

SHORT TAKES

CM'S HOLI GREETINGS, NO CELEBRATION

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH. 28

Chief Minister Sri YS Jagan Mohan Reddy has extended warm greetings and good wishes on the occasion of Holi, the festival of colours. Holi, which ushers in spring, is celebrated throughout the country with joy and gaiety, the Chief Minister said.

Andhra Pradesh Governor Biswa Bhushan Harichandan conveyed his greetings and good wishes to the people of Andhra Pradesh on the occasion of the Holi festival. He said that the Holi is a vibrant festival that strengthens fraternity among people signifying peace and prosperity in society in his message.

The Governor has decided not to organise Holi celebrations at Raj Bhavan in Vijayawada this year, due to the rising number of Covid-19 cases. He appealed to the people to celebrate the festival by staying at home and by following Covid appropriate behaviour such as maintaining social distance, wearing a mask and frequent hand wash using sanitiser or soap.

The Governor also appealed to all eligible persons to get vaccinated against Covid-19. (160w-ilyas)

TD WANTS YSRC MINISTER TO TAKE BACK WORDS

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 28

Telugu Desam MLA Anagani Satya Prasad on Sunday vehemently objected to YSRC minister Ch. Sri Ranganatha Raju's comment that paddy cultivation has become a lazy profession with farmers growing this crop without performing any hard work.

The TD legislator demanded that the minister not only take back his comments but tender an unconditional apology to farmers as a whole. "It is shameful of Ranganatha Raju to say paddy cultivation is a profession of lazy fellows," Satya Prasad remarked.

He advised YSRC leaders to stop making such comments when farmers are toiling hard in farms to produce food for others. Instead of appreciating them, "corrupt and unscrupulous" are passing insulting comments against farmers and others, he said.

Telugu Desam MLA accused Jagan Mohan Reddy regime of betraying farmers in the name of Rythu Bharosa. He wanted to know from YSRC ministers why the state government is unable to ensure remunerative prices for farmers, which has led to over 760 of them committing suicide in the past 22 months. The legislator pointed out that farmers are taking the extreme step as their debts are mounting in absence of any support from ruling YSRC.

Satya Prasad asserted that TD will launch a massive agitation if YSRC government dares to fix meters on agricultural pump sets.

GOV APPROVES AP BUDGET ORDINANCE

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 28

Governor Biswabhusan Harichandan on Sunday approved Andhra Pradesh Vote-on-Account Budget Ordinance.

The ordinance okays a total expenditure of ₹86,000 crore over a period of three months.

An amount of ₹86,000 crore has been approved for the first three months of this financial year, that is, till the end of June.

The state government had earlier planned to hold budget session of the AP Legislative Assembly to okay the vote on account. But the session had to be postponed because of gram panchayat and municipal elections in the state. The government has thus taken the ordinance route for the vote on account, which has now received the Governor's approval.

The ordinance became mandatory for the new financial year, as the state government has to pay salaries, pensions and make other payments.

● **THE ORDINANCE** became mandatory for the new financial year, as the state govt. has to pay salaries, pensions and make other payments.

New agri laws haven't impacted AP farming

Farmers fear laws could dismantle support price system

MD ILYAS | DC
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 28

Though the farming community of Andhra Pradesh is worried over the three new agriculture laws passed by the centre, these have not impacted the ongoing agricultural season in AP compared to northern states.

This is mainly because farmers of northern states are more dependent on government procurements within agriculture markets at minimum statutory prices (MSPs). The situation is different in AP, where farmers sell their produce as needed in open markets, without depending on government procurement and MSPs.

Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020, Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020 and Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020 are the three laws that have created worries with-



Farmers at work in this file picture

in the farming community.

Though the AP farming community is habituated to open market system, it is now worried about the impact these three central laws may have on AP in the long run.

The state's farmers are currently growing mixed crops over 59.06 lakh acres, including paddy, Bengal gram, black gram, green gram, jowar, maize, tobacco, chillies, groundnut, pluses, sunflower, sesamum, onion, bajra, ragi and minor millets. Thus, AP's crop pattern is

quite different from northern states, where majority farmers are preoccupied with cultivating wheat and paddy.

Farmers P. Naresh and D. Kondal Reddy say multi-cropping system helps Andhra farmers sell their produce in local markets without depending on government procurements. Further, Rythu Bharosa and other welfare schemes aid farmers in marketing their crops within the state.

However, Naresh and Kondal Reddy do fear that the central laws could dis-

mantle the minimum support price system, which can allow private corporations to exploit farmers in the long run within AP.

The two farmers are keen that the laws are rolled back as otherwise agriculture trade and commerce will get controlled by corporate companies whose motive will be profit at any cost.

CPM leader Ch. Babu Rao, who has led various farmers' protests, pointed out that 80 percent of agricultural lands in AP are cultivated by tenant farmers, as landowners are more interested in other lucrative businesses.

But in northern states, landowners are themselves cultivators and depend on government procurement and minimum support price.

The CPM leader pointed out since the past few months, farmers of Andhra Pradesh too have started protests, after realising that the three new agriculture laws will turn into a big hurdle for their livelihood in the future.

High port fee may hit export of rice

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, MARCH 28

Exporters expect that nearly 370 lakh metric tonnes of rice will be exported in the coming financial year 2021-22 out of which 35 lakh to 40 lakh metric tonnes will be from Kakinada if there are relaxations in the ocean freight charges which were hiked recently.

Exporters expect a bumper paddy crop from Telangana state, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh during the Rabi season and are engaged placing purchase orders from millers.

But, there was a setback as ocean freight charges were hiked abnormally. Besides, the trade is suffering from a scarcity of containers, sources said.

The freight charges have been escalated from \$45 to \$94 per MT and the shipping trade said that it will hamper rice exports. According to sources, the charge on parboiled rice is \$385 per metric tonne, raw rice \$367 and on raw-broken rice it is \$274 per metric tonne.

Cocanada Chamber of Commerce director Mamidapalli Satya Kumar said that if the ocean freight charges are relaxed and if there is any improvement in container availability, more rice could be exported.

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Family friend arranged vehicle for pilgrimage

FROM PAGE 1

According to Buchireddypalem circle inspector B. Suresh Babu, a family friend of the victims from Chennai arranged the vehicle at Nellore to enable them to visit Mantralayam in Kurnool district, Brahmamgari Matam at Kadapa and Srisailem.

They came to Nellore on March 25 by Howrah Mail. The CI said that the truck laden with black stone was on its way to

Krishnapatnam Port.

The truck driver parked the vehicle on the road margin close to the petrol bunk located on the opposite side of the road.

Though he kept the truck parking lights on, the driver of the vehicle failed to notice them. Police believe that he dozed off.

The deceased have been identified as Nandakumar (67), M Jagadeesh (29) of Agaram, Sai Krishnan Sujatha (50) of Sembium, S u b r a m a n y a m

Sadgunadevi of Perambur and Vasantha Asha (60) of Perambur, Nandakumar Padmini of Agaram, Damaramadugu, Revathi (60), Agaram, Chennai (82) and Nallapureddy Gurunadreddy (36) (driver) of Kommalapudi village, Manubolu mandal, SPS Nellore.

Governor Biswa Bhushan Harichandan expressed shock over the accident and offered condolences to members of the bereaved families.

STATE OFFICIALS FOR RETAINING STAKE IN PORT

FROM PAGE 1

The state officials were of the view that Gangavaram port being the goose that lays the golden eggs, it would be wise to retain the government's stake and receive dividend and share in gross revenues which will increase year on year. "We have credible information that the Adani group is eyeing doubling the present cargo handling capacity of 34.5 million metric tonnes within two to three years," a senior infrastructure and investment official said adding that company valuation would naturally go up with added capacities.

The officials were of the view that the state government would not face the problem of equity dilution in the event of fresh infusion of capital. The company will have cash reserves of nearly ₹1,000 crore and the AP will never face a situation wherein it has to decide between fresh infusion of capital and equity dilution, he added.

MANTRI VOWS AID TO VICTIMS' KIN

DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, MARCH 28

Minister for industries, IT and skill development Mekapati Goutham Reddy consoled the family members of the victims who lost their lives in the recent road accident a few days back during a visit to their homes in Duvuru village in Sangam mandal.



An Indigo aircraft, the first commercial flight to be operated to the Kurnool airport, is given the traditional water cannon salute after landing.

— DC

Flier: Airport was a dream

FROM PAGE 1

A passenger in the flight, Hari Kumar, said upon arrival that it was a memorable day for him.

A smallscale entrepreneur in Bengaluru, Hari Kumar said that the dream of Kurnool people was realised as flights had started operating from the city, thanks to the initiative of Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy and finance minister Buggana Rajendranath Reddy.

Another passenger, SMD Sarif, a native of Kurnool, said it takes 15 hours to travel from Kurnool to Visakhapatnam by bus. The availability of a flight comes as a major boon, he said.

A six-year-old girl passenger was accorded a rousing reception on her arrival from Bengaluru in the inaugural flight.

The maiden flight left for Visakhapatnam with 72 passengers on board. Kurnool collector G. Veera Pandian left for Chennai on another flight from Kurnool.

KURNOOL, VIZAG LINKED BY AIR

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, MARCH 28

The inaugural flight from Kurnool arrived at about 12.40 pm, connecting the proposed judicial capital and executive capital.

Tourism minister Muttamsetti Srinivasa Rao, local MP M.V.V. Satyanarayana and deputy mayor Jiyani Sridhar received the flight. The minister released the first day postal cover on the occasion.

Rao said direct flights would speed up development of both the important cities. He lauded Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy for his decentralisation proposals that would augur well.

Chief Post Master General M. Venkateswarulu, airport director Raj Kishore and officials from IndiGo Airlines were present to mark the event.

KURNOOL AIRPORT OPERATES 3 FLIGHTS, READY FOR AIR CARGO OPERATIONS

DC CORRESPONDENT
KURNOOL, MARCH 28

Kurnool airport director Kailash Mondal said that flights to all the three destinations were operational on Sunday the first day of commercial services from the Uyyalawada Narasimha Reddy Kurnool airport at Oravakal.

Speaking to *Deccan Chronicle*, Mondal said flights from Chennai, Bengaluru, and Vishakhapatnam were operated as per schedule.

While the inaugural flight arriving from Bengaluru carried 52 passengers, the Chennai flight brought 17 passengers.

SHORT TAKES

COPS PRAISED FOR HUMANITARIAN ACT BY DGP

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 28

AP DGP Gautam Sawang has praised Rambilli police personnel for their humanitarian act of retrieving a highly decomposed dead body from the seashore near Seetaapalem village on Friday.

Rambilli police in Visakhapatnam district had received information that an unidentified body of a man had got washed ashore in Seetaapalem village on Friday. SI Arun Kiran registered a case and asked villagers in surrounding areas to help carry the corpse, which was three km away from the village.

When no one came forward till Saturday, Arun Kumar, ASI Dora, head constable Masenu, constable Narsinga Rao, and home guard Konda Babu brought the decomposed body from the shore to Seetaapalem by wrapping the body in a cover and carrying it to their shoulders for three kilometres.

From there, the body was taken in a vehicle to the mortuary in Yalamanchili.

Gautam Sawang congratulated the policemen saying though local did not show any compassion, police people made it their duty to retrieve the body.

PRISONER ENDS LIFE, KIN BLAME OFFICIALS

DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, MARCH 28

A remand prisoner, Harikrishna, who attempted suicide at the Nellore Central Prison on Friday evening, breathed his last while undergoing treatment at Sri Venkateswara Institute of Medical Sciences in Tirupati on Sunday.

Harikrishna, who belongs to Vaddapalem village in Buchireddypalem mandal, was sent to remand in a case booked sometime back. He attempted to end life in his cell at the Central Prison late on Friday evening.

Prison officials rushed him for treatment to SVIMS and he died on Sunday. Venkatachalam SI Shaik Karimullah said that they have booked a case under Section 176 of Criminal Procedure Code based on a complaint from the Superintendent of the Central Prison Rajeswar Rao. Meanwhile, the victim's parents squarely blamed the prison authorities for the death of Harikrishna. When they approached them, the police told them to approach the RDO since he deals with cases related to custodial deaths.



Left: Children take out a rally with palms on the occasion of Palm Sunday in Vijayawada on Sunday.

— C. NARAYANA RAO

Above: Children apply colours and cheer up on the eve of the Holi Festival at Ramakrishna Beach in Visakhapatnam on Sunday.

— K. MURALIKRISHNA

Covid cases in AU rise to 102

Preventive measures ignored: Fishing harbour market overcrowded

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, MARCH 28

Minister for tourism Muttamsetti Srinivasa Rao (Avanti) held a Covid review meeting with Andhra University vice chancellor in the presence of Mayor G. Hari Venkata Kumari at the university registrar's office on Sunday.

Officials said the total number of infections at AU rose to 102. Of them, 96 were boys, one a girl student and five faculty members.

The minister said quality treatment was being given to the infected students and added that the parents need not worry. All the 102 were kept in isolation and 200 other students/staff in quarantine. He said 550 super specialty beds were kept ready in CSR Block in King George Hospital and another 600 in VIMS Hospital.

Vice chancellor Prof. P.V.G.D. Prasad Reddy, Andhra Medical College principal Dr P.V.

Sudhakar, district medical and health officer Dr P. Suryanarayana and university registrar Prof. K. Krishnamohan were present.

Dr Sudhakar said sporadic cases were being reported from the peripheral areas of Visakhapatnam, which include Madhuravada, Arilova, Pendurthi, Vepagunta and Gajuwaka.

"People have lowered their guard and crowd around in public places despite the advisories from the health department.

The number of tests are being increased," he said and urged the people to have the vaccination at ward secretariats or other nearest places.

Another official said the fishing harbour market that witnessed a crowd of over 5,000 people on Sunday morning, as also tourist spots, cinema halls and shopping complexes are places where the infection could spread rapidly.

Covid vigil tightened in Karnataka border

DC CORRESPONDENT
ANANTAPUR, MARCH 28

In the wake of the rise of Covid-19 positive cases, border areas have been alerted to prevent spread of cases in the region. Even as no restrictions were announced at the borders so far, authorities in the border districts of Andhra Pradesh were on vigilance, particularly in Anantapur district.

The Karnataka government had already announced restrictions about entry to Bengaluru and has mandated Covid-19 negative reports from April 1. The district administration noticed that the abnormal rise earlier was because of connectivity through different parts mostly Karnataka and New Delhi.

For instance, positive cases were reported from

border villages of Hindupur and Hindupur municipality through connectivity from the adjacent Gowribidanur taluk of Karnataka.

A senior official from the medical and health department stressed the need for serious precautions at border areas.

"With no option, Bengaluru authorities restricted entry without a 'negative' report but we should concentrate on conducting random tests at railway stations and bus stations," the official observed.

In fact positive cases are being reported from Anantapur headquarters and interior mandals. At least six persons tested positive from Kothacheruvu mandal headquarters. Meanwhile, the spiritual organisations and other private traditional functions are attracting huge gatherings.

STATE REPORTS 1,005 COVID-19 POSITIVE CASES

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 28

The rate of Coronavirus infections is gradually increasing in Andhra Pradesh. As many as 1,005 new infections were reported in Sunday's daily count, this being the highest single-day tally since November last.

In the 24 hours ending Sunday morning, 1,005 infections and two deaths were reported. With this, the cumulative Coronavirus infection tally reached 8,98,815 and the death toll touched 7,205.

"The total number of active cases stood at 5,394 while 324 patients have recovered and were discharged in the past 24 hours. The total recoveries were 8,86,216 and the recovery rate now stood at 98.60 per cent in AP," officials said.

As many as 81,142 samples were tested in the past 24 hours and their positivity rate was 3.23 per cent, the highest in the past five months. The overall positivity rate vis-a-vis the 1.499 crore total samples tested in AP is stood at six per cent. One each death was registered in Krishna and Chittoor districts on Sunday.

Guntur district reported the highest single-day tally of 225 new Covid-19 cases on Sunday. This was followed by Chittoor with 184.

Mask drive: Cops book thousands

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, MARCH 28

As Covid-19 is on a rebound, the police in the East and West Godavari districts started a 'mask-enforcement drive' and are imposing fines on those who fail to wear it.

The fine ranges from ₹200 to ₹250 per person, followed by a warning a more severe penalty

would be on the way if they continued to defy the Covid regulations. They are also giving counseling to them about the impact of Covid-19 virus and of the preventive steps.

Eluru Range DIG K.V. Mohan Rao, East Godavari SP Adnan Nayem Asmi were among those participating in the drive.

Rao is leading the police drive for masks from 4.30 pm to 6.30 pm every day. He said people should wear mask covering the entire mouth and nose. He visited Prakashnagar, Ramalayam Centre and other areas to spread the message.

East Godavari SP Asmi inspected the Main Road, Masjid Centre,

Sarpavaram junction, Bhanugudi etc and round up scores of unmasked people. On Sunday, 2,573 cases were booked and police collected ₹1,96,850 from the unmasked loiterers.

Asmi also distributed masks to unmasked people.

The traffic police said 2,299 cases were booked on Saturday.

Software to ensure smooth room booking at Tirumala

DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, MARCH 28

Securing accommodation at Tirumala, abode of Lord Venkateswara, is the most stress-full part of pilgrimage to the holy shrine. There is no hyperbole in saying devotees coming from all parts of the country and abroad, including those with advanced reservations, face hardships before getting their accommodation.

Pilgrims have to wait in queues at the Central Reservation Office for a couple of hours despite fatigue from long travel, hunger, and their children demanding attention. Even after securing allotment from CRO, pilgrims have to reach sub-reservation offices in different parts of

the temple town to secure keys for the room or cottage allotted to them.

Seeing for himself hardships faced by lakhs of devotees, TTD executive officer K.S. Jawahar Reddy ordered a study to decentralise allotment of rooms at Tirumala. Sharing his plans with DC, the EO pointed out that 30-35 per cent of pilgrims reserve their accommodation in advance. Yet, they too have to wait for anywhere between one to two hours for allocation of rooms. Jawahar Reddy said they are preparing software for automatically allotting rooms or cottages to those with advanced bookings when they log in at Alipiri, the gateway to Seven Hills. Boards will be displayed on rents related to different

accommodations at Alipiri for benefit of those wishing to take room or cottage at Tirumala. Accordingly, they can approach CRO offices located in different parts of Tirumala avoiding rush and reduce waiting time. The EO said, in addition, a call centre with toll-free number is being introduced exclusively to expedite disposal of complaints pertaining to amenities and equipment at cottages or rooms in Tirumala. Complaints will be automatically forwarded to TTD staff manning cottages for resolving the issue on a war-footing. Staff will have to report back to call centre about resolution of the issue. Jawahar Reddy said these new initiatives are a few among several such proposals in offing.

HOUSING MINISTER TENDERS APOLOGY TO FARMERS

DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, MARCH 28

Housing minister Ch. Ranganatha Raju tendered an unconditional apology to the farming community while regretting the inadvertent comments he made against the farming community on Sunday.

It may be recalled that the minister, while taking part in a private programme at Undi in West Godavari district on Saturday, observed that the laziest activity in the world was of the farmers involved in paddy cultivation.

At the private programme he also said that paddy farmers got very little to do to raise the crop since water is abundant and the only job for them is to signal someone to harvest the

crop. The loose comments angered farmers' associations across the state on Sunday. Taking serious objection to his utterances, the unions demanded the minister to tender an unconditional apology.

Understanding the mood of the farmers, Ranganatha Raju said that he is sorry for hurting the sentiments of the farmers during a press conference in Tirupati on Sunday.

He said that he is also a son of a farmer and his comments pertain to big landlords, who are benefiting from the government schemes meant for the small and marginal farmers.

The minister said that he is moved by the plight of the small and marginal farmers.

REAL DEAL 'Reduce registration stamp duty from 7.5 per cent to 2 per cent'

Credai seeks reduction in stamp duty

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, MARCH 28

Confederation of Real Estate Developers Associations of India (CREDAI), Andhra Pradesh, has asked the AP government to reduce registration stamp duty from 7.5 per cent to 2 per cent for help the real estate sector,

which is reeling under the impact of Covid-19.

The confederation pointed out that Coronavirus apart, realty sector has been affected due to shortage of skilled and semi-skilled workforce in the state, as over 40 per cent of them had returned to their hometowns last year due to Covid-19 lockdown.

They have not yet returned to AP.

Speaking to reporters after the annual general body meeting on Sunday, Credai president-elect B. Raja Srinivas pointed out that the stamp duty had been reduced from 7.5 per cent to 2 per cent in 2009 when Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy was the chief min-

ister of united Andhra Pradesh. The reduction remained in force for two years in view of the global financial crisis. That decision had helped the real estate sector, because lower prices made buyers come forward to purchase flats.

"A similar situation exists now. We are thus

urging AP government to reduce stamp duty, so that it would reduce the burden on buyers on buying homes. This would also push the growth of real estate sector as well," Srinivas added.

Credai members expressed confidence that the reduction will help increase sales of flats.

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SHORT TAKES

CRUDE BOMBS, FIREARMS SEIZED IN WEST BENGAL

Canning (WB), March 28: A large number of crude bombs and several country-made firearms were seized in different poll-bound areas in West Bengal's South 24 Parganas district, police said on Sunday.

Acting on a tip-off, police personnel seized 48 crude bombs near a water body in Kathipota village in Narendrapur police station area on Sunday, an officer said.

The crude bombs were defused and further investigation is underway, he said. An arms factory was also busted in Merigunj village in Kultali police station area late on Saturday night, another officer said.

The owner of the house, where the illegal arms manufacturing unit was functioning, was arrested, he said. Four country-made firearms and an unfinished gun have been seized, the officer added. These areas will go to polls in the third phase on April 6.

TMC LEADER HELD IN 2009 MURDER CASE

RAJIB CHOWDHURI | DC KOLKATA, MARCH 28

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) arrested Maoist frontman-turned-Trinamul Congress state committee member Chhatradhar Mahato early Sunday on the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and several Indian Penal Code charges for repeatedly skipping its summons for questioning in its case against him over the Naxals' guerrilla-style-attack on the Rajdhani Express at Jhargram in the Jangalmahal of West Bengal in 2009.

At around 3.30 am, a 40-member NIA team raided the home of the former convener of the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities — a frontal outfit of the Maoists for the tribals during the Communist rule — at Amlia village in Lalgarh of Jhargram. Chhatradhar and his family members were asleep then.

On Saturday morning the 57-year-old, who became the BJP's target for his entry to the ruling TMC over his influence among the tribals, cast his vote in Jhargram in the first phase of the Assembly election in the state, for the first time after languishing in jail over a decade in many high profile cases of Maoist violence.

His wife Niyoti alleged, "Around 15 members of the NIA team stormed in while others were on the rooftop. They took away the cellphones of four security personnel deputed for him." A scuffle however unfolded when Chhatradhar's family members allegedly tried to resist the NIA team from dragging him out of their home.

PILOT: ASSAM POLLS A STRUGGLE TO SAVE PEOPLE

Silchar / Karimganj (Assam), March 28: Congress leader Sachin Pilot on Sunday claimed that the Assembly election in Assam is a struggle to save the people of the state from the "misrule" of the BJP.

The BJP government never stood by the people during the hour of crisis, Pilot alleged while addressing two election meetings at Silchar and Karimganj in Barak Valley region.

"We are not fighting to come to power, but to save the people of Assam from the misrule of the BJP," he said.

The BJP is dividing people on religious lines and they need to remain united in Assam and India, the former deputy chief minister of Rajasthan said.

"When people were in crisis during the demonetisation, GST and lockdown, the BJP government was nowhere to be seen. So, it is time that we remove the party from power," he added.

The Congress will form the next government in Assam, Pilot asserted.

"In five years, the BJP gave CAA, NRC, autocracy, inflation and communalism, but not jobs. The biggest challenge today in front of the country and Assam is unemployment. The Congress has guaranteed that it will give five lakh government jobs (in five years)," he said.

Pilot along with All India Mahila Congress president Shushmita Dev also led a procession in Karimganj town in support of Congress candidates.



Union home minister Amit Shah with BJP chief spokesperson and media incharge Anil Baluni (second right) and party leaders Sanjay Mayukh (left) and Sambit Patra (right) arrives to address a press conference at his residence in New Delhi on Sunday.

— PTI

Shah sees big win for BJP in Assam, Bengal

Says peaceful polling, high voter turnouts are positive signs

New Delhi, March 28:

Union home minister and senior BJP leader Amit Shah on Sunday exuded confidence that his party will win 26 out of the 30 West Bengal seats and more than 37 of the 47 Assam seats which went to polls in the first phase of Assembly elections in these states on Saturday.

Citing the internal party feedback that he has received, Shah claimed that the BJP is on course to achieve its target of winning over 200 seats in the 294-member West Bengal Assembly and improving its alliance tally of 86 seats in the 126-member Assam Assembly, and asserted that people have voted for the "positive" agenda espoused by the party.

Addressing a press conference, Shah also rejected West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's charge that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to a temple of the Matua community — which is in sizeable number in the state — during his trip to Bangladesh violated the poll code.

He said that the visit had nothing to do with the elections and was aimed at fostering deeper ties between the two countries.

Shah also parried a query about reports that he might have met leaders of the NCP, which is a key constituent of the opposition-run government in Maharashtra, saying

Didi questions Shah over phase-1 poll 'predictions'

RAJIB CHOWDHURI | DC KOLKATA, MARCH 28

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Sunday questioned Union home minister Amit Shah's assertion of the BJP's victory in 26 out of the 30 Assembly seats, polled in the first of the eight phases in the state, before her return to Nandigram where she is contesting from this time.

The Trinamul Congress supremo, who will spend next four days at the hot seat till it goes to the polls on April 1 in the second phase, addressed two rallies including one at Birulia Bazar where she cast injured during her poll campaign on March 10 evening.

Targeting Shah for his prediction, Banerjee earlier told a TMC rally at Chandipur of East Midnapore, "A BJP leader today claimed to have won

26 out of 30 seats. Why 26 only? Why don't you say 30 out of 30? Only then it will sound like getting more seats! They want to have Rosogolla but without its Ros (juice)! Why didn't you count the remaining four also? Are these left for the CPI(M) and Congress?"

She wondered, "Someone should have some shame at least. Only a day before polling were held in 30 seats. Now if you ask me how many seats I am winning then should I go inside the voting machines for a check? How would I know how many seats I will win? People know because they cast their votes. I can only say in view of an 84 per cent voters' turnout that my brothers and sisters, farmers and labourers voted for us."

Banerjee argued, "They have given their votes for us in those seats during

the Lok Sabha polls where we were lagging behind. If it is not true then why were the central forces sent for beating the people at Kanthi (in East Midnapore) on Saturday? They need to work under the state police. I do not know who ensured it."

Slamming her nemesis Shuvendu Adhikari and his father Sisir, she claimed, "The father-son duo does not have the capacity to win the polls. So they harboured armed goons from Uttar Pradesh, captured booths and did not allow the women to vote. It is not the central forces' job to deny the voters without masks of exercising their rights. Who gave them so much power that they would threaten the women instead of allowing them to cast their votes? How dare they? What an audacity! I know on whose orders they did it."

everything cannot be made public.

He said that peaceful polling in Assam and West Bengal and high voter turnouts are positive signs for the two states, noting that West Bengal often witnessed violence

during polls held earlier.

The home minister lauded the Election Commission (EC) for the violence-free polls.

Targeting the ruling Trinamul Congress in West Bengal, Amit Shah said an atmosphere of

appeasement and an euphemism for alleged pro-Muslim policies have prevailed in the state and illegal immigrants were allowed uninhibited while public funds were misappropriated and development plunged.

— PTI

Cong. urges EC to register FIRs against BJP leaders

New Delhi, March 28:

With the BJP advertising claims of winning all seats in upper Assam, the Congress on Sunday said it is in violation of the Representation of the People Act and urged the Election Commission to register FIRs against BJP chief J.P. Nadda and Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal.

In a complaint to the Election Commission (EC), Congress leaders Randeep Surjewala, Ajay Maken and Mukul Wasnik sought directions and action against top BJP leaders for giving advertisements in newspapers claiming victory in all upper Assam seats. They said such advertisements are in clear violation of the directions given by the EC that no one can make predictions of the results

during the prohibited period.

"We pray to the EC to take all such actions as may be necessary and required in law, including direction for registration of offences against Sarbananda Sonowal, J.P. Nadda and Ranjit Kumar Dass for the blatant violation of Model Code of Conduct and the RP Act, 1951," the Congress stated.

The party also demanded action against the media publishing such advertisements. Assam goes to polls in three phases and the first phase of polling was held on March 27.

"The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), after realising that their defeat is inevitable, has resorted to desperate illegal and unconstitutional methods to influence voters across the state," the Congress

said in a memorandum to the poll body.

The Congress leaders alleged that in a "pre-planned conspiracy" and in order to "defraud the voters of Assam", Sonowal, Nadda, Assam BJP president Ranjeet Kumar Dass and other BJP members and functionaries "willfully and knowingly have today issued advertisements camouflaged as political predictions as headlines on front page, in various newspapers throughout Assam".

They said through such ads, the BJP leaders have disseminated "false/untrue outcome of the results" of the first phase of voting in Assam and have "falsely claimed that BJP will win all constituencies of upper Assam".

Surjewala said. — PTI

Tharoor: BJP's 'love jihad' will never go far in Kerala

New Delhi, March 28:

The BJP can only offer communalism, tired scare-mongering over "love Jihad" and a hate-filled politics of division that will never go far in pluralist Kerala, senior Congress leader Shashi Tharoor said on Sunday and asserted that the BJP's high-profile recruit 88-year-old E. Sreedharan cannot be the answer to the state's political future.

He also dismissed suggestions that not having a chief ministerial face could dent the Congress-led United Democratic Front's (UDF) chances in the Kerala Assembly polls and said the party is "richly endowed" with experienced and capable leaders, any of whom could assume the mantle of chief ministership.

Tharoor said the trend in Kerala is clearly in favour of the UDF and he expects a "strong victory" when the results are announced on May 2.

On whether the BJP would be a factor in the polls and the impact of 'Metroman' E. Sreedharan being project-

ed as the key person by the saffron party, the former Union minister said the BJP "can only offer communalism, tired scare-mongering over 'love Jihad' and a hate-filled politics of bigotry and division that will never go far in pluralist, inclusive Kerala".

"They (the BJP) have hit their ceiling in the state. Sreedharan's impact peaked with the announcement of his candidacy. An 88-year-old technocrat cannot be the answer to the state's political future," Tharoor said.

On the BJP accusing the Congress of double standards in aligning with the Left in Bengal and fighting against it in Kerala, the MP from Thiruvananthapuram said in a vast country like India, each state has its distinctive political characteristics.

The competition between the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the UDF is deeply entrenched here, but on national issues, especially those related to secularism and opposition to the "anti-people policies" of

the BJP, they share many common views and often make common cause, he said.

"Since 2014, CPM MPs who campaigned against me in Kerala have supported my stand on many issues in the Lok Sabha. As for Bengal, you will have to ask the local party leaders there," Tharoor said.

But the BJP's allegation is not surprising because they have never understood or appreciated the diversity of India, he added.

Asked about home minister Amit Shah questioning Congress' secular credentials over its alliance with the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) in Kerala, the Indian Secular Front in West Bengal and the All India United Democratic Front in Assam, Tharoor reiterated that each state and each state party has its own history, traditions and political appeal. There is little in common among the three parties mentioned other than that they are seen as essentially Muslim parties, he pointed out. — PTI

BJP is behind the mask AIADMK wears: Rahul

DC CORRESPONDENTS CHENNAI / SALEM, MARCH 28

Campaigning for DMK alliance candidates in Salem on Sunday, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said that the present election was no longer a fight between political parties.

Firing on all barrels, Rahul Gandhi lashed out at Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palanisami showered praises on the minister calling him 'son of the soil', a 'person who lives with you', and 'a familiar person who stood for the welfare of the constituency'.

Campaigning for the DMK and its allies in Chennai for the first time after having visited the western and southern parts of the state earlier, Rahul addressed a public meeting in the city before flying to Salem to join DMK chief M.K. Stalin.

Chastising the BJP and the RSS, Rahul said they were trying to take Tamil culture out of the Tamils, and impose their own on them.

"We have seen many elections in Tamil Nadu, those fought between political parties. But this election is not like that. We are witnessing a full-scale attack on Tamil language, culture and history. If we are to say that Tamil Nadu is India, then we have to say that India is Tamil Nadu. Any relationship has to be one which is equal love and

CM PROMISES JOBS, SOPS FOR FISHERMEN
D. SEKAR | DC CHENNAI, MARCH 28

Hitting the campaign trail to canvass votes for his cabinet colleague and fisheries minister D. Jayakumar, who represents Royapuram assembly constituency, Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palanisami

showered praises on the minister calling him 'son of the soil', a 'person who lives with you', and 'a familiar person who stood for the welfare of the constituency'. Flashing the 'Two leaves' sign, the Chief Minister urged the public

to vote for D. Jayakumar and help him emerge victorious in the polls with a thumping majority.

Listing out the achievement of the current government, the Chief Minister said the Metro rail project was introduced by the AIADMK, and is planning to strengthen and expand the Metro rail network. On the law and order front, Tamil Nadu stands number one in the country today. Over 10 lakh jobs for youths will be provided, for which many sops have been provided to the small scale industries.

respect. India is a Union of states, languages, traditions and religions. No one idea or language or tradition is superior. They are all equally important to the country. I say this is an attack on Tamil language and culture. But it is also an attack on ideas which India knows," said Rahul Gandhi.

Slamming the AIADMK government, Rahul said, "One has to be careful during Covid-19. Today we see masks everywhere. It is difficult to recognise what is behind the mask. If you smile at someone, they do not know you are smiling. Today's AIADMK looks like wearing an AIADMK mask, but if you take out that mask, you

will find the BJP and the RSS behind that mask. The AIADMK is now a hollow shell controlled by the RSS and the BJP. People of Tamil Nadu have to be careful and understand what is behind the mask. No Tamil person wants to bow before Prime Minister Narendra Modi or touch the feet of Union home minister Amit Shah or RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat. But the current Chief Minister is very submissive to the RSS, Modi and RSS, because Modi controls the enforcement directorate and the CBI, and so the corrupt Chief Minister has to be very servile," alleged Rahul.



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and DMK president M.K. Stalin during a public meeting ahead of the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections, in Salem on Sunday.

— PTI

LOST DIALECT Karbi is a Tibeto-Burman language, spoken by people in parts of Assam region

PM lauds Assam man trying save Karbi language

MANOJ ANAND | DC GUWAHATI, MARCH 28

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday lauded the efforts of Sikari Tissau, a resident of Assam for his life-long mission to document the Karbi language.

Karbi is a Tibeto-Burman language, spoken by the indigenous community of Karbi in parts of Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh,

Burma and Bangladesh.

The Prime Minister in his 75th episode of Mann Ki Baat said, "Tisso of Karbi Anglong district of Assam has been documenting Karbi language for 20 years. Language is now disappearing from the mainstream, so he decided to dedicate his life to protect the identity of language. Today his efforts have resulted in the documentation of information about the lan-

guage."

He said, "'Once upon a time, in another era, 'Karbi', the language of 'Karbi tribal' brothers and sisters...is now disappearing from the mainstream. Tissau decided that he would protect the identity of theirs. He has also received accolades at many places for his efforts, and has also received awards."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi also

thanked listeners for their continued support as the monthly radio programme 'Mann Ki Baat' reached the milestone of 75 episodes.

"It seems like just yesterday when in 2014 we began this journey called Mann Ki Baat. I want to thank all listeners and those who have given inputs for the programme. During this journey, we have discussed a wide range of subjects. We all have learnt so

much. Diverse topics have been covered," PM Modi added.

The Karbis inhabiting in hills traditionally practice "jhum cultivation" where as those dwelling in plains earn their livelihood by engaging in agriculture and livestock rearing.

According to Assam Human development report 2003, this tribe has the highest number of people in human poverty.

● **PRIME MINISTER** said, Tisso of Karbi Anglong district of Assam has been documenting Karbi language for 20 years. Language is now disappearing from the mainstream, so he decided to dedicate his life to protect the identity of language. Today his efforts have resulted in the documentation of information about the language.

SHORT TAKES

MORE THAN 100 PROTESTERS HELD IN BELARUS

Kyiv, March 28: Police in the capital of Belarus arrested more than 100 people who assembled for a protest march Saturday to call for the resignation of the country's authoritarian president.

The planned event in Minsk indicated that supporters of the political opposition seek to revive the wave of mass protests that gripped Belarus for months last year but were dormant during the winter. During the first sizable anti-government protests of 2021, more than 200 people were detained Thursday.

EGYPT BUILDING COLLAPSE TOLL CLIMBS TO 18

Cairo, March 28: Egyptian state media said Sunday that at least 25 people were killed in a 10-storey building collapse in Cairo the day before, revising the toll up as rescue operations continued.

Al-Ahram newspaper said the number of injured in Saturday's incident in the capital's eastern Gesr Suez district rose to 75.

Rescue workers continued to sift through cement and rubble on Sunday, a security source said. *Al-Ahram* quoted local reports as claiming four of the building's floors had been added illegally.

Cairo governor Khaled Abdel Aal toured the site on Saturday and ordered a team of experts to be formed to inspect nearby buildings for damage.

GOTABAYA: WON'T SUCCUMB TO UNHRC PRESSURE

Colombo, March 28: President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on Sunday said the recent UNHRC resolution against Sri Lanka was the doing of "local and foreign forces" which do not want the country to progress, and vowed that his government would not succumb to such pressures. The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted a resolution against Sri Lanka's rights record on March 23, giving the UN body a mandate to collect evidence of crimes committed during the country's brutal three decade-long civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Rajapaksa said: "We will never succumb to (such) pressures (UNHRC resolution); we are a free nation. We will not be a victim of big power rivalry in the Indian Ocean."

FLOYD MURDER: ARGUMENTS TO BEGIN TODAY

Minneapolis, March 28: Opening arguments begin on Monday in the trial of the white police officer accused of killing George Floyd, a PoC man whose death was captured on video and touched off protests against racial injustice across the United States and around the world.

Derek Chauvin, a 19-year veteran of the Minneapolis Police Department, faces murder and manslaughter charges for his role in the May 25, 2020 death of the 46-year-old Floyd.

Chauvin, 44, who was fired from the police force along with three other officers, could be sentenced to up to 40 years in prison if convicted of the most serious charge — second-degree murder.

Opening arguments are to begin at 9:00 am Central time (1400 GMT) in a heavily guarded Minneapolis courtroom for a trial expected to last about a month. Fifteen jurors have been selected for the high-profile case.

Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill is expected to drop one juror on Monday and proceed with 12 and two alternates. The panel seated after two weeks of jury selection is racially mixed: Six white women, three PoC men, three white men, two mixed race women and one PoC woman.

Police officers are rarely convicted in the United States when charges are brought against them and the trial is being closely watched around the world. A conviction on any of the charges — second-degree murder, third-degree murder or manslaughter — will require the jury to return a unanimous verdict.

Floyd's cause of death is expected to be the central issue in the trial and a key piece of evidence is likely to be the viral video that triggered a summer of anti-racism protests.



Anti-coup protesters run around their makeshift barricade they burn to make defence line during a demonstration in Yangon on Sunday. — AP/PTI

A day after 100 killed, Myanmar protests on

Demonstrators are back, demand return to democracy

● UN SECRETARY-GENERAL Antonio Guterres said he was shocked by the killings of civilians, including children. The continuing military crackdown is unacceptable and demands a firm, unified & resolute international response, he wrote on Twitter.

Myanmar returned to the streets Sunday to press their demands for a return to democracy, just a day after security forces killed more than 100 people in the bloodiest day since last month's military coup. Protests were held in Yangon and Mandalay, the country's two biggest cities, as well as elsewhere. Some of the demonstrations were again met with police force.

At least 114 people were killed Saturday as security forces cracked down on protests against the Feb. 1 coup that ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government, according to the online news service *Myanmar Now*. The reported fatalities included several children under 16 years old.

Similar tallies of the death toll were issued by other Myanmar media and researchers, far exceeding the previous highest death toll on March 14. The number of killings since the

Myanmar and from abroad. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said he was shocked by the killings of civilians, including children.

The continuing military crackdown is unacceptable and demands a firm, unified & resolute international response, he wrote on Twitter.

In the United States, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a tweet that his country was horrified by the bloodshed perpetrated by Burmese security forces, showing that the junta will sacrifice the lives of the people to serve the few.

The military chiefs of 12 nations issued a joint statement condemning the use of force against unarmed people.

A professional military follows international standards for conduct and is responsible for protecting not harming the people it serves, it said. We urge the Myanmar Armed Forces to cease violence and work

to restore respect and credibility with the people of Myanmar that it has lost through its actions."

The statement was issued by the defence chiefs of Australia, Canada, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Korea, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The human rights group Amnesty International revived criticism that the international community was not doing enough to end the state violence in Myanmar.

United Nations Security Council member states' continued refusal to meaningfully act against this never-ending horror is contemptible, said Ming Yu Hah, the organisation's deputy regional director for campaigns.

The Security Council has condemned the violence but not advocated concerted action against the junta, such as a ban on selling it arms.

— AP

EUROPE TIGHTENS VIRUS CURBS WITH FRANCE 'CRITICAL'

Paris, March 28: France, Belgium and Poland on Saturday tightened curbs as Coronavirus cases surged in Europe while the Philippines readied for a giant lockdown and Chile confined over 80 percent of its population. France admitted the situation is "critical" and added three more departments to the 16 already under tight restrictions.

Twenty million people in France, including the greater Paris region, are classed as living in high-infection zones.

They are not allowed to travel further than 10 kilometres (six miles) from home without an essential reason.

Daily cases in France have nearly doubled since the start of the month and there have been more than 200,000 new cases every week.

But that did not stop a protest concert outside Saturday evening in central Paris.

— AFP

20 hurt as suicide bomber targets Mass in Indonesia

Makassar (Indonesia), March 28: Two attackers blew themselves up outside a packed Roman Catholic cathedral during a Palm Sunday Mass on Indonesia's Sulawesi island, wounding at least 20 people, police said.

A video obtained by *The Associated Press* showed body parts scattered near a burning motorbike at the gates of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral in Makassar, the capital of South Sulawesi province.

Rev. Wilhelmus Tulak, a priest at the church, said he had just finished celebrating Palm Sunday Mass when a loud bang shocked his congregation. He said the blast went off at about 10:30 am as a first batch of churchgoers was walking out of the church and another group was coming in.

He said security guards at the church were suspicious of two men on a motorcycle who wanted to enter the building and when they went to confront them, one of the men detonated his explosives.

Police later said both attackers were killed instantly and evidence collected at the scene indicated one of the two was a woman. The wounded included four guards and several churchgoers, police said. The attack a week before Easter in the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation came as the country was on high alert following December's arrest of the leader of the Southeast Asian militant group, Jemaah Islamiyah, which has been designated a terror group by many nations.

Canada library stabbing: 1 dead

Vancouver (British Columbia), March 28: A man went on a stabbing spree inside and around a library, killing one woman and injuring six other people in North Vancouver, British Columbia, authorities said.

Sgt Frank Jang of the Integrated Homicide Investigation Team said a suspect was in custody. He said the man is in his 20s and has had interactions with police in the past.

Jang said officials didn't have any information yet about a motive.

One witness, Steve Mossop, said he and his partner stopped in traffic when they saw a bloodied woman who told them she had just been stabbed. They then saw several victims within about 100 meters of each other, he said. "There was a man, there was an older woman, there was a younger woman, a mom, a

There was a man, there was an older woman, there was a younger woman, a mom, a random group of individuals in the wrong place at the wrong time," Mossop said. "It seemed like he was just running in a direction, whoever was in his path happened to be victimised"

— STEVE MOSSOP
A witness

random group of individuals in the wrong place at the wrong time," Mossop said. "It seemed like he was just running in a direction, whoever was in his path happened to be victimised," Mossop said of the attacker.

On Twitter, Canadian Public Safety Minister Bill Blair expressed shock and sadness over the incident, calling it a senseless act of violence.

— AP

Indonesia has been battling militants since bombings on the resort island of Bali in 2002 killed 202 people, mostly foreign tourists. Attacks aimed at foreigners have been largely replaced in recent years by smaller, less deadly strikes targeting the government, police and anti-terrorism forces and people militants consider as infidels.

President Joko Widodo condemned Sunday's attack and said it has nothing to do with any religion as all religions would not tolerate any kind of terrorism.

I call on people to remain calm while worshipping because the state guarantees you can worship without fear, Widodo said in a televised address.

— AP



An Indonesian policeman manages the traffic after an explosion outside a church in Makassar on Sunday. — AFP

Police: 2 dead, 3 arrested in Virginia Beach shootings

Virginia Beach (US), March 28: Overnight shootings near the Atlantic oceanfront in Virginia Beach left two people dead and eight wounded in a scene described by authorities as very chaotic.

Three men ranging in age from 18 to 22 have been arrested and face charges that include felonious assault and reckless handling of a firearm, Virginia Beach police said in a statement.

● INVESTIGATORS BELIEVE the first shooting stemmed from a fight involving a group of people.

● SEVERAL INDIVIDUALS produced firearms and began shooting at each other, resulting in numerous people being wounded, the police department statement said.

People were literally falling over themselves, Drayton said. Investigators believe the first shooting stemmed from a fight involving a group of people, police said.

Several individuals produced firearms and began shooting at each other, resulting in numerous people being wounded, the police department statement said.

Officers patrolling the area quickly responded, police said. But more gunfire followed several minutes later.

Police said they found a female bystander about a block away who died of her injuries from a second shooting incident. Investigators believe the woman's death was not related to the initial shooting.

— AP

a club on Friday night after the shooting ended and saw mass chaos and many people running.



Antony Blinken

CHINA SANCTIONS CANADIAN, U.S. OFFICERS, BLINKEN WARNS BEIJING

Washington, March 28: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned Saturday that China's tit-for-tat sanctions against two Americans in the growing dispute over Beijing's treatment of Uighurs were "baseless" and would only shine a harsh spotlight on the "genocide" in Xinjiang.

"Beijing's attempts to intimidate and silence those speaking out for human rights and fundamental freedoms only contribute to the growing international scrutiny of the ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang," Blinken said. He spoke out after China announced sanctions against two Americans, a Canadian and a rights advocacy body, in response to sanctions imposed this week by the two countries over Beijing's treatment of the Uighurs.

Blinken called the sanctions on the two members of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom "baseless." At least one million Uighurs and people from other mostly Muslim groups have been held in camps in China's Xinjiang region, according to rights groups, who accuse authorities of forcibly sterilising women and imposing forced labour.

— AFP

2 tugboats speed to free stuck ship

Suez (Egypt), March 28: Two additional tugboats sped Sunday to Egypt's Suez Canal to aid efforts to free a skyscraper-sized container ship wedged for days across the crucial waterway, even as major shippers increasingly divert their boats out of fear the vessel may take even longer to free.

The massive Ever Given, a Panama-flagged, Japanese-owned ship that carries cargo between Asia and Europe, got stuck Tuesday in a single-lane stretch of the canal. In the time since, authorities have been unable to remove the vessel and traffic through the canal valued at over \$9 billion a day has been halted, further disrupting a global shipping network already strained by the coronavirus pandemic.

The Dutch-flagged Alp Guard and the Italian-flagged Carlo Magno, called in to help tugboats already there, reached the Red Sea near the city of Suez early Sunday, satellite

data from MarineTraffic.com showed.

The tugboats will nudge the 400-metre-long (quarter-mile-long) Ever Given as dredgers continue to vacuum up sand from underneath the vessel and mud caked to its port side, said Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement, which manages the Ever Given.

Workers planned to make two attempts Sunday to free the vessel coinciding with high tides, a top pilot with the canal authority said.

"Sunday is very critical," the pilot said. It will determine the next step, which highly likely involves at least the partial offloading of the vessel. Taking containers off the ship likely would add even more days to the canal's closure, something authorities have been desperately trying to avoid. It also would require a crane and other equipment that have yet to arrive.

The pilot spoke to AP on condition of anonymity.

— AP

ENGLAND FIND

The markings found during garden digging mean it is likely a Rugosa coral

PIO boy unearths fossil, millions of years-old

London, March 28: A six-year-old Indian-origin boy says he is really excited after he found a fossil from millions of years ago while digging in his garden in the West Midlands region of England.

Siddak Singh Jhamat, known as Sid, was using a fossil-hunting set he received as a Christmas present when he came across a rock that looked like a horn.

"I was just digging for worms and things like pottery and bricks and I just

came across this rock which looked a bit like a horn, and thought it could be a tooth or a claw or a horn, but it was actually a piece of coral which is called horn coral," the schoolboy said.

"I was really excited about what it really was," he said. According to a BBC report, his father Vish Singh was able to identify the horn coral through a fossil group he is a member of on Facebook and estimates the fossil is between 251 to

● ACCORDING TO a BBC report, his father Vish Singh was able to identify the horn coral through a fossil group he is a member of on Facebook and estimates the fossil is between 251 to 488 million years old. In that there were loads of little molluscs and sea shells, and something called a crinoid

488 million years old. "We were surprised he

found something so odd-shaped in the soil... he found a horn coral, and some smaller pieces next to it, then the next day he went digging again and found a congealed block of sand, said Vish Singh.

In that there were loads of little molluscs and sea shells, and something called a crinoid, which is like a tentacle of a squid, so it's quite a prehistoric thing," he said.

Singh believes the fossil's markings mean it is most likely a Rugosa coral and

that the period that they existed from was between 500 and 251 million years ago, the Paleozoic Era.

"England at the time was part of Pangea, a landmass of continents. England was all underwater as well... that's quite a significant expanse of time," said Vish Singh.

The family, from Walsall, said they do not live in an area known for its fossils, like the Jurassic Coast in the south of England, but that they do have a lot of natural clay in the garden

where the fossils were found.

Singh added: "Lots and lots of people have commented on how amazing it is to find something in the back garden."

"They say you can find fossils anywhere if you look carefully enough, but to find a significantly large piece like that is quite unique."

They now hope to tell Birmingham University's Museum of Geology about their discovery.

— PTI

DECCAN

Chronicle

29 MARCH 2021

Good start in Bangla, but Teesta is credibility test

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's just-ended visit to Bangladesh is likely to be noted as an effort on India's part to pull back from the brink and rescue what is arguably the most mutually fruitful relationship this country has with any other neighbor. It is to be welcomed.

No matter how the effort is eventually assessed, a genuine attempt has doubtless been made. The tone struck in Dhaka by both sides was one of warmth, indicating that a return to a positive normal, and then moving to a higher plane, is an aspiration of both countries.

India's governing party's regrettably communal pitch on the question of citizenship, as manifested through the Modi government's relentless pursuit of NRC, specifically in the context of being the primary step toward giving effect to the CAA, cast a shadow on a perfectly productive relationship with Bangladesh.

Since then it would appear that the Modi government is learning that it is a bad idea to play domestic politics in a manner that adversely impacts India's diplomatic ties and hurts its heritage of being a country that promotes high human values in a mind-bogglingly diverse democracy.

In the fitness of things, the PM should have taken with him an all-party delegation to Dhaka and not made the journey a purely governmental affair

neighbourhood policy, in its dealings with Dhaka, a higher profile must be accorded to aspects that touch ordinary people. Easing trade, transport, and irrigation bottlenecks suggest themselves.

It is in this context that the interim agreement to share the waters of the Teesta river with Bangladesh, signed in January 2011, was flagged yet again by the Bangladesh leader in her conversation with the Indian PM. New Delhi is yet to find creative ways to help West Bengal overcome its reservations on the sharing of the Teesta waters. It is time for India to apply itself with diligence to this subject, lest in Bangladesh it acquire the status of being the touchstone of good intentions on India's part.

During Mr Modi's visit, India signed five important agreements in areas such as disaster management and trade. Better border management, starting new train services to connect the people of the two countries, invitation to innovative Bangladesh start-up entrepreneurs to find angel investors in India, looking at cooperation in the fields of civil nuclear energy and artificial intelligence, besides supplying the anti-Covid vaccine, are among the many likely areas of future cooperation. The going will be smoother in these and other important areas if past promises and agreements are not lost sight of.

The 50th anniversary of Bangladesh as an independent country and the centenary of the birth of its charismatic founder Sheikh Mujibur Rehman was seized on by Mr Modi to try to re-invigorate ties with our neighbour. In the fitness of things, the PM should have taken with him an all-party delegation to Dhaka and not made the journey a purely governmental affair. The liberation of Bangladesh was a non-partisan affair in India, and this should have been reflected.

Killings by junta an outrage

The Myanmar Army is shooting to kill protesters. Even as the senior general, Min Aung Hlaing, was mouthing platitudes about protecting the people and restoring democracy after the next elections, his soldiers were carrying on with their brutal repression of protests, firing indiscriminately at people, including children, and killing at least 114 persons on Saturday. Ironically, it was Myanmar's 76th Armed Forces Day while the rebels marked it as Resistance Day whose history goes back to World War II. At least 400 civilians may have been killed, besides at least one policeman who had joined anti-coup protesters demonstrating against the February 1 coup that displaced the government led by of Aung San Suu Kyi of NLD.

The lack of a strong international response, thus far limited only to sanctions against top military brass and a few companies they deal with, may be contributing to a worsening situation in which the people are under the thumb of a blood-letting junta, which had backed Opposition parties in the November 2020 polls. The response of India, which shares a long border with its eastern neighbour and hence is likely to be affected more than the others, has also been wishy-washy in merely expressing the hope that democracy would be restored soon. Saturday's bloody incidents should draw a much harsher response, to do which India must abandon thinking only about its old ties with the junta, which used to prove useful in pushing back rebels who run insurgency movements in India's Northeast.

India's soft power may be seen to be declining these days when its own freedoms are in peril. But, if it still retains its ambitions of a seat at the high table at the UN and a voice to be reckoned with in international affairs, it must learn to stand up against injustice. It may seem intriguing that Suu Kyi's people are protesting suppression while they had discriminated against Rohingya Muslims who were forced to flee Myanmar. But India must stand up for the rights of the Myanmarese citizens against a brutal Army that thinks nothing of shooting civilians.

DECCAN CHRONICLE

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Subhani



Hosabale's rise: RSS-BJP ties still remain opaque



Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

The myth about the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the BJP is that they are independent entities, though umbilically linked through ideology. That is, each one of them functions on its own, and the one — that is the RSS — does not interfere in the internal and day-to-day affairs of the other — that is the BJP. The BJP leaders have always maintained that it is not true that they follow the directions issued from Nagpur, the headquarters of the RSS. But the suspicion has lingered among BJP watchers that the saffron party does not have total freedom. That is, the president of the BJP has to be approved by the RSS. Though there are organisational elections in the BJP, there is never a contest, and this is especially so in the case of the president of the party. And there is always a representative of the RSS in the BJP, and many of the RSS folk are seconded to the party. This has been so right from the time when Syama Prasad Mookerjee set up the Bharatiya Jan Sangh with members lent by the RSS, including Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, Balraj Madhok and Atal Behari Vajpayee. Those who joined the BJP in 1980 and who were not members of the RSS were not seen as insiders. This was the case with Jaswant Singh, Sushma Swaraj and even Arun Jaitley.

The equation between the RSS and the BJP became prickly when the BJP came to power in 1996 for a short while, and again in 1998 and 1999 under Atal Behari Vajpayee. It became clear that Vajpayee was older and more senior to then RSS chief K. Sudarshan, and the tus-

sle for dominance became quite embarrassing. Was it because Vajpayee was by nature more liberal and the RSS was dogmatically communal? Vajpayee was as much a dyed-in-the-wool RSS communist as any other, but the question seemed to be one of personal dominance and tactics. The defeat of the BJP in 2004 came as a blessing in disguise.

In the run-up to the 2014 election, a middle-rung BJP leader indicated that the RSS would be working for the party in the elections, and this was the first time after 1977 that this was happening. The impressive victory of the BJP under Narendra Modi then was a collaborative effort by the RSS-BJP. In many ways, the RSS had kept away from election campaigns in 2004 and in 2009. A middle-rung Congress leader from Uttar Pradesh had opined that the importance of the RSS was exaggerated by the media, and if it was actually true then the BJP should never lose an election.

A senior RSS functionary was once quite irritated when I had sent him a questionnaire for an interview, and he said there were too many questions on RSS-BJP relations, and that the RSS should not be seen through the BJP prism

The argument that has arisen after the elevation of Dattatreya Hosabale as the RSS's second in command, replacing Bhaiyaji Joshi, is that Mr Modi and Mr Hosabale are seen as fairly close, and are on the same page

The BJP's strategy is that the party must have its own foot soldiers. It is also questionable whether the BJP really needs the RSS to formulate Hindutva ideology since it remains a crude, simplistic ideology of majoritarianism.

or even the other way around. The implication was that the RSS had its own self-defined goals and could not be reduced to the politics of the BJP. But many political observers have no doubt that the BJP's rule is in effect the rule of the RSS, and that Hindutva is the ideological glue. Most BJP leaders are not willing to admit that they are mere pawns and the real command rests with the RSS, and most BJP leaders avoid using the word "Hindutva" though they may be practising it in toto as in the pursuit of measures like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the abrogation of Article 370 in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The electoral victories of 2014 and 2019 have made it clear that the BJP is now the leading party of Hindutva and it no longer has any need to serve an ideological apprenticeship with the RSS and play second fiddle. And that Mr Modi is the undisputed icon of Hindutva, and he doesn't have to depend on the RSS for ideological ballast. He can articulate it himself. The BJP then doesn't have to look to the RSS for ideological inputs. The argument that has arisen after the elevation of Dattatreya Hosabale as the RSS's second in command, replacing Bhaiyaji Joshi, is that Mr Modi and Mr Hosabale are seen as fairly close, and are on the same page, which is hardly a strange formulation given the common ideological roots of the RSS and BJP. It showcases the old dilemma of what should be the nature of the relation-

ship between the two organisations. As Mr Modi remains the dominant figure, the RSS will have to play second fiddle to the BJP. If and when Mr Modi loses his star position, the BJP will have to fall back to the secondary position of being a RSS affiliate.

One of the RSS's vaunted strengths has been its huge army of foot soldiers through its cells or *shakhas*, running into millions. It is this amorphous, anonymous army that got activated at election time and which was the invisible strength of the BJP. Amit Shah changed this when he was made president of the BJP by Mr Modi in 2014. He vowed to transform the BJP into a 10 million-strong organisation, and even after J.P. Nadda took over the party, the membership drive continued, and the number has reached 18 million. The BJP's strategy seemed to be that the party must have its own foot soldiers and that it should not depend on the RSS volunteers. But a friend pointed out that there is a big difference between the BJP's millions of members and the RSS cadres. The members are only BJP voters and they are not necessarily party workers. The RSS will still have the advantage as it has a dedicated cadre base.

It is also questionable whether the BJP really needs the RSS to formulate or refine the Hindutva ideology because Hindutva remains a crude, simplistic ideology of majoritarianism. There is not much need for redefining it, much less refining it. A new generation of RSS and BJP leaders are not inclined to update the Hindutva ideology because glorifying a dead national past is their basic principle. If the BJP survives in power, it may not need the RSS much longer. The RSS then will have no option but to slowly wither away.

The writer is a Delhi-based commentator and analyst

LETTERS

CANCEL KUMBH

The second wave of Covid is deadly and dangerous. Lockdown was imposed in a few areas and night curfews clamped in certain areas. Penalty is levied for not following rules. Under these circumstances, Kumbh Mela where lakhs of pilgrims from all over the world come must be cancelled to safeguard public health which is more important.

K.L. Rao
Visakhapatnam

MYANMAR JUNTA

I never thought Myanmar would improve even after Aung San Suu Kyi took charge remotely (*Myanmar junta kills over 90 protesters on 'day of shame', DC, March 28*). Perhaps under the influence of China, the ouster of Suu Kyi and murder of protesters was Junta following the Chinese model of crushing dissent. But in doing so, it has disgraced itself. The people of Myanmar deserve a better deal and the Junta should that. Further military action can trigger unprecedented violence.

Govardhana Myneedu
Vijayawada

DELHI'S NEW ACT

Even a layman can understand that the recent law passed by the Centre vis-a-vis Delhi's elected CM and a chosen unelected L-G, is that CM's wings are pruned so much so that he becomes subservient to LG in all matters of governance. Whatever the Centre attributes to its decision, it doesn't cut ice with the people. The BJP's frustration against Kejriwal's developmental projects is visible. Hope the apex court will repeat its earlier verdict and reprimand the Centre for its belligerence.

K. Nehru Patnaik
Visakhapatnam

Fight takes heavy toll of civilians

PARIS, March. 29 Pakistan's Army appears to have inflicted a heavy toll on Bengali civilians of breakaway Eastern wing since it moved out from barracks in Dacca and other places last Thursday night. The army opened fire with automatic weapons, tank cannons and rockets, according to information reaching here. Army censorship made it impossible to get any despatches out of the country, and over 30 journalists lost their notes when they were stripped and searched before being expelled from Dacca on Saturday night.

50 YEARS AGO IN

DECCAN

Chronicle

Kishwar Desai

London Diary



India wave hits UK's vax drive, amid adulation for Poonawala

At last, the Sun is shining both literally and figuratively. This is "Happy Monday" as another phase of lockdown comes to an end and we can meet in groups of two families. Or so we were told a while ago. But the Covid situation keeps changing like the London weather, and strict international travel bans come into force.

Earlier last week, India was headlined on the front page — fortunately in a way it was a compliment not a criticism. But now the news that our vaccine supply may be interrupted because the new wave in India will impact vaccine exports to UK has spread gloom. We have had only the fantastic success of the vaccination programme thus far to cheer us. By now, 32 million doses have been delivered catering to 43 per cent of the population, Second only to Israel. All adults were due to be "vaxxed" by end April. Now we are not sure and have to wait.

There is awe and wonder at how the Serum Institute has become the largest supplier of vaccines with special features on Adar Poonawala appearing in the media every day. (Makes a change from debates on farmers' protests being discussed in Parliament.)

And so now we have stories on the "prince of vaccines", with a fortune of 11 billion pounds, hiring a mansion on Mayfair for 50,000 pounds a week. We also know all about his property portfolio including the homes in India and about his fleet of 35 luxury cars which includes a Mercedes redesigned as a batmobile... Of course it may be modelled on the vehicle owned by the fictional superhero, Batman, but with Covid, bats have a special significance, wouldn't you say, hmm? But to be honest, while he vaccinates the world, Adar has become a superhero as well... who can grudge him his reported collection of Picasso and Dali? Well deserved — as lives have been saved, after Adar took a risk

and invested in the "Oxford" vaccine, long before anyone else thought of it.

The country remains obsessed by vaccines. On the news channels, in newspapers in daily conversations, Covid and vaccines dominate, as now we await the Covid annual booster jabs just like we have for flu.

We are also eagerly awaiting our final release in end-June. Even so, Boris Johnson keeps on hedging his bets. Twice bitten, three times shy is his story. People are demanding a final decision but no luck. The angry ones want an inquiry into the mistakes made over the last fifteen months but Boris is in no hurry. These inquiries take so long that he may have retired by the time they give their report.

The half-serious speculation is that Boris will quit being Prime Minister — not because he can't win — but because he can't afford it. Compared to what he made as a columnist (at £2500 per column) the

Prime Minister only gets a low six figure salary. The house at No. 10 Downing Street has just the top floor flat for living purposes. There is no government budget for decoration. So when they moved, his fiancée decided that the place needed redecoration. There was no money from the government kitty. So private donations had to be made to buy a decent sofa and repaint the walls. This created another scandal, which has been running for some time... Where did the quarter million come from? This must be the only country where the citizens don't want their rulers to spend money officially on their homes but also don't approve if they help themselves to their friends' money. So what can a poor Prime Minister do? Unlike in India, no one here gets huge budgets to redecorate their homes when they shift into an "official residence". But in India — politicians to bureaucrats — everyone is entitled to a redecoration spree.

Perhaps the saddest event of the week has been the accidental death of a seal, who had made his home in the Thames. Freddie, as the locals called him, had washed up from colder climes into the river some time back and decided to settle down. He had become a much-loved attraction. Alas, the other day, a woman, QC no less, was walking her dog by the river when the dog escaped her control and mauled poor Freddie. Freddie died but there are no guilty parties. The dog owner was helpless, as the dog would not let go. It was as if they had known each other and had a score to settle. Seals may be cute but the English treasure their dogs. After all, we are told that highly placed advisers to the Prime Minister have been transferred for being rude to Dilyn the Number 10 dog.

Kishwar Desai's latest book, The Longest Kiss: The Life And Times of Devika Rani, has just been published and she is the Chair of the Trust that set up the world's first Partition Museum in Amritsar

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	49,008.50	1.17
Nifty 50	14,507.30	1.27
S&P 500*	3,974.54	1.66
Dollar (₹)	72.5	0.17
Pound Sterling (₹)	100.00	-0.50
Euro (₹)	85.50	0.31
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	44,081▼147	0.33
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	64.69	4.42
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.123	0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.641	0.027

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Banks to conduct special clearing operations: RBI

Banks will conduct special clearing operations for annual closure of government accounts on March 31, which is the last day of the current fiscal year, the RBI has said. With regard to annual closing of accounts related transactions of the governments, special measures are put in place for 2020-21, the RBI has instructed all the banks to maintain sufficient balance in their clearing settlement account.

Coal import drops 14% in 11 months of fiscal 2020-21



India's coal import dropped 13.6 per cent to 196.13 million tonne (MT) in the April-February period of the ongoing fiscal year. The country had imported 227.23 MT of coal in the year-ago period, according to a report by mjunction services. "For April-February 2020-21, total coal and coke imports stood at 196.13 MT, about 13.69 per cent lower than 227.23 MT imported during April-February 2019-20," it said.

Procurement from GeM portal crosses ₹1L cr

Public procurement of goods and services has crossed ₹1 lakh crore from government buying portal GeM since the platform was launched in August 2016, on account of a sharp increase in buying activities by different ministries, an official said. The Government e-Market (GeM) portal was launched on August 9, 2016, for online purchases of goods and services by all the central government ministries and departments.

Trai writes to all agencies on new bulk SMS norms

Trai has written to key ministries, associations like COAI and Nasscom and nodal agencies like NIC as it pulls out all stops to ensure smooth implementation of its new regulations on bulk messages after March 31. Sources in the Trai said NIC has assured it that it is in a state of readiness to assist government organisations and agencies, and resolve issues, as new rules for commercial messages come into force.



Global liquidity, buoyed market trigger IPO rush

New Delhi, March 28: Global liquidity and bull run in domestic equity market helped Indian companies raise over ₹31,000 crore through initial share-sale in the ongoing fiscal year and the IPO pipeline remains strong for 2021-22 too, experts said on Sunday.

This also marks the highest fund-raising through IPOs in last three years. Sandeep Bhardwaj, CEO, retail at IIFL Securities, said the IPO pipeline remains strong with 28 companies holding markets regulator Sebi's approval for raising nearly ₹28,710 crore through initial share-sale going forward.

Moreover, companies including LIC, HDB Financial Services, NCDEX, ESAF Small Finance Bank are expected to come out with their IPOs in 2021-22, said Rajendra Naik, managing director, investment banking, Centrum Capital.

● Thirty firms raised ₹31,277 crore through IPOs in 2020-21, significantly higher than ₹20,352 crore mopped up through 13 initial share-sales in the preceding fiscal year.

● The IPO pipeline remains strong with 28 companies holding markets regulator Sebi's approval for raising nearly ₹28,710 crore through initial share-sale going forward.

● Companies such as LIC, HDB Financial Services, NCDEX, ESAF Small Finance Bank are expected to come out with their IPOs in FY22

According to an analysis of data available with the stock exchanges, 30 firms raised ₹31,277 crore through initial public offerings (IPOs) in 2020-21, significantly higher than ₹20,352 crore mopped up through 13 initial share-sales in the preceding fiscal year.

Prior to that, 14 companies had floated IPOs in 2018-19 to raise ₹14,719 crore and 45 main-board IPOs during 2017-18 collectively raised ₹82,109 crore.

Apart from IPOs, the fiscal 2020-21 witnessed a

₹15,000-crore follow-on public offer of Yes Bank.

Adding depth to the IPO markets, companies from diverse sectors like jewellery, technology, specialty chemicals, banking and financial services have made their way to the IPO space during the period under review. "The biggest factor driving companies to fund-raising through IPO is the bull run in the stock market. Improved sentiments in the secondary market acted as a support for the primary market," Naik said.

According to him, ample liquidity, better than expected economic recovery uplifted the market sentiment and the same was visible in the primary market.

Making similar statement, IIFL Securities' Bhardwaj said the availability of ample liquidity in the system across the world, new sectors businesses with immense opportunities and optimism around the Indian demography, demand and growth story triggered the IPOs' gold rush.

V.K. Vijaykumar, chief investment strategist at Geojit Financial Services, believes that there is exuberance in the market and this has attracted large number of retail investors into the market.

He, further, said new retail investors are actively and a bit irrationally applying for the initial public offers and suggested that such investors should be discrete in selecting IPOs. — PTI

Higher PF cap won't help most staff

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO NEW DELHI, MARCH 28

The government's decision to double the cap on an individual's investment in general provident fund (PF) is unlikely to benefit an employee in the lower or middle ranks compared to ultra-high salaried persons.

According to the law, any organisation that employs 20 or more people on a per-

manent basis is supposed to provide the PF facility to its employees. An amount that is 12 per cent of the basic pay needs to be contributed by the employee every month.

Recently, the government had amended PF rules to increase the cap on Employees' Provident Fund or EPF contribution — whose interest income is tax-exempt — from ₹2.5 lakh to ₹5 lakh per

annum. This amendment will allow even the individuals, who are earning an annual salary of ₹83.33 lakh or a monthly salary of ₹6.94 lakh to benefit from tax-exempt interest from EPFO. Earlier, the benefit of tax-free PF interest was available only to those who received an annual income of ₹41,66,666 or a monthly income of ₹3,47,222.

A source in the govern-

ment said that the recent amendment on the EPF contributions would benefit only a very small section of staff who contribute higher amounts in provident fund because employees receiving a salary upwards of ₹3.47 lakh a month make up just one per cent of the total workforce in the country. Ordinary employees, he said, may have nothing much to gain.

OVER 4 CRORE OLD VEHICLES ON INDIAN ROADS, SAYS ROAD MIN



New Delhi, March 28: Over four crore vehicles older than 15 years are plying on roads pan-India and fall under the ambit of green tax, with Karnataka occupying the top slot with more than 70 lakh such vehicles.

The ministry of road transport and highways has digitised the data of such vehicles throughout the country, excluding Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana and Lakshadweep as their records were not available.

A proposal to levy green tax has already been sent to the states.

More than four crore vehicles have been found to be older than 15 years, including over two crore which are more than 20 years old, as per the data.

The digitised vehicle records are as per the centralised Vahan database that excludes "AP, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, and Lakshadweep", the ministry said.

Uttar Pradesh occupies the second spot with 56.54 lakh vehicles, of which 24.55 lakh are older than 20 years. The capital Delhi is at the third place in terms of old and polluting vehicles at 49.93 lakh, of which 35.11 lakh are older than 20 years.

The digitisation of vehicle numbers revealed that Kerala has 34.64 lakh such vehicles, followed by 33.43 lakh in Tamil Nadu, 25.38 lakh in Punjab and 22.69 lakh in West Bengal.

Maharashtra, Odisha, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Haryana have these vehicles in the range of 17.58 lakh and 12.29 lakh. The number of such vehicles ranges between 1 lakh and 5.44 lakh for Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, HP, Puducherry, Assam, Bihar, Goa, Tripura and UTs of Dadra-Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu. — PTI

39% PM housing units completed

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, MARCH 28

Out of the Centre's target houses under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G), only 2.77 per cent housing units have been completed in FY20-21. On the other hand, the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban (PMAY-U) has completed only 39 per cent of the target houses since 2015.

In FY20-21, the Centre had set a target of sanctioning 63.76 lakh houses under PMAY-G. Out of this, sanctions were provided for 34.47 lakh units, which is 54 per cent of the target. According to data from the ministry of rural development, only 2.77 per cent of houses have been completed till February. In 2019-20, 56.63 per cent of the target houses were completed.

According to the ministry, the pace of completion has slowed down drastically. "This slow pace can be attributed to some factors like inactivity due to Covid-19, election in a few states, saturation of eligible beneficiaries from SC and ST categories, slow pace of working of remand module and lack of timely allocation of targets to districts,"

finds the ministry.

The PMAY-G being implemented from April 1, 2016 with the target of construction of 2.95 crore houses by the year 2022, has completed 1.35 lakh units, as per the data from the ministry of rural development.

Similarly, against the validated demand of 1.12 crore houses across the country, so far 1.11 crore houses have been sanctioned under the four verticals of PMAY-U Mission.

Out of the sanctioned houses, more than 75 lakh houses are in various stages of construction, and over 43 lakh houses have been completed, which is 39 per cent of the target houses as well those sanctioned. This also includes incomplete houses under the National Urban Renewal Mission run by the United Progressive Alliance government.

The ministry of housing and urban affairs has been implementing PMAY-U Mission since June 25, 2015 to assist states and union territories technically and financially in providing all-weather pucca houses with basic civic infrastructure to all eligible urban households by year 2022.

KFC believes in India story, to expand stores

New Delhi, March 28: The US-based fast food chain KFC will continue to expand its restaurant network in India despite the coronavirus pandemic bringing structural changes in the business, believing the country to be a growth market in the coming years, according to a top company official. KFC India, which opened around 30 new restaurants last year during the peak of the Covid-19-induced disruptions, is looking at adding new outlets this year too as it looks to enhance access of the brand to its consumers.

"Our intent is definitely to keep growing the brand. One of our biggest strategic pillars is what we call as access. We have to ensure that access to the brand continues to grow for the consumers, both physical and digital," KFC India managing director Samir Menon said.

Despite the Covid-19 disruptions, he said, "We actually have more restaurants now than we had in pre-Covid. During the course of the year, our franchisees have opened new restaurants. So we actually have more restaurants now than we were in pre-Covid in terms of number of restaurants."

Before Covid-19 hit, KFC India had a restaurant count of about 450 and at present it has over 480 restaurants in more than 130 cities across India.

"We believe very strongly in the India story and we don't really have any doubt that India is definitely going to be a growth market for KFC in the coming years. Definitely, it was a tough year but it



● We believe very strongly in the India story and we don't really have any doubt that India is definitely going to be a growth market for KFC in the coming years. Definitely, it was a tough year but it hasn't deterred us from that intent

SAMIR MENON, MD, KFC India

hasn't deterred us from that intent," Menon emphasised.

From a physical access perspective, he said the company continuously identifies new trade areas and potential areas and starts setting up restaurants there through its franchise partners.

"Physical access is definitely going to be a key part of growth strategy. As the year goes, a better sense of what kind of numbers we are trying to chase will emerge. It will

be more than 25 for sure," Menon said.

With the pandemic bringing about a change in consumer behaviour with online orders and off-premise consumption growing, he said KFC India has also accelerated its efforts to address the changing consumer needs.

"I do feel our online portion of business would have grown at least by 50 per cent between pre-and post-COVID and that has also led us to a larger shift in the way we are communicating with the consumers, a part of it is the aggregators and part of it is our own assets," he said.

Giving a sense of how the pandemic has brought about a structural change in the business, he said more than half of the sales were on premise in pre-pandemic times and in post-Covid, delivery has seen huge growth with over two-thirds of the business now moving to off premise, including takeaway. — PTI

Manappuram MFI may get listed

Kochi, March 28: Manappuram Finance, the second largest gold loan company in the country, is toying with the idea of hiving off and taking its microfinance arm Asirvad Microfinance public within a year, a top company official said.

With a loan portfolio of over ₹5,360 crore and close to 25 lakh customers across 23 states, the Chennai-based Asirvad is the fourth largest microfinance lender in the country in terms of the loan book.

Founded in 2008 by S.V. Raja Vaidyanathan, Asirvad was taken over by Manappuram in February 2015 for ₹48.63 crore. The V.P. Nandakumar-led company first bought 71 per cent stake which was later increased to 95 per cent and the rest is with the founder Vaidyanathan.

Under Manappuram, Asirvad has grown leaps and bounds.

From a loan book of just ₹300 crore and a few lakh customers across 115 branches in Tamil Nadu,

Kerala and Karnataka when it was bought over, the company has over 1,030 branches across 314 districts in 23 states (excluding Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) and a loan book of over ₹5,358 crore as of 2020-end, of which over ₹1,000 crore is in Tamil Nadu alone.

As of the December 2020 quarter, Asirvad had a loan book of ₹5,357.71 crore, a growth of 6.68 per cent from ₹5,022.14 crore in the year-ago quarter. — PTI

PORSCHE FINDS INDIA TO BE A MARKET FOR NEW PANAMERA



Mumbai, March 28: Sports luxury car maker Porsche has said India is a potential market for its recently-launched new-generation Panamera sedan, even as its focus will remain on all models across segments.

Porsche India also said the launch of the new-format showrooms in Delhi and Mumbai in a short span of three months exhibits investors confidence in its business here despite the pandemic.

The company, which is part of the German auto giant Volkswagen group, had early last month rolled out the 2021 edition of Panamera in four variants — Panamera, GTS, Turbo S, and Turbo S E-hybrid, priced between Rs 1.45 crore and Rs 2.43 crore (both ex-showroom).

After setting up its first Porsche Studio in Delhi in January, the company opened another one in Mumbai early this week under a new dealer partner Infinity Cars Pvt Ltd, a luxury car dealership group, which represents a variety of marquee brands across different cities.

"For sure, India can also become a Panamera market in future. It is also an important segment which we want to develop in future," Monolito Vujicic, brand head at Porsche India, said.

He said the company delivered the first Panamera to a customer just after one week of the opening of the new outlet in Delhi in January. "It means there are customers here, we have to communicate it the right way."

Vujicic said that even Panamera Exclusive, which is the limited edition of the luxury sedan, is an option for the India market. — PTI

FUTURE | READY

Niti Aayog member asks farm unions to consider government's offer

‘Reforms key for doubling farm incomes’

New Delhi, March 28: Niti Aayog Member Ramesh Chand on Sunday said the target of doubling farmers' income by 2022 will not be fulfilled if the three new farm laws are not implemented immediately, adding that the protesting farm unions should consider the government's offer of discussing the legislations clause by clause.

In an interview to PTI, Chand further said the blanket ban on genetically modified crops is not the right approach.

The government and unions representing farmers, who have been



camping at Delhi's border for four months in protest against the three laws that they say will end state procurement of crops at MSP, have held 11 rounds of talks, the last being on January 22. Talks broke down after widespread violence dur-

ing a tractor rally by protesting farmers on January 26.

"I think the way forward can come only from give and take, so if we feel we will stick to whatever we are demanding, then you will find that there will not be any desirable way

forward. "The government has given a bold option to the farmer leaders, the government is willing to put these farm laws on hold for one-and-a-half years," the Niti Aayog member (agriculture) said.

Chand pointed out that the government is willing to discuss the three farm laws clause by clause, and farmer leaders should consider this offer.

"There was enough time to think coolly, to think in a balanced manner. Initial reaction could be emotional, initial reaction could be under some pressure, but now I think

everybody has thought coolly.

"So farmer leaders must come up with their reaction, they must seek change wherever they think this is going against their interest," he argued.

According to Chand, protesting farmers must speak up and open their minds, otherwise their silence will go against them.

"In the society, image is coming that it is becoming political... so they (farmers) must study in detail... they must say 'look this clause is against us'," the Niti Aayog member added. — PTI

SHORT TAKES

Krishna-Vishnu falter in final

Badminton: The Indian pair of Krishna Prasad Garaga and Vishnu Vardhan Goud let slip a strong start to go down to England's Ben Lane and Sean Vendy in the men's doubles finals of the Orleans Masters badminton tournament here on Sunday.

The unheralded Indians, the only ones left in contention from the country on the final day, lost 21-19, 14-21, 19-21 in a 56-minute battle with the fourth seeds. Krishna and Vishnu had paired for the first time in this event and would be pleased with the results they managed.

Krishna, 21, is India's no. 1 ranked doubles player and used to pair up with Satwiksairaj Rankireddy in his junior days. He and Ishaan Bhatnagar had reached the finals at the 2019 Bulgarian Junior international. On Saturday, Saina Nehwal bowed out in straight games in the women's singles semifinals to end India's singles challenge at the tournament. — *PTI*

Badrinath tests Covid positive

New Delhi: Former India batsman S. Badrinath on Sunday said he has tested positive for Covid-19 and is currently in home isolation, making him the third ex India cricketer from Road Safety World Series tournament to be infected by the virus in the last couple of days. The 40-year-old Badrinath recently played in the veteran's tournament in Raipur, just like the legendary Sachin Tendulkar and former India all-rounder Yusuf Pathan, who also tested positive for Covid-19.

"I have been taking all necessary precautions and have been getting tested regularly. However, I have tested positive for Covid-19 and have some mild symptoms," Badrinath said in his Twitter handle. "I will follow all protocols and will be isolating myself at home and will take needful action as per advise (advice) from my physician," said Badrinath who announced retirement from all forms of cricket in 2018. — *PTI*

Repsol Honda eye Qatar success

Doha: Pol Espargaro and Stefan Bradl kept their heads down and focused on Sunday as the first Qualifying of 2021 got underway in Losail, the pair lining up on the fourth and sixth rows of the grid. Saturday in Qatar started under an even more punishing sky as track temperatures pushed 50°C, the MotoGP field made the most of the track time in Free Practice 3 regardless but the temperatures meant there were no changes on the combined times. As on Friday, the conditions would steadily improve throughout the evening.

As a result, Espargaro earned direct passage to Q2 and accomplished the first goal of his opening weekend with the Repsol Honda Team. Saturday overall proved to be a more complicated day for Espargaro as he continued to learn the Honda in the varying conditions of the day. Espargaro will line up on the fourth row of the grid for his first race in Honda colours.

Mitchell's hot start fuels Jazz

Los Angeles: Utah's Donovan Mitchell scored 35 points and handed out seven assists as the Jazz boosted their NBA-leading record on Saturday with a 126-110 victory over the Memphis Grizzlies. With Mike Conley taking the night off to rest a hamstring injury, Mitchell took charge early. He made his first five shots on the way to scoring 28 first-half points — his most ever in a half.

He erased an early 8-2 deficit with a three-pointer and a drive to the basket for a three-point play, and his three-pointer at the buzzer to end the half put the Jazz up 70-53. Jordan Clarkson came off the bench to add 28 points. Joe Ingles added 15 points and seven assists and the Jazz notched their fifth straight victory and 33rd of the season. The Los Angeles Clippers, chasing Utah and the Phoenix Suns in the West, won their fifth straight game, 122-112 over the Eastern Conference-leading Philadelphia 76ers. — *AFP*

Live on TV

FOOTBALL

FIFA Friendly: India vs UAE from 8.30 pm on Eurosport, HD

INDIA 3, ENGLAND 0

Kohli & Co. complete hat-trick of series wins after clinching a thriller

Pune, March 28: The Indian cricket team completed one of their best four-month spells across formats, pipping England by a mere 7 runs in the third and final ODI after surviving Sam Curran's determined assault in an exciting contest for a well-deserved hat-trick of series victories.

For India, near domination of England in all three formats at home comes straight after humbling Australia in their own backyard earlier this year during a gruelling tour.

The 2-1 win against the reigning world champions will certainly please Virat Kohli but he will not at all be amused by the fact that India nearly let the game slip away with some unimaginative bowling and poor fielding at the death.

Rishabh Pant and Hardik Pandya hit stroke-filled half-centuries but Indian lower-order also caved in meekly to settle for a below-par 329 on a great batting track. But Bhuvneshwar Kumar (3/42) and Shardul Thakur (4/67) got the breakthroughs at just the right times before Curran (95 not out off 83 balls) almost changed the result single-handedly. England finished on 322 for 9.

Yorker specialist T. Natarajan bowled a brilliant final over with England needing 14 but Curran could manage only six runs because the Indian bowled mostly in the block-hole.

It was a gettable total on a flat pitch but Kohli's ploy to attack with predominantly pace attack paid off for the better part of the game before Curran launched a swift counter-assault.

Bhuvneshwar brought



India's Shardul Thakur (second from left) celebrates with teammates after dismissing England's Liam Livingstone during their third ODI at the Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium in Pune on Sunday. India won by seven runs.

SCORECARD

India: Rohit Sharma b Rashid 37, Shikhar Dhawan c & b Rashid 67, Virat Kohli b Ali 7, Rishabh Pant c Buttler b Curran 78, KL Rahul c Ali b Livingstone 7, Hardik Pandya b Stokes 64, Krunal Pandya c Roy b Wood 25, Shardul Thakur c Buttler b Wood 30, Bhuvneshwar Kumar c Curran b Topley 3, Prasidh Krishna b Wood 0, T Natarajan (not out) 0. Extras (lb-1, w-10) 11. **Total (all out, in 48.2 overs) 329.** **FoW:** 1-103, 2-117, 3-121, 4-157, 5-256, 6-276, 7-321, 8-328, 9-329 **Bowling:** Sam Curran 5-0-43-1, Reece Topley 9.2-0-66-1, Mark Wood 7-1-34-3, Ben Stokes 7-0-45-1, Adil Rashid 10-0-81-2, Moeen Ali 7-0-39-1, Liam Livingstone 3-0-20-1.

England: Jason Roy b Kumar 14, Jonny Bairstow lbw b Kumar 1, Ben Stokes c Dhawan b Natarajan 35, Dawid Malan c Sharma b Thakur 50, Jos Buttler (c) lbw b Thakur 15, Liam Livingstone c & b Thakur 36, Moeen Ali c H Pandya b Kumar 29, Sam Curran (not out) 95 Adil Rashid c Kohli b Thakur 19, Mark Wood run out (H. Pandya/Pant) 14, Reece Topley not out 1. Extras (lb-1, w-12) 13. **Total (for 9 wkts, in 50 overs) 322.** **FoW:** 1-14, 2-28, 3-68, 4-95, 5-155, 6-168, 7-200, 8-257, 9-317.

Bowling: Bhuvneshwar Kumar 10-0-42-3, T. Natarajan 10-0-73-1, Prasidh Krishna 7-0-62-0, Shardul Thakur 10-0-67-4, Hardik Pandya 9-0-48-0, Krunal Pandya 4-0-29-0.

Ronaldo fumes after WC qualifying winner denied

Paris, March 28: Cristiano Ronaldo threw his captain's armband to the ground in anger after being controversially denied an injury-time winner as Portugal blew a two-goal lead against Serbia in World Cup qualifying on Saturday, while Romelu Lukaku's 59th international goal salvaged Belgium a 1-1 draw with the Czech Republic.

The Netherlands saw off Latvia 2-0 after their opening Group G defeat by Turkey, who backed up that performance with an impressive 3-0 victory over Norway.

Portugal drew 2-2 in Belgrade, despite Ronaldo believing he had scored the winner in the third minute of stoppage time when the ball appeared to cross the goalline before Stefan Mitrovic cleared. But without technology in use, the goal was not awarded and a fuming Ronaldo was then booked for his protests.

At the final whistle he stormed from the pitch, throwing his captain's armband to the ground.

"I always give and will



Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo (centre) and Bruno Fernandes react during the World Cup 2022 Group A qualifying match against Serbia in Belgrade, Serbia, on Saturday.

give everything for my country, that will never change," Ronaldo later posted on his Instagram page.

"But there are difficult times to deal with, especially when we feel that an entire nation is being harmed."

Portugal had appeared to be cruising to three points

in Belgrade when 2-0 up through Liverpool striker Diogo Jota's first-half double.

But Nemanja Radonjic's half-time introduction proved crucial for Serbia as he set up Aleksandar Mitrovic and Filip Kostic to net in the first 15 minutes of the second period.

— *AFP*

India ready for desert storm

Dubai, March 28: On a high after an impressive 1-1 draw against a fancied Oman, India are pitted against the formidable United Arab Emirates in their second football friendly here on Monday, with head coach Igor Stimac again set to experiment with a fresh set of rookies.

Ten players made their debut against Oman on Thursday as India made a fine comeback in the second half to hold the gulf side who are 23 places above them in the FIFA charts.

Oman completely dominated the first half with the Indians not being able to hold the ball for any length of time. The visitors were rather busy defending in their own half in their first international outing in more than a year.

The UAE are ranked eighth in Asia and 74th overall while India are at 104th. The UAE had won three matches out of the four played

● **The UAE had won three matches out of the four played between the two sides in the last decade while one game ended in a draw.**

between the two sides in the last decade while one game ended in a draw. But India will draw inspiration from their match against UAE during the 2019 Asian Cup group stage where they had created a lot of scoring chances even though they lost 0-2.

India paid dearly for poor finishing in that match while luck also did not favour them as two shots hit the framework. "UAE are even tougher than Oman, so I except a very tough match tomorrow. They (UAE) are technically better side and they will give a lot of pressure on us," Stimac said.— *PTI*

HAMI STARTS SEASON WITH STUNNING WIN

Sakhir (Bahrain), March 28: Lewis Hamilton produced another stunning demonstration of his supreme racing talent on Sunday to resist a charging Max Verstappen and win a thrilling season-opening Bahrain Grand Prix.

The defending seven-time champion defended with supreme skill over the closing laps in his Mercedes to hold off the Red Bull driver and claim a record-stretching 96th Formula One victory.

Hamilton came home seven-tenths of a second ahead of the Dutchman, who was forced to hand back the race lead in the closing laps after passing the champion with a move that had taken him off the track and beyond the limits.

As expected, Hamilton and his heir apparent delivered an exhilarating exhibition of racing as they stormed to the flag - the pair leaving third placed Valtteri Bottas, in the second Mercedes, to finish adrift by 37 seconds.

It was Hamilton's first season-opening triumph since 2015 and surprised many observers after Red Bull had dominated pre-season testing and two days of practice and qualifying ahead of the race.

"Firstly, can I just say it's the first time I've seen fans in a long time," said a delighted Hamilton.

"What a difficult race that was — stopping early we knew it was going to be tough, but we had to cover Max and it was always going to take something pretty special to do it," Hamilton further added.

A disappointed Verstappen said: "Of course, it's a shame, but you also have to see the positives. We're putting the fight on to them so it's great to start the year like that" — *AFP*

What a difficult race that was — stopping early we knew it was going to be tough, but we had to cover Max and it was always going to take something pretty special to do it.

— **LEWIS HAMILTON**

After winning season-opening Bahrain Grand Prix

OSAKA, ISNER ADVANCE IN MIAMI OPEN

Miami, March 28: John Isner won a match that had no break points Sunday, hitting 16 aces as he edged No. 11-seeded Felix Auger-Aliassime 7-6 (5), 7-6 (5) in the third round of the Miami Open.

That made it four consecutive sets Isner has won by tiebreaker against Auger-Aliassime in Miami. The score when they met in the 2019 semifinal was 7-6 (3), 7-6 (4).

On the women's side, Naomi Osaka advanced to the fourth round for the first time in her career when qualifier Nina Stojanovic withdrew from their match shortly before the scheduled start because of a right thigh injury.

Osaka has won 22 consecutive matches since her most recent defeat in February 2020, and she earned her fourth Grand Slam title at the Australian Open last month. But in Miami, where she is making her fifth appearance, she has previously made early exits. Jessica Pegula defeated No. 6 Karolina Pliskova for the third time this year, 6-1, 4-6, 6-4. In other men's play, No. 7 Roberto Bautista Agut rallied past Jan-Lennard Struff 4-6, 6-3, 6-2. — *AP*

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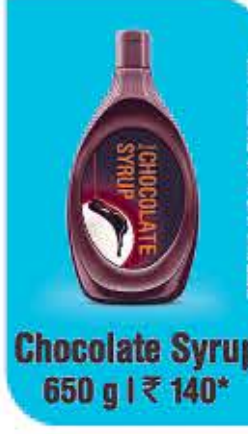
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