Personality cult infiltrates Left; leaked ‘survey’ rattles TMC

The Opposition leaders refer to him derisively as “Kerala’s Modi” or “Copycat Modi”. This may be a classic case of sour grapes but there is no doubt that Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan’s ongoing poll campaign is not very different from that of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As in the case of the Bharatiya Janata Party whose election campaigns revolve around Mr Modi, the Kerala Assembly election is all about Pinarayi Vijayan. Like Mr Modi, he invariably makes a rockstar-like grand and dramatic entry at his election rallies and keeps the crowds engaged with his fiery speeches. The student and youth wings of the CPI(M) are deployed in large numbers at each venue to whip up passions and generally set the mood for Mr Vijayan’s arrival while chanting cadres line the roads leading to the podium. Often, a fireworks display is also part of the welcome drill. The puritanical CPI(M) cadres must be cringing as the cadre-based Left parties generally have an aversion to building a personality cult but given their political marginalisation, the Marxists have no choice

but to accept that the party in Kerala has become a one-man show.

While Pinarayi Vijayan is on a roll, the Congress-led United Democratic Front is fighting hard to wrest the state from its chief political rival. However, it finds itself in trouble as doubts have arisen about its Christian support base. Unlike the past elections, the various Christian factions are learned to have told Congress leaders that they will not issue any advisory to its followers to vote for the grand old party. Though it is not openly supporting any party, the Church will not issue an appeal in favour of any party. The Christian community has been partial to the Congress in the past but the BJP has also been wooing it, especially the Jacobite Syrian Christians and Catholics. The saffron party is weaning them away from the Congress by convincing the community that the Congress is taking them for granted and neglecting them in favour of Muslims and Hindus. On its part, the Church wants to safeguard its interests as it

has land and other investments it has made across the state.

Chhattisgarh chief minister Bhupesh Baghel and Rajasthan chief minister are a study in contrast. Both were given special duties in the poll-bound states — Mr Baghel was assigned to Assam and Mr Gehlot to Kerala. While Mr Baghel took on his assignment in mission-mode, Mr Gehlot has only made a cursory visit to Kerala, evincing little or no interest in the election even though former Congress president Rahul Gandhi is focusing all his energies on the Kerala poll. Mr Gehlot maintains he is busy with the by-elections in Rajasthan but it is being joked that Mr Gehlot is scared to leave Jaipur for fear that his bete noire Sachin Pilot may start plotting against him in his absence. Mr Baghel, on the other hand, has barely left Assam, immersing himself in the election, providing both funds and manpower from his state. Mr Baghel, it is said, is working overtime to retain his “gaddi” as his rival T.S. Singh Deo was promised the chief minister’s post midway during the five-year term, which

happens to be in May.

Keeping a firm eye on the crucial West Bengal Assembly polls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi undertook a well-timed trip to Dhaka to mark fifty years of the liberation of Bangladesh. Though he did make a fleeting reference to Indra Gandhi’s role in liberating Bangladesh, Mr Modi managed to make the event all about him. The Congress, which should have and could have, made a big splash by recalling Indra Gandhi’s contribution to the neighbouring country’s freedom struggle, maintained a studied silence. In fact, Sonia Gandhi had even set up an in-house committee headed by former defence minister A.K. Antony and comprising senior leaders like Amarinder Singh and Prithviraj Chavan, to plan and coordinate the party’s programmes to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1971 Bangladesh war. This was last December but nothing has been heard from this panel. It met once but no one knows what activities were drawn up by the committee.

There has been radio silence since then.

There is no end to the twists and turns in the high-decibel West Bengal Assembly election. In fact, there is never a dull moment as charges and counter-charges between the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamul Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party fly thick and fast. In addition, violent clashes between their workers have become the order of the day. But over the past few days, the two parties have been locked in a battle over a “leaked internal election survey”, apparently commissioned by poll strategist Prashant Kishor, which shows that the Trinamul is losing. A gleeful BJP has obviously gone to town with this revelation but Mr Kishor’s outfit, IPAC, has tied itself in knots issuing a series of denials about its involvement in this survey. It is insisting that this is the handiwork of the BJP’s dirty tricks department or its IT cell.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

SHORT TAKES

BUILDING IN BANGKOK FALLS, 5 DIE

Bangkok, April 3: A Bangkok residence building collapsed on Saturday, killing at least four rescue workers and a resident, according to an emergency worker.

The three-story house was engulfed in flames around 6 am and the fire raged for about an hour before it was put out.

At around 7 am, as firefighters and rescue workers were moving through the razed structure in the Thai capital, it abruptly collapsed, killing at least five, including a resident.

EXPLOSIONS AT 2 SOMALI ARMY BASES KILL 9

Mogadishu, April 3: Simultaneous large explosions were heard in and around two Somali army bases on Saturday, with the military confirming at least nine of its people killed but asserting "heavy losses" among the attackers.

The al-Shabab extremist group claimed responsibility. Residents said the attacks occurred in Barriire and Awdhegheh villages of Lower Shabelle region, 75 kilometres (46 miles) south of the capital, Mogadishu. Speaking to local media, General Odawa Yusuf Ragheh, the commander of the Somali National Army, confirmed the twin attacks but said al-Shabab had been repulsed with "heavy losses".

ROBOT ARTIST SELLS ART FOR \$688,888

Hong Kong, April 3: Sophia is a robot of many talents — she speaks, jokes, sings and even makes art.

In March, she caused a stir in the art world when a digital work she created as part of a collaboration was sold at an auction for \$688,888 in the form of a non-fungible token. The sale highlighted a growing frenzy in the NFT market, where people can buy ownership rights to digital content. NFTs each have a unique digital code saved on blockchain ledgers that allow anyone to verify the authenticity and ownership of items. David Hansson, CEO of Hong Kong-based Hanson Robotics and Sophia's creator, has been developing robots for the past two and a half decades. He believes realistic-looking robots can connect with people and assist in healthcare and education.

MALI ATTACK KILLS 4 UN PEACEKEEPERS

Bamako, April 3: Four United Nations peacekeepers from Chad were killed in an attack by jihadists on their camp in Aguelhok in northern Mali and 19 others were injured, UN officials said Friday.

The UN mission in Mali said helicopters were dispatched to the scene to evacuate the wounded from the camp, which houses mostly Chadian peacekeepers. The mission said that the attackers suffered heavy losses and had abandoned several of their dead at the site of the attack. UN Secretary-General Guterres condemned the attack by armed elements in the strongest terms and commended the courage and bravery of the peacekeepers who robustly repelled the attack, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

Guterres reiterated attacks targeting peacekeepers may constitute war crimes.

EGYPT, ETHIOPIA, SUDAN RESUME TALKS ON DAM

Cairo, April 3: A new round of talks between three African nations began Saturday, officials said, aimed at resolving a yearslong dispute over a giant dam Ethiopia is building on the Nile River's main tributary. The three-day talks are taking place in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the current chair of the African Union.

The AU is mediating the negotiations between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Egypt's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that Cairo wants the negotiations to eventually lead to a legally binding agreement over the operation and filling of the dam's massive reservoir.

Foreign and irrigation ministers of the three nations were attending the talks, along with experts from the African Union.

Protest in London



Demonstrators taking part in a Kill The Bill protest against the Government's Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill while holding placards in central London on Saturday. — AP

7 blood clot deaths after 18.1mn vax jabs

No evidence of a casual link, says UK medicine regulator

London, April 3: The UK's medicines regulator has confirmed seven cases of blood clot-related deaths in people who received the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine against Covid-19, but stressed on the safety of the jabs as there is no evidence of a causal link.

The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) said in its latest Yellow Card monitoring of the Coronavirus vaccine programme this week that of the 18.1 million people who had the Oxford vaccine in the UK, 30 people developed blood clots and seven had died as of March 24.

Its official advice continues to be that the benefits of the vaccine, which is also being produced as Covishield by the Serum Institute of India, far outweigh any risks.

Our rigorous review into the UK reports of rare and specific types of blood clots is ongoing. Up to and including 24 March, we have received 22 reports of cerebral venous sinus thrombosis (CVST) and 8 reports of other thrombosis events with low platelets, out of a total of 18.1 million doses of Covid-19 vaccine AstraZeneca given by that date, the MHRA report said.

On the basis of this ongoing review, the benefits of the vaccines against Covid-19 continue to outweigh any risks and you should continue to get your vaccine when invited to do so, it said.

The regulator said that investigations are under-

Dhaka, April 3: The Bangladesh government on Saturday decided to impose a week-long nationwide lockdown from Monday as Covid-19 cases and deaths surged across the country.

Road Transport Minister Obaidul Quader made the announcement at a media briefing in Dhaka on Saturday, the *Dhaka Tribune* newspaper reported.

Bangladesh on Friday logged 6,830 new cases, the

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MEDICINES AND HEALTHCARE PRODUCTS REGULATORY AGENCY REPORT

way to determine if there is a link or if the cases are a coincidence and reiterated that increased adverse reaction or ADR reports reflect the increase in vaccine deployment.

— PTI

Lanka tightens church security ahead of Easter

Colombo, April 3: Security at churches across Sri Lanka have been beefed up ahead of Easter, police said on Saturday, ahead of the second anniversary of the April 2019 coordinated attacks on tourists and minority Christian community in the country in which 270 people, including 11 Indians, were killed.

"We have tightened security of churches by deploying over 12,000 security personnel, Senior Deputy Inspector General and police spokesperson Ajith Rohana said.

The security personnel include 9,350 police officials and 2,542 troops from the tri forces (Army, Navy and Air Force), he said.

Rohana said some 111 churches in the western coastal town of Negombo would be provided security, along with 107 churches in the neighbouring coastal town of Chilaw and some 98 churches in the eastern town of Batticaloa. The St Sebastian's Church at Negombo's Katuwapiya was the worst-hit in the Easter Sunday

blasts that rocked the island nation in 2019 with 114 people dying in the church attack.

As many as 270 people were killed and around 500 others injured when six near-simultaneous and coordinated explosions, carried out by local jihadist group National Thowheeth Jamaath (NTJ) linked to the Islamic State (IS), rocked three churches and three luxury hotels frequented by tourists in Sri Lanka on April 21.

While describing the horror scene at the St Sebastian's Church, a top priest had said that pieces of flesh were thrown all over the walls, on the sanctuary and even outside the church.

The church, built in 1946, is one of the many churches in Sri Lanka dedicated to St Sebastian who is considered a martyr in the Catholic Church history. The head of the church, Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith, has recently expressed his disappointment over the probe in the blasts.

— PTI

Dhaka, April 3: The Bangladesh government on Saturday decided to impose a week-long nationwide lockdown from Monday as Covid-19 cases and deaths surged across the country.

Road Transport Minister Obaidul Quader made the announcement at a media briefing in Dhaka on Saturday, the *Dhaka Tribune* newspaper reported.

Bangladesh on Friday logged 6,830 new cases, the

highest count in a day, taking the tally of infections to 624,594. The death toll climbed by 50 in 24 hours to 9,155, according to data released by the government.

In a bid to arrest the spread of the Coronavirus, the government has decided to enforce a seven-day lockdown from Monday as the Coronavirus cases and deaths are surging across the country, Quader, also the general

secretary of the ruling Awami League, said.

However, the order does not apply to utility and emergency services.

Factories will remain open and workers can work shifts by following hygiene rules, the report said. Every office and court will be closed during this lockdown but industries and mills will continue their operation on rotation.

— PTI

Argentina president tests +ve for Covid-19

Buenos Aires, April 3: Argentina's President Alberto Fernandez, who has been vaccinated against Covid-19, announced late Friday that he had tested positive for the deadly Coronavirus.

"At the end of today, after presenting a fever of 37.3 and a slight headache, I performed an antigen test, which was positive," he tweeted, adding he was waiting for the results of a PCR test to confirm the diagnosis.

The president, who turned 62 on Friday, was in isolation as a precaution but said he was "physically well."

"Although I would have liked to end my birthday without this news, I am also in good spirits," he said.

Fernandez was inoculated with the Russian Sputnik V vaccine and had his second shot on February 11, sources in the presidency said.

Argentina is facing a second wave of the Coronavirus with a sustained rise in cases.

The South American country of 44 million inhabitants has recorded more than 2.3 million infections and over 55,000 deaths from Covid-19.

— AFP

Biden lifts curbs on ICC staff

Washington, April 3: President Joe Biden on Friday lifted sanctions that Donald Trump had imposed on two top officials of the International Criminal Court, undoing one of the past administration's more aggressive moves targeting international institutions and officials.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a statement stressed that the United States still strongly disagreed with some actions by the court, which is a standing body based at The

Hague in the Netherlands charged with handling genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The United States is not one of the about 120 member countries of the court. "We believe, however, that our concerns about these cases would be better addressed" through diplomacy "rather than through the imposition of sanctions," Blinken wrote.

The removal of the sanctions was the latest signal that the Biden administration is intent on returning

Death toll in Myanmar mounts amid protests

Yangon, April 3: Security forces in central Myanmar opened fire on anti-coup protesters on Saturday, killing at least two people according to local media. A human rights group said mounting violence since the February 1 military takeover has killed at least 550 civilians.

Of those, 46 were children, according to Myanmar's Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. Some 2,751 people have been detained or sentenced, the group said.

Threats of lethal violence and arrests of protesters have failed to suppress daily demonstrations across Myanmar demanding the military step down and reinstate the democr-

atically elected government. The coup reversed years of slow progress toward democracy in the Southeast Asian country.

Government forces fired at demonstrators in central Myanmar on Saturday, killing at least two people, the *Myanmar Now* news service reported. One video posted on social media showed a group of protesters carrying away a young man with what appeared to be a serious head wound, as gunfire sounded. His condition wasn't immediately known. At least seven people were injured in the shooting, two of whom sustained severe wounds and were taken into custody by soldiers, *Myanmar*

Now said, citing a member of a local rescue team.

Late Friday, armed plainclothes police took five people into custody after they spoke with a CNN reporter in a market in Yangon, the country's largest city, local media reported citing witnesses. The arrests occurred in three separate incidents.

Two women reportedly shouted for help as they were being arrested, *Myanmar Now* reported. One police officer, who was carrying a gun, asked if "anyone dared to help them," a witness told the news service. "They pointed their pistols at everyone — at passersby and at people in the store," a witness said.

— AP

H-1B wage levels: US Labour Dept seeks public input

Washington, April 3: The US Department of Labor has sought feedback from the public in the next 60 days on determining the wage levels for the employment of various immigrants and non-immigrants, including those on the H-1B visas, the most sought-after work visa among Indian professionals.

The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows the US companies to employ foreign workers in specialty occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise. The technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China. In a federal notification published on Friday, the US Department of Labor urged the public to respond to its request in the next 60 days.

The request by the department's Employment

and Training Administration follows a prior announcement by the department proposing an 18-month delay in the effective date of a final rule changing on calculating the prevailing wage levels for certain immigrants and non-immigrant workers.

Published in January 2021, the final rule affects employers seeking to employ foreign workers on a permanent or temporary basis through certain immigrant visas or through H-1B, H-1B1 and E-3 non-immigrant visas.

While the E-3 visa is one for which only citizens of Australia are eligible, the H-1B1 visa is for people from Singapore and Chile. The delay will give agency officials time to compute and validate prevailing wage data covering specific occupations and geographic areas, complete necessary system modifications and conduct public outreach.

— PTI

Breach to delay Capitol fencing

Washington, April 3: The deadly breach of the Capitol's perimeter could delay the gradual reopening of the building's grounds to the public just as lawmakers were eyeing a return to more normal security measures following the Jan. 6 insurrection.

Capitol Police officer William Billy Evans, an 18-year veteran of the force, was killed Friday when a man rammed his car into a barrier outside the Senate side of the

building. The driver, identified as 25-year-old Noah Green, was shot and killed after he got out of his car and lunged at police with a knife.

Their deaths came less than two weeks after the Capitol Police removed an outer fence that had cut off a wide swath of the area to cars and pedestrians to secure the complex after supporters of then-President Donald Trump had marched on the building Jan. 6. — AP

TAIWAN SEEKS ARREST IN TRAIN CRASH

Hualien County (Taiwan), April 3: Prosecutors in Taiwan on Saturday sought an arrest warrant for the owner of an unmanned truck that rolled onto a rail track and caused the country's worst train disaster in decades that killed 50 people and injured 178.

The train was carrying 494 people at the start of a long holiday weekend on Friday when it smashed into the construction truck that slid down a hillside above the tracks, the Taiwan Railways Administration said.

Many passengers were crushed just before the train entered a tunnel, while some survivors were forced to climb out of windows and walk along the train's roof to safety. Authorities initially reported 51 deaths but revised the count down by one on Saturday.

The truck's emergency brake was not properly engaged.

— AP

Third-party vendor Accellion closed 'all known vulnerabilities'

University of Calif. victim of hack attack

Los Angeles, April 3: The University of California is warning its students and staff that a ransomware group might have stolen and published their personal data and that of hundreds of other schools, government agencies and companies nationwide.

A cybersecurity attack targeted a vulnerability in Accellion, a third-party vendor that is used to securely transfer files, the university said in a statement Wednesday. "We understand those behind this

attack have published online screenshots of personal information, and we will notify members of the UC community if we believe their data was leaked in this manner," the university said.

The hacker or hackers also have been sending threatening mass emails threatening to publish data "in an attempt to scare people into giving them money," the statement said. In an update Friday, the university system said the cyberattack affected

about 300 organisations, "including universities, government institutions and private companies." Other schools, including Stanford University's School of Medicine and Yeshiva University in New York City, have reported that student and employee Social Security numbers and financial information were stolen and that some were posted online.

The information was obtained in December and January when hackers exploited a vulnerability in a

20-year-old Accellion file transfer service, various reports have said. However, some organisations said they only recently became aware of the breach. The *Baltimore Sun* on Thursday reported that private information of staff members and students at the University of Maryland, Baltimore was posted online this week.

The school said a hacking group known as Clop gained access to Accellion in December, the *Sun* said. The University of Color-

ado and the University of Miami reported that files were accessed in January and included personal data and some health, study and research data. The Washington State Auditor's Office reported last month that information on nearly 1.5 million unemployment applicants had been stolen.

Accellion released a statement in March that said it had closed "all known" vulnerabilities and no new ones had been found.

— AP

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

How to kill a dissident, Saudi style

The Dissident

DIRECTOR: Bryan Fogel
RATING: ★★★★★
Streaming on diff.co.in till April 8

SUPARNA SHARMA

Oscar winning director Bryan Fogel's documentary, *The Dissident*, is a scary film. An investigation into the planned assassination of 59-year-old journalist *Jamal Khashoggi* by Saudi Arabia's royal regime at their embassy in Istanbul, *The Dissident* is visually sombre, often flat, but stunning in the things it reveals.

Constructed like a thriller; the documentary begins by talking with Omar Abdulaziz, who seems like a paranoid young man in Canada, and ends by making us listen to a blood-curdling transcript of people laughing, talking as they are killing Khashoggi. Then there's the sound of a bone saw cutting a body into pieces.

In Istanbul, on October 2, 2018, Jamal Khashoggi walked into the Saudi Arabian embassy to get a document which would certify that he was unmarried. His young fiancé, Hatice Cengiz, a Turkish academic researcher, waited outside, on the other side of the cement barricades. They were looking forward to getting married. They had got a house and *Khashoggi* was especially thrilled with the *Lazy Boy* chair he had bought.

The Dissident, which begins with the disappearance of *Khashoggi*, moves to the Turkish authorities' investigation, Saudi cover up, revelation of the murder, en route putting us inside several rooms where we meet Khashoggi's fellow journalists, his friends, other activists critical of the Saudi regime. Mostly, the location of these rooms is not disclosed because many are in hiding.

We also visit the "meeting room" at the embassy where we see, under the glare of ultraviolet light, a freshly cleaned carpet and a trail of blood drops that form a large uneven circle.

Omar Abdulaziz Alzahrani, a 27-year-old Saudi vlogger, left his country

and took political asylum in Canada after his father received a phone call from the authorities asking that he bring in his son. Omar had barely 100 followers on Twitter, but he was critical of the regime.

Omar now has 5,79,000 Twitter followers and says that *Khashoggi* and he were working on several "project". He believes that *Khashoggi* was killed because of him.

Omar, handsome and built like a boxer, moves cautiously through Montreal because, he says, whenever he begins to relax, a text or a phone call reminds him to be careful, to keep moving, change cities, change his Sim card. "They will try to kill you," he is told.

The Dissident spends a lot of time with *Khashoggi*, to tell us why the man who was once an insider of the Saudi royal family, became a threat and was eventually killed.

Khashoggi is often smiling but he also talks of the constant feeling of loneliness.

We watch him go into the embassy. There is no footage of him leaving it.

Khashoggi was a part of the Saudi royals' inner circle for 30 years, working as a journalist and media consultant for the government. He left Saudi Arabia in 2017, at the age of 58, moved to the US where he joined *The Washington Post* and began writing articles critical of the Saudi government and MBS.

Khashoggi's friends talk about his visit to Tahrir Square, how much he was affected by the Arab Spring, became more vocal about citizen's rights and accused the Saudi royals of funding the counter-revolution that killed "hope" in the Arab world.

The Dissident chronicles the history of Saudi Arabia, which controls

about half of the world's oil reserves, the Saudi royal family and the power it wields, at home and abroad.

Most of this power now rests with Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the king of Saudia Arabia, and crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, or MBS.

Described as "ambitious, impatient and the king's favourite", MBS serves as the deputy Prime Minister and is the power behind the throne.

MBS has, what he calls, "Vision 2030" for Saudi Arabia. He is keen to give women some rights, like watching football, driving, allowing music and films, so that the regime's place at international forums is palatable. Criticism, dissent is not a part of Vision 2030.

Control, *The Dissident* claims, especially of social and other media is a major part of it.

If two out of 10 people in the US are on Twitter, in Saudi Arabia it's eight out of 10, the film claims and explains the Saudi Arabia regime's use of trolls and the spyware, Pegasus, to infect the phones of friends and foes, to quash dissent.

Omar talks about "flies" — Saudi trolls — and how they target and attack criticism, and shares his plans to create a voluntary online army of "bees" who would mount counter attacks on social media.

Khashoggi liked Omar's plan. It required investment to buy American SIM cards that would be distributed to the volunteers. The first lot of SIMs were bought by money that came from Khashoggi.

Omar recalls how, after several days and many failed attempts, finally the Bees' hashtag was trending, above Saudi Arabia's *J a m a l Khashoggi* had 2 million followers on Twitter. And a year

before *Khashoggi* was killed, MBS told one of his aides that he would go after *Khashoggi* with a "bullet".

In the transcript of chats and phone chats between Saudi officials who had flown in to Istanbul on private jets five days before Khashoggi's murder, one asks, "Has the sacrificial victim arrived?" "Yes," another replied.

Turkish officials — investigators and the prosecutor — provide evidence that Khashoggi was killed in a planned manner. They say that 10 minutes after he entered the embassy, he was gagged, perhaps with a plastic sheet on his head.

Khashoggi was asthmatic and according to the Turkish authorities he was held and suffocated by several men for seven-and-a-half minutes.

The film leaves out some crucial bits — like how did the Turkish authorities got these tapes (they had bugged the embassy) — but we see Turkish authorities searching the house of the Saudi consul general, wanting to drain out a well but are denied permission.

They film at a large tandoor with ash and a Turkish official says that 70 lbs of meat was ordered the night Khashoggi went missing.

The unbearable bits in *The Dissident* are towards the end, when Agnes Callamard, the UN's special rapporteur for extrajudicial killing, travels to Istanbul to review the evidence of Khashoggi's murder. She talks of listening to the most chilling parts of the audio recordings — when Khashoggi's body was being cut with a bone saw.

But perhaps the most stunning fact in *The Dissident* is how MBS, a friend of Jeff Bezos, who owns Washington Post, was upset that he was not shutting down the Post's campaign for justice for Khashoggi.

The film shares their WhatsApp messages. We see the silly video that MBS sent to Bezos — it unleashed Pegasus and turned Bezos' phone into a listening device.

The Dissident is scary because Bryan Fogel's 2017 documentary *Icarus*, on doping in competitive cycling, won the Oscar. But none of the streaming sites, including Jeff Bezos' Amazon Prime Video, have picked up *The Dissident*. They don't plan to, either.



Nomadland: A different kind of American odyssey

The great recession didn't just eliminate jobs, it also erased an entire town. Six months after U.S. Gypsum closed its doors in Empire, Nevada, a company town since 1948, its zip code was retired and its inhabitants forced to leave. It's this brief history that opens Chloé Zhao's extraordinary "*Nomadland*," which follows one of those residents, Frances McDormand's Fern, on a journey through the American West to nowhere in particular.

Fern is a wanderer, partially by choice and partially by circumstance — the shuttering of Empire, the costly and slow death of her husband and a deep-seated desire for solitude and exploration have left her with few connections and even fewer possessions, which she whittles down to the essentials and the most sentimental. Everything else is left in a storage unit off a desolate, snowy highway that looks like it is quite literally in the middle of nowhere. It might as well be on the moon.

We don't hear much from Fern at the beginning, or ever really. An Amazon factory floor manager speaks more words than she does in the first few scenes. It's one of the beauties of "*Nomadland*," which is based on Jessica Bruder's book about the invisible casualties of the modern economy. This is a quiet, somewhat romantic, but mostly realistic exploration of a fringe population of aging workers and recent retirees who are living out the rest of their days wandering, picking up odd jobs and paychecks as seasonal workers at National Parks, South Dakota's Wall Drug and in massive Amazon warehouses through something called the CamperForce program.

McDormand disappears into Fern, which is no small accomplishment for an actor as recognizable as she is. She doesn't have a show-stopping monologue railing against the system that's left her with so little, or a tear-filled admission about why she has taken to the road. You pick up things here and there about her in normal conversation which helps propel her journey along to its quiet conclusion. But otherwise Fern is there to listen and to learn. She is the vehicle through which we meet the Vietnam vet with PTSD, the woman who watched her parents die of cancer and the corporate America exile who saw a friend deteriorate in a desk job with a retirement boat in his driveway that he never got to use. Many are authentic nomads too, like Linda May, a main character in Bruder's book, and the wandwelling evangelist Bob Wells, a mini celebrity in his own right.

There is always a lingering tension that things might take a turn. But for this most part, this is a film full of kind souls. They're just not the ones we're used to seeing on film. Zhao has since her first film been drawn to non-actors, who she uses exceedingly well. But "*Nomadland*" is no doubt elevated thanks to the addition of seasoned performers, including David Strathairn in a great supporting role, who know how to inhabit the frame.

Zhao is a spiritual descendant of another cinematic poet, Terrence Malick, and there are a handful of shots that look straight out of "*The New World*." But she also goes beyond Malick in some ways. He keeps the interesting and real people on the fringes and the glamorous movie stars at the center of his films. She stays unapologetically on the fringe.

I'll admit, I had a bit of anxiety over revisiting "*Nomadland*" after naming it my top film of 2020 just over two months ago. You never know what will happen on a second watch, whether your appreciation will grow or diminish, whether you'll be as invigorated as the first time or, in a worst-case scenario, bored. It's not the kind of film you'll want to turn on every week, but two months was the perfect amount of distance to fall in love with "*Nomadland*" again.

Don't let words like Oscars frontrunner and awards darling get in the way of your openness, either. This film is a small miracle and a uniquely meditative experience.

"*Nomadland*," a Searchlight and Hulu release, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association of America for "some full nudity." Running time: 108 minutes. Four stars out of four.

— AP

Idris Elba drama enhanced by real-life urban cowboys

Concrete Cowboy

CAST: Idris Elba, Caleb McLaughlin, Jharrel Jerome
DIRECTOR: Ricky Staub
RATING: ★★★★★
Streaming on Netflix



It feels like a tale as old as time: Wayward teenage son meets up with estranged father, one needing some straightening out, the other some serious humanizing. Can they connect?

But if that's the familiar story at the heart of "Concrete Cowboy," starring the appealing duo of Idris Elba and terrific newcomer Caleb McLaughlin, there's much more here to contemplate. That's because of the fascinating, very real-life world in which this predictable yet warm-hearted story takes place: the community of Black equestrians in North Philadelphia.

Wait, what? Urban cowboys in the streets of Philly? That's exactly the reaction 15-year-old Cole (McLaughlin) has after being transported from Detroit and dumped in the streets by his desperate Mom, who hopes Dad will set him right. Harp (Elba) is over at the stables, Cole is told. He replies: "THE WHAT?"

"Concrete Cowboy," an impressive debut by writer-director Ricky Staub that overcomes formulaic dialogue and we-

saw-that-coming plot twists with its sheer heart, is based on a novel, "Ghetto Cowboy" by Gregory Neri. But if the story is fiction, the film finds its greatest strengths in the parts that are real. In an inspired choice, Staub casts some key supporting roles with actual members of the Fletcher Street Stables, a unique equestrian community more than a century old (hint: you can tell these regulars by who's a natural in the saddle.)

The most effective scenes are those that include these true-life figures, such as a joyful community celebration, or a campfire scene in which actors like McLaughlin and the always wonderful Lorraine Toussaint, as neighbor Nessie, mix with regulars telling their stories. While illuminating the long history of Fletcher Street, they also set us, and Cole, straight about the Hollywood-enabled myth that all cowboys looked like John Wayne. "You thought all cowboys were white?" one of them scoffs. Notes Nessie: "Hollywood has whitewashed us. They

just deleted us out of the history books."

The story begins with Cole facing expulsion from high school in Detroit. His mother, at the end of her tether, packs his belongings into a few garbage bags and drives him to his father's Philadelphia doorstep. He is not happy. "Mama, don't leave me here!" he yells.

It only gets worse when Cole sees the ramshackle apartment Harp an ex-con, lives in. There's nothing but beer in the fridge, and Harp's roommate is ... a horse. Cole bolts, and finds himself in the arms of Smush, a charismatic cousin who promises to show him "how Philly pops."

Smush (the excellent Jharrel Jerome) has dreams of owning a ranch out West; he's a cowboy, too. But he wants to make money quickly, and that means a risky sideline involving drugs. The story settles into worn territory here, with Smush representing the temptation of the streets, and Harp and his friends representing a tougher, more honest existence. Staub spent two years getting to know the

Fletcher Street Stables community, and it shows, especially in his welcome choice to feature several real urban cowboys. One is Jamil Prattis as Paris, who teaches Cole how to clean manure out of a stall (tip: use a wheelbarrow). Then there's Ivannah Mercedes as Esha, a young woman at the stables who advises Cole that horses aren't the only ones that need "breaking in" — he does, too. There's a sweet hint of romance, and when Esha teaches Cole how to stand up on a horse, it's a gesture rich in symbolism.

Not to give anything away, but it's pretty clear Harp and Cole will wind up appreciating each other. Elba, who unsurprisingly looks great on a horse (but in truth is somewhat allergic to them), has fewer lines than we might like, but gives off a steady, grizzled vibe that grounds the movie. He also pulls off a motivational speech that would sound way too corny coming from anyone else. As for McLaughlin, the film would falter without his fresh, honest and unaffected presence throughout.

The best comes last, though — and by that we mean the closing credits, where members of the Fletcher Street community (the city of Philadelphia is developing the vacant lots they use, we learn) discuss its importance, especially to youngsters who would otherwise be on the streets.

"I think if more people knew how important the stable was to so many young people who don't have anywhere else to go," Mercedes says — not finishing the sentence. She doesn't have to. — AP

Once more unto the breach in 'Godzilla vs Kong'

Godzilla Vs. Kong

CAST: Alexander Skarsgård, Millie Bobby Brown, Rebecca Hall, Brian Tyree Henry, Shun Oguri, Eliza González
DIRECTOR: Adam Wingard
RATING: ★★★★★
Playing in theatres

Godzilla vs. Kong" begins, fittingly, with the big guy asleep. There is King Kong, colossus of the big screen, slowing waking on a mountainside. He rouses slowly in the morning sun from slumber before showering in a nearby waterfall. It's, maybe, a little bit the same for the kind of movies King Kong symbolizes and still holds some dominion over: big spectacles of mass destruction made to be seen on equally towering screens. That kind of moviegoing has been been in hibernation for much of the past pandemic year. "*Godzilla vs. Kong*," the only creature feature to dare wide release in some time, is a rock 'em-sock 'em monster-movie

revival with all the requisite explosions, inane plot twists and skyscraper smashing to satisfy most lovers of gigantic amphibians. Vive le cinéma!

"*Godzilla vs. Kong*," directed by Adam Wingard, follows in the very big but quickly forgotten footsteps of the 2014 reboot "*Godzilla*," 2017's Vietnam-set, "Apocalypse Now"-tinged sequel "Kong: Skull Island" and 2019's "*Godzilla: King of Monsters*." But, of course, the lineage is much longer than that. *Godzilla* and Kong first squared off in 1962's "King Kong vs Godzilla" (Kong got first billing back then), the Toho Studios film that mashed together monsters both East and West. (Before the Japanese studio got involved, the original template had Kong meet

Frankenstein.)

This time, the ultra-heavyweight prize fight between the Coke and Pepsi of the MonsterVerse doesn't break any new ground. That might be its salvation. Wingard ("You're Next," "The Guest") gives us some solid supporting characters (Brian Tyree Henry as a podcasting conspiracy theorist on the right track is the best of the

humans) and some slick sound design. But mostly "*Godzilla vs. Kong*" supplies appropriately silly sci-fi escapades and a few good rounds of monster mayhem, including, in their first meeting, a ballet of battleships on the open ocean.

One difference this go around: You can see the film immediately on either a Godzilla-sized screen or a salamander-sized one. "*Godzilla vs. Kong*," debuting on Wednesday, is playing in theaters and streaming

simultaneously on HBO Max. I saw it at home, with a five-year-old in the next room asking why the big monkey was so angry. For the mighty Empire State Building-climbing beast, it's a new, more humble home.

And it's home he seeks in "*Godzilla vs. Kong*." That sunny morning waterfall, it turns out, is an enclosed habitat for the locked-up ape, who's watched over tenderly by Dr. Ilene Andrews (Rebecca Hall) and her deaf adopted daughter Jia (Kaylee Hottle). When *Godzilla* makes a seemingly unprompted attack on Apex, a high-tech cybernetics company ruled by Walter Simmons (Demian Bichir), a plan is hatched to use Kong to lure *Godzilla* to the surface and then track *Godzilla* to his power source — an undiscovered center-of-the-world realm theorized to exist by "hollow Earth" proponent Nathan Lind (Alexander Skarsgård). It's a scheme so obviously des-

tined to run afoul and turn a metropolis into ruins that you can almost hear Hong Kong pleading, "Please, no."

With a debt owed to Jules Verne, "*Godzilla vs. Kong*" makes its way, via Antarctica, to the center of the Earth. It covers a lot of mileage only to ultimately fall back where so many action blockbusters do: at the hands of a melomaniac tech CEO. It's not just a predictable foe for the kaijus, who have cycled through countless metaphors over the decades. It's also a somewhat ironic one. "*Godzilla vs. Kong*" is so much a totem to the powers of advanced technical wizardry.

Shot with a lustrous glow by Ben Seresin, the movie is soaked in the glossy sheen of CGI. King Kong, born in stop-motion, and *Godzilla*, once a guy in a suit, have swelled so much in design and texture that they now appear like veteran movie stars who have moved on from their B-movie origins. By they end, they appear exhausted, and who can blame them? They're likely tired from emerging again and again from the depths to play out our fantasies of destruction. Next time, someone should let Kong hit the snooze. — AP



SHORT TAKES

Lanka stand firm to draw final Test

North Sound, Antigua and Barbuda: Sri Lanka's top-order batting held firm to ensure a draw and a drawn series against the West Indies on the last day of the second and final Test at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium in Antigua on Friday. Set the daunting target of 377 and resuming at 29 without loss, the tourists reached 193 for two with a tops score of 75 by captain Dimuth Karunaratne and an unbeaten 66 by Oshada Fernando leading the resistance. After managing just 16 runs in three previous innings, Karunaratne's 25th Test half-century spanned over four hours. He faced 176 deliveries and struck nine fours before being trapped lbw by seam bowling all-rounder Kyle Mayers just before the end of the post-lunch period. — *AFP*

Brief scores (Day 5, stumps): West Indies 354 & 280/4 dec draw with Sri Lanka 258 & 193/2 in 79 overs (D. Karunaratne 75, O. Fernando 66 n.o.)

Archers to get 2nd dose of vaccine

Pune: Olympic-bound Indian archers, who are based at the Army Sports Institute here, will get their second dose of Covid-19 vaccine next week before leaving for the upcoming World Cup Stage I in Guatemala City. The World Cup Stage I, to be held from April 19, will be the first tournament for the senior archers in Covid era. The archers will compete in three World Cups, with the third being a Olympic qualification before the Tokyo Games in July. As part of their vaccination drive, the ASI inoculated all the archers, which included the eight frontline Indians — Atanu Das, Tarundeep Rai, Pravin Jadhav and B Dhiraj (reserve) in men's and Deepika Kumari, Ankita Bhakat, Komolika Bari and Madhu Vedwan (reserve) in women's. — *PTI*

Olympic swim champ Clara dead

New York: Clara Lamore Walker, who swam for the US at the 1948 Olympic Games in London, won three national championships, and later in life set hundreds of national and world swimming records in several masters age groups, has died. Walker died on Friday of natural causes at an assisted living facility in North Smithfield, Rhode Island, according to her great-niece, Alyssa Kent. She was 94. She participated in the 200-metre breaststroke in the Olympics when she was 22 years old, but swore after her last heat that she was giving up competitive swimming for good, according to her biography on the International Swimming Hall of Fame website. In total, she set 184 world records and 468 national records as a masters swimmer, according to the website. — *AP*

Injured Tiger to miss Masters

Augusta, United States: Severe leg injuries in a February car crash ensured Tiger Woods won't be playing in this year's Masters on the 20th anniversary of his "Tiger Slam" victory at Augusta National. But the 45-year-old superstar, whose 15 major titles include five Masters green jackets, will have his legacy felt after the famed layout. Woods is recovering at home in Florida after suffering serious injuries when his car flew off the road and flipped several times during the Southern California accident. Hours of surgery were required to repair his shattered lower right leg and ankle, including a rod inserted into his tibia and the use of screws and pins to stabilize the joint. — *AFP*

Live on TV

CRICKET

South Africa vs Pakistan: Second ODI from 1.30 pm on Star Sports 1

FOOTBALL

English Premier League: Southampton vs Burnley from 4.30 pm; Newcastle vs Tottenham from 6.35 pm; Aston Villa vs Fulham from 9 pm; Manchester United vs Brighton from 12:01 am (Monday) on Star Sports Select 1, HD

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COVID SCARE

10 Wankhede ground staff test +ve; Hyd stand-by venue for IPL

Mumbai, April 3: The BCCI remains hopeful of conducting the scheduled IPL matches in Mumbai from April 10-25 despite a massive surge in Covid-19 cases in the city and 10 members of the Wankhede Stadium staff testing positive for the deadly virus.

Indore and Hyderabad have been kept as stand-by venues for the IPL in case the Covid situation spirals out of control. Mumbai is scheduled to host 10 games of the cash-rich league. With in excess of 47,000 cases on Friday, Maharashtra is looking at a potential situation of mini-lockdown. Of equal concern to the organisers is the number of groundstaff at the Wankhede going up from 8 to 10 between Friday evening and Saturday morning.

If that wasn't enough, around six members of the event management team have also tested positive for Covid-19 and have been sent to isolation.

"Yes, it was 8 positive cases yesterday as far as ground-staff are concerned. Today two more positive cases have emerged and all 10 have been sent back home and are isolated.

"We are bringing fresh ground-staff from the Mumbai CA ground in Kandivali for preparations. Also 6 to 7 event management staff hired by BCCI have also tested positive," a senior Mumbai CA official said.

When a senior BCCI office-bearer was asked about the situation, he admitted that BCCI is indeed concerned.

"Look, even if there is a lockdown, the teams are in bio-bubble and also it's a closed-door event. So we are still confident that IPL games in Mumbai will be held as per schedule with DC playing CSK on April 10 on the second day of the tournament.

"But Hyderabad and Indore are there on stand-by in case the situation goes out of hand," the office bearer said on Saturday.

"Delhi Capitals ad Punjab Kings for example are taking turns to train at the Brabourne Stadium and Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC) ground. KKR is training in Navi Mumbai at the DY Patil before they leave for Chennai," the official informed. — *PTI*

SMITH REACHES MUMBAI TO JOIN DELHI CAPITALS

Mumbai, April 3: Star Australian batsman Steve Smith on Saturday joined the Delhi Capitals squad and will undergo a mandatory seven-day hard quarantine.

The 31-year-old, who was released by Rajasthan Royals, was acquired by Delhi Capitals for ₹2.2 crore at the IPL auctions in February.

"2 monumental icons in one frame. Welcome to the DC family, @stevesmith49," the franchise tweeted a picture of the Australian with the Gateway of India in the frame.

The team has already started its training camp. Smith and compatriot Marcus Stoinis will hardly get time to train before DC's opening game against the Chennai Super Kings here on April 10 as the two will undergo a week of hard quarantine.

The prolific right-hand batsman, who joined the Rajasthan Royals franchise in 2019, captained the side in the 2020 edition in the UAE, where they finished last. — *PTI*



Daniel Christian of the Royal Challengers Bangalore plays a shot during a practice session in Chennai ahead of the upcoming edition of IPL.

— RCB

RCB look to end title drought

New Delhi, April 3:

Armed with exciting new recruits, including Australia allrounder Glenn Maxwell and New Zealand pacer Kyle Jamieson, perennial under-achievers Royal Challengers Bangalore will hope to battle hard in their bid for the elusive IPL trophy.

Balance issues in the squad, injuries and over reliance on Virat Kohli and AB de Villiers marred RCB's chances to win the title last season. Here's a SWOT analysis of the side that will take on MI in the tournament opener on April 9.

STRENGTHS

RCB have assembled a strong batting line up on paper. Run-machine Kohli

● **Balance issues in the squad, injuries and over reliance on Virat Kohli and AB de Villiers marred RCB's chances to win the title last season.**

has already confirmed that he will be opening the innings.

Partnering Kohli will be the highly-talented Devdutt Padikkal who impressed everyone last season and is in red-hot form. Young wicketkeeper-batsman Mohammad Azharuddeen, who had a staggering strike-rate of 194.64 in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, and New Zealand's Finn Allen are other attacking options at the top. De Villiers and Maxwell add the fire-power to the mid-

dle-order while Sachin Baby, Daniel Christian and Washington Sundar add to the depth.

WEAKNESSES

The RCB pace department does not inspire confidence. Navdeep Saini and Mohammed Siraj lack the experience of bowling with the white ball and have a propensity of leaking runs. Jamieson has struggled in T20s and has no experience of playing in India. Other options include medium pacer Harshal Patel, and the

AXAR PATEL OF DELHI CAPITALS TESTS POSITIVE

New Delhi, April 3: Delhi Capitals' and India all-rounder Axar Patel has tested positive for Covid-19 and kept in isolation, the IPL franchise said on Saturday.

Patel is the second IPL player to have returned a positive report after Nitish Rana. Nitish had initially tested positive for Covid-19 but later returned a negative report.

"Delhi Capitals all-rounder Axar Patel has tested positive for Covid-19. He had checked into the team hotel in Mumbai on March 28, 2021, with a negative report. His report from the second Covid test, came positive," the franchise said in a statement.

"He is currently in isolation at a designated medical care facility. The Delhi Capitals medical team is in constant touch with Axar and ensuring his safety and well-being. We wish him a speedy recovery," it added.

Meanwhile, a positive case has also emerged from CSK's media content team. The member isn't a part of the bio-bubble. The team's training schedule remains unaffected. — *PTI*

Australian trio of Christian, Daniel Sams and Kane Richardson.

OPPORTUNITY

The presence of several big-hitters in the team could go in RCB's favour while chasing big totals. It is also the perfect opportunity for Maxwell to set the tournament ablaze. He has been a disappointment in the IPL.

THREATS

Maxwell is a vital cog in RCB's grand scheme of things this season. If he tanks with the bat, it could have disastrous consequences for the side. The over-reliance on Kohli and de Villiers continued last year despite big signings. — *PTI*

I'M OBSESSED WITH RISHABH, HE IS A MATCH-WINNER, SAYS GANGULY

New Delhi, April 3: BCCI

president Sourav Ganguly says he is "obsessed" with Rishabh Pant's game and calls the swashbuckling India wicketkeeper-batsman "an absolute match-winner". The former India captain added that he loves watching the likes of Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma bat.

"There are some fantastic players and I think as President of the Board I should not say who is my favourite player. All are favourite to me but I enjoy Kohli, I enjoy Rohit

Sharma," Ganguly said. "I am obsessed with Rishabh Pant because I think he is just an absolute match-winner. Jasprit Bumrah is good, Mohammed Shami is good, I like Shardul Thakur a lot because he has got the courage and guts. There is immense cricketing talent in India. When (Sunil) Gavaskar was there people used to think what will happen after him, then came (Sachin) Tendulkar, (Rahul) Dravid, Anil Kumble. When Tendulkar,

Dravid left, Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma, Rishabh Pant took over," he said. "There is so much talent for cricket in India that I think it will produce world beaters in every generation," he added. Ganguly, who was picked for India's tour of Australia in 1992 but didn't get a single game, recalled how that experience Down Under and the hard work that followed in the subsequent years made him a better cricketer. — *PTI*

Jannik storms into Miami final

Miami, April 3: Italian teen Jannik Sinner rallied past Spanish seventh seed Roberto Bautista Agut at the Miami Open on Friday to book a meeting with Hubert Hurkacz in the biggest final of his young career.

Sinner, who reached last year's French Open quarterfinals, defeated Bautista 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 to become only the fourth teen to reach the men's final in the 36-year history of the ATP Miami Masters.

Poland's Hurkacz, seeded 26th, won his second straight match over a top 10 player, beating Russian fourth seed Andrey Rublev 6-3, 6-4.

Coming off a quarter-final win over second-seeded Stefanos Tsitsipas, Hurkacz became the first player to take a set off Rublev at the tournament. Sinner, 19 and playing only his third Masters 1000, joined 1990 champion Andre Agassi, 2005 runner-up Rafael Nadal and 2007 winner Novak Djokovic as Miami teen finalists.

Sinner took his eighth career triumph over a top-20 rival and ensured he will rise into the ATP's top 25 next week, although he nearly smashed a racquet in a tense second set.

Sinner seeks his third career ATP title after last year at Sofia and February

● **Italian teen Jannik Sinner stifled Roberto Bautista Agut 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 in the men's singles to set up the Miami final match against Hubert Hurkacz.**

in an Australian Open tuneup at Melbourne.

Bautista missed out on his second career ATP Masters 1000 final after 2016 at Shanghai, where he lost to Britain's Andy Murray.

Bautista broke Sinner to open then saved two break points and held for a 2-0 lead. But Sinner broke back at love in the sixth game to level at 3-3.

The Spaniard broke again for 6-5 when Sinner netted a backhand and he held to claim the set on his second ace after 51 minutes. In the second set, Sinner saved four break points in the seventh game to hold but sent a backhand wide on his first break chance in the eighth games as Bautista held for 4-4.

Sinner held and then broke when the Spaniard netted a backhand to force a third set. Bautista broke at love for a 2-1 lead in the deciding set, but Sinner roared back to claim the victory. — *AFP*



Jannik Sinner of Italy returns a shot to Roberto Bautista Agut of Spain in their men's singles semifinal match during the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida.

— AFP

West Brom leave Chelsea sulking

London, April 3: Chelsea manager Thomas Tuchel suffered the first defeat of his reign as struggling West Bromwich Albion took advantage of Thiago Silva's red card to earn a stunning 5-2 win on Saturday.

Tuchel had overseen a 14-match unbeaten run in all competitions since replacing the sacked Frank Lampard in January.

But that impressive start came to an embarrassing end as West Brom ran riot at Stamford Bridge.

Christian Pulisic put Chelsea ahead early in the first half, only for Brazil defender Thiago to get his marching orders moments later for a second booking.

That proved the turning point as Albion's Matheus Pereira struck twice in first half stoppage-time.

Mbaye Diagne grabbed West Brom's third goal and Callum Robinson netted twice to leave Tuchel shell-shocked.

Mason Mount's reply was no consolation as Chelsea's bid to qualify for next season's Champions League via a top four finish in the

Premier League suffered a significant blow.

The early signs were ominous when Jorginho's wayward pass was intercepted by Pereira on the edge of the Chelsea penalty area, forcing Thiago into a cynical foul that earned him a yellow card.

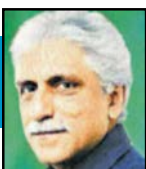
Despite their sloppy start, Tuchel's men took the lead in the 27th minute. Marcos Alonso's 25-yard free-kick cannoned back off the post and Pulisic was first to react as he alertly steered his shot past Sam Johnstone from close-range.

But Thiago gifted Albion a lifeline two minutes later when he jumped into a rash two-footed foul on Okay Yokuslu, earning his second booking.

Chelsea were punished for some dismal defending in first half stoppage-time.

A long punt forward by Johnstone should have been dealt with easily, but Kurt Zouma allowed Pereira to run behind him and guide a superb lob over the exposed Edouard Mendy. — *AFP*

Captain Pant will be under the microscope this IPL



Ayaz Memon
Over The Top

The IPL starts in less than a week, with the usual brouhaha considerably diminished because of Covid fears, but with expectations high as always. There have been some last-minute drop outs because of the pandemic threat (Josh Hazlewood, Mitchell Marsh, Josh Philippe), but the vast majority of overseas players contracted by various franchises are playing. This highlights the

importance of the IPL within the cricketing fraternity and in the sport. After the IPL became an instant hit in its very first season in 2008, several leagues have come into existence, but none matches its appeal.

Money, of course, is a major factor — if not the biggest in this. The salary cap for IPL franchises is 7-8 times larger than the next best league, which means more moolah for players and other stake-

holders. But money apart, it's also the high adrenaline ambience, the manic following by fans which makes the IPL special.

Players, after all, are performing artists. While they want to optimise their earnings, they also crave for attention. The IPL bags the most number of eyeballs and is the most discussed and debated cricket tournament.

Defending champions Mumbai Indians start as favourites considering their track record and the fact that less than six months back they had won the title in the UAE. But all other teams are in serious contention.

One of the attributes that makes the IPL not just attractive for fans, but also extremely competitive, is

how even is the spread of talent. Yet, of the eight teams, Royal Challengers Bangalore, Punjab Kings and Delhi Capitals have never won the title, which also shows that only having talent is not good enough to win.

While every team looks equal on paper, what makes the difference between winning and losing is the mental toughness and attitude of players. In a tournament that is played at frenetic pace, mental toughness and attitude of players become even more critical.

Among teams, I am particularly interested in how Delhi Capitals and Rajasthan Royals shape up this season. Young Rishabh Pant, who has enjoyed a glorious interna-

tional season, has been appointed captain of DC after Shreyas Iyer injured himself.

Pant will be under the microscope on two counts: whether captaincy affects his batting form, and also how well he can carry the team, flush with many senior players.

If he succeeds on both counts, the swashbuckling youngster could soon rise a notch higher in Indian cricket hierarchy.

In some ways, though not quite to the same extent, Sanju Samson will also be under scrutiny. He replaces Steve Smith as captain and will have players of the class and experience of Jos Butler and Ben Stokes playing under him.

How he gets the best out of these senior pros, as

well as a line-up of Indian players, is not the only examination Samson will be under. Also in the RR team is Chris Morris, the most expensive buy in the last auction.

While the onus is on Morris to justify the high price tag, so much will also depend on how the captain deploys him.

On the technical side, interestingly the BCCI has chosen to remove the umpire's 'soft signal' proviso, in likely deference to India captain Virat Kohli's objections during the recent series against England.

Kohli made no bones about his unhappiness, particularly after Surya Kumar Yadav was given out caught in the deep in one of the matches

because the umpire had given a soft signal against the batsman. Replays showed that the ball may have been grounded by the fielder.

The ICC Technical Committee in its meeting last week did not tackle the 'soft signal' matter directly, but upheld the 'umpire's call' (which would be tantamount to almost the same thing) in DRS with some improvisations.

In judging LBWs now, 50 per cent of the ball hitting the stumps will be measured from top of the ball and not bottom as earlier for a decision to go against the batsman.

This means bowlers have an extra 1.38 inches to get a decision in their favour. How this pans out remains to be seen.