


DECCAN Chronicle

THE LARGEST CIRCULATED ENGLISH DAILY IN SOUTH INDIA
RAJAMAHENDRAVARAM | SATURDAY | 27 FEBRUARY 2021

WEATHER

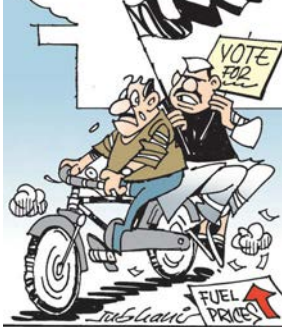
 **Max:** 38.0°C
Min: 19.0°C
RH: 73%
Rainfall: NIL

Forecast: Clear.
Max/Min temp.
38/19 °C

ASTROGUIDE

Sarvari: Uttarayana
Tithi: Magha Shuddha Pournami till 1.43 pm
Star: Magha till 11.15 am
Varjyam: 6.41 pm to 8.10 pm
Durmuhurtam: 6.39 am to 8.12 am
Rahukalam: 9 am to 10.30 am
HIJRI CALENDAR
Rajab 14,1442 AH
PRAVERS (ROYAL MOSQUE)
Fajar: 5.40 am
Zohar: 1.30 pm
Asar: 4.30 pm
Maghrib: 5.48 pm
Isha: 8.30 pm
SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.21 AM
SUNSET TODAY 6.09 PM
MOONRISE TODAY 6.18 PM
MOONSET TOMORROW 7.09 AM

COUNTER POINT



We will save 99% of election expenses by campaign on bicycles!

SHORT TAKES

TN CM vows gold loan waiver

Chennai: Loans availed from cooperative societies by pledging jewels upto six sovereigns and pending loans of women members of Self Help Groups in co-op banks and societies would be waived, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister K Palaniswami announced here on Friday. The decision was taken after representations made by SHG members that they were not in a position to repay the gold loans.

Terrorist hideout busted in J&K

Jammu: Security forces busted a terrorist hideout in Jammu and Kashmir's Reasi district on Friday and seized a huge cache of arms, ammunition and explosive materials, officials said. A huge cache of arms and ammunition, including an AK-47 rifle with two magazines and 150 cartridges, a rocket launcher, 16 UBGL grenades, four hand grenades, besides two VHF radio sets with antennas.

Tax settlement deadline extended

New Delhi: The income-tax department on Friday extended the deadline for filing declarations and making payment under direct tax dispute resolution scheme Vivad Se Vishwas (VsV) till March 31 and April 30. "CBDT further extends the date for filing of declarations under the #VivadSe Vishwas Act, 2020 to 31st March, 2021," the I-T department tweeted.

US to indict Saudi prince

Washington: The US director of national intelligence is expected to release a damning report on Friday that fingers Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for the brutal murder and dismemberment of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018. The classified report based on intelligence collected by the CIA.

■ Report on Page 5



NATION | 4

Bandaru manhandled by Congress MLAs



WORLD | 5

US strikes Iran militia in Syria

SPORTS | 8

Ignored Yusuf Pathan retires from cricket



Magh mela



Devotees offer prayers after taking the holy dip in the Sangam, the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and mythical Saraswati, on the eve of the Maghi Purnima, or the full moon day during the annual traditional fair of 'Magh Mela' in Prayagraj on Friday. Hundreds of thousands of devotees are expected to take a holy dip at the confluence during the astronomically auspicious period of over 45 days celebrated as Magh Mela.

— AP

HC okays urban local polls

Judge dismisses petitions against polls; Elections on March 15

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 26

The Andhra Pradesh High Court has allowed the State Election Commission to go ahead with the holding of urban local body polls as per schedule. The court dismissed a batch of petitions challenging the latter's order to resume the conduct of polls on Friday.

A single judge bench headed by Justice D.V.S.S. Somayajulu heard the batch of petitions.

The court observed that Rule 7 conferred the power to the SEC to modify or alter the election pro-

gramme for urban local bodies for valid reasons. The prevalence of Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant administrative issues were a valid reason for the SEC to defer the polls.

Moreover, the court said, the SEC was given the responsibility to conduct elections, and hence it was up to it to resume the suspended elections and fulfill its constitutional mandate.

The petitioners challenged the notification issued by the SEC on February 15 to resume the election process for municipal corporations and municipalities or

nagara panchayats. The SEC had earlier issued a notification, on March 9 last, for conduct of polls and then deferred them due to the Covid-19 pandemic, on March 15.

Senior counsel Vedula Venkata Ramana argued that the State Election Commission was not having the power, on its own, to either postpone the election or resume the election process.

Advocate general N. Ranga Reddy informed the court that the Supreme Court did not interfere with the postponement of the elections and said the postponed elections would

need be resumed in consultation with the state government.

SEC's counsel Ashwani Kumar said the Supreme Court approved the order of the SEC to resume the deferred the election process.

Earlier, the SEC issued a notification resuming the conduct of elections to 12 municipal corporations and 75 municipalities and nagar panchayats from the time of commencement of withdrawal of nominations on March 2, 2021. Date of polling is March 10 from 7 am to 5 pm and counting on March 14 from 8 am.

TTD'S DECISION TO HIKE ALIPIRI TOLL GETS NOD

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, FEB. 26

The toll fee collected at the Alipiri toll gate in Tirupati has been substantially raised by the state government on Friday, on the basis of a recommendation from the TTD toll board.

The revised rates are: All LCV/LMVs including taxis: uniform toll of ₹50 from the existing fee of ₹15, ₹30, ₹25 and ₹60 based on classifications of vehicles and seating capacity. LCV two-axle, mini buses, lorries and goods vehicles will be charged ₹100 as against current ₹50-₹60, while lorries, JCBs and other heavy vehicles ₹200 as against the current ₹100.

■ Page 3: Hike aims at reducing congestion

Desam cadre in Kuppam demands Jr NTR re-entry

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, FEB. 26

Telugu Desam chief Nara Chandrababu Naidu on a three-day mission to repair the damage done to his party by the YSR Congress in panchayat polls in his home turf Kuppam faced a tricky situation on Friday when he was addressing the public at Santhipuram mandal.

TD supporters who attended the roadshow raised slogans in support of Jr NTR and asked the TD chief to bring in the Tollywood hero and late NTR's grandson for a TD roadshow in Kuppam.

In a video that went viral on media, Naidu was seen nodding as TD supporters shouted "Jai Jr NTR" slogans. Naidu did not pay much attention to these

■ TD supporters who attended the roadshow raised slogans in support of Jr NTR and asked the TD chief to bring in the Tollywood hero and late NTR's grandson for a TD roadshow in Kuppam.

■ Some party activists had erected flexes in Chittoor and Prakasam districts during the Sankranti festival, inviting Jr NTR into active politics to save the party.

■ A few TD leaders have on occasions also said if Jr NTR is projected as the next CM candidate, the party would get a new lease of life in the 2024 elections.

slogans, though, and continued with his road show.

Notably, Naidu has been trying his best to establish his son Nara Lokesh as the new face of the party while a section of TD leaders and party supporters feel Jr NTR can be the only saviour of the party in a sinking mode.

Some party activists had

erected flexes in Chittoor and Prakasam districts during the Sankranti festival, inviting Jr NTR into active politics to save the party. A few TD leaders have on occasions also said if Jr NTR is projected as the next CM candidate, the party would get a new lease of life in the 2024 elections.

5 poll results to be out on May 2

18.68 cr to vote from March 27 to April 29

VINEETA PANDEY | DC
NEW DELHI, FEB. 26

The stage is set for Assembly elections in two states in eastern India, and two states and a Union territory in the south, as the Election Commission announced the voting days in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Assam and Puducherry UT. The Assembly polls for 294 seats in West Bengal will be conducted over a record eight phases, from March 27 till April 29, and that of Assam's 126 seats in three phases — from March 27 to April 6. The southern states and the UT will hold polls in a single phase on April 6. The counting of votes for all five states/UT will be held on May 2.

Kerala has 140 Assembly seats, Tamil Nadu 234 and Puducherry 30. The term of the Assemblies in Assam, TN and West Bengal will end in May, while that of Kerala and Puducherry expires in June.

Nearly 18.68 crore voters are expected to cast their votes at 2.7 lakh polling stations for 824 Assembly seats across Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry,

POLL DATES	
West Bengal:	SEATS 294
Mar 27	April 17
April 1	April 22
April 6	April 26
April 10	April 29
Assam:	SEATS 126
March 27	
April 1	
April 6	
APRIL 6, 2021	
Tamil Nadu	SEATS 234
Puducherry	SEATS 30
Kerala	SEATS 140

Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora said. He added that all officials and other personnel on poll duty will be vaccinated against Covid-19 before the polling begins.

The Election Commission has decided to appoint two special observers for West Bengal and a third may also be sent if required, Mr Arora said.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, however, questioned the

Economy exits Covid-induced recession in Q3

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO
NEW DELHI, FEB. 26

The road to recovery appears to be in sight for the Indian economy, with the country's gross domestic product growing by 40 basis points or 0.40 per cent in the October-December quarter. The size of the economy had shrunk in April-June quarter and July-September quarter, pulling down the country into a technician recession. However, the positive growth — though not very strong yet — has taken the Indian economy out of the recession.

A consistent growth in consumer demand, festive spends and a jump in government expenditure appear to have supported the Covid-battered economy to spring back into the positive territory. Expenditure trend, however, remains weak as government and private consumption expenditure continued to contract in the third quarter.

"The GDP at constant (2011-12) prices in Q3 of 2020-21 is estimated at ₹36.22 lakh crore, as against ₹36.08 lakh crore in Q3 of 2019-20, showing a growth of 0.4 per cent," data released by the min-

AS MEASURES taken by the government to contain spread of the Covid-19 have impacted data collection mechanisms, NSO expects sharp revision in growth figures in due course.

istry of statistics and programme implementation showed on Friday.

The Indian economy had grown at the rate of 4.7 per cent in the same quarter last year.

According to the data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO), farming, manufacturing, construction, electricity, gas, water supply and other utility services have entered positive zone.

Trade, hotels, transport, communications and services related to broadcasting continued to bore the brunt to post-Covid consumer behaviour. These segments posted a 7.7 per cent contraction in the third quarter.

While the third quarter data suggested buoyancy in the economy, the NSO revised its growth projection for the fiscal 2020-21 marginally downwards by 30 basis points or 0.30 per cent.

rationale behind the eight-phase Assembly polls announced by the EC — one more than the seven phases in the last election.

West Bengal has in the past seen major political violence during elections, and accordingly, a huge deployment of security forces has been put in place to prevent that. The CEC said webcasting will be done at polling stations in critical and vulnerable areas, while adequate deployment of Central armed police forces will be ensured. He added that all critical and vulnerable areas have been identified and advance teams have already been deployed across the four states and one Union territory.

The CEC said that in view of the Covid-19 safety protocols, candidates can file their nominations online and voting will be allowed for an additional hour. Door-to-door campaigning will be restricted to five persons, including the candidate, while roadshows will be allowed with a maximum of five vehicles.

The EC has decided to issue a "Voter Information Slip" in place of the "Photo Voter Slip".

DC IMPACT

POLICE SEIZE 30 DONKEYS BEING SMUGGLED FROM R'STHAN

VADREVI SRINIVAS | DC
KAKINADA, FEB. 26

The Dacheipalli police of Gurazala circle in Guntur district rescued 39 donkeys which were being illegally transported to Cherukupalli near Chirala from Rajasthan on Friday night and arrested four persons for smuggling the animals.

This comes on the day *Deccan Chronicle* had highlighted the practice of slaughtering of donkeys on Thursday. Following this, People for Animals and the Animal Welfare Board alerted the state police to the illegal practice, following which DGP Gautam Sawang gave directions to the superintendents of police concerned to keep a watch.

Guntur Rural SP Vishal Gunni told this reporter on Friday after the seizure that when the donkeys were being illegally transported, the police caught the gang near Dacheipalli and shifted the donkeys to a rescue home. Four accused including the vehicle driver were arrested.

Gurajala circle inspector R. Umesh said that following the report by *Deccan Chronicle*, police had gone on the alert on the borders with Telangana and caught the gang and rescued the animals. He said that the donkeys would be shifted to a sanctuary at Kakinada for their protection.

Umesh said the donkeys were being taken to Cherukupalli near Chirala for slaughtering. He said that some animal welfare organisations had helped the police department.

Donkeys, which are in the extinction list, are slaughtered because it is believed that their meat can cure respiratory and breathing problems and increase sexual potential.

OTHER STORIES

TWO INDEPENDENTS
WITHDRAW FROM
BIENNIAL POLLSDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 26

Two independent candidates withdrew their nominations to contest in biennial election to AP legislative council from two teachers' constituencies on Friday.

They are Didde Ambedkar from East-West Godavari teachers' constituency and Chandu Vijaya Lakshmi from Krishna-Guntur teachers' constituency.

There are 11 contestants in fray from East-West constituency and 19 from Krishna-Guntur constituency.

On the other hand, no nomination was filed to contest in biennial election to AP legislative council by MLAs to fill up five vacancies on Friday.

POLAVARAM
SPILLWAY BRIDGE
SLAB COMPLETEDDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 26

The multipurpose Polavaram irrigation project's spillway bridge slab at a length of 1,128 meters was completed.

Following the direction from the Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy to complete execution of whole project by end of 2021 and ensure supply of water to the farmers for cultivation of crops for kharif season in 2022, the project executing agency Megha Engineering and Infrastructures Limited expedite works on several key components of the project. The execution works on spillway bridge began on Sept. 9, 2020 and despite facing floods and Covid-19 pandemic, were completed by Friday. Nearly 5,200 cubic meters of concrete and 700 tonnes of steel was used for the spillway bridge.

Along with laying spillway bridge, hydraulic cylinders were set up at 29 crest gates so far and power pack rooms are also being set up to secure the power packs meant to operate the crest gates.

TD MANIFESTO
ASSURES BETTER
CIVIC AMENITIESDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 26

The Telugu Desam released its manifesto with ten promises for the ensuing municipal elections.

Party general secretary and MLC Nara Lokesh, after releasing the manifesto on Friday, asserted that YSR Congress leaders had no moral right to ask for votes in the municipal elections as the Jagan Mohan Reddy government has ignored civic amenities like roads, drainage, drinking water, health and housing needs of the people across cities and towns.

Lokesh appealed to the people to realise what damage the YSRC had done to the State since coming to power.

Addressing a press conference, he maintained that they had framed the manifesto after conducting a three-month long survey to understand the expectations of the urban people. He explained that the manifesto contained 10 promises beginning with their commitment to reopen Anna canteens across the state.

BJP SEEKS FRESH
NOMINATIONS FOR
AP CIVIC POLLSDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 26

Former BJP state president and senior party leader Kanna Lakshminarayana has sought that State Election Commission (SEC) give chance to file fresh nominations for the forthcoming municipal elections in Andhra Pradesh. In support of his suggestion, he alleged that ruling YSR Congress leaders had forcibly stopped many aspirants of opposition parties from filing their nominations when polls were originally announced last year before the Covid-19 pandemic. Lakshminarayana was speaking after a joint meeting of BJP and Jana Sena leaders on Friday over the municipal polls in Guntur district. Leaders of the two parties discussed how they should move forward in the upcoming municipal elections.

The senior BJP leader said many candidates belonging to opposition parties had been forcibly prevented by the ruling party leaders from filing their nominations in majority of the places.



Vizag-south MLA, Vasupalli Ganesh Kumar takes part in a campaign rally for the upcoming GVMC elections at the 35th Ward near Poorna Market in Visakhapatnam on Friday.

Civic polls: Tough time for
TD as leaders flock to YSRC

3 candidates who filed nominations for TD, shift to oppn

DC CORRESPONDENT
ANANTAPUR, FEB. 26

Telugu Desam faces a tough situation in the municipal corporation polls here as the YSRC is seeing an influx of leaders and candidates from the TD in the context of differences between rival groups in the party.

Three candidates had filed nominations from TD prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. They have now quit Telugu Desam and shifted their allegiance to the YSRC. Lakshmi Reddy, sitting corporator from Third Road had filed nomination papers as TD candidate but quit the party and joined YSRC in the presence of urban MLA Ananta Venkatrami Reddy. Jolted, the Telugu Desam is reportedly unable to find another

AFTER YSRC ANNOUNCES LIST, MANY
QUIT DESAM, JOIN RULING PARTYDC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, FEB. 26

The YSRC high command on Friday released a list of 44 candidates who would be contesting from various wards of the corporation.

The list contained the names of candidates contesting in Anakapalle, Bhimili, Visakhapatnam North and Visakhapatnam West assembly constituencies. The list contained names of five candidates

candidate to field from the area. Meanwhile, internal bickering between Lok Sabha area in-charge JC Pavan Reddy and urban assembly in-charge V Prabhakar Chowdary

from Anakapalle constituency, 8 in Bhimili, 17 in Visakhapatnam North and Visakhapatnam West 14.

Meanwhile, 500 active members of Telugu Desam joined YSRC at a gathering held in Visakhapatnam north constituency and in the presence of Lok Sabha member MVV Satyanarayana. A group picture containing the new joining was circulated in the media on Friday.

worsened during the ongoing civic polls, as both groups tried to field their own candidates.

A senior leader from the 1st Road area of New Town area extended sup-

port to an Independent candidate, instead of the TD nominee, saying the decision by the in-charge was one-sided. "Voters in our division are against the former corporator as he had failed to serve the area well," the leader said and announced that his group would back an independent candidate.

Even after differences emerged in the party, the YSRC high command entrusted responsibilities to urban MLA Ananta Ventaktrami Reddy to select candidates from all divisions. Former MLA Gurunath Reddy, though a close aide of the YSR family, had shifted base to the TD during the last polls but re-joined the YSRC, saying he had not been heard during selection of candidates for mayor and various divisions.

Top YSRC leaders threaten
Independent candidateDC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, FEBRUARY 26

Top leadership of the ruling YSRC allegedly threatened an independent candidate contesting in 21st ward where mayoral aspirant Vamsi Krishna Yadav was pitted against him in a one to one battle.

Observers said the independent Mohammed Ghouse is likely to win the elections as he has strong support from the local people. His wife Unnisa won as independent in 2007 elections and on the request of former chief minister YS Rajasekhara Reddy she supported Congress mayoral candidate Pulusu Janardhana Rao.

Family members of Mohammed Ghouse told this correspondent on Friday that a person belonging to a minority community claiming to be a police officer came to their house late in the evening on Wednesday asked Ghouse to accompany him to his car. After he sat in the car, the man called a person and put the phone in speaker mode.

Initially there was a gentle request to withdraw from the elections and support YSRC candidate. When Ghouse kept mum another person in a harsh tone warned him of consequences and said the election would be manipulated

MINISTER AVANTI CAMPAIGNS FOR DAUGHTER

DC Correspondent Visakhapatnam, February 26: Minister for Tourism Muttamsetti Srinivasa Rao (Avanti) campaigned for his daughter Muttamsetti Priyanka, who is contesting for ward no 6 in Visakhapatnam.

She is pitted against TD candidate Pothina Seetha, who is strongly backed by former mayor Sabbam Hari.

The minister took out a rally from the cricket stadium, Madhuravada and reached Gayatrinagar. On the way, the minister welcomed Pothina Prasad, a strong TD leader of Madhuravada, into the

party fold. A large number of party workers including women walked along with the minister and his daughter. Addressing people at different places, the minister said YSRC would win the majority of the wards in the corporation as the people were impressed with the welfare schemes launched by Jagan Mohan Reddy government during the last 21 months.

Balaraju said it would be a good advantage for the people if they elected Priyanka, who is a doctor by profession. The ward would also witness development, he added.

The ward has 17,830 votes and of them the strong community of Rellis having a voter strength of 1500 and minorities with 800 and a sizeable Yadavs would vote for him.

"My wife Unnisa won with a good majority and I will repeat the same," Ghouse said with a confident note.

Observers said for Vamsi Krishna Yadav it would be do or die battle. If loses, his political career and the dream of becoming first mayor of the capital designated city would come to an end.

Jagan tells town planners
to be ready for challengesDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 26

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has called upon town planners to come up with solutions for emerging challenges with a futuristic outlook, in accordance with sustainable development goals set up by the United Nations.

Inaugurating the 69th National Town and Country Planners Conference online at Vishakhapatnam on Friday, the CM said that he is looking forward to their recommendations on affordable housing for lower-income groups and reducing financial burden on the government owing to growing cost of land.

● **THE CHIEF MINISTER** reiterated that his government will take forward all suggestions and recommendations that the conference makes after deliberations and put them to best use.

He expressed confidence that the three-day meet will come up with solutions pertinent to the state and country vis-a-vis the 17 sustainable goals set by the United Nations for 2030.

Jagan Mohan Reddy said the issue of increasing greenhouse gases is a matter of serious concern. Water management is another issue requiring comprehensive planning, as cities are growing in

multiple directions. He stated that the government is looking forward to develop the coastal region, utilising the vast stretch of 974 km of seashore.

Even Visakhapatnam will be one of the beneficiaries of an integrated coastal development plan, he stated.

The Chief Minister reiterated that his government will take forward all suggestions and recommendations that the conference makes after deliberations and put them to best use. The meeting, organised by the Institute of Town Planners of India, is being attended by town planners, academics, researchers and directors of institutes from across the country.



Ambati Rambabu

NAIDU FAILED TO
PROVIDE WATER
TO KUPPAMDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 2

YSR Congress state officials spokesperson and MLA Ambati Rambabu said that Chandrababu Naidu is frustrated after the Kuppam debacle in panchayat polls and termed Telugu Desam Party manifesto for civic polls a farce and impracticable as it cannot implemented by the Leader of Opposition.

Addressing a press conference on Friday, Mr Rambabu stated that in Kuppam, TDP had won only 14 of the total 89 seats as people were fed up with Chandrababu Naidu for four long decades. He commented that since TDP lost in the polls, Naidu came running to town ahead of Municipal polls, otherwise he would have never visited Kuppam even for filing nomination.

He recalled that Chandrababu Naidu had failed to implement the promises gave during the 2014 municipal elections while in power for five years, leaving people and welfare to winds. He stated that Chandrababu Naidu had failed to recognize the services of his party workers, including Jr NTR. He recalled that Chandrababu Naidu, who had earlier taken junior NTR for an election campaign, had sidelined him after the defeat. Mr Rambabu said that Chandrababu Naidu should be ashamed to demand water for Kuppam in spite of serving as a Chief Minister for 14 years.

Mr. Ambati Rambabu has also hit out at Nara Lokesh for his abusive comments made on Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, saying that people have faith in the Chief Minister and reminded him of the defeat in Mangalagiri.

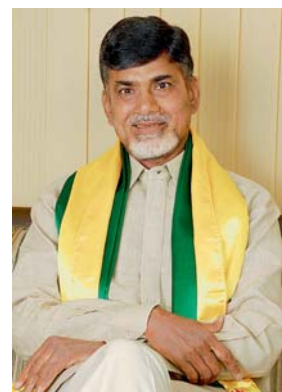
People will turn
against YSRC
soon, says NaiduDC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, FEB. 26

Telugu Desam supremo Nara Chandrababu Naidu has objected to Chief Minister Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy and YSRC leaders asserting that they have won big in Kuppam. Naidu retorted that TD cadres know how ruling party leaders tried to suppress them and will repay YSRC with interest by defeating it in the future.

As part of the three-day tour of his Kuppam constituency, Naidu asserted that he will stay put in Kuppam till the ZPTC, MPTC elections to ensure that ruling party candidates do not even get their deposit in the forthcoming civic body elections.

Charging YSRC leaders of intimidating his party candidates during panchayat elections in Punganur to make the elections unanimous, the former chief minister said he will ensure that minister Peddireddy Ramachandra Reddy loses his deposit in the next election from Punganur.

"Peddireddy is not only illegally trading in precious red sanders but is also smuggling sand in an effort to amass more and more wealth. He has utilised his money earned through illegal activities



Chandrababu Naidu

to ruin democracy in Kuppam," Naidu observed.

He further said: "The capital issue has gone, special status and Polavaram project have become a thing of past and now Visakhapatnam is facing threat of closure. How YSRC can be continue under such circumstances," he asked.

The TDP chief visited Poduru village in Kadapalle panchayat to console family members of TD activist Krishnappa, who had died in a road accident recently. He assured that the family of Krishnappa will be taken care of by the party. He also announced a financial assistance of Rs. 50,000 for the family of deceased.

R&B GUESTHOUSE IN KUPPAM HIT
BY POWER OUTAGE FOR 2 HOURSDC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, FEB. 26

The R&B guest house in Kuppam constituency, where Telugu Desam Chief Nara Chandrababu Naidu was staying as part of his three-day tour to Kuppam, has been allegedly hit by a power outage for almost two hours on Friday.

Former minister and TD leader N. Amaranth Reddy came down heavily at the ruling party, when he spoke to the media persons in Kuppam on Friday, alleging that the YSR Congress led government has intentionally cut the power to the R&B guest house in a bid to force the opposition to call off his tour to Kuppam.

"Jaganmohan Reddy's government was resort-

ing to vindictive and revenge politics by targeting the TD Chief Chandrababu Naidu and creating obstacles for his public tour and meetings. This is clearly visible in Kuppam today, as the power was cut to the guest house on purpose. At least they didn't even provide a generator or a battery", Mr Reddy alleged.

He warned of giving more shocks to the ruling party in the coming days. "The YSRC government is causing trouble to the TD leaders. Even the officials are not following protocol during the visit of the TD Chief and Kuppam MLA. These kinds of events never happened before, but they are happening now at the behest of the Jagan government", he said.xy

RIISING | TRADE Excise dept earned ₹1,473.91cr from Feb. 1 to 21, whereas it was ₹1,380.58cr last year

Liquor earnings soar during panchayat polls

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, FEB. 26

Sale of liquor in the first three weeks of February, during the gram panchayat elections, has come as a blessing for the excise department, as the value of liquor sold went up by 6.76 per cent when compared to the same period last year.

Going by the sales report of the excise department, the overall consumption of alcohol and alcoholic bev-

erages has fallen drastically but the department earned ₹1,473.91 crore from February 1 to 21, whereas it was ₹1,380.58 crore during the same period last year.

Around 14.15 lakh cases of Indian made foreign liquor (IMFL) were sold, marking a 22 per cent decrease over the sale of 18.23 lakh cases during the same period last year. Similarly, 4.57 lakh beer cases were consumed this year – 22 per cent less than

● **ON THE OTHER** hand, the Special Enforcement Bureau (SEB), police and excise department personnel arrested over 5,000 bootleggers, besides seizing lakhs of liquor bottles, destroying fermented jaggery wash, ID liquor and other freebies, which were reportedly meant for distribution to voters.

the corresponding figure (5.89 lakh cases) last year.

In all, five districts – Visakhapatnam, East Godavari, Guntur, Krishna and West Godavari – accounted for nearly 53 per cent of all

liquor sold in the state during this three-week period, together marking a whopping sale of ₹793.71 crore. This is against last year's sales of ₹732.19 crore in the five districts. On an average, liquor

worth ₹70 crore was sold in the state during the three-week election period. This is besides the locally made illicit arrack and liquor smuggled from Telangana state, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, that was supplied by candidates in rural areas.

On the other hand, the Special Enforcement Bureau (SEB), police and excise department personnel arrested over 5,000 bootleggers, besides seiz-

ing lakhs of liquor bottles, destroying fermented jaggery wash, ID liquor and other freebies, which were reportedly meant for distribution to voters.

Meanwhile, the gram panchayat election has thrown up a new trend with some people, especially youth, going to the extent of demanding liquor rather than money. This trend is expected to play a crucial role in the ensuing MPTC, ZPTC and civic body polls.

SHORT TAKES

AP WITNESSES
SURGE IN
COVID-19 CASESDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 26

As several states like Maharashtra and Kerala witness a surge in Covid-19 infections, Andhra Pradesh is no exception as it is registering a similar trend in the last few days.

A look at the daily reports on the number of persons tested and infections reported from Feb. 20 onwards show, rise in the number of cases. On Feb. 20, out of 26,436 persons tested, 54 found infected with the virus. Similarly, on Feb. 21-31,680 persons tested-88 found positive. On Feb. 22-out of 18,257 tested, 41 reported positive; Feb. 23-28,268-70; Feb. 24-32,494-94; Feb. 25-35,443-82 and on Feb. 26, out of 34,778 tested, 97 found positive to the virus. However, the number of deaths gives a major relief as only two deaths were reported with one a day in the last seven days.

As per the Covid-19 bulletin issued by the state health authorities on Friday, out of 1,38,77,968 samples tested so far, 8,89,681 persons were infected with the virus and of them, 8,81,877 were recovered while 635 are still active with the virus.

Among the daily Covid-19 cases, Chittoor topped the state with 22 followed by 17 in Guntur.

RAILWAY COURT
ISSUES SUMMONS
TO MUDRAGADADC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, FEB. 26

The Vijawayada Railway Court issued summons to Kapu Nadu leader Mudragada Padmanabham and other accused in Ratnachal Train burning incident in Tuni incident. The directed Mudragada Padmanabham and other accused to attend before court on March 3. The incident took place on 31, January 2016, when Mr Mudragada Padmanabham took up agitation demanding providing reservations for the Kapu community in the name of Kapu Ayikhya Garjana and held a public meeting at Tuni. After concluding the meeting, Tuni Ratnachal Express was burnt. The railway police registered a case under sections 146, 147, 153 and 174.

TRIBUTES PAID TO
NOTED NOVELIST
SINGAMANENIDC CORRESPONDENT
ANANTAPUR, FEB. 26

Noted novelist Singamaneni Narayana was laid to rest at his agriculture fields in Kanaganipalli mandal in the district on Friday. The noted writer Singamaneni Narayana, 78, suffered injuries to his thigh bone six months ago and was moved to a private hospital in Hyderabad.

During the treatment, he contracted Covid-19 and recovered from the dreadful virus. The writer was at his residence in Anantapur while his health condition was serious and recently shifted to a local nursing home where he died on Thursday.

Singamaneni Narayana, of farmers family born on 26 June 1943 at Bandameedapalle in Rappthadu mandal in the district. He completed primary education at Bandameedapalli elementary school and high school in Sri Sathya Sai Baba National School in Anantapur.

Narayana wrote many novels about farmers and other issues of Rayalaseema.

Many people including writers, leaders, intellectuals, Communist party leaders paid tribute to the mortal remains of the writer.

The body was taken out procession from his residence and other parts towards Kanaganipalle mandal head quarters at his farm fields. The writer was laid to rest at his farmhouse in Kanaganipalli in the district. TDP politburo member Kalava Srinivasulu observed Singamaneni Narayana was a good writer to bring reforms in society.

Urban MLA Ananta Venkatrami Reddy also paid tributes to the mortal remains of the writer and consoled the family members.

● **NARAYANA WROTE** many novels about farmers and other issues of Rayalaseema.

● **MANY PEOPLE** including writers, leaders, intellectuals, Communist party leaders paid tribute to the mortal remains of the writer.

NTR varsity without
executive council

Several projects held up as no council for two years

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 26

The Dr NTR University of Health Sciences (NTRUHS) has no Executive Council for the last two years, affecting its functioning and holding back the implementation of several academic programmes.

The Executive Council will be having 14 members with the Vice-Chancellor as its chairman, the registrar as convener and secretaries of finance and health, commissioner of health and family welfare, directors of health and medical education and some others as nominated members.

The term of the EC lasts three years. The

● University sources say lack of EC meant no major decision could be taken as in a change of curriculum and initiation of welfare schemes for students.

term of the last EC ended two years ago. Since then, no new EC was constituted by the state government due to various reasons.

University sources say lack of EC meant no major decision could be taken as in a change of curriculum and initiation of welfare schemes for students.

Though the university planned to come up with a plan to hold exams in remote mode for the university college and all its constituent and affiliated colleges, it was unable to do this for want of clear-

ance and sanction of funds from the EC. The project was estimated to cost more than ₹2 crore.

Similarly, the university proposed to enter into MoUs with several states as also national and international research institutes to share knowledge and expertise, facilitate good exposure to students and help them come up with innovative projects.

This too did not materialise as no EC existed for grant of nod.

The university planned to sign an MoU with the National Institute of

Nutrition in Hyderabad but that too remains on paper for the same reason.

Sources say that several programmes, projects, agreements and welfare activities for students are held back due to lack of mandatory clearance and financial concurrence of the EC.

State government sources conveniently sought to put the blame on the civic polls. They said though there was a move to constitute an EC for NTRUHS recently, the model code of conduct announced by the state election commission in the run-up to the gram panchayat and urban local body polls came in the way and delayed the process further.



Police personnel detain Left party activists who were staging a protest against the privatisation move on Visakhapatnam Steel Plant by the central government at Maddilapalem junction in Visakhapatnam on Friday.

Left party stages stir
over VSP privatisationDC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, FEB. 26

The Left leaders supported by various political parties organised a Rasta Roko at Kurmannapalem near Steel Plant main gate on the National Highway and Maddilapalem junction protesting against proposals for privatisation and hike in petroleum prices in Visakhapatnam on Friday.

BJP and Jana Sena members were not present at the protest.

The police arrested important leaders of the

AP NGOS PROTEST AGAINST PRIVATISATION

Visakhapatnam: Members of Visakhapatnam district unit of AP Non-Gazetted Officers Association protested against the privatisation of the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant and other public sector undertakings. They staged a dharna at NGO Home located in the collector's office.

Left parties and worker and later released them on self bail.

Thousands of workers from the steel plant and

President of Vizag district NGO Association K. Esavara Rao said the protests were being held by NGOs in all the districts in the state.

Rao blamed the BJP government for trying to privatise the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant, an institution close to the hearts of the people.

other organisations joined the protest at the main gate raising slogans against the BJP government.

FAPCCI SEEKS PROACTIVE SUPPORT
FROM STATE GOVERNMENTDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 26

Federation of Andhra Pradesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FAPCCI) representatives met the government officials to promote procurement opportunities with multilateral banks.

The FAPCCI team appraised about the activities of the Federation

and seek proactive support from Government for the development of Industry and Trade in the State.

Mr Atchut Rao gave representation to the officials for promoting MSME Business Facilitation Centre, Global Trade Facilitation Centre and Entrepreneurship Development Institute in Kadapa/Kurnool

Advocates cricket tourney

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 26

AP High Court chief justice Arup Kumar Goswami played cricket and enthralled audiences for some time during the first South India Advocates Tournament held in the ACA cricket stadium at Mulapadu on Friday. Justice Arup Kumar Goswami, with other judges, inaugurated the tournament and later showed his batting skills. HC judge justice Praveen Kumar donned the role of a bowler and Justice Goswami turned batsman. Justice Goswami asserted the need for physical fitness to the advocates suggesting them to play sports to keep them mentally and physically fit.

The tournament was conducted by Andhra Pradesh Advocates Cricket Association in which advocates from Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka states are participating. CJ Arup



High Court Chief Justice Arup Kumar Goswami plays cricket to mark the inauguration of 1st South India Advocates Cricket Tournament at Mulapadu in Krishna district on Friday.

Kumar Goswami said that sports bring mental well-being as well as good health. He said that there is a need for everyone to have proficiency in at least one sport. He said that lawyers are always stressed at work and games and sports can help them stay calm and fit with good health.

Later, the High Court judges were felicitated and mementoes were given to Justice Praveen



Eastern Navy Flag Officer Commanding in chief, Vice Admiral Atul Kumar Jain and his wife Devina Jain met Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy at the camp office on Friday.

Jagan all praise for Velcheru on
Sahitya Akademi Award winDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 26

Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has congratulated Velcheru Narayana Rao for winning the Central Sahitya Akademi Award for his contributions to the literary field. The CM pointed out that Narayana Rao has to his credit, translations of various books and research works.

In a separate programme,

● Endowment minister Vellampalli Srinivasa Rao and Srisaillam temple executive officer called the CM and invited him for Mahashivaratri Brahmotsavams

endowment minister Vellampalli Srinivasa Rao and Srisaillam temple executive officer K. S. Rama Rao called the Chief Minister and invited him for Mahashivaratri Brahmot-

savams at Srisaillam from March 4 to 14. On the occasion, Jagan Mohan Reddy released the book Srisaillakhandam, which depicts the times and glory of the Srisaillam temple.

Vice Admiral Atul Kumar Jain, Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command (ENC), along with his wife Devina Jain, too called on the Chief Minister at his camp office here on Friday.

Commodore Raju new
AP naval in-chargeDC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, FEB. 26

Commodore M. Goverdhan Raju took over as the Naval Officer-in-Charge (Andhra Pradesh) from Commodore Sanjiv Issar at a ceremonial parade held in the Naval Base in Visakhapatnam on Friday.

Cmde Raju, an alumnus of Sainik School, Korukonda and National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, was commissioned into Indian Navy July 1, 1989 and is a specialist in navigation

and direction. He was responsible for the commissioning crew of INS Sagardhwani, specialist and executive officer appointments on frontline warships, Joint Director Staff Requirements at the Naval Headquarters, Director (Training and Policy) at HQ Integrated Defence Staff, Principal Director (Training) at the premier training establishment, Indian Naval Academy (Ezhimala) and Director, Maritime Warfare Centre (Vizag).

Hike aims at reducing
congestion at Alipiri

FROM PAGE 1

All two-wheelers were exempted from payment of toll fee.

The TTD had, in February last year, sent a letter to the government seeking its approval for the classification of vehicles at Alipiri tollgate as per National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) regulations and fix the fee accordingly. It had also proposed a complete exemption of toll for two-wheelers.

The TTD has been operating two ghat roads between Tirumala and Tirupati and collecting toll fees as per rates approved by the state government in September 1996.

In pre-Covid times, about 8,000-10,000 vehicles passed through this toll plaza on normal days and 12,000 vehicles on special occasions and weekends.

The TTD has been netting a revenue of ₹2.5 lakh to ₹3.5 lakh on an average a day in the form of toll collections.

Around 35.33 lakh vehicles have passed through this toll plaza in 2019 and a toll fee of ₹7.47 crore was collected, sources said.

The temple body had pro-

posed to enhance the toll in December 2000 through a resolution 656, but TTD could not implement the revised rates. After a gap of many years, the TTD trust board, in February last year, again proposed to enhance the toll fee through resolution 300 and sent a letter to the government seeking its nod for the new rates.

In August last year, the special chief secretary to the government, revenue, suggested to the TTD board to further enhance the tariff for four-wheelers in a bid to reduce the congestion and pollution atop Tirumala. The TTD trust board, in its second round of discussions on this subject, however, felt that its earlier decision was good enough and saw no reason to enhance tariff on four-wheelers and conveyed the same to the government.

In December last, the TTD executive officer again sent a letter to the government, seeking its approval for the first proposal.

In response, the principal secretary to government, Revenue, passed GO 45 on Friday, approving the TTD resolution to enhance the toll fee and give complete exemption to two-wheelers.

MP launches postal
cover for AmbedkarDC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, FEB. 26

Kakinada MP Vanga Gita released special postal cover for Dr B.R.Ambedkar on Friday on the eve of visiting Dr B.R. Ambedkar to Kakinada and other areas in Andhra Pradesh for 75 years back. The Chief Post Master General M. Venkateswarlu, Postal Superintendent of Kakinada Division D.S.U.N. Reddy, Assistant Superintendent K.P.L.V.S.N. Murthy, SC, ST Postal Employees Union leaders and others attended the function.

The postal employees led by SC, ST Postal Employees Union took out a procession from Head Post Office to Head Post Office through Main Road and Balaji

● **THE POSTAL** employees led by SC, ST Postal Employees Union took out a procession from Head Post Office to Head Post Office through Main Road and Balaji Cheruvu.

Cheruvu. An Employee acted like Dr Ambedkar and he attracted the show.

In the meeting of releasing postal cover, Gita said that it was fortunate occasion to the people of Kakinada as well as Andhra Pradesh that Dr Ambedkar visited the state. She said that many of the down trodden sections are being improved educationally and economically only due to Ambedkar's services to the nation as well as the society.

SHORT TAKES

CAMPAIGNING FOR GUJ LOCAL POLLS ENDS

Ahmedabad, Feb 26: Campaigning for polls to various local bodies of Gujarat ended on Friday evening with voting scheduled for February 28. Counting of votes for elections to 81 municipalities, 31 district panchayats and 231 taluka panchayats will take place on March 2, a release by the State Election Commission said.

While the BJP is riding high after winning all six civic corporation polls held recently, the Congress believes the hike in fuel prices and public disenchantment with the ruling party will turn the tide.

On the last day of campaigning, Gujarat BJP president C R Paatil led a road show in Navsari, while Leader of Opposition in the Assembly, Paresch Dhanani, took part in a motorcycle rally in Amreli.

Aam Aadmi Party head and Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal sought votes during a road show in Surat.

For the first time, the All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen has fielded candidates in minority-dominated seats in Godhra, Modasa and Bharuch municipalities, with party chief Asaduddin Owaisi holding public gatherings in Modasa and Godhra two days ago.

State Director General of Police Ashish Bhatia said over 44,000 policemen, including State Reserve Police and 12 companies of CAPF, along with 54,000 homeguards will be deployed on February 28 to ensure incident-free voting in 23,000 booths.

ON BIKE, IRANI LEADS RALLY FOR WB POLLS

Sonarpur (WB), Feb 26: Riding a scooter, Union minister Smriti Irani led a rally of the BJP on Friday as she campaigned for the upcoming West Bengal elections in the South 24 Parganas district.

Taking part in the BJP's state-wide 'Poriborton Yatra', Irani along with BJP MP Roopa Ganguly and Agnimitra Paul began the campaign in Gangajora near Garia on the party's 'rath' - a bus decked up with slogans and photos of the leaders.

After covering a short distance, the minister got down from the 'rath' and took to a scooter, wearing a black helmet and a mask.

"When we began the 'rath yatra' on Friday, the administration deliberately tried to delay it. We will ride two-wheelers, walk on foot because West Bengal is on the march towards change," Irani said.

Enthusied by the minister's spontaneity, scores of BJP workers followed Irani on two-wheelers, chanting 'Jai Shri Ram' and "Khela Hobey", meaning 'game on' - a slogan first raised by the Trinamool Congress, which has now become the catchphrase of this election season.

EVERYONE ON POLL DUTY TO GET COVID-19 VACCINE

New Delhi, Feb 26: Everyone on election duty for the upcoming polls for five assemblies will be vaccinated against Covid-19 before polling day, the Election Commission said on Friday.

Voting will take place for 126 seats in Assam, 234 in Tamil Nadu, 294 in West Bengal, 140 in Kerala and 30 in Puducherry.

Nearly 18.68 crore electors will be eligible to vote at 2.7 lakh polling stations for 824 seats in five assembly elections, Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora said at a press conference here.

Arrangements will be put in place for candidates to file their nominations online for the five assembly polls. Voting will be allowed for an additional hour, keeping in mind Covid-19 safety guidelines, he said.

Also, webcasting arrangements will be in place at polling stations in critical and vulnerable areas, while adequate CAPF (Central Armed Police Forces) deployment will be ensured for the assembly polls, Arora said. All critical and vulnerable areas have been identified and advance teams have been already deployed across all four states and one union territory Puducherry going to the polls, he added.

He said door-to-door campaigning will be restricted to five persons, including the candidate, while roadshows will be allowed with a maximum of five vehicles.

Mamata questions 8-phase elections in West Bengal

Are poll dates announced as per suggestions of Modi, Shah, asks Didi

Kolkata, Feb 26: Questioning the eight-phase assembly elections in West Bengal, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said on Friday that she suspects that the dates were announced as per the suggestions of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah for better management of the BJP's poll campaign.

Addressing a press conference at her residence in Kalighat, Banerjee said the Election Commission should not look at the state "through the eyes of the saffron camp" a reference to the BJP.

"With all due respect to the Election Commission, I want to say that questions are being raised on why elections will be held in so many phases in Bengal while other states will be voting in one phase. If EC doesn't provide justice to the people, where will the people go," she said.

"I request the Election Commission to consider West Bengal as their own state," the Trinamool Congress chief said.

Banerjee also raised questions on the way the phases were divided.

"They have divided our stronghold districts such as South 24 Parganas and North 24 Parganas into three parts. This is unprecedented," she said.

Banerjee said that despite "all these tricks", she will win the elections.

"I have information from my sources that the poll dates are similar to the ones BJP wanted. Have the dates been announced as per Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah's suggestions? The PM and the home minister cannot misuse their power for the state elections," she



West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee addresses a press conference at Kalighat in Kolkata on Friday. She has taken exception over the EC appointing two special police observers for West Bengal. - PTI

added. Banerjee also urged the EC to stop the misuse of money power.

"The Union home minister should work for the country. He cannot misuse his powers for the elections here. We welcome the PM, but he cannot misuse his powers for West Bengal polls," she said.

Her comments came just minutes after the Election Commission announced that voting for the five assembly elections will begin on March 27, with West Bengal having the maximum eight phases continuing till April 29, while counting of votes for the four states and one Union Territory will be on May 2. Cautioning the

● **ELECTIONS FOR the West Bengal assembly will be held in eight phases, up from seven last time.**

● **AFTER HAVING a limited presence in the politically polarised state for decades, the BJP has emerged as the TMC's main rival over the last couple of years, managing to win 18 out of 42 seats in the Lok Sabha polls of 2019 and following it with inducting popular TMC MLAs and ministers into the party**

Centre against "misuse of power", Banerjee said it would prove detrimental

for the BJP. "Centre can't misuse their powers for a state election. If they do it, then it will be a big blunder and they will have to face the music. We are common people, we will fight our battle. I request the EC to stop the misuse of money. BJP has sent money to all the districts through agencies," she alleged.

Banerjee also took exception over the EC appointing two special police observers for West Bengal - Vivek Dubey and M K Das. "Vivek Dubey is the same man who was the observer for Bengal during the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. We all know the role he had then played then,"

she said. Banerjee said she is the daughter of the state and knows Bengal better than the BJP, exuding confidence about her party Trinamool Congress winning the elections.

Banerjee's allegations drew sharp reactions from the BJP, which alleged that she is perplexed over the eight-phase elections as her party won't be able to intimidate the voters.

"Why is she so worried about eight-phase elections? Is she worried because TMC goons won't be able to influence the elections? We welcome the EC's decision for eight-phase elections to ensure free and fair polls," BJP leader Rahul Sinha said.

AAP SETS EYES ON 2022 GUJ ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

Surat, Feb 26: Buyoed by the Aam Aadmi Party's good performance in the recently-held Surat civic polls, party chief Arvind Kejriwal has now set his eyes on the 2022 Gujarat Assembly polls.

Kejriwal, who arrived in Surat on Friday, said that AAP would seek votes from the people of the state in the next Assembly polls based on the performance of the party's 27 newly-elected corporators in the city.

Polls to six civic bodies in Gujarat, including in Surat, were held on Sunday.

While the BJP retained power in the Surat Municipal Corporation (SMC) by winning 93 seats, the AAP bagged the remaining 27 seats. The Congress failed to win even a single seat.

During his address to the party corporators here, Kejriwal said, "The people of Gujarat are watching you with great hope. In our first attempt, AAP won 28 Assembly seats in Delhi and came to power. People trusted us because they knew that we are true patriots, as we were associated with Anna Hazare's agitation."

"In the 49 days of our rule, we did a lot of pro-people work. As a result, the people of Delhi gave us 67 seats in the second election. Now, six crore people of Gujarat will observe the work of 27 AAP corporators. If you perform well, I am sure there will be a huge revolution in 2022," the Delhi chief minister added.

Fearing a "poaching attempt", Kejriwal warned the elected representatives to inform the party leaders if "anyone from the BJP" contacts them over phone and gives an offer to switch sides.

—PTI

Disengagement at all friction points necessary, says India

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI | DC NEW DELHI, FEB. 26

India has now told China clearly that the disengagement of troops "at all friction points" in the Ladakh sector alone will lead to the restoration of peace and tranquility between the two countries, adding that "both sides should now quickly resolve the remaining issues along the LAC in eastern Ladakh" after the "successful" disengagement at the northern and southern banks of Pangong Tso lake. This was made clear by India's external affairs minister S. Jaishankar in a 75-minute phone call with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi on Thursday afternoon, when the two ministers also agreed to establish a hotline between them.

Jaishankar told the Chinese minister that "bilateral relations have been impacted severely over the last year; adding — in an obvious reference to the deadly Galwan Valley clash last June — that "disturbance of peace and tranquility, including by violence, will inevitably have a damaging impact on the relationship". But seeking to put the blame on India,

the Chinese foreign minister claimed that "there has been some wavering and back-peddalling in India's China policy, and practical cooperation between the two countries has been affected".

Significantly, while India stepped up the pressure on China to disengage from all friction points, Beijing — in a statement put out by the Chinese foreign ministry — only said "it is imperative for the two sides to cherish the hard-won relaxation... further ease the situation and improve the border management and control mechanisms". But China did say that "India wants more dialogue and consultation with China to realise quick disengagement at the remaining points".

In a statement on Friday, the external affairs ministry said, "The external affairs minister and the state councillor and foreign minister of China, Wang Yi, had a phone conversation yesterday afternoon. It lasted 75 minutes. The two foreign ministers discussed the situation along the LAC in eastern Ladakh and also issues related to overall India-China relations. EAM... noted that the bilateral relations have been

impacted severely over last year. EAM said that boundary question may take time to resolve, but that the disturbance of peace and tranquility, including by violence, will inevitably have a damaging impact on the relationship."

The MEA added, "Noting the completion of disengagement in Pangong Lake area, EAM emphasised that both sides should now quickly resolve the remaining issues along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh."

EAM said that once disengagement is completed at all friction points, then the two sides could also look at broader de-escalation of troops in the area and work towards restoration of peace and tranquility... It was therefore necessary that the two sides should work towards early resolution of the remaining issues. It was necessary to disengage at all friction points in order to contemplate de-escalation of forces in this sector. That alone will lead to the restoration of peace and tranquility and provide conditions for progress of our bilateral relationship."

In its separate statement on the conversation, the Chinese foreign minister said, "state councillor

and foreign minister Wang Yi ... noted that what had led to the situation last year at the China-India boundary was clear and that lessons from the past deserve deep contemplation. There has been some wavering and back-peddalling in India's China policy, and practical cooperation between the two countries has been affected. This does not serve the interests of either side. Decades of experiences have shown repeatedly that heightening differences does not help solve problems, and that it only erodes the basis of mutual trust."

Beijing added, "Wang said that the frontline troops of the two countries have recently completed disengagement in the Pangong Lake areas. The situation on the ground has been noticeably eased. It is imperative for the two sides to cherish the hard-won relaxation, and work together to consolidate the progress, keep up the consultation momentum, further ease the situation, and improve the border management and control mechanisms. The two sides also need to advance the boundary talks to build up mutual trust and realise peace and tranquility in the border areas."

Police make public 'threat letter' to Mukesh Ambani

SHAHAB ANSARI | DC MUMBAI, FEB. 26

The Mumbai police on Friday made public content of the letter found inside explosives laden car parked near billionaire Mukesh Ambani's residence and said that it was a threat letter terming the incident as trailer and warning of returning with more preparation next time to target the family.

According to the police, it is a handwritten letter in a broken English, addressed to Mukesh Ambani and his wife Neeta Ambani. The

police has stated that there are grammar mistakes in the letter and the writer is either not much educated or is pretending to be so.

The letter was found on next to driver's seat.

Scanning of the CCTV has also revealed that even though the said SUV was parked on the Carmichael Road near Ambani's residence Antilia at around 1am however, the driver of the car sat in the car post 3am. The driver came out of the car from the rear door of the car but could not be identified, as he was wearing a mask as well as a

hoodie. The police is scanning CCTVs of nearby areas to locate the driver. The police will enhance the quality of the CCTV footage to identify the suspect.

Maharashtra home minister Anil Deshmukh has said that if needed security cover of Ambani family will be enhanced.

It may be recalled that a car carrying unassembled explosive materials was found abandoned at Carmichael Road in South Mumbai on Thursday evening, near the house of Reliance Industries chairman Mukesh Ambani.

RIGHTS ACTIVIST NAUDEEP KAUR GRANTED BAIL

Chandigarh, Feb. 26: Around six weeks after her arrest in a criminal case filed under several charges including attempt to murder, labour rights activist Nandeep Kaur was on Friday granted bail by the Punjab and Haryana HC.

"The court accepted the bail application of Nandeep Kaur. She has been granted bail by the High Court," her counsel Arshdeep Singh Cheema said. Kaur was arrested in Haryana's Sonapat for allegedly gheraoing an industrial unit.

—PTI

SHORT TAKES

**7 DEAD, 1 HURT
AFTER PRISON
OUTBREAK**

Croix-Des-Bouquets: At least seven people were killed and one injured on Thursday after several inmates tried to escape from a prison in Haiti's capital, witnesses said. The incident occurred in northeast Port-au-Prince at the Croix-des-Bouquets Civil Prison, which is known for a 2014 breakout in which more than 300 inmates escaped. Residents in the area who declined to be identified out of concern for their safety said that they observed a group of heavily armed men start shooting at prison guards before the inmates began to flee.

**ISRAELI SHIP
EXPLODES IN
TENSE MIDEAST**

Dubai: An explosion struck an Israeli-owned cargo ship sailing out of the Middle East on Friday, an unexplained blast renewing concerns about ship security amid escalating tensions between the U.S. and Iran. The crew and vessel were safe, according to the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations, which is run by the British navy. The explosion forced the vessel to head to the nearest port. The site of the blast, the Gulf of Oman, saw a series of explosions in 2019 that the U.S. Navy blamed on Iran against the backdrop of steeply rising threats between former President Donald Trump and Iranian leaders. Tehran denied the accusations, which came after Trump abandoned Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers and reimposed harsh sanctions on the country. In recent weeks, as the administration of Joe Biden looks to re-engage with Iran, Tehran has escalated its breaches of the nuclear accord to create leverage over Washington. The deal saw Tehran agree to limit its enrichment of uranium in exchange for the lifting of crippling sanctions.

**HEAVY FIGHTING
KILLS 27 IN
CENTRAL YEMEN**

Sanaa (Yemen): Heavy fighting between rebels and government forces in Yemen's oil-rich Marib has killed at least 27 people, tribal leaders and security officials said on Friday, amid a resurgence of violence in the area.

The Iranian-backed Houthi rebels earlier this month renewed their attack on Marib, a stronghold for Yemeni forces allied with the internationally recognized government. The rebel offensive has faced stiff resistance and made little progress so far. The officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity as they were not authorised to talk to the media, said the uptick in violence came over the past twenty-four hours, adding that most of the dead were rebel fighters. Yemen's stalemated civil war began in 2014, when the rebels seized the capital of Sanaa and much of the country's north.

A Saudi-led coalition — with US backing — intervened months later to restore the internationally recognised government's authority.

**4 DIE IN SWEDEN
AFTER FALLING
ON ICEY LAKE**

Stockholm: Four people were killed when they fell through the ice on a lake in southern Sweden on Thursday, police said, as the country experiences a spell of unseasonably mild weather.

Four men aged between 65 and 75 were found in a hole in the ice on Savsjo lake, south of the town of Jonkoping, and could not be resuscitated after being pulled out of the water, a local police spokesperson said.

The exact circumstances of the incident were yet to be determined, she said.

Accidents caused by people walking across unstable ice are common in Sweden, but it is rare for the death toll to be so high. After several weeks of intense cold throughout most of the country, which drew walkers to frozen lakes and estuaries, parts of Sweden have seen a rapid hike in temperature over the past few days.

A national heat record for February was set on Thursday, according to the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute. A temperature of 16.8 degrees Celsius (62.2 degrees Fahrenheit) was registered in Kalmar, in the southeast of the country.

US strikes Iran militia in Syria

22 killed in first military action against Iran-linked groups since Joe Biden became US Prez

Beirut, Feb. 26: The US military has struck Iran-backed militias in eastern Syria, killing at least 22 fighters according to a war monitor, in what the Pentagon said was a message from the new administration after recent rocket attacks targeting US troops in Iraq.

In its first military action against Iran-linked groups since Joe Biden became president five weeks ago, the Pentagon said it had carried out air strikes on Thursday at a Syria-Iraq border control point used by Iran-backed groups, destroying "multiple facilities".

"At President Biden's direction", the US raids targeted "infrastructure

utilised by Iranian-backed militant groups in eastern Syria", spokesman John Kirby said in a statement.

"These strikes were authorised in response to recent attacks against American and coalition personnel in Iraq, and to ongoing threats to those personnel," he said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 22 fighters were killed when the strike hit three trucks loaded with munitions coming from Iraq near the Syrian border town of Albu Kamal.

Militia border posts were also destroyed, the war monitor said.

It said all the dead were from Iraq's state-sponsored Hashed al-Shaabi

paramilitary force, an umbrella group that includes many small militias with ties to Iran.

Kirby said the location was used by Kataeb Hezbollah and Kataeb Sayyid al-Shuhada, two Iraqi pro-Iran groups operating under the Hashed umbrella.

Kataeb Hezbollah has yet to formally comment but an official with the group said one of its fighters was killed.

"One of our fighters was killed and a small number wounded by two missiles targeting one of our points along the Syrian-Iraqi border" he said on condition of anonymity.

Syrian state television condemned the "American

aggression" against the Iraqi fighters, who are allied with the Damascus government.

The US action followed three rocket attacks on facilities in Iraq used by US and coalition forces fighting the Islamic State group.

One of those strikes, on a military complex in the Kurdish regional capital Arbil on February 15, killed a civilian and a foreign contractor working with coalition forces, and wounded several US contractors and a soldier.

The attacks in Iraq laid down a challenge to the new Biden administration just as it opened a door to resumed negotiations with Tehran over its nuclear

programme.

Last week, the administration offered talks with Iran led by European allies as it seeks to salvage a 2015 nuclear deal, left on the brink of collapse after Biden's predecessor Donald Trump withdrew from it.

But the administration has also made clear it will not brook "malign activities" in the region by Iran.

Although Kataeb Hezbollah did not claim responsibility for the attacks, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin said that the powerful pro-Iranian group was behind them.

"We're confident in the target we went after. We know what we hit," he told reporters on the plane back to Washington after a

tour of the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz off the California coast.

"We are confident that the target was being used by the same Shia militia that conducted the strikes" against US interests in Iraq, he said.

Iran is believed to be searching for an opportunity to avenge the US assassination of top general Qasem Soleimani one year ago. Soleimani, a senior Revolutionary Guards commander, was Iran's key liaison to its allies in Iraq and Syria, and elsewhere in the region.

He was killed in a US drone strike just as he arrived in Baghdad for meetings with top Iraqi officials.

— *AFP*

US intel report to name MBS for Khashoggi killing

Washington, Feb. 26: The US director of national intelligence is expected to release a damning report on Friday that fingers Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for the brutal murder and dismemberment of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018.

The classified report is believed to say that, based on intelligence collected by the CIA and other spy bodies, the kingdom's de facto leader directed the assassination of the respected US-based writer in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

The prince has steadfastly denied a part in the murder, even as some of his closest advisors have been shown to be deeply involved.

Intent on strengthening relations with Riyadh, previous US president Donald Trump's administration avoided making the report public or naming Prince Prince Mohammed in the case.

Its declassification and release comes just as President Joe Biden endeavors to reset US relations in the Middle East and return principles of human rights to a prominent position in US policy.

Ahead of the release, Biden spoke on the telephone Thursday with Saudi King Salman, Prince Mohammed's father, in their first discussion since he became president five weeks ago.

A White House state-

● **THE CLASSIFIED** report is believed to say that, based on intelligence collected by the CIA and other spy bodies, the kingdom's de facto leader directed the assassination of the respected US-based writer in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

ment on the call did not mention the Khashoggi report, but Biden said Wednesday that he had read it.

A respected veteran Saudi journalist and editor, Khashoggi was in self-exile and residing in the United States, writing articles critical of the crown prince when he was assassinated on October 2, 2018.

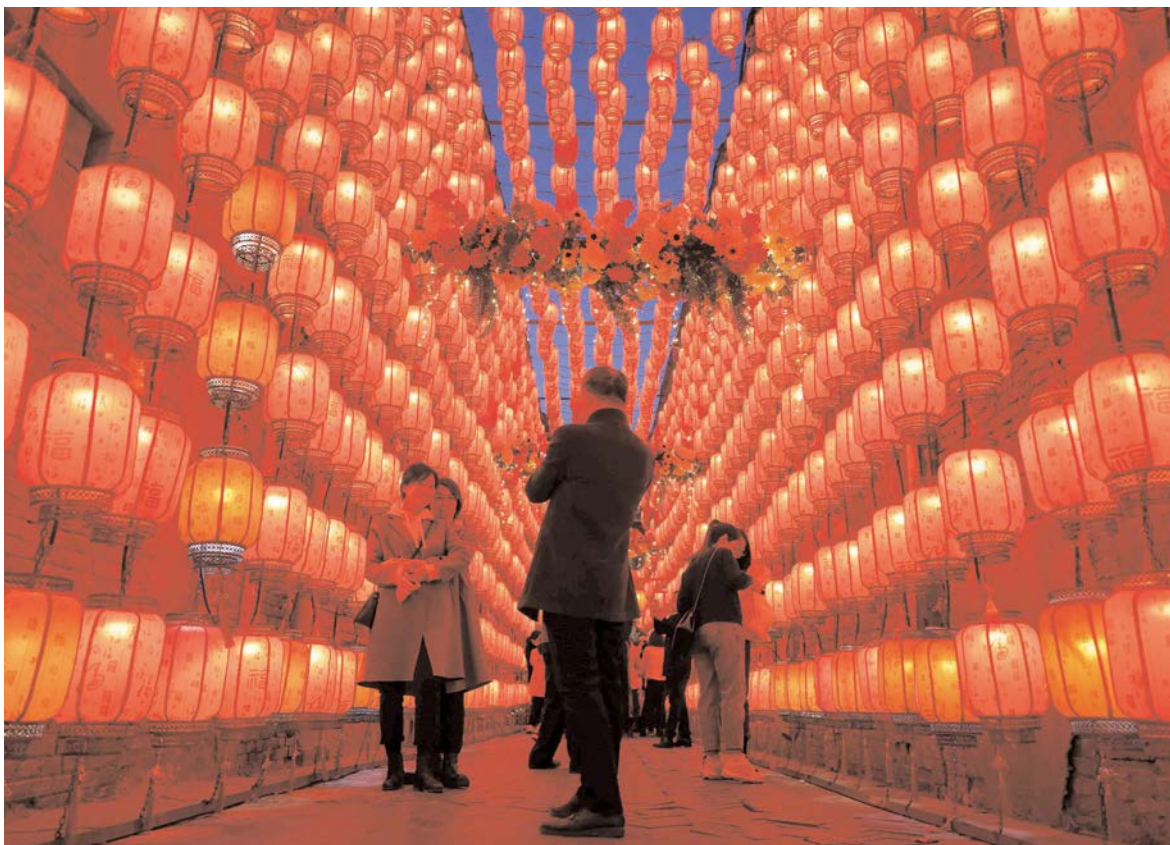
The 59-year-old writer had been told by Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States to go to the Saudi consulate in Istanbul if he wanted to obtain documents for his forthcoming marriage to a Turkish woman, Hatice Cengiz.

There, he was killed and his body dismembered by a team sent from Riyadh under the direction of a top aide to Prince Mohammed, Saud al-Qahtani.

Just one month after the murder, the US Central Intelligence Agency concluded with high confidence that Prince Mohammed had ordered the assassination, according to *The Washington Post*.

— *AFP*

Festival of lights



People take photographs next to lanterns decorated with lights during the Lantern Festival, which marks the end of the Lunar New Year celebrations in Taiyuan, in northern China's Shanxi province on Friday.

— *AFP*

Russian B-777 lands in emergency

Moscow, Feb. 26: Russian media report said that a Boeing 777 plane made an emergency landing in Moscow in the early hours of Friday after the pilot reported a problem with the engine.

The Interfax news agency cited an anonymous source saying that the pilot on the flight from Hong Kong to Madrid reported a failure of one of the left engine control channels and requested an

emergency landing at the Moscow Sheremetyevo airport.

The plane landed safely and no one was injured, the report said. It was carrying out a "cargo-passenger" flight, Interfax said. The flight tracking website Flightradar24

confirms that the plane operated by Russia's state-funded Rossiya airline landed early Friday at the Moscow airport.

Earlier this month, a

Boeing 777 operated by United Airlines had to make an emergency landing in Denver after one of its engines blew apart, spewing huge chunks of wreckage that landed in neighbourhoods and sports fields.

The investigation is focusing on a fan blade that appeared to be weakened by wear and tear, a development reminiscent of a fatal failure on board another plane in 2018.

The event caused authorities to ground Boeing 777 models that use that engine, the Pratt & Whitney 4000-112. Flightradar24 identified the plane that landed in Sheremetyevo on Friday as a Boeing 777-31H model, which does not use the Pratt & Whitney engines. Instead, that model uses the General Electric GE90-115B engines, according to fleet tracking site Airfleets.net.

— *AP*

FB SIGNS PAY DEALS WITH 3 OZ PUBLISHERS

Canberra, Feb. 26: Facebook announced on Friday preliminary agreements with three Australian publishers, a day after the Parliament passed a law that would make the digital giants pay for news.

Facebook said letters of intent had been signed with independent news organisations *Private Media*, *Schwartz Media* and *Solstice Media*. The commercial agreements are subject to the signing of full agreements within the next 60 days, a Facebook statement said. "These agreements will bring a new slate of premium journalism, including some previously paywalled content, to Facebook," the statement said. Schwartz Media chief executive Rebecca Costello said the deal would help her company continue to produce independent journalism.

"It's never been more important than it is now to have a plurality of voices in the Australian press," Costello said in the Facebook statement.

Private Media chief executive Will Hayward said the new deal built on an existing Facebook partnership. Australia's Parliament on Thursday had passed the final amendments to the so-called News Media Bargaining Code. — *AP*

Nigeria gunmen kidnap 300+ girl students

Lagos, Feb. 26: Hundreds of girls are missing after a large group of gunmen raided a school in northern Nigeria early Friday morning, residents say. The Government Secondary Jangebe School in Zamfara state was the scene of the latest mass abduction of school children in northern Nigeria.

Nasiru Abdullahi said that school records show 300 girls are missing. His daughters, aged 10 and 13, are among them. Resident Musa Mustapha said the gunmen also attacked a

nearby military camp and checkpoint, preventing soldiers from interfering while the gunmen spent several hours at the school. It was not immediately clear if there were any casualties.

Several large groups of armed men operate in Zamfara state, described by the government as bandits, and are known to kidnap for money and for the release of their members from jail.

● **SEVERAL LARGE** groups of armed men operate in Zamfara state, described by the government as bandits, and are known to kidnap for money and for the release of their members from jail.

Nigeria," said Peter Hawkins, UNICEF representative in the country. "This is a gross violation of children's rights and a horrific experience for children to go through." He called for their immediate release.

mediate release.

The West African nation has seen several such attacks and kidnappings over the years, notably the mass abduction in April 2014 by jihadist group Boko Haram of 276 girls from the secondary school in Chibok in Borno state. More than a hundred of the girls are still missing.

Friday's attack came less than two weeks after gunmen abducted 42 people, including 27 students, from the Government Science College Kagara in

Niger State. The students, teachers and family members are still being held. In December, 344 students were abducted from the Government Science Secondary School Kankara in Katsina State. They were eventually released.

Anietie Ewang, Nigeria researcher at Human Rights Watch, noted the recent abductions and tweeted that "Strong action is required from the authorities to turn the tide & keep schools safe."

— *AP*

COURT ORDER

Begum had challenged the UK Home Office's decision to remove her citizenship

IS bride loses bid to return to UK for citizenship



Shamima Begum's sister holds her picture.

— *AFP*

London, Feb. 26: The UK government on Friday won a major legal battle as the Supreme Court ruled against allowing a London-born 21-year-old woman of Bangladeshi descent, who ran away to Syria as a teenager to join the Islamic State (ISIS) terror group, to return and fight her citizenship case.

The unanimous decision — with all five top court justices in agreement — comes six years after the then 15-year-old schoolgirl, Shamima Begum, ran away with two other friends to join the Islamic State (ISIS) group in February 2015. Begum had her British citizenship

revoked on national security grounds shortly after she was found in a Syrian refugee camp in February 2019.

"The Supreme Court unanimously allows all of the Home Secretary's appeals and dismisses Ms

Begum's cross-appeal," said Lord Robert Reed, the President of the Supreme Court. "The right to a fair hearing does not trump all other considerations, such as the safety of the public," he said.

Begum was born in the

UK to parents of Bangladeshi heritage. Begum, dubbed an ISIS bride in reference to her marriage to Dutch ISIS fighter Yago Riedijk, was one of three schoolgirls from Bethnal Green in east London who travelled via Turkey to ISIS headquarters in Raqqa.

When discovered in a refugee camp two years ago, she had already lost two children and was heavily pregnant with her third who died shortly after being born. Begum had challenged the UK Home Office's decision to remove her British citizenship and wanted to be allowed to return to the

UK to pursue that appeal. She is currently in a camp controlled by armed guards in northern Syria.

Initially, the UK Court of Appeal said she should be allowed to return to fight the case but in July last year it allowed a Home Office appeal and found that the case must go ahead to the Supreme Court before she is allowed back into the country because the case raised a point of law of public importance that only the highest court can resolve.

In November, the Home Office took its appeal to the Supreme Court arguing that allowing her to return to the UK "would

create significant national security risks" and expose the public to "an increased risk of terrorism".

In reference to the Court of Appeal's judgment, the top court said that it had failed to take proper account of the UK Home Secretary's case. "It did not give the home secretary's assessment the respect which it should have received, given that it is the home secretary who has been charged by Parliament with responsibility for making such assessments, and who is democratically accountable to Parliament for the discharge of that responsibility," said Lord Reed. — *PTI*

US, EU AFFIRM VAX ROLLOUT IS ON TRACK

Washington, Feb. 26: The United States hailed progress in turning around its troubled Covid-19 vaccine rollout, as the European Union said it was on track to meet jab targets and Asia's inoculation drive gained pace on Friday.

Brazil hit 2,50,000 fatalities — the second-highest national death toll after the United States — while the worldwide vaccine campaign received the endorsement of Queen Elizabeth II, 94, who urged people not to be wary of the shot.

President Joe Biden declared the US rollout is now "weeks ahead of schedule" as he celebrated 50 million doses administered since he took office on January 20, but he warned Americans to keep masking up.

"We're moving in the right direction despite the mess we inherited," Biden said, referring to the program under his predecessor Donald Trump.

The United States is the world's hardest-hit country, with coronavirus deaths crossing the 5,00,000 mark earlier this week.

Rollouts in Asia also gathered momentum as Hong Kong and South Korea began their mass vaccination programs on Friday.

Both places were among the first to experience outbreaks after the coronavirus spread from central China early last year, but have kept infections comparatively low.

— *AFP*

US PANEL TO VOTE ON J&J COVID VACCINE

Washington, Feb. 26: A US panel of independent experts was set to vote on Friday on whether to recommend emergency approval of Johnson & Johnson's single-shot Covid-19 vaccine, potentially paving the way for at least three million doses to ship next week.

The committee's 22 members, who were convened by the Food and Drug Administration and include leading scientists as well as consumer and industry representatives, will hold a daylong virtual meeting to decide if the known benefits of the drug outweigh its risks.

It is an exercise in transparency without parallel among other advanced countries, giving the public access to the nitty gritty details of the scientific debate.

Though the panel's recommendations aren't binding, they are usually followed, and the members are widely expected to vote in favor.

An emergency use authorisation (EUA) would soon follow, making the J&J vaccine the third to be greenlighted in the United States after Pfizer's and Moderna's were provisionally approved in December.

"If the FDA approves the use of this new vaccine, we have a plan to roll it out as quickly as Johnson & Johnson can make it," US President Joe Biden said on Thursday.

— *AFP*

DECCAN
Chronicle

27 FEBRUARY 2021

A welcome first sign
of an India-Pak thaw

The joint statement released by the militaries of India and Pakistan on Thursday, February 25, on observing the ceasefire at the Line of Control and in all other border areas, and respecting previous agreements in this regard, is a positive development that deserves to be built upon. It marks the first sign of thaw in India-Pakistan relations since January 2, 2016, when Pakistan-based terrorists struck the Indian Air Force base in Pathankot a mere eight days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's surprise visit to Lahore on Christmas Day to celebrate the birthday of then Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif. Understandably, this was taken as a sign that the Pakistan Army, which calls all the shots in that country, was not comfortable with the potential of an evolving entente between the two countries.

Since then it has been a roller-coaster ride of negativity in bilateral ties, as the Uri terror attack of September 2016, India's "surgical strike" days later, the subsequent Pulwama terrorist attack in early 2019 that killed 40 CRPF personnel, India's retaliatory airstrike across the LoC, and the immediate response of a Pakistani fighter jet crossing the LoC, showed.

If the Pakistan Army chief's initiative has to survive, he must ensure that J&K is out of bounds for terrorism. This means the message must go down to the homegrown Kashmir outfits as well.

Through this sorry saga, in response to overtures by Pakistan PM Imran Khan, New Delhi maintained that "talks and terror cannot go together". Clearly, this left room for the idea that dialogue leading to mutually favourable long-term bilateral outcomes — which will benefit the region as a whole — is indeed possible if terrorism is taken off the menu.

After five years of a hostile stasis in the relationship, Pakistan Army chief Gen. Qamar Javed Bajaj, in a February 3 address, attempted to mark a change of course in ties with India. He said: "We stand firmly committed to the ideal of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. It is time to extend the hand of peace in all directions. Pakistan and India must also resolve the longstanding issue of Jammu and Kashmir in a dignified and peaceful manner."

The joint defence statement suggests that India was not unresponsive, and both sides got on to practicalities. Across governments, India has held that it is the Pakistan Army that is the fly in the ointment, and that a turn in a beneficial direction is contingent on the Pakistan Army desiring it. Evidently, Gen. Bajwa's remark has emerged as a possible catalyst.

How the thaw unfolds lies in the future. Over the decades, Pakistan Army has tied itself into knots by cultivating terrorist outfits as its surrogates operating in Kashmir, in other parts of India, and in Afghanistan with which India seeks to deepen its friendship.

If the Pakistan Army chief's initiative has to survive, he must ensure that J&K is out of bounds for terrorism. And this means the message must go down to the homegrown Kashmir outfits as well. Further, terrorist actions against all Indian entities in Afghanistan must also cease. The joint statement is a military statement. At some point, if things go well, it needs to acquire a political dimension at the level of the two governments. The statement notes that it was "agreed to address each other's core issues and concerns which have (the) propensity to disturb peace and lead to violence". Such a formulation covers terrorism as well as Kashmir. India should not fight shy of taking the "K" word on board in all its dealings with Pakistan.

Diamonds aren't forever

The decks have been cleared for the extradition from Britain of the diamond merchant Nirav Modi. It is up to India to use its heft in pursuing the matter to a conclusion by convincing the UK home secretary Priti Patel to sign off on the court ruling and allow the repatriation of a jewel thief who masterminded one of the great heists of the time in defrauding the Punjab National Bank. The booty to the tune of Rs 14,000 crore (nearly US \$2 billion) is nearly the equivalent of what thieves took from the 1963 Great Train Robbery in the UK.

The Indian people, whose money it is that was wrangled from the bank by the illegal use of Letters of Undertaking (LoUs) in connivance with bank officials, would be hoping that the justice system here would ultimately hand down an apt sentence commensurate with the crime. Mr Modi has also added to his repertoire such crimes as intimidation of witnesses in the form of death threats and tampering with the evidence. A jail in India may not, however, be to the liking of the notorious diamantaire as it may not quite match the decorated cell in Her Majesty's Prison in Wandsworth which boasts of flat screen TV, high ceiling fans and a large clean bathroom.

Indian officials have done exceptionally well in pursuing the case with all the documentation necessary for the judge to deliver such a stinging indictment of Nirav Modi's modus operandi. But, in its inability to ferret out a fraud amounting to robbery, the banking industry may not have acquitted itself as professionally. And this is not a case of straightforward business loss like many that have blighted banking to the tune of several lakh crores that have become NPAs in just the last two decades. There could not possibly any grounds on which such a character can claim asylum in Britain either, which means that at least one big fraudster who took India for a ride gets his comeuppance.

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Farrukh
Dhondy
Cabbages
& Kings



*"They say all property is theft
Hence, I own nothing and am
left bereft
My ancestors were never Earls
or thieves
And depending, then, on what one
believes
About making it rich through toil
and sweat
It's just not true — so I'll place
my bet
On Proudhon who formulated the
phrase
With which Marx disagreed — All
praise, all praise!"*

— From Dil Deykey Dildo by
Bachchoo

Life on Zoom:
You learn a lot
about yourself,
and others too

To "zoom", a dictionary will tell you, is to travel fast or rise quickly and perhaps noisily. It must have been, I thought with some irony, that the principal instrument I seem to use to confer with anyone in the lockdowns of the plague year was called Zoom. One goes nowhere.

If it is, as I suspect, not a Chinese but an American device, there was probably no ironic intent in naming it. After all, 74 million Americans don't care whether a

person is a self-obsessed habitual liar, misogynist, racist, fraudster, rabble-rousing insurrectionist, anti-democrat and fantasist, they still want to make him President. Not very high on the irony scale, then.

But one must admit that Americans are good on the onomatopoeic front. It was their popular and renowned form of literature, the comic, which gave us words for violence. I suppose "bang bang" may have preceded Amerigo Vespucci's discovery of Trumpistan and may have been imported, perhaps from Ireland, but adding "Chitty Chitty" to it was a stroke of genius attributed to the USA. But I digress.

What I meant was that the comics gave us words for fisticuffs such as "sock" and "pow". Who can't see in their mind's eye the spiked splatter of a powerful punch from Superman or Batperson landing on the villain's skull as this nasty individual tilts away from the vertical? The words inside the spiked bubbles or splashes, giving visual form to the impact of fists, aren't exactly onomatopoeic, as a punch sounds more like "phut" — but "pow" packs

imaginative power.

So, gentle reader, Zoom, as the name of a device by which you connect to anyone (who has an appropriate electronic device, of course) anywhere in the world, may be a word that is supposed to and successfully conveys the speed of contact between stationary persons — two or a full screen of them.

If Indians had invented the ethereal conversation device and needed an onomatopoeic name for it, they would probably have called it "Dhishoom", because as far as I know it's the only sound word that we have invented. It is of course Bollywood for the sound of a gun going off, and there are always two shots fired so it becomes "Dhishoom! Dhishoom!" The precedent is the Western "bang bang" — because if it's just the one word, it could merely stand for the slamming of a door. I venture to speculate that we would have called our communication device "Dhishoom" because having invented the word, we use it as the name of a chain of very good British restaurants. That's not supposed to represent the explosion of your stomach when you eat there.

My constant, even daily, use of Zoom has given me several useless insights into human behaviour, perhaps not new ones, but ones that confirm what we do and are. It has also reinforced my self-consciousness in a not terribly positive way.

You see, Zoom forces you to see yourself as you speak to others and, depending on the strength of echo in your device, you can even hear yourself speak and, like me, be rather surprised at your lamentable accent, the slight lisp you hadn't noticed before and the stupid fumbles and pauses you thought others made but which your fluency was free of.

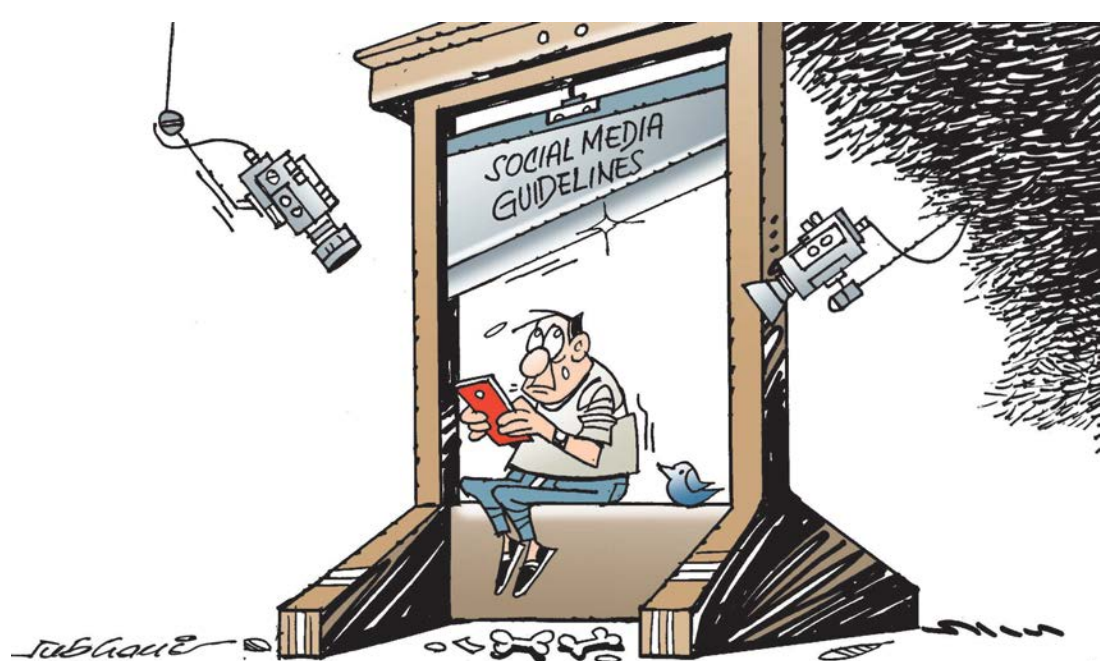
And then there's appearances, of course. Before a Zoom call, I check my hair and brush it this way and that. My creeping baldness (a family inheritance which, as they say, looking on the bright side, allows more space for rude tattoos) and the fact that I haven't had a haircut since the lockdown began does funny things, in my self-conscious perception, to my appearance. The hair in the centre of my head insists on standing upright, as though I was auditioning for the role of TinTin from the French comics.

I used to despise the self-deceivers who brushed their hair forwards to hide their baldness, but now find myself wondering, comb in hand at the mirror, whether it's a good strategy. It's not.

Gentle reader, in my job as a teacher, and then in my short and happy life as an agitator and pamphleteer, I have addressed countless classes, assemblies and audiences. I never began with the old opening: "unaccustomed as I am to public speaking", but perhaps should have. Zoom has demonstrated to me that any conceit I cultivate about my ability to present an argument is precisely that. I have now taken a vow during the Christian Lent to begin speaking on Zoom with that precise and modest caveat. Watch that screen!

Zoom gives one an insight into the rooms that your "zoomists" work or speak from. The convention is to have a bookshelf or some dignified piece of art behind you, but that may only be true of the people I associate with or speak to or watch on a televised Zoom. I wonder if others have dirty pictures or washing hanging up behind them as they interlocute.

Subhani



Judges need to protect
right to dissent, protest



Patralekha
Chatterjee

Dev 360

At a time when the people's faith in key institutions is plummeting, judicial verdicts that seek to restore the citizens' faith in justice and fair play are hugely welcome. In recent days, two court orders in particular have buoyed spirits because they emit a powerful signal — that the attempts to invoke the law to muzzle freedom of thought and expression and quieten dissent will not always work.

A Delhi court has granted bail to 22-year-old climate activist Disha Ravi, arrested by the Delhi police on February 13 from her Bengaluru home in the by-now famous "toolkit" case, saying there was just not enough evidence to keep the young woman in custody. Additional sessions judge Dharmender Rana's order set Disha free on bail on the condition of her furnishing two sureties of ₹1 lakh each and with the directive that she cooperate with the investigation into the FIR and not leave the country.

A few days earlier, there was another welcome verdict. The Nagpur bench of the Bombay high court granted interim bail on medical grounds to ailing 82-year-old poet-activist Varavara Rao.

These verdicts are good news; but the questions they raise and the momentum they have generated need to be sustained and leveraged to trigger a public debate on judicial reforms.

As citizens, reading both the verdicts is instructive.

While granting conditional bail on medical grounds to Varavara Rao, an accused in the Elgar Parishad-Bhima Koregaon case, the Bombay High Court pointed out that the National Investigation Agency (NIA) had kept him in custody for a long period without framing charges.

Senior advocates Indira Jaising and Anand Grover, who argued on behalf of Mr Rao, pointed out that considering his age, medical history, and multiple health complications, the prison atmosphere was absolutely not conducive to his mental and physical well-being. Such well-being is a fundamental right of every prisoner, points out *Leaflet*, a legal website.

The NIA had opposed the bail plea citing a bar under Section 43-D (4) and (5) of the UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act), which says bail cannot be granted to an accused under the anti-terror statute if the prosecution makes out a prima facie case against the accused. Ms Jaising argued that the fundamental right to health of a prisoner could never be ousted by Section 43(D)(5) of the UAPA.

The high court observed that it was a "genuine and fit" case for granting relief in view of the advanced age of Mr Rao and inadequate facilities at the Talaja jail hospital; it argued that if it denied relief to Mr Rao, it would be abdicating its constitutional duties as a protector of human rights and right to health covered under Article 21 of the Constitution.

The arguments undergirding the verdict related to Disha Ravi, arrested on the charge of sedition, are equally important. The court punctured most of the arguments of the Delhi police against Ms Ravi, including her alleged engagement with groups with "dubious" credentials, her links with banned organisations, her alleged role in incitement as well as the destruction of "evidence" and gave detailed reasons for doing so.

While taking the decision to grant bail to Ms Ravi, the court noted that "mere engagement with persons of dubious credentials is not indictable". A key argu-

ment of the prosecution hinged on the charge that a group called "Poetic Justice Foundation" (PJF), which was allegedly pro-Khalistani and secessionist, and people associated with it, was involved in creating the "toolkit" document. The police alleged that two of Ms Ravi's associates, Nikita Jacob and Shantanu Muluk, attended a Zoom meeting in which activists of the PJF also participated along with many others and this somehow made Ms Ravi also culpable.

The court said that no real evidence had been put on record to establish a direct link between Ms Ravi and the PJF activists mentioned. "In my considered opinion, it is not mere engagement with persons of dubious credentials which is indictable, rather it is the purpose of engagement which is relevant for the purpose of deciding culpability," the judge said.

The prosecution had sought to connect Ms Ravi with the violence that rocked Delhi on January 26. The court pointed out that there was no evidence of this. The judge noted that merely sharing a platform with people who oppose a law is not secessionist.

"In the absence of any evidence to the effect that the applicant/accused agreed or shared a common purpose to cause violence on January 26 with the founders of the PJF, it cannot be presumed by resorting to surmises or conjectures that she also supported the secessionist tendencies or the violence caused on January 26, simply because she shared a platform with people who have gathered to oppose the legislation," the order said.

While granting bail to Varavara Rao, the Bombay High Court pointed out that the National Investigation Agency had kept him in custody for a long period without framing charges

The crux of the matter, as the court pointed out, is whether Disha Ravi was merely involved in peaceful protest and dissent against the farm laws or if she was actually involved in seditious activities under the guise of protesting against these laws.

The court's view, as articulated in the order, is that citizens cannot be tossed behind bars simply because they disagree with the government of the day.

"Difference of opinion, disagreement, dissent, or for that matter, even disapprobation, are recognised legitimate tools to infuse objectivity in state policies... The offence of sedition cannot be invoked to minister to the wounded vanity of governments," the court said, citing a 1942 ruling.

Another critical observation by the court in the Disha Ravi case pivots around the right to dissent being firmly enshrined in Article 19 and that freedom of speech includes the right to seek a global audience.

These observations are welcome and will have far-reaching implications.

Young Indians, mostly women in their early 20s, have been arrested over the past few years merely for exercising their fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression, by engaging in democratic protests with no intentions of perpetrating violence and with no intention of inciting violence, members of the Delhi High Court Women Lawyers Forum have pointed out in a public letter to the Chief Justice of India and other Supreme Court judges. The letter notes that Disha was brought from Bengaluru to the national capital by the Delhi police without following the prescribed legal procedures.

"We feel that the Bar and Bench cannot watch silently as young people are forced into long incarceration," the letter said.

The judiciary must take heed.

The writer focuses on development issues in India and emerging economies. She can be reached at patralekha.chatterjee@gmail.com.

LETTERS

MODI STADIUM

Now that the die is cast and Motero stadium is renamed as Narendra Modi Cricket Stadium replacing Sardar Patel, it's no use to crib because the trend of changing names of cities, railway stations, was the order of the day since NDA's rule in 2014.

K. Nehru Patnaik
Visakhapatnam

AXARDHAM

The Motera pitch has been the focus of attention after the pink ball Test match ended in a little more than 5 sessions (*Axardham, DC, Feb. 26*). The English team failed to read the pitch. Their rotation policy and the team selection was surprising on the eve of a crucial match with respect to reaching WTC final. Local boy Axar was brilliant and made good use of the conditions. His impactful debut in Test cricket would give selectors trouble once Jadeja returns.

Sajid Farooq
Kurnool

DEFECTION POLITICS

The unprecedented defections from political parties, especially in certain states that are going to polls in the years ahead is a matter of concern as there does not seem to be any ideology in politics. Being the Prime Minister, Modi's personal campaign for the BJP does not augur well as he has powers to take vengeful actions. This trend was never seen in decades.

Someshwar
Siripuram, Visakhapatnam

KILLING DONKEYS

It is distressing to read donkeys are wrongfully being butchered in Eluru (*Meat love threatens donkeys in Eluru, DC, Feb. 26*). It is a concern that donkeys are on the way to become extinct. Authorities concerned and Animal rescue organisations need to step in immediately.

Dr C. Ghanshyam
Visakhapatnam

50 YEARS AGO IN

DECCAN
Chronicle

Assassination
threat to PM

NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY. 26

The Congress (R) today handed over to police a letter which threatened Prime Minister Indira Gandhi with death if she does not stop criticising the Jana Sangh or the RSS. The letter written in Hindi said: "I want to warn PM Indira Gandhi that if she continues to criticise the Jana Sangh or the RSS, I shall finish her physically — yours, an active worker."

quick BITES

INDICATORS	%
Sensex	49,099.99 -3.80
Nifty 50	14,529.20 -3.76
S&P 500*	3,853.11 0.62
Dollar (₹)	73.47 -1.42
Pound Sterling (₹)	101.83 0.80
Euro (₹)	88.76 -0.29
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	45,599*342 0.75
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	66.13 -1.12
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.229 0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.491 -0.024

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Inflation band okay for next 5 years: RBI report

With the next review of the flexible inflation target (FIT) framework coming up soon, the RBI said the current inflation target of 4 per cent with a +/-2 per cent tolerance band is appropriate for the next five years. India adopted the FIT framework in 2016, and the next review of the inflation target is due by March 31. "The current numerical framework for defining price stability...is appropriate for the next five years," it said.

PFC board okays ₹1 L cr borrowing plan for FY22



Power Finance Corporation said its board has approved a plan to borrow Rs 1 lakh crore under different debt segments. The borrowing will be made in one or more tranches in FY21-22, PFC said. The NBFC plans to raise a maximum of Rs 60,000 crore from long-term borrowing, Rs 20,000 crore from long-term foreign currency borrowing, Rs 5,000 crore from short-term borrowing and Rs 15,000 crore from commercial papers.

Brazil to buy 20m Covaxin doses from B. Biotech

Hyderabad: Bharat Biotech will supply 20 million doses of its Covid-19 vaccine Covaxin to Brazil during the second and third quarters of current year, the city-based vaccine maker said on Friday. It has signed an agreement with the Brazilian government for the supply of the vaccine. The company also said that several countries around the world have expressed strong interest in Covaxin.

RailTel Corp makes strong market debut

Telecom infrastructure provider RailTel Corporation of India Ltd made a strong debut with its shares zooming over 29 per cent on closing compared with the issue price. On the BSE, the scrip opened on a strong note of Rs 104.6 apiece against the IPO price of Rs 94. In intra-day trade, the stock touched a high of Rs 125.5 before settling at Rs 121.4, higher by 29.15 per cent. The RailTel IPO was subscribed 42.39 times.



■ Sensex sheds more than 1900 points US bombing, bond yields spook mkt

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, FEB 26

Investors suffered notional loss of over Rs 6 lakh crore as the domestic stock market experienced its worst fall in the last 10 months after the US bombing in Syria and sharp overnight rise in bond yields in the US market.

Rising Covid cases in India also added to negative sentiments in the market, said analysts.

The Sensex fell 3.8 per cent, or 1939 points, closing at 49099 while the Nifty-50 fell 3.7 per cent, or 568 points, to close at 14529.

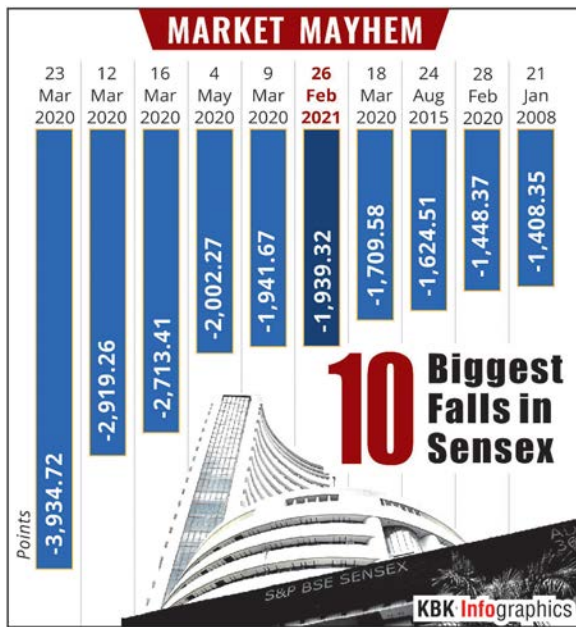
Intra-day the Sensex fell over 2000 points to a low of 48890.48. All the Sensex and Nifty constituents closed in the red.

Overnight US bond yield rose to a high of 1.61 and finally closed at 1.51 per cent, scaring the global investors. US benchmark indices Dow Jones fell 1.75 per cent and Nasdaq 100 fell 3.56 per cent, setting off negative opening for the Asian markets.

India's 10-year government bond yield also rose sharply intraday to 6.242 per cent and closed at 6.229.

As per provisional data, foreign portfolio investors were net sellers of equities worth Rs 8,295.17 crore.

Financials suffered the most among sectoral indices after the recent rally, with the Nifty Bank Index closing down 4.78 per cent. Other big losers were Nifty Auto (-3.12 per cent) and Nifty Metal (-2.70 per cent). NSE's volatility index



RUPEE DIVES 104 PAISE AGAINST \$

Mumbai, Feb. 26: The rupee on Friday posted its biggest single-day fall in nearly 19 months, tumbling 104 paise to close at 73.47 against the US dollar, as a rout in global bond markets weighed on investor sentiments. Besides, rising geopolitical tensions between the US and Syria also led to weaker appetite among investors in domestic forex markets, analysts said. At the interbank forex market, the rupee opened at 72.43 against the dollar, then lost further ground. It finally ended at 73.47. —PTI

India VIX shot up 22.93 per cent to 28.14, indicating a volatile market ahead.

The GDP data expected after the market hours also weighed on the market sentiments. "The Q3 GDP growth number at 0.4 per cent is lower than our esti-

mates of 0.8 per cent but quite short of some other estimates which were in the range of 1.4-2 per cent. The equity markets may be a tad disappointed with these data points," said Dhiraj Relli, MD & CEO, HDFC Securities.

Friday. "Enhancement of sterilisation capacity may be necessary to deal with possible surges in capital flows in the future," the report pointed out.

The RBI report recommended further strengthening foreign-exchange reserves, citing the swings in the rupee around the time of the global taper tantrum in 2013. India's stockpile is already close to \$600 billion and exceeds most standard metric requirements. —Bloomberg

EMERGING MARKETS BRACE FOR CAPITAL FLIGHT

LIVIA YAP &
LILIAN KARUNUNGAN
FEB. 26

Emerging markets are bracing for an exodus of funds as a surge in US treasury yields evokes memories of the taper tantrum of 2013.

After rallying at the start of 2021, developing-nation assets have slumped during the past two days as US treasury yields jumped to the highest level in more than a year, sounding a warning about the outlook for interest rates and inflation. The MSCI Emerging Market Index of shares tumbled as much as 2.8 per cent on Friday.

Emerging-market assets are falling out of favour as expectations for tighter global monetary policy and a revival of inflation reduce the relative appeal of risk assets. This week's surge in US yields is reminding many of the taper tantrum, when the Federal Reserve's announcement that it would start winding back its quantitative-easing policy led to a spike in bond yields around the world.

"It appears the market is pricing in a taper tantrum whatever the Fed says," said Alvin T. Tan, head of Asia foreign-exchange strategy at RBC Capital Markets in Hong Kong. "Like in 2013, it is generally negative for EM FX," he said. —Bloomberg

RBI report suggests issuing debt to mop up hot money

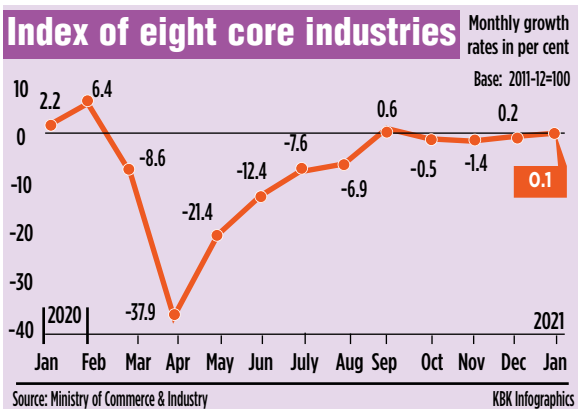
SUBHADIP SIRCAR &
ASHUTOSH JOSHI
FEB. 26

The Reserve Bank of India may consider issuing its own bonds to help soak up a deluge of foreign money into stocks that threatens financial stability, according to a report published by its researchers.

Current laws forbid the RBI from selling its own paper, and budgetary constraints could prevent the government from issuing so-called market stabilisation

scheme, or MSS, bonds that authorities have used in the past. That's made it harder for the central bank to navigate what's known as the Impossible Trinity, i.e. maintaining an independent monetary policy while also allowing free flows of capital and ensuring a stable currency.

"Sterilised intervention is an effective solution to managing the trilemma in India," the central bank said in its annual Report on Currency and Finance, published on



Sony to open PS 5 for storage upgrades

TAKASHI MOCHIZUKI
FEB. 26

Sony Corp. is preparing to open up its PlayStation 5 for internal storage upgrades this summer, lifting a bottleneck that prevents gamers from having more than a few marquee games on their console at one time, people briefed on the plan said.

Adding support for additional drives will be enabled with a firmware update that also unlocks higher cooling-fan speeds to ensure the console doesn't overheat, the people said, asking not to be named because the plans are not yet public. The PlayStation 5 comes with a custom solid-state drive with around 667GB available for storing games,

apps and media—at a time when the latest Call of Duty game needs 133GB of installation space and most major titles take up at least 40GB each.

Sony's latest console has a customised architecture that accelerates loading and processing times, but makes it impractical to plug in an external hard drive, the typical way gamers add storage. Such a drive can only be used for older PS4 games. After the planned firmware upgrade, players need only take a plastic cover off the PS5 and attach a new storage unit to add space.

"We are working to enable M.2 SSD storage expansion for PlayStation 5. The timing has not been announced," a Sony spokesman said. —Bloomberg

SBI readies MF arm for IPO

BAIJU KALESH &
SUVAASHREE GHOSH
FEB. 26

State Bank of India, the country's largest lender, is preparing for its mutual fund joint venture for an initial public offering, according to people familiar with the matter.

SBI plans to ask investment banks for proposals after discussions with its board and shareholder Amundi Asset Management and kick off the process in the next few months, the people said. The lender could raise about \$1 billion from the offering, one of the people said, who asked not to be identified, as the informa-

tion is private.

SBI's mutual fund is now valued at about \$7 billion, another person said.

At \$1 billion, the first-time share sale could be India's biggest since the \$1.4 billion listing by SBI Cards & Payment Services Ltd in March, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. The SBI mutual fund business would also be the third such listing of its kind in the country, joining rivals UTI Asset Management Co and HDFC Asset Management Co.

SBI's plan to list the mutual fund arm is part of its strategy to extract more value from its units after divesting some of its stakes in its life insurance

and cards businesses last year.

SBI's mutual fund is the largest in India with Rs 5 lakh crore (\$68.4 billion) of assets under management, according to its website. The fund house posted a net income of Rs 498 crore for the April-December period, according to an investor presentation. SBI holds a 63 per cent stake in the mutual fund business, while Paris-based Amundi owns the rest.

Deliberations are at an early stage and details of the share sale could still change, the people said. A representative for SBI didn't immediately respond to requests for comment. —Bloomberg

INSTITUTIONAL INVESTMENTS IN REALTY SEEN RISING BY 14.6%

MICHAEL GONSALVES
PUNE, FEB. 26

Investments in Indian real estate is expected to grow by 14.6 per cent to Rs 39,600 crore in 2021 from Rs 34,600 crore in 2020, as institutional investors continue to be bullish on domestic real estate asset classes such as offices, data centres and warehouses and are looking to deploy their existing dry powder, Colliers has said in its report.

In 2020, investments had dropped 23 per cent from 2019.

Between 2018 and 2020, an average annual supply of over 35 million square feet entered the top six Indian cities such as Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi NCR, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Pune, with the majority being snapped up by institutional investors.

Even though a similar level of supply is set to enter the market, some investment firms are increasingly looking towards developing their own greenfield office assets, the report said.

Investors remain bullish on the long-term prospects even as they target an internal rate of return of about 17-18 per cent. "The investment climate in India is very buoyant with global investors' interest in real assets getting stronger," Piyush Gupta, managing director, Capital Markets & Investment Services (India) at Colliers, said.

Moreover, the resilience of the Indian market is also evident from continued good housing sales across various markets, the large institutional investments in commercial office and industrial parks, and the listing of two REITs in the past six months, he pointed out.

MOBILE | TO MOBILITY

Firm in talks with carmakers to use their plants

Battered Huawei plans foray into EVs

JULIE ZHU, YILEI SUN
HONG KONG/BEIJING,
FEB. 26

China's Huawei plans to make electric vehicles under its own brand and could launch some models this year, four sources said, as the world's largest telecommunications equipment maker, battered by US sanctions, explores a strategic shift.

Huawei Technologies Co Ltd is in talks with state-owned Changan Automobile and other automakers to use their car plants to make its electric vehicles (EVs), according to two of the people familiar with the matter. Huawei is also in discus-

sions with Beijing-backed BAIC Group's BluePark New Energy Technology to manufacture its EVs, said a separate person with direct knowledge of the matter.

The plan heralds a potentially major shift in direction for Huawei after nearly two years of US sanctions that have cut its access to key supply chains, forcing it to sell a part of its smartphone business to keep the brand alive.

Huawei was placed on a trade blacklist by the Trump administration over national security concerns. Many industry executives see little chance that blocks on the sale of billions of dollars



of US technology and chips to the Chinese company, which has denied wrongdoing, will be reversed by his successor. A Huawei spokesman denied the company plans to design EVs or produce Huawei branded vehicles.

"Huawei is not a car manufacturer. However through ICT (information and communications technology), we aim to be a digital car-oriented and new-added components

provider, enabling car OEMs (original equipment manufacturers) to build better vehicles."

Huawei has started internally designing the EVs and approaching suppliers at home, with the aim of officially launching the project as early as this year, the sources said.

Richard Yu, head of Huawei's consumer business group who led the company to become one of the world's largest smartphone makers, will shift his focus to EVs, said one source. The EVs will target a mass-market segment, another source said.

All the sources declined to be named as the discussions are private. —Reuters

SHORT TAKES

Hima inducted as DSP in Assam

Guwahati: Star sprinter Hima Das was on Friday inducted as Deputy Superintendent of Assam Police in the presence of chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal and described the moment as a childhood dream coming true. Hima was handed the appointment letter by Sonowal, also a former Union Sports Minister, at a ceremony attended by the top functionaries of the state government as well as from the police department, including the Director General of police. "People here know and I am not going to say anything different. Since my early school days, I harboured a wish to become a police officer one day and my mother also wished that," Hima said. "I got everything due to sports, I will try to work for betterment of sports in the state and try to make Assam one of the best performing states in the country, like Haryana," Hima further added. — *PTI*

Deepak stuns world champion

New Delhi: Asian silver-winner Deepak Kumar (52kg) on Friday stunned Olympic and world champion Shakhobiddin Zoirov of Uzbekistan to storm into the finals of the 72nd Strandja Memorial Boxing Tournament in Sofia, Bulgaria. Deepak clinched one of the most memorable wins of his career with a 4-1 win over more fancied Zoirov, who had claimed the 2019 world championship title beating India's Amit Panghal.

In the quarterfinals on Thursday, Deepak defeated Bulgaria's Darislav Vasilev 5-0. However, former youth world champion Jyoti Gulia (51kg) and Bhagyabati Kachari (75kg) bowed out of the women's competition. With their loss, India's challenge in the women's draw has come to an end without anyone managing to secure a medal. — *PTI*

Charlotte to lead cricketers union

London: England great Charlotte Edwards has become the first female president of the Professional Cricketers' Association.

An outstanding top-order batsman, Edwards scored over 10,000 runs in more than 300 matches during an international career that lasted from 1996 to 2016. Edwards, who succeeds Graham Gooch, another former England captain, was elected for an initial two-year term at Thursday's annual general meeting of the PCA, which represents all professional cricketers playing in England. "I'm hugely honoured to be given such a prestigious title in being the president of the PCA," said Edwards. Edwards was England captain when they won both limited-overs World Cups in 2009, while she remains the country's leading run-scorer in both women's one-day internationals and Twenty20s. — *AFP*

Belinda sees off Coco, into final

Adelaide: Second seed Belinda Bencic battled for almost three hours before seeing off 16-year-old American Coco Gauff in three sets Friday to reach the final of the Adelaide International. Bencic set up a final showdown against Poland's French Open champion Iga Swiatek with her 7-6 (7/2), 6-7 (4/7), 6-2 win. Fifth seeded Swiatek had a much easier passage to the final, beating Swiss player Jil Teichmann 6-3, 6-2. Bencic went into the semi-final against Gauff as favourite, but the young American has been in good form this week, winning through two rounds of qualifying just to make the main draw. — *AFP*

Live on TV

FOOTBALL

English Premier League: Manchester City vs West Ham United from 6 pm; West Brom vs Brighton from 8.30 pm; Leeds United vs Aston Villa from 11 pm; Newcastle United vs Wolverhampton Wanderers from 1.30 am (Sunday) on Star Sports Select 1, HD

Italian League: Spezia vs Parma from 7.30 pm; Bologna vs Lazio from 10.30 pm; Verona vs Juventus from 1.15 am (Sunday) on Sony Ten 2

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SURESHOT SPINNER

Match-winner Axar says confidence did trick

Ahmedabad, Feb. 26: It was a long wait for Axar Patel and it didn't help that everyone around him had just one question for the past three years — "Why aren't you in the Indian team?"

But Patel was unfazed as he knew, his time would come.

"I think it's all about confidence," said the 27-year-old spinner from Anand in Gujarat.

With his record 11 wickets in the day-night third Test against England, the left-arm spinner finally found his big moment in international cricket, seven years after he made his India debut in an ODI against Bangladesh.

Since that day, he has been in and out of the team with the spin all-rounder's spot firmly with Ravindra Jadeja.

In this series too, he made it because Jadeja was out injured. He hadn't been in the national team since 2018 and made his Test debut in the second game against England last week in Chennai.

"I have been out of the team for three years and at that time, I used to think about the areas of my game which need to be worked upon. So, I was working on my bowling and batting," he told Hardik Pandya in a *bcci.tv* interview, thoroughly enjoying his good time.

"When you are out of the team, many people, friends keep asking you 'why aren't you in the team despite doing well?' These things keep coming in the mind," he said.

"So, I told myself 'just wait for the right time and whenever I get an opportunity I will give my 100 per cent'," he added.

Captain Virat Kohli said England may have been "relieved" when Jadeja was injured.

"But then this guy comes in. Bowls it quicker and from a bigger height as well."

It is a tribute to his hard work, his accuracy," said Kohli.

"It is impossible to sweep him, impossible to defend him all day. If the wicket gives him anything he is just a lethal bowler," Virat added. — *PTI*

HUSSAIN SAYS ENGLAND WERE SCARED RABBITS

London, Feb. 26: England have lost their batting rhythm after playing on two difficult surfaces and looked like "startled rabbits" in the second innings of the third Test against India, according to former skipper Nasser Hussain.

"Especially on this pitch, where one spins prodigiously and the other skids on, you lose all kind of rhythm. That's what successive Test matches on these sorts of pitches do for your mind-set," Hussain said.

"England looked like startled rabbits in that second innings. I don't think it was an 81 all out pitch but this was a much tougher pitch than Chennai," he added.

"Axar is very accurate. He bowls stump to stump and some balls turn and some don't. Most of his wickets came from balls that didn't turn, so people say 'why not play for those straight deliveries?' but it's the ball before," he added. — *PTI*



India's star spinner Axar Patel appeals for a wicket during the third Test in Ahmedabad.

Rohit bats for batting intent

Ahmedabad, Feb. 26: Intent to score and not just survive was the key to flourish on the Motera pitch, asserted India opener Rohit Sharma who batted effortlessly on the "interesting but normal" pitch that was declared difficult and challenging by visiting England batsmen.

Rohit attributed his sublime first innings half-century to the positive intent that he displayed during the day-night third Test in which England got thrashed by 10 wickets inside two days on the spin-friendly pitch.

"When you are playing on a pitch like that, you need to have an intent and look to score runs as well. You can't just keep blocking," Rohit said during the virtual conference after the match on Thursday.

When you are playing on a pitch like that, you need to have an intent and look to score runs as well. You can't just keep blocking. You just need to be slightly ahead at times and try and find ways to score runs.

— **ROHIT SHARMA**
India star batsman



England captain Joe Root and Zak Crawley had earlier described the track as challenging.

The senior opener scored India's only half-century of the game with the home side spinners accounting for 19 wickets. England batsmen were deceived by left-armers Axar Patel's straighter deliveries that skidded straight instead of turning. Rohit felt that during

his innings of 66, he was a step or two ahead of England bowlers.

"You just need to be slightly ahead at times and try and find ways to score runs. My intent was not just to survive but try and score runs as well, while respecting the good balls. That's all I tried to do."

"The pitch was an interesting one and odd ball was just coming in and

some were taking turns. On a track like this, you need to have a clear mind-set, which I think I did until I played that sweep shot," Rohit added.

He felt that Patel's strategy of attacking the stumps paid off well. The spinner ended the game with 11 wickets in his kitty.

"Axar was simply brilliant," Rohit said, lauding the bowler who had big shoes to fill.

"Coming out from nowhere and performing is never easy. He was out injured, slightly down, came back and bowled very well in Chennai. He understands conditions well and how to vary the pace and what lines to bowl," Rohit added.

Coming wider off the crease was also another effective ploy used by Patel. — *PTI*

INDIA CAN WIN AGAINST ODDS, SAYS HAYDEN

Chennai, Feb. 26: Indian team has all the markings of a great side as it can not only fight it out but win against the odds in all conditions, Matthew Hayden said.

"India have shown that they are a modern team who can not only fight it out but win against the odds in all conditions. This is a mark of all the great teams in history. The ability to win both at home and away," Hayden said. The wickets in Chennai and Ahmedabad came in for sharp criticism during the second and third Test of the ongoing series.

Asked if too much was being made about the pitches especially when they were spin-friendly, Hayden said: "Provided the wickets are not unfairly groomed, reducing the game to only one type of cricket, I don't have a problem with it at all. Conditions should promote an even game."

— *PTI*

Coach kills self after sex slur

Lansing (USA), Feb. 26: A former U.S. Olympics gymnastics coach with ties to disgraced sports doctor Larry Nassar killed himself, hours after being charged with turning his Michigan gym into a hub of human trafficking by coercing girls to train and then abusing them.

John Geddert faced 24 charges that could have carried years in prison had he been convicted. He was supposed to appear in an Eaton County court, near Lansing, but his body was found at a rest area along Interstate 96, according to state police.

"This is a tragic end to a tragic story for everyone involved," Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel said.

Nessel earlier announced that Geddert was charged with a bushel of crimes, including sexual assault, human trafficking and running a criminal enterprise. The charges were the latest fallout from the sexual abuse scandal involving Nassar, a former Michigan State University sports doctor now in prison.

Geddert, 63, wasn't arrested and transported to court. Rather, Nessel's office allowed him to show up on his own.

"We had no indication that Geddert intended to flee or hurt himself or others. We had been in contact with his attorney and were assured of his cooperation," Nessel spokeswoman Kelly Rossman-McKinney

● US Olympics coach John Geddert faced 24 charges that could have carried years in prison had he been convicted. He was supposed to appear in an Eaton County court, near Lansing, but his body was found at a rest area along Interstate 96.

said.

Calls seeking comment from attorney Chris Bergstrom weren't immediately returned.

Geddert was head coach of the 2012 U.S. women's Olympic gymnastics team, which won a gold medal. He was long associated with Nassar, who was the Olympic team's doctor and also treated injured gymnasts at Twistars, Geddert's Lansing-area gym. Among the charges, Geddert was accused of lying to investigators in 2016 when he denied ever hearing complaints about Nassar. But the bulk of the case against him involved his gym in Dimondale and how he treated the young athletes whose families paid to have them train under him.

The charges against Geddert had "very little to do" with Nassar, said Assistant Attorney General Danielle Hagaman-Clark. — *AP*



Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang of Arsenal celebrates after scoring his side's third goal against Benfica during their Europa League Round of 32 match at Georgios Karaiskakis stadium in Piraeus port near Athens on Thursday. Arsenal won the match 3-2. — *AP*

Auba nets brace to beat Benfica

Paris, Feb. 26: Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang scored twice including a late winner as Arsenal qualified for the last 16 of the Europa League on Thursday with a 3-2 victory over Benfica in Greece, while Manchester United and Rangers cruised through to the next round. The Gabon striker put Arsenal ahead at the Karaiskakis stadium in Piraeus in their home leg of a tie relocated due to Covid-19 travel restrictions between Portugal and the United Kingdom.

Diogo Goncalves levelled the contest with a magnificent free-kick and Rafa Silva gave Benfica a 2-1 lead on the night when he took advantage of an error from Dani Ceballos on the hour.

Kieran Tierney rifled in an equaliser and Aubameyang headed in the decisive goal from Bukayo Saka's cross on 87 minutes, earning the Gunners a 4-3 aggregate victory and saving them from an unusual away goals exit following a 1-1 draw in the first leg in Rome.

Leicester City, who are behind second-placed United in the Premier League only on goal difference, were knocked out after sliding to a 2-0 loss at

THE RESULTS	
Arsenal (Aubameyang 21, 87, Tierney 67)	3
Benfica (Goncalves 43, Silva 61)	2
Manchester United	0
Real Sociedad	0
AC Milan (Kessie 9-pen)	1
Red Star Belgrade (Ben Nabouhane 24)	1
Napoli (Zielinski 3, Fabian Ruiz 59)	2
Granada (Montoro 25)	1
Slavia Prague (L. Provod 49, Sima 79)	2
Leicester City	0

home to Czech champions Slavia Prague.

Lukas Provod fired Slavia in front just after half-time following a goalless draw in the first leg, and Senegalese teenager Abdallah Sima ensured the visitors extended their run in the competition.

Steven Gerrard's Rangers progressed following their 5-2 win over Belgian side Antwerp at Ibrox, with five different players on target for the Scottish league leaders. — *AFP*

Rajat wallops ton to down Andhra

Indore, Feb. 26: Rajat Patidar's brilliant century propelled Madhya Pradesh to a facile 98-run victory over an erratic Andhra in a Group 'B' game of the Vijay Hazare Trophy here on Friday.

Riding on Rajat's quick-fire 102 that came off 61 balls, Madhya Pradesh posted a huge total of 316 runs. In reply Andhra could only muster 218 and were all out in 42.3 overs.

Nitish Kumar Reddy (59) was Andhra's top scorer but his efforts went in vain. Karan Shinde was

next best for Andhra with an unbeaten 47.

Meanwhile in Surat, skipper Krunal Pandya's unbeaten 133 formed the cornerstone of Baroda's 13-run win over Chhattisgarh in an Elite Group 'A' game, even as Atit Sheth blazed away to a 16-ball 51.

Opening to bat, Baroda rode on Pandya's hundred and Sheth's big-hitting to post 332/6 after a top-order failure, and then restricted the opposition to 319/9 to record their fourth win on the trot.

Baroda lost openers Kedar Devdhar (12) and Smit Patel (13) cheaply and was teetering at 29/2. Medium pacer Sourabh Majumdar (2/85) accounted for both the wickets.

It became 39/3 after Abhimanyusingh Rajput (5) perished cheaply. But Vishnu Solanki (78 off 99 balls, 8x4) and Pradeep Yadav (32) started the rescue act and added 53 runs for the fourth wicket.

After Yadav departed, in walked skipper Pandya, who was in his element and toyed with the

Chhattisgarh attack.

He smashed 20 fours and three sixes in his whirlwind 100-ball knock while forging a 139-run stand for the fifth wicket with Solanki.

Chhattisgarh pegged Baroda back by taking two quick wickets, but Sheth, who walked in at number eight, smashed seven sixes while helping his team to a formidable total. — *PTI*

BRIEF SCORES

■ **Madhya Pradesh 316/8 in 50 overs** (Rajat Patidar 102, Shubham Sharma 78,

Abhishek Bhandari 49, K. V. Sasikanth 3/46) bt Andhra 218 in 42.3 overs (Nitish Kumar Reddy 59, Karan Shinde 47 n.o, Shoaib Mohd Khan 32, Mihir Hirwani 4/50).

■ **Gujarat 222/9 in 50 overs** (Karan Patel 78, Het Patel 67, T Ravi Teja 4/45) bt Hyderabad 210 in 48 overs (Tanmay Agarwal 54, B. Sandeep 5/36, Arzan Nagwaswalla 3/36).

■ **Baroda 332/6** (Krunal Pandya 133 not out; Vishnu Solanki 78) bt Chhattisgarh 319/9 (Amandeep Khare 67; Babashafi Pathan 3/73).