

IN BRIEF

HC TO HEAR MPTC, ZPTC POLL PROCESS ON APRIL 19DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 15

The Andhra Pradesh High Court to hear a batch of petitions on MPTC/ZPTC election process on April 19.

The High Court held hearing on a batch of petitions filed by the Telugu Desam and others challenging the election notification issued for conduct of MPTC/ZPTC polls on the norm of four weeks gap from the date of issue of notification to conduct of polls for implementation of poll code, on Thursday. The HC posted the next hearing in the case to April 19 to hear the arguments from all the parties on the issue.

EX-MLA GETS BAIL IN POLICE OFFICER ABUSING CASEDC CORRESPONDENT
SRIKAKULAM, APRIL 15

Former Amadalavalasa MLA and TD leader Kuna Ravi Kumar surrendered to the police and later obtained bail from Rajam court in Srikakulam on Thursday.

The police filed a case against Ravi Kumar for allegedly abusing a DSP-rank police officer in Ponduru during Parishad elections. Two days ago, a posse of police personnel raided his house in Srikakulam town and conducted searches. Since then he has been absconding.

VOLUNTEERS TOLD TO RENDER THEIR SERVICES TO NEEDYDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 15

The Village /Ward volunteers were told to render their services to the needy sections of the society.

Minister for endowment Vellampalli Srinivas Rao along with YSRC East in-charge Devineni Avinash, Vijayawada mayor Rayana Bhagyalakshmi and VMC Commissioner Prasanna Venkatesh presented Seva Mitra, Seva Ratna and Seva Vajra awards.

Srinivas Rao said that AP is the first state to introduce a volunteer system. Amazed at the services being rendered by volunteers, other states are toeing the line, he said. He stated that there is no corruption in the volunteers system.

Avinash objected to the comments made by Naidu while terming volunteers as gunny-bag coolies.

He assured volunteers about resolving their issues by taking them to the notice of the Chief Minister.

CID ISSUES NOTICE TO UMA FOR DISTORTING JAGAN'S WORDSDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 15

The CID has issued notices to former minister and Telugu Desam leader Devineni Umamaheshwara Rao, seeking his presence before it for a hearing at its Kurnool office following a complaint that he distorted chief minister Jagan Mohan Reddy's words.

The notice was attached to the wall of his residence in Gollapudi Thursday morning. In the complaint, Rao is accused of distorting the words of the CM and showing morphed videos through a Tablet/I-phone on April 7 during the Tirupati byelection campaign.

Rao alleged the summons were politically motivated and sought 10 days' time to appear before the CID.

Advocate N. Narayana Reddy, president of the YSRC legal cell's core committee for Kurnool district lodged the complaint with the CID. Following this, a case was registered under sections 464, 465, 468, 469, 470, 471, 505 and 120 (b) of IPC.

The CID notice asked Rao to attend the inquiry along with the electronic gadget and videos in the CID office at 10.30am on April 15.

Rao said he was not worried over fake cases being foisted on him and claimed that he showed the words of CM Jagan from the original videos. He said that he had criticised the "hypothecation" of Krishna river waters by the YSRC government under which AP would lose its rights on the river water.

"At present, I am busy in the election campaign and by-election work in Nellore district. Hence I am unable to attend the inquiry. I would require 10 days' time to attend the hearing," he wrote back to the CID.

TD's defeat is imminent in Tirupati bypoll: Peddireddy

Stone-throwing incident was stage-managed by Naidu, says minister

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, APRIL 15

Claiming that the Telugu Desam's defeat is imminent in the forthcoming Tirupati (SC) Lok Sabha byelection, panchayat raj minister Peddireddy Ramachandra Reddy alleged that the stone-throwing incident was stage-managed by TD chief Chandrababu Naidu to gain sympathy among people.

Addressing the media here on Thursday, Peddireddy reiterated his challenge to Naidu that YSRC MPs would resign in case the party loses in Tirupati bypoll and that the TD MPs should quit otherwise.

"The Opposition leader and his son Nara Lokesh don't have guts to take up my challenge. But Lokesh posed a drama, challenging the CM to swear at Alipiri on the allegations regarding Y.S. Vivekananda Reddy murder case. As both the father and son duo have no courage to seek votes in the byelection, they are trying to divert people's attention with these cheap tactics", the minister said.

Accusing the TD chief of trying to gain sympathy among the public by staging a stone-throwing drama, Peddireddy said there was no evidence of stone throwing found in the footage, retrieved from the CC cameras in the vicinity where Naidu addressed the public meeting. He added that a TD activist Akula Venkatesh said it was not a stone, but the shirt he threw on Naidu.

"Naidu should give an explanation on the video that went viral on social media, in which TD state president K. Atchannaidu spoke against the party and Nara Lokesh, while saying that there is no confidence in the leadership of Naidu and Lokesh among the TD leaders," he asked.

Peddireddy said the BJP-Jana Sena combine has been trying to secure more votes than NOTA in the byelection.

Claiming that Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has implemented more welfare schemes and development works in the last 22 months and gave good governance when compared to 14 years governance of Naidu, the minister said that the YSRC chief is working with welfare and development as his agenda in the state. He urged the people of Tirupati Lok Sabha constituency to vote for Dr M. Gurumurthy and make him win with a huge majority.



Panchayat Raj minister Peddireddy Ramachandra Reddy addresses the media during a press conference in Tirupati on Thursday.

Oppn spreading false propaganda: Sajjala

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 15

Asserting that the 22-month governance of Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy will ensure YSRC win in the Tirupati byelection, government adviser (Public Affairs) Sajjala Ramakrishna Reddy said that opposition parties are confined to false propaganda rather than publicising achievements during their regime.

Speaking to the media here on Thursday, Ramakrishna Reddy said that running out of issues for campaign, opposition parties have been targeting the Chief Minister personally and spreading communal hatred.

He slammed TD, BJP and Pawan Kalyan for not fulfilling promises made during the 2014 elections,

including special category status. He said BJP and TD should tell what they have done for the state or explain the reasons why they did not fulfill the promises made.

The YSRC leader slammed TD chief N. Chandrababu Naidu and Nara Lokesh for not demanding an explanation from Atchannaidu or issuing him a show-cause notice and letting him accompany them despite his anti-party comments.

He said Jagan Mohan Reddy has written a letter to the electorate of Tirupati parliamentary constituency explaining the welfare schemes and development works and sought votes for YSRC but did not criticise opposition parties. He said YSRC has never influenced voters.

Chinta calls Naidu, Jagan corrupt leaders

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, APRIL 15

Calling former chief minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu and present Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy as corrupt leaders, Congress Working Committee (CWC) special invitee and party candidate for Tirupati Lok Sabha byelection Chinta Mohan questioned how they both could earn thousands of crores within a short span of time after they came into power.

Speaking to the media here on Thursday, he claimed that his party had spent only ₹3 lakh for campaigning in the Tirupati Lok Sabha byelection while Telugu Desam and YSRC are spending ₹20 and ₹30 crores respectively.

He took a jibe at both Naidu and Jagan, stating that they both have backstabbed the Congress.

"When the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi made Naidu the minister, he backstabbed her as well as his father-in-law and TD founder-president N.T. Rama Rao. Now, Jagan has already committed 99 mistakes and he is on the edge of his 100th mistake by distributing money to the voters", he alleged.

The education minister slammed them for criticising the flagship programme of the ruling party, Amma Vodi, even though they failed to extend financial assistance to the mothers.

Suresh alleged that the TD chief's remarks such as Amma Vodi and Nanna Buddi are in bad taste while reminding that the programme supports the poor mothers to continue the education of their children without break.

Taking serious view of Chandrababu Naidu's suggestion to the voters to enjoy liquor and vote for the TD, he warned the Telugu Desam bigwigs not to forget that people are watching dramas of Naidu and Lokesh.

The education minister stressed that the former chief minister targeted other parties to cover his lapses, he took a dig at him for maintaining silence on leaked video footage of TD state president K. Atchannaidu.

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SURESH HITS OUT AT TD SUPREMO FOR CRITICISING WELFARE SCHEMES

DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, APRIL 15

Education minister Adimulapu Suresh took potshots at TD, BJP and Congress while highlighting their shortcomings during the election campaign for Tirupati Lok Sabha seat which came to an end on Thursday evening.

Speaking to the media here on Thursday, the minister said the TD has done nothing for Tirupati parliament segment to claim credit and the situation is no different with respect to the Congress and the BJP.

Stressing that the former chief minister targeted other parties to cover his lapses, he took a dig at him for maintaining silence on leaked video footage of TD state president K. Atchannaidu.

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TD complains to EC, alleges police bias

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 15

The Telugu Desam has lodged a complaint with the Election Commission against some police officials, alleging that they were showing bias towards the ruling YSR Congress in the Tirupati byelection and sought action against them.

The TD team, led by its MLC Paruchuri Ashok Babu, submitted the complaint to the chief electoral officer on Thursday evening.

The complaint said, "As the polling day for Tirupati parliamentary constituency byelection approaches, the ruling YSRC has intensified the implementation of its sinister designs."

It said that as part of threatening the Opposition Telugu Desam, the YSRC has clandestinely entered into an agreement with a section of the police force. As per this, the police are threatening polling agents of TD. "For instance, sub-inspector Sekhar Babu of Ojili mandal and circle inspector Narasimha Yadav of Vakadu have been summoning TD village-level leaders outside the village and demanding of them to avoid appointing their booth agents."

Further, the police officials were threatening the TD leaders that the YSRC will be in power for another three years and anything could happen to them.

"Similarly, Siva Kumar Reddy, Inspector of Police, Yerpedu, has been working in favour of the YSRC and is threatening the TD leaders with dire consequences if they continued with the party."

They claimed that in the recently concluded local body elections, the same Inspector had filed numerous false cases against TD leaders and activists.

In this context, the TD urged the chief electoral officer to deploy additional security forces in all booths in Yerpedu mandal as "a section of the police force is working in connivance with the YSRC."

The TD leaders alleged that the YSRC government has been misusing village/ward volunteers by deploying them for the ruling party's election campaign. "Village/ward volunteers are actively campaigning in favour of YSRC and are threatening voters that the people would lose their state government benefits if they do not vote for the YSRC."

"The YSRC leaders have grabbed postal ballots from government staff after obtaining their signature," the TD leaders said.

BJP asks ECI to ensure fair polls

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 15

Andhra Pradesh BJP complained to the Election Commission of India seeking its intervention to prevent misuse of the state government machinery for conduct of bypoll to Tirupati Lok Sabha constituency in a free and fair manner.

BJP state president Somu Veerajulu wrote a letter to the Chief Election Commissioner on Thursday alleging that the ruling YSRC government was abusing the government machinery to obtain illegitimate political gains in the bypoll scheduled to be held on April 17. He alleged that the ruling party was misusing the village/ward volunteers though appointed by the state government in every gram panchayat and urban ward, in the guise of delivering government services to the local residents at their doorstep.

The BJP senior leader said that the volunteers were taking part in door-to-door campaign by distributing a letter written by Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy to the voters seeking their votes for the YSRC's nominee in the bypoll.

He requested the ECI to order removal of volunteers from their villages/wards till the completion of election process, to deploy central paramilitary forces, to video record the polling at the polling stations and to disqualify YSRC nominee Dr M. Gurumoorthy on the grounds that he professes a religion other than Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist in violation of the Constitution (SC) Order, 1950.

In another letter addressed to the CEC, the AP BJP president sought disqualification of the YSRC nominee Dr M. Gurumoorthy, alleging that he was canvassing in the bypoll by appealing to the voters on religious sentiments and said that an election pamphlet was brought by him displaying the image of Lord Venkateswara prominently on it, in violation of certain provisions in the Representation of People's Act, 1951.

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TIRUPATI | BYPOLL Sanctity of temple town has been destroyed, alleges TD chief

Naidu calls upon voters to safeguard AP future

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, APRIL 15

Launching a scathing attack on the ruling YSRC over various issues, including the spate of attacks on the Hindu temples across the state, rising prices of essentials and alleged illegal mining of sand, Telugu Desam chief Nara Chandrababu Naidu called upon the people of Tirupati Lok Sabha constituency to take advantage of the byelection and vote for his party to safeguard the future of AP.

Addressing the media at a press conference here on Thursday, the former chief minister said that the Tirupati Parliament

byelection is not just limited to temple city, but people should use it as a 'Vajrayudham' — a diamond weapon — to teach a befitting lesson to the ruling party.

"We all should recall what the YSRC leaders have done to the state during their two-year rule. Now, the onus is on the Tirupati electorate to protect the state, as the victory of TD in this byelection will not only change the political face of the state but also solve many issues", he added.

Claiming that he had seen hundreds of JCBs and tipper's plundering sand in the river-belt between Uthukkotai,



N. Chandrababu Naidu

Surukupalli and Nandam, while he was coming from Satyavedu, Naidu alleged that the YSRC mafia has been digging sand up to 60, 70 feet, despite the Green Tribunal put a stay on sand digging.

"During the two years rule of YSRC, the prices of essentials have been increased to many folds,

we have witnessed attacks on people, exploitation of natural resources, corruption and human rights violations in the state. AP is being robbed in all possible ways and now we are the number one state in debt and price rise", he noted.

He asked, "What is Jagan Reddy doing when all these unfortunate developments were taking place in the state? Is he sleeping or installed any DND board (Don't disturb me) at his office or imposed Section 144 at his home?"

He alleged that there was no fee reimbursement scheme in the state as the arrears have crossed ₹1,000 crore. "Jagan had

closed down the scheme and now he was also not able to feed residential schoolchildren. Salaries are not being paid to the government employees. Since he destroyed the economy by taking debts, the financial system of the state has reached the point of collapse", he said.

Stating that the sanctity of Tirupati has been completely destroyed, Naidu alleged that the ruling party leaders have turned the temple city into a red sander smuggling den. He also alleged that the lands of common people and government are being occupied illegally by the private persons backed by the ruling party.

SHORT TAKES

NGT EXPERT PANEL
IMPOSES ₹17.08 CR
FINE ON ONGCDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 15

National Green Tribunal constituted expert committee recommended for imposition of fine on ONGC to the tune of Rs 17.08 crore for a series of violations in exploration of oil and gas in Krishna-Godavari basin located in both the East and West Godavari districts in AP.

In the matter of Venkatapathi Raja versus Union of India represented by the secretary, Union ministry of environment and forests, New Delhi, the NGT constituted an expert committee to take up a joint inspection on violations. The expert committee comprising Amalapuram Sub Collector Himanshu Kaushik; Narasapuram Sub Collector K.S. Viswanathan; Scientist-C Dr C. Pal Pandu from Union ministry of environment and forests; prof. M. Deepa, department of chemical engineering, Andhra University; P. Ravindranath, senior environmental engineer, APPCB, Visakhapatnam and Scientist-D Mahima T, Central Pollution Control Board, Chennai.

The petitioner filed an application at NGT, Southern Bench, Chennai alleging that air, sound, soil and water pollution were being caused on account of activities being carried out by M/s GAIL India Limited and M/z ONGC in KG Basin in Godavari districts in AP.

The committee observed non-compliance to the several norms on various issues recommended to the NGT to impose fine to pay towards environmental compensation to the Central Pollution Control Board. Accordingly, ONGC's Tatipaka Group Gathering Station to pay Rs 7.28 crore, Kesanapalli GGS to pay Rs 4.11 crore and Odalarevu GGS to pay ₹5.68 crore.

CPCB SCIENTIST
VISTS TYCHE
INDUSTRIESDC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, APRIL 15

The team headed by Central Pollution Control Board Scientist T. Mahima visited Tyche Industries on Thursday at Sarpavaram, in the aftermath of two persons died and four were injured when a reactor blasted in the company last month.

The National Green Tribunal has appointed a team, headed by Integrated Regional Officer of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change Dr P. Suresh Babu.

Central Pollution Control Board Scientist Mahima, Chief Factories of Inspector R.Trinadha Rao, Kakinada RDO A.G.Chinni Krishna, AP Pollution Control Board East Godavari Environmental Engineer A.Ramarao Naidu and others inspected the factory and inquiry on environmental issues. They visited the blasting place and observed the surroundings. They interacted with the victims and inquired about the incident. Mahima said that a report would be submitted to the NGT on April 30.

ADIKAVI NANNAYYA
VARSITY TO START
ONLINE CLASSESDC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, APRIL 15

In view of the increasing Covid-19 cases, the Adikavi Nannayya University will start online classes to the students. The Vice Chancellor of the University Registrar Professor T. Ashok said that the online classes will start from April 16. He said that University students are asked to vacate the hostels and go back home and attend online classes. He said that after decreasing Covid-19, the students will be allowed to colleges and university for their education and until then they should attend online classes.

CID INSPECTS
GOVERNMENT
HOSPITALSDC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, APRIL 15:

The CID team led by its DSP A.B.G. Tllak conducted inspections in government hospitals at Rajamahendravaram and Kakinada on Thursday in the aftermath of irregularities in drug stores in the state. The officials enquired about the details of previous drug transactions and stocks and verified the records.

Staff shortage hits KGGH
as Covid caseload surges

Kurnool district reported 626 positive cases and two deaths

DC CORRESPONDENT
KURNOOL APRIL 15

Kurnool General Hospital is under stress as corona positive cases are on the rise. On Thursday, the district reported 626 positive cases and two deaths. The KGGH has 363 Covid-19 patients under treatment as 60 of them are in serious condition. The hospital requires at least 100 male and female ward boys immediately, the in-charge superintendent, Dr Bhagawan raises a red flag. He said there is no Covid-19 control room to monitor the surge in cases, he said.

The KGGH Superintendent Dr Narendranath Reddy who tested positive a few days back has not delegated duties to his deputies. The hospital administration is struggling to handle the surge of cases as already 303 positive cases and 60 critical cases under oxygen supply are being treated here. Kurnool general hospital superintendent in-charge Dr Bhagawan said already 500 beds are kept ready and 150 more beds would be added as it is feared that the explosion of cases would choke the patient's services.

There is a severe shortage of male and female words boys. Dr Bhagawan however said permission to recruit ward boys has been sent to the district collector and awaiting the instructions. Lack of Covid-19 control rooms in the district is having an impact in handling the rising number of Covid admissions in the hospital. The hospital staff is under constant threat of being turned positive for Covid-19 as one Gynecology head and an assistant proffer and a few house surgeons were also quarantined, he said. On the other hand, 626 cases in a day is the highest number reported in the district during the second wave.



People come out of the Government ENT Hospital while the Covid-19 tests are not done due to the unavailability of Reagent kits for RT-PCR Covid test in Visakhapatnam on Thursday.

AP REVIVES COVID COMMAND
AND CONTROL CENTREDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 15

In the wake of rise in Coronavirus cases, the state government revived the State Covid Command and Control Centre with immediate effect.

The state government issued an order on Thursday reviving the Covid Command and Control Centre by appointment of special officers for Covid-19 management and also for vaccination in the state.

Principal secretary, transport, roads and buildings M.T. Krishna Babu to look after quality monitoring of food and sanitation in Covid hospitals and Covid Care Centres.

Principal secretary, Covid management and vaccination, M. Ravi Chandra to take care of primary contact tracing and testing and testing on demand facility.

Commercial tax commissioner Peeyush Kumar to monitor the help desk and CCTV.

COVID PATIENT DIES BY SUICIDE

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, APRIL 15

A 55 year old Covid patient, currently undergoing treatment at the CSR Block (Covid ward) at King George Hospital died by suicide by jumping from the fourth floor of the building in

Visakhapatnam on Thursday. KGH superintendent Dr P Mythili said the woman was admitted along with three others recently. The other three were discharged on Thursday and making arrangements to leave for home. She was alone in the ICU ward and jumped from the building.

Avenging daughter's rape, man
hacks six of a family in VizagDC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, APRIL 15

Avenging daughter's rape and subsequent blackmail, a middle-aged man hacked to death six members of a family including two infants in Juttada village under Pendurthy mandal in Visakhapatnam in the early hours of Thursday.

The accused was identified as Battina Appala Raju, the victims' neighbour. Appalaraju wanted to kill B. Vijay Kiran, who raped his daughter, and his family members but ended up killing all his family members.

The deceased were identified as Vijay Kiran's father Bamidi Ramana

(57), Kiran's wife Bamidi Usha Rani (30), Kiran's son B. Uday (2), Kiran's daughter B. Urvasi (six months), Allu Ramadevi (53), mother of Usha Rani and Nakettlu Aruna, relative of Usha Rani. The victims were found in a pool of blood.

The police said Vijay Kiran allegedly raped Appala Raju's daughter (20-year-old victim) in 2018. A case has been registered against Vijay Kiran and the case is under trial. The rape victim reported that the accused Vijay Kiran, a married person, moved very closely with Appalaraju family and called the victim to his house and offered sedative laced soft drinks to her. He

later allegedly raped her several times.

Kiran's wife Bamidi Usha Rani blackmailed the rape victim by showing her semi-nude photos and demanded money from her. Maniyala Vinay, Bammidi Sai, Pilleni Durga Prasad and Challa Nagaraju also co-operated the rape accused and blackmailed her for money.

Later the complainant's brother Bathina Vijay Prasad noticed WhatsApp messages in his sister's phone, immediately challenged the Vijay Kiran family. But they threatened to kill him. The police filed a charge sheet against the accused Vijay Kiran and the case is pending in the court.

Four of a family found dead in Vizag

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, APRIL 15

Four members of a family were found dead under suspicious circumstances in a flat in Aditya Fortune Towers at Mithilapuri Colony, Madhurawada under PM Palem police station limits in Visakhapatnam city.

The deceased were identified as Sunkari Bangaru Naidu (49), Dr Sunkari Nirmala (44), Sunkari Deepak (21) and Sunkari Kashyap (19).

The police said neighbours heard shouting at 2 am and two hours later they found smoke emanating from the flat. Fire tenders rushed to the spot and broke open the front door with a crowbar. They found bodies of Bangaru Naidu, Dr Nirmala and Kashyap scattered from the main door to hall and bedroom. The body of Deepak was

Top student suspected as accused

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, APRIL 15

Deepak, who was suspected to have killed his parents and younger brother in the apartment on Wednesday night, was a brilliant student and determined to get into civil services. He also participated in meelo evaru kotiswarudu hosted by actor Chiranjeevi and came close to winning the first prize, his uncle Ramu Naidu said.

After passing out from NIT Warangal, he moved to New Delhi to get coach-

ing to appear for UPSC examinations. He along with his parents and brother visited his village Gantayada in Vizianagaram district on March 21 to participate in the Yellamma Goddess festival. The entire family also celebrated Sankranti festival in the village.

Ramu said his brother worked hard to get into the present position. After completing his polytechnic from Kakinada, he graduated in engineering and later did his MBA in which he obtained a PhD. After

which went out of hands. The elder son might have stabbed his parents and younger brother as stab wounds and lacerated wounds were found on the bodies.

PEOPLE FACE
DIFFICULTY TO
GET COVID TESTDC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, APRIL 15

People are finding it difficult to get Covid test in Visakhapatnam city since the last three days. The corporate hospitals hung said no test till April 18" while limited testing is being conducted in government hospitals. King George Hospital, where the only lab in the district is located, refused testing on Wednesday but resumed on Thursday.

The other major hospitals VIMS and Government Hospital for Chest diseases are not conducting tests. The government ENT hospital, which takes maximum load after KGH, stopped testing since noon on Thursday. Shortage of testing kits was said to be main reason, according to sources.

District collector V. Vinay Chand said there was no shortage of kits and testing was being conducted at the designated places as usual. The collector said he was not aware of the position in corporate hospitals.

District Medical and Health Officer Dr P. Suryanarayana said the hospitals were testing only those having serious symptoms of Covid-19 and refusing those coming to hospitals out of fear due to the sudden spike in the cases.

He said the KGH lab working round the clock is overloaded and hence the casual testing has been reduced. "Earlier we were testing 7,000 to 8,000 people on an average but now the number has been reduced to 3,000 and odd," the DMHO told this newspaper.

Inspector of Pendurthi police station, Ashok Kumar said that Vijay Kiran and his family have been staying in Vijayawada and came to attend a marriage.

Knowing that Vijay Kiran's family had come to Juttada, Appala Raju (49) who has been waiting to take revenge on Vijay Kiran and his family, hacked six persons to death in the early hours of Thursday when they were asleep.

Vijay Kiran and his elder son were at Sivajipalem in Vizag city.

The police shifted the bodies to a mortuary for post-mortem. The locals staged a dharna and demanded to hang the accused in public.

LANDLORD
ATTACKS BANK
STAFF IN
SRIKALAHASTIDC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, APRIL 15

In a bizarre incident, a landlord who leased out his premises to Andhra Bank and Union bank of India - located adjacent to each other near Srikalahasti's I town police station, has allegedly attacked the bank manager and security staff, who were on duty, on Thursday.

According to the police, following the amalgamation of Andhra Bank and Corporation Bank into the Union bank of India last year, the management has decided to vacate one among the two branches (Andhra Bank and Union Bank) located side by side in the Srikalahasti town. The bank officials have decided to continue the existing Andhra Bank premises and surrender back the Union bank of India premises to the common landlord M. Prasad and communicated the same to the latter in March this year. However, he asked the bank officials to continue their operations from the Union bank of India premises and vacate the Andhra Bank premises.

BODY STUFFED
IN LUGGAGE
BAG FOUND
IN KUPPAMDC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, APRIL 15

A chopped body of a man with its head cut off and stuffed into a luggage bag was found dumped on the side of Kuppam-Krishnagiri highway close to Nadumuru Gurukul high school near Kuppam town in Chittoor district on Thursday morning.

According to the police, passers-by noticed a luggage bag covered with a plastic cover lying in a suspicious state near the bridge close to the Gurukul school. On an information about the suspicious bag, a police team reached the spot and retrieved the bag only to found the lower part of the body of a man.

"Upon opening the bag, lower part of a man in his late 20s or early 30s was found inside. We did a thorough search in the vicinity but not found the remaining body parts including the head. We found no clues at the spot and working out on it. We have informed our counterparts in nearby Tamil Nadu and Karnataka as part of Standard Operation procedure", Kuppam CI Sridhar said.

The Police shifted the half-chopped dead body to government hospital for an autopsy. They also informed the same to their Tamil Nadu and Karnataka State counterparts at Krishnagiri, Tirupattur and KGF Police Stations. The Kuppam Police have registered a case on this and further investigation is being done.

Gale broke electric
poles into half in state

FROM PAGE 1

The authorities claim that the gale was so powerful that they broke electric poles in the middle, and uprooted the stems of banana crops in parts of Chagallu, Denduluru, T. Narasapuram and Dwaraka Tirumala mandals in West Godavari. The banana plantations in parts of Kadapa, Guntur and Vizianagaram also bore the brunt.

The horticulture authorities claim that the chilli farmers saved the harvested crop which was kept on platforms for drying by covering them with tarpaulin

clothes in anticipation of the rainfall. Horticulture commissioner S.S. Sreedhar directed the officials in the affected districts to estimate the extent of crop damage due to the rains and gales and submit a final report soon.

Horticulture additional director K. Balaji Naik said, "We have received preliminary crop damage reports from five districts in the state due to rains with gales and we are taking necessary measures to provide input subsidy to the eligible affected farmers to help them resume cultivation."

DOCTOR GETS DISTINGUISHED FARMER AWARD

Vijayawada: A practicing doctor who also follows innovative methods in natural farming in his agricultural fields have been bestowed with the Visishtha Rhythu (distinguished farmer) award from NG Ranga Agriculture University. Dr Yeraguti Sambasiva Reddy is a famous doctor in Guntur city. He raises escrops in his 15-acre farmland in his native village Kunkalagunta in Nekarikallu mandal of Guntur district. The NGRAU presented the award for his highly commendable efforts in natural farming. University officials said Dr Reddy was taking a lot of interest in agricultural activities and invented a new equipment, at a cost of just ₹500, by way of making a few changes to the Inapa Gorru (drill plough) that would ease the works of agriculture coolies.

The government selected Dr Sambasiva Reddy for the award on the occasion of

Ugadi. Due to Corona-related problems, it was presented only on Thursday. University faculty and staff felicitated Dr. Sambasiva Reddy and presented him with the Visishtha Rhythu award.

Dr Reddy said he was having a keen interest in agriculture young age and hence started cultivation of various crops through zero-based natural farming process. He tried various methods and found natural farming useful to get good quality and quantity yields with less expenditure.

The doctor noted that labourers, during farm work, faced a lot of difficulties in ploughing the land. Hence, he made changes to Inapa Gorru (drill plough) which eased their work in farms. He said he would continue cultivation activities and work towards making natural farming profitable to farmers.

Passengers narrowly
escaped from dangerDC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, APRIL 15:

A private bus, going from Vijayawada to Visakhapatnam, narrowly escaped from danger the as the bus met with an accident at National Highway near Diwanchervu village under Bommuru police station limits in East Godavari District. According to the Bommuru police, a lorry

going in front of the bus hit a container lorry and the bus driver was trying to overtake the lorry. In that attempt, the driver hit a divider and the bus was overturned. Bommuru Sub-Inspector K. Jagan Mohan said that the passengers came out without any injuries but the lorry driver was injured. A case was registered against both the lorry and bus drivers.

OFFICIALS IN TIGHT SPOT FOLLOWING
SUDDEN SPURT IN COVID CASESDC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, APRIL 15:

Sudden spurt in the Covid positive cases during last two weeks have been causing jitters not only to the medical and health officials but also to the district officials monitoring the situation.

There is no hyperbole in stating that Nellore officials have to recall the medical and paramedical staff, they hired temporarily when Covid was at its peak in Nellore district last year.

Chittoor authorities already gave a call to all the medical personnel who worked on temporary basis last year to return to work after cases started increasing at alarming rate.

Sources in medical and health department said there is an urgent need to increase the number of Covid tests to avoid delay in detecting the cases to prevent wild-spread of the dreaded virus.

"We hired more than 20 odd data entry operators, a team of technicians, and other staff to collect swab samples for RT-PCR tests to give results within 24 hours last year but we have skeletal staff now" a medical officer said lamenting over the situation.

Taking advantage of the situation, private hospitals, labs and scanning centers have been fleeing the Covid patients.

Relative of an aged couple from Hyderabad who is infected by Covid, said a private hospital in Pogathota told them to take them away when their condition turned critical after charging more than ₹2.50 lakhs

for the treatment.

"We don't know that the hospital does not have permission to treat Corona patients. They forced us to shift the patients and we admitted in GGH" the relative said. Meanwhile, sensing the alarming situation, District Joint Collector N.Prabhakar Reddy instructed the health officials to set up more beds, equipment and medicines for providing COVID19 services in all government and private hospitals in the district.

He gave the directions during a review with the officials of medical and health, Nodal officers, private COVID hospital managements at his camp office in Nellore city on Thursday.

Joint Collector asked the health officials and private hospital managements to provide better medical services for the infected patients without any delay duly following the protocol.

He maintained that the medical officials should be on standby to offer emergency medical services to the infected patients at any time of the day or night.

He said COVID patients have to be admitted only with the notice of Arogyamitra and Nodal officers. COVID medical services would be provided free of cost to the patients with CMCO letter who are not having Arogyasri and EHS cards, the JC informed.

In a piece of advice to the patients and their relatives, he told them to inform Arogyamitra and Nodal officers if they found any fault in providing medical services to the infected patients.

	EASTERN POWER DISTRIBUTION COMPANY OF A.P. LTD OPERATION CENTRE RAJAMAHENDRAVARAM	
	e-TENDER NOTICE NO. 04/2021-22 at SECO/RJMV e-tender is invited from the registered contractors in APEPCIL for "Carrying out continuous monthly spot billing work on contract basis in Agency Areas of three operation sub divisions of Rampachodavaram division from 01.05.2021 to 31.03.2023". For downloading detailed Tender Notice explore web site www.apeasternpower.com / www.eprocurement.gov.in or contact office of the Superintending Engineer, Operation, Rajamahendravaram. Last date for receipt of Tenders is 27-04-2021 at 13-00 Hrs.	
Ph: 94906 10003, 94906 10089		Advnt-11 Superintending Engineer, Operation: Rajamahendravaram

SHORT TAKES

CONG. WANTS SPL PACKAGE FOR DABBAWALAS

SONU SHRIVASTAVA | DC
MUMBAI, APRIL 15

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

Two days ago, Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray had announced several sops from monetary reliefs to free distribution of food grains for the vulnerable sections including registered auto drivers, construction workers and hawkers. In addition to this, financial assistance will be provided to the economically weaker sections below the poverty line families, women, senior citizens, widows, disabled and tribal communities. Close to seven crore beneficiaries of Food Security schemes in Maharashtra would be given free food grains including 3 kg wheat and 2 kg rice per person for a month.

In his letter to the Chief Minister, the Congress state president said that during *Sanchar Bandi* (curfew), vegetable vendors, flower vendors and flower cultivators are going to be hit badly.

STATES TOLD TO MAKE GOOD USE OF MEDICAL OXYGEN

New Delhi, April 15: The Centre on Thursday asked states to make rational use of medical oxygen and ensure there is no wastage while stressing that there is sufficient stock of oxygen in the country.

Medical oxygen is a critical component in the treatment of Covid-19 affected patients. An inter-ministerial Empowered Group (EG2) of officers was constituted during the Covid pandemic in March 2020 to ensure the availability of essential medical equipment including medical oxygen to the affected states, the Union health ministry said.

Along with the ramped up production of the oxygen manufacturing units and the surplus stocks available, the present availability of oxygen is sufficient, the ministry said.

Besides, states have been asked to set up control rooms to ensure smooth supply of oxygen to the districts according to need and review requirement of cylinders, tankers etc. the ministry said in a statement.

A detailed daily mapping of sources for supply of medical oxygen to the affected states is under preparation to ensure uninterrupted oxygen supply, it said.

The exercise will be carried out on the basis of detailed daily deliberations between officers of department for promotion of industry and internal trade, health ministry, various critically affected states.

INDIA, FRANCE SIGN PACT ON GAGANYAAN

New Delhi, April 15: Space agencies of India and France on Thursday signed an agreement for cooperation for the country's first human space mission Gaganyaan, the French space agency CNES said.

The agreement was announced during French Foreign Affairs minister Jean-Yves Le Drian visit to the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) headquarters.

ISRO has asked CNES to help prepare for Gaganyaan missions and to serve as its single European contact in this domain.

"Under the terms of the agreement, CNES will train India's flight physicians and CAPCOM mission control teams in France at the CAD-MOS centre for the development of microgravity applications and space operations at CNES in Toulouse and at the European Astronaut Centre (EAC) in Cologne, Germany," the CNES said.

The agreement provides for the CNES to support implementation of a scientific experiment plan on validation missions, exchange information on food packaging and the nutrition programme, and above all the use by Indian astronauts of French equipment, consumables and medical instruments.



DELHI
A health worker collects swab sample from a woman for Covid-19 test at MCD dispensary in Jangpura. — PTI



AGARTALA
Devotees wait in a long queue to offer prayers on the occasion of Bengali New Year on Thursday. — PTI



AMRITSAR
People, not adhering to norms, walk at the Heritage Street near Golden Temple. — PTI

Weekend lockdown in Delhi till April 30

■ Gyms, malls, auditoriums to remain closed ■ Restaurants to operate home-delivery services

DC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 15

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Thursday announced a curfew this coming weekend and the closure of malls, gymnasiums and auditoriums till April 30 as part of sweeping restrictions to break the chain of the Covid-19 infection in the city. According to an official order, the weekend curfew will be effective from 10 pm on April 16 (Friday) to 5 am on April 19 (Monday), even as gymnasiums, auditoriums, malls, spas, entertainment parks and assembly halls will remain closed in the national capital till April 30.

Cinema halls will function with only 30 per cent capacity. However, officials said a decision to extend the weekend curfew will be taken after reviewing the Covid-19 situation next week. There will be no in-house dining in restaurants, the Chief Minister said at an online press conference a day after the city recorded the biggest single-day jump of 17,282 Covid-19 cases.

However, the restaurants will be allowed to operate home-delivery and take-away services, he said, adding that bars will remain closed till April 30. The Chief Minister made these announcements after he met Lieutenant Governor Anil Bajjal. He said the essential services and weddings will not be affected by the weekend curfew and passes will be provided to those attending weddings.

In its order, the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) said during the weekend curfew, the movement of people for wedding-related (up to 50 people) and funeral-related (up to 20 people) gatherings will be allowed. People going to airports,



KOLKATA
West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee during a roadshow campaign for state Assembly polls, amid the rise in Covid-19 cases across the country, in Kolkata on Thursday. — PTI

EC rules out clubbing poll phases

RAJIB CHOWDHURI & PRANMOY
BRAHMACHARI | DC
KOLKATA/BERHAMPORE,
APRIL 15

Undeterred by the exponential rise in daily cases of the Coronavirus disease across the country and West Bengal, the Election Commission of India (EC) ruled out a possibility of clubbing the remaining phases of the ongoing Assembly elections in the state due to lack of availability of another 1,500 companies

of the Central paramilitary forces.

"There is no such plan of clubbing" the three poll phases, the Election Commission said after new Chief Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra took stock of the ground reality from various poll observers deputed in the state and chief electoral officer West Bengal Ariz Aftab in a video conference.

At the meeting, opinions were also sought from them about the deployment and distribution of

the Central forces in case of clubbing the last three poll phases after the state recorded daily new Covid-19 cases at 6,769 till Thursday with 22 fresh deaths in the last 24 hours, sources said.

This time, election to the West Bengal Assembly is being held in eight phases. Polling for four phases have ended and the fifth phase will be held on Saturday. Polling for the sixth, seventh and the eighth phase will be held on April 22, April 26 and April 29, respectively.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Thursday evening also appealed to the EC to club the "remaining phases" of the polls into one, within few hours of the central poll panel's decision to go ahead with the existing poll schedule even after the deadly virus claimed a Congress candidate's life and infected two others, including one from the TMC in the state. She also stressing that her party had opposed the prolonged eight-phase poll schedule.

railway stations and ISBTs will be allowed to proceed on the production of valid tickets.

However, those going for vaccination will be

required to apply for a curfew pass. Mediapersons have been exempted from the weekend curfew.

People dealing in food, groceries, fruits, vegetables

and dairy products will also have to seek a curfew pass for their movement.

Kejriwal said the reason behind the weekend curfew was that on these days,

people often indulged in recreation and other such activities that could be "curtailed" and "curbed" without much inconvenience to them.

'Tika ustav' another sham by govt: Rahul

DC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 15

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi once again lashed out at the BJP-led central government over the Covid-19 'mismanagement'. He alleged that the "tika ustav" was just another sham by the government and further that there are no beds, ventilators or vaccines available.

Through his official Twitter handle, he tweeted, "There are no tests, no beds in hospitals. There are no ventilators, no oxygen. There are no vac-

cines also. The utsav is a pretense".

Gandhi's attack comes in the wake of India reporting an unprecedented increase in Covid-19 cases with over 2,00,000 cases being reported on Thursday, the biggest single-day hike since the beginning of the pandemic.

Rahul Gandhi has been actively using social media and other platforms to highlight the 'deficiencies' of the central government in managing the outcome of the Coronavirus pandemic.

J&K defers shifting of 'Darbar'

YUSUF JAMEEL | DC
SRINAGAR, APRIL 15

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

The 'Darbar' was scheduled to close in Jammu later this month and reopen in Srinagar on May 10. But now the secretariat will function at both Jammu and Srinagar "in an equitable manner", Lieutenant

Governor, Manoj Sinha, said on Thursday.

"In view of sharply rising cases of Covid in J&K, the Govt has taken few important decisions ensuring safety of employees. Darbar move deferred because of Covid, Secretariat to function in both Srinagar & Jammu, office functioning not to be affected because of e-office," he tweeted.

He added, "Secretaries will function from both locations in an equitable manner. Office functioning will not be affected as files to move electronically between both Secretariats in e-Office."

MAHA OPPOSES OPENING OF JAIN TRUSTS TO DISTRIBUTE 'PIOUS FOOD'

SHAHAB ANSARI | DC
MUMBAI, APRIL 15

A day after the Bombay High Court refused permission to a city mosque to open up for Ramzan prayers, the Maharashtra government opposed a petition by two Jain Trusts seeking permission for devotees to collect food from the trust's premises during the nine-day-long Ayambil fast.

A division bench of Justice S.C. Gupta and

Justice Abhay Ahuja have deferred the hearing till Friday on two petitions filed by two Jain Trusts seeking an urgent relief by allowing devotees to take away "pious boiled cooked food" from the premises of the trust for nine days between April 19 and April 27.

The main prayer of the petitioners was to quash the state dictat and allow them and other 48 Jain Trusts to open their temples with SOPs in place.



Prem Singh Patel

MP MINISTER STIRS ROW, SAYS 'PEOPLE GET OLD, THEY MUST DIE'

RABINDRA NATH
CHOUDHURY | DC
BHOPAL, APRIL 15

An 'uncharitable' comment by a minister in Shivraj government on spiraling Covid-19 deaths in Madhya Pradesh has sparked a huge row here with Opposition Congress calling it 'shockingly insensitive'. State animal husbandry minister Prem Singh Patel while seeking to downplay the sudden spurt in fatalities due to Coronavirus infections in MP, said "people get old, they have to die".

He was speaking to reporters in Barwani in MP late on Thursday. "Deaths are occurring. Nobody can stop death. People get old, they have to die", Patel said.

The minister's comment comes at a time when the situation has worsened in the state with hospitals running out of beds for patients and mortuaries and crematoriums overflowing with bodies of the Covid-19 victims.

DIET | PLAN Pet food makers cite ambiguous biz environment, absence of uniform framework

India's 29 million pets facing shortage of food

New Delhi, April 15: India, which has an estimated pet animal population of 29 million, is facing a shortage of pet foods, a government body said on Thursday and urged the industry to boost local production by taking advantage of the existing central schemes.

Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) chairman O.P. Chaudhary, addressing a webinar organised by industry body PHDCCI, said the industry players can avail credit facility given under the Animal Husbandry Infrastructure Development Scheme

(AHIDS) for setting up animal feed manufacturing facilities.

However, pet food makers such as Mars International India and Royal Canine India said higher taxes, ambiguous business environment, absence of uniform framework and quality standards are major hindrances for the sector's growth.

"On an average, India requires 30,000 tonnes of pet foods. In India, there are pet food manufacturers but not sufficient enough to meet demand and quality," Chaudhary said while addressing the

webinar on the pet food industry.

Some quantity of pet foods are imported but are costly to reach the people at affordable prices, he said, adding that the scarcity of pet foods was faced during the Covid-19 lockdown last year and the government had intervened.

Asserting that a balanced nutritious diet is key to keep the pets healthy, Chaudhary said, however, pet foods are not reachable to every Indian pet owner because of the cost and availability.

Overall, animal nutrition is a concern for

Indian livestock sector as there is about 35-40 per cent shortage of animal feed and fodder, he added.

Stating that the pet industry in India is growing at a faster rate, the AWBI chairman said the government is taking measures to address the demand-supply gap and assisting the private sector to invest in setting up of animal feed plant under the ₹15,000 crore worth AHIDS scheme.

Under the scheme, up to 90 per cent credit is given at a lower rate form scheduled banks to the individuals, MSME (Micro, Small

and Medium Enterprises), FPOs (Farmer Producer Organisations) and Section 8 companies for infrastructure development, he said.

"The pet food industry can avail the opportunities to manufacture pet food in India and meet the demand," he added.

Further, the chairman said animal feed is not regulated in India at present. "There is no system in place for meeting licensing norms. Therefore, it is the high time to establish the pet food plants."

He also said that raw materials required for pet

food is available in the country. India is producing 8.1 million tonnes of meat, out of which chicken meat is 50 per cent.

"The offals are wasted and same can be utilised for pet food manufacturing. Not only chicken and meat, India is sufficiently producing foodgrains which can also be utilised," he added.

According to AWBI Secretary Sujit Kumar Dutta, there is a huge opportunity in research and development of pet foods as many are demanding vegetarian pet foods. — PTI

IN BRIEF

Taiwan transport minister resigns

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

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

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

Lawmaker caught naked

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

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

Xi to attend climate summit

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

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

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

Russia threatens Ukraine: Kiev

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

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

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

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

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

CHAUVIN WON'T TESTIFY AT FLOYD TRIAL

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

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

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

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

WHO: Europe surpasses 1 million Covid-19 deaths

Novartis, Roche team up on drug

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

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

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

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

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

Let there be no doubt

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

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

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

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

re production site during the second quarter of 2021.

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

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

— AFP

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

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

— AFP

LEATHER LINING IN GANESHA BAG: BRAND SORRY

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

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

— PTI

COPS CHARGE MAN WITH AXE NEAR QUEEN RESIDENCE

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

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

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

French nationals in Pak told to leave

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

US expels 10 Russian diplomats

Kremlin: Sanctions won't 'help' Putin-Biden potential summit

Washington, April 15: The United States announced sanctions and the expulsion of 10 Russian diplomats Thursday in retaliation for what Washington says is the Kremlin's US election interference, a massive cyber attack and other hostile activity.

President Joe Biden's broadside against Russia came the same week as he offered to meet President Vladimir Putin for their first summit — a meeting US officials say remains "vital" so that the two countries can deescalate.

In an executive order, Biden widened restrictions on US banks trading in Russian government debt, expelled 10 diplomats who include alleged spies, and sanctioned 32 individuals accused of meddling in the 2020 presidential election.

Biden's order "sends a signal that the United States will impose costs in a strategic and economical-

Moscow, April 15: The Kremlin said Thursday that planned US sanctions against Russia in retaliation for alleged election interference and hacking will not "help" a potential summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his United States counterpart Joe Biden.

Biden in a phone call with Putin on Tuesday invited him to hold a summit on neutral ground, as tensions between the West and Russia have escalated in recent weeks over the

ly impactful manner on Russia if it continues or escalates its destabilising international action," the White House said.



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

Myanmar troops shoot at health staff, 1 killed

Protesting medicos flee for safety to a nearby mosque

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

what kind of help he wanted from the British government. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said last week he condemned the bullying actions of the Myanmar military regime in London.

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

— AP

Blinken in Kabul to sell Biden troop withdrawal plan

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

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

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

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

"We are grateful to your people, your country, your administration," Abdull-

OZ TO WITHDRAW LAST 80 TROOPS IN SEPTEMBER

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

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

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

— AP

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

— AP

COVID | CURBS

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

Philip funeral: Seniors to skip uniforms

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— AP

DECCAN Chronicle

16 APRIL 2021

Biden's Afghan exit will hurt India, aid Pakistan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let all follow CBSE's example

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

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

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Subhani



Covid: Who'll pay price for irresponsible netas?



Karan Thapar

As I See It

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ter or simply an irresponsible attempt to pass the buck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The writer is a television commentator and anchor

LETTERS

TESTING TIMES

Due to the alarming surge in Covid-19 cases, the cancellation and postponement of Class X and Class XII exams respectively is welcome and a respite from a tense situation to worrisome parents and anxious students (*CBSE Class XII exams put off, no Class X test, DC, April 15*). However, in the education sector, the government at the Centre needs to devise with earnest intent and come up with a long-term strategy using technology in order to save careers.

Dr C. Ghanshyam
Visakhapatnam

COVID CARE

With Covid second wave reaching epic proportions, I request the GHMC to close or seize all roadside eateries, chai stalls, pan shops, and drinking rooms. Request public to eat and drink only homemade food before it turns fatal.

Joseph Cherian
Secunderabad

CO-WIN APP

With the apparent shortage of vaccines, Covid vaccination centres are not able to vaccinate registered people on schedule dates. Further, the Co-Win app allows registration despite this situation ignoring the ground reality that there are no vaccines. This is creating anxiety.

S. Sridhar
Hyderabad

50 YEARS AGO IN

DECCAN Chronicle

Bill to revise ST structure likely

HYDERABAD, April 15
The Chief Minister, Mr. K. Brahmamanda Reddi, said here today that a legislation revising the Sales Tax structure would most probably be introduced in the June session of the State Assembly.

Speaking at the 54th annual meeting of the Federation of Andhra Pradesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, he said that the Government was awaiting the report of the Bhootalingam Committee. The committee had been appointed to study the existing Sales Tax structure and suggest revision to take it broad based.

Kamal Davar



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and a grave violent orientation.

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

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

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

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

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

quick BITES

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

* As of 8:30 PM IST

WPI inflation spikes to 7.39% in March

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



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

FALAKNAAZ SYED
MUMBAI, APRIL 15

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

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

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



Financial Services Private Limited.

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

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

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

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

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

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

CITIBANK TO EXIT CONSUMER BANKING BUSINESS IN INDIA

Mumbai, April 15: US banking major Citibank on Thursday announced it will exit the consumer banking business in India as part of global strategy. The business comprises credit cards, retail banking, home loans and wealth management.

The bank has 35 branches in the country and employs about 4,000 people in the consumer banking business.

On Thursday, the bank announced exiting from the consumer banking businesses in 13 countries, with its global CEO

Jane Fraser attributing the decision to an absence of scale to compete in these geographies.

Contours of the exit were not immediately known. Citi had entered India in 1902 and started the consumer banking business in 1985. —PTI

Farm jobs increase by 9 mn in FY21

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, APRIL 15

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

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

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

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

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

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

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, APRIL 15

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

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

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



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

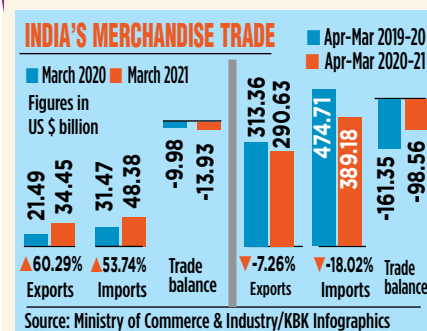
Cleartrip will continue to operate as a separate brand, retaining all employees while working closely with Flipkart to further develop technology solutions to make travel simple for customers.

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

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

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

BUSINESS BRIEFS



WIPRO Q4 NET PROFIT UP 27.7%

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

GAMES

SHORT TAKES

Chess wizard Anand bereaved

Chennai: Five-time world chess champion Viswanathan Anand's father, K Viswanathan, died here on Thursday following brief illness. He was 92 and breathed his last at a city hospital, family sources said. A former General Manager of the Southern Railway, Viswanathan is survived by two sons and a daughter. Anand's wife Aruna described him as a great support to the celebrated chess player. "He was a great support to Anand. He witnessed all of Anand's world championship victories," Aruna said. "A simple man, he made sure his son had the right values. He took great pride in his achievements," she added. — PTI

Djokovic bows out of Monte Carlo

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

Aditi gets off to season's best start

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

Olympics could be cancelled

Tokyo, April 15: A senior Japanese politician said cancelling the Tokyo Olympics over the coronavirus remains a possibility on Thursday, as a surge in cases renews concerns about the Games with less than 100 days to go. Toshiro Nikai, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's number two, said the Olympics must be cancelled "without hesitation" if the virus situation is too severe. A year after their historic postponement, the 2020 Olympics remain beset by pandemic problems, with parts of the torch relay forced behind closed doors and public support consistently low. Organisers and Olympic officials insist the Games

will go ahead safely, but Nikai said Thursday that all options were on the table. "We need to make a decision depending on the situation at the time," he told the private TBS television network. "We need to cancel it without hesitation if they're no longer possible," added Nikai, who is the LDP's secretary general. Asked if he considered cancellation an option, Nikai said: "Yes of course. If infection spreads because of the Olympics, I don't know what the Olympics is for." He added however that he sees the Games as an "opportunity", and it was "important for Japan to foster excitement with

support from the public". "We definitely want to make a success. In order to do so, there are various issues to solve. It's important to solve them one by one." "MIGHT BE NO SPECTATORS" The comments were quickly dismissed by an unnamed LDP official, who told the Jiji news

agency: "The Games will not be cancelled." Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike said she had "been told that the comment meant it is an option". "I take it as a message of strong encouragement that we contain the coronavirus by all means," she said. Japan's vaccine minister meanwhile mooted the possibility of a total ban on spectators at the Games. "We'll hold the Olympics in a form that is feasible," the *Asahi* newspaper quoted Taro Kono as saying. "There might be no spectators." Nikai's remarks come with fresh worries in Japan about what experts have called a fourth wave of infections.

Record numbers of cases have been reported in Osaka in recent days, and the government has been forced to authorise new restrictions just weeks after lifting a virus state of emergency. Compounding the problem is the comparatively slow roll-out of the vaccine in Japan, which has so far only approved the Pfizer/BioNTech version. Around 1.1 million people in the country of 126 million have received a first dose of vaccine so far, with the roll-out only expanding to the elderly this week. Despite the problems, Olympic organisers insist the Games can be held safely and have released virus rulebooks to allay public fears. — AFP

Hardik promoted in BCCI contracts

New Delhi, April 15: The star trio of India captain Virat Kohli, his white-ball deputy Rohit Sharma and pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah retained their top bracket BCCI contracts, worth ₹7 crore each, while all-rounder Hardik Pandya earned a promotion despite an injury-plagued season. A total of 28 cricketers were awarded central contracts in four categories on Thursday. At this moment in Indian cricket, there are only three certainties across formats and the scenario hasn't changed with Kohli, Rohit and Bumrah being the elite of elites. All-rounder Pandya is one of the notable promotions to Grade A, which is worth ₹5 crore, despite the fact that he endured a back injury which has prevented him from bowling for much of the last year. He was in Grade B last year. "Hardik is very much in line to play Test matches in England and will be one of the most important players after our A+ cricketers when we play the T20 World Cup. So Hardik's promotion is about what he brings to the team. That's what the selectors have factored in," a senior BCCI official said on conditions of anonymity.

LIST OF BCCI'S ANNUAL CONTRACTS	
GRADE A+ (₹7 crore): Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma, Jasprit Bumrah.	
GRADE A (₹5 crore): R Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ajinkya Rahane, Shikhar Dhawan, K.L. Rahul, Mohammed Shami, Ishant Sharma, Rishabh Pant, Hardik Pandya.	
GRADE B (₹3 crore): Wriddhiman Saha, Umesh Yadav, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Shardul Thakur, Mayank Agarwal.	
GRADE C (₹1 crore): Kuldeep Yadav, Navdeep Saini, Deepak Chahar, Shubman Gill, Hanuma Vihari, Axar Patel, Shreyas Iyer, Washington Sundar, Yuzvendra Chahal, Mohammed Siraj.	

Rookies Shubman Gill and Mohammed Siraj have got their maiden central contracts worth ₹1 crore in Grade C while Shardul Thakur has been elevated to group B. The trio has been rewarded for lion-hearted performances during India's historic Test triumph in Australia this year. Among the demotions, pacer Bhuvneshwar Kumar has dropped to Grade B, which is worth ₹3 crore, while Kedar Jadhav has been dropped for good. — PTI

Foden fires Man City into semis

Dortmund (Germany), April 15: Manchester City set up a blockbuster Champions League semi-final against Paris Saint-Germain as Phil Foden's second-half winner sealed a 2-1 victory at Borussia Dortmund on Wednesday to send the Premier League leaders through 4-2 on aggregate. England midfielder Jude Bellingham gave Dortmund an early lead, but a second-half Riyad Mahrez penalty and Foden's powerful strike moved City into the last four of Europe's top club competition for the second time. Having also scored the 90th-minute winner to give City a 2-1 victory in last week's first leg in Manchester, England international Foden again broke Dortmund hearts. "We are finally in the semi-finals and we're really happy," Guardiola told Sky with his team bidding to win four titles this season. "The guys deserve it because what they have achieved this season is incredible." Guardiola was full of praise for Mauricio Pochettino's PSG after they reached the last four by squeezing past holders Bayern Munich on away

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

goals. "We saw yesterday how strong they (PSG) are, Neymar is an excellent player and they have eliminated the world's best team," said Guardiola. "It's time to celebrate and drink a lot of wine, then prepare to face Chelsea (in the FA Cup semi-finals on Saturday)." City had bowed out at the quarter-final stage in each of the last three seasons, and had to come from behind at Signal Iduna Park as Dortmund shrugged off their indifferent Bundesliga form to take the lead on 15 minutes. Four days after scoring his first Bundesliga goal, Bellingham also hit the back of the net for the first time in the Champions League. — AFP



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

SARITA FIGHTS BACK TO KEEP ASIAN TITLE

Almaty, April 15: Scripting a sensational comeback, an aggressive Sarita Mor reeled off nine straight points in the summit clash to retain her Asian Championship title in 59kg while Seema Bisla (50kg) and Pooja (76kg) settled for bronze medals here on Thursday. Sarita, who won gold at the 2020 championship, lagged 1-7 after a botched up challenge but turned it around with a tremendous fight back against Mongolian's Shoovdor Baatarjav. Attempting a move at 1-3 on the edge of the mat, Sarita lost her balance, allowing her rival to get one point. However, the Mongolian's coach challenged the call to get her ward four points. From there on, there was no stopping Sarita. She effected a take-down, exposing it up with an elbow and then one more take down on the edge of the circle to make it 7-7. At that juncture, time running out fast, the Mongolian camp challenged the call and lost that to give an extra point to Sarita, who won 10-7. — PTI

ALL-WIN DAY FOR INDIAN BOXERS AT YOUTH WORLDS

New Delhi, April 15: It was a second successive all-win day for Indian boxers at the youth world championships in Kielce, Poland with two from the women's contingent advancing to the quarterfinals after clinching dominating triumphs. Poonam (57kg) and Vinka (60kg) won their bouts comprehensively to make the last-eight stage on Wednesday. While Poonam defeated Hungary's Beata Varga, Vinka sailed past Bosnia and Herzegovina's Tara Bohatjuk. In the men's draw, Asian youth silver-medallist Ankit Narwal (64kg) advanced to the second round after a comprehensive 5-0 win over Slovakia's Miroslav Herceg. In the 91kg category, Vishal Gupta notched up a comfortable unanimous victory over Bulgaria's Georgi Stoev to enter the round of 16. Also entering the pre-quarters was Vikas (52kg) after getting the better of Bulgaria's Yassen Radev 5-0. — PTI

