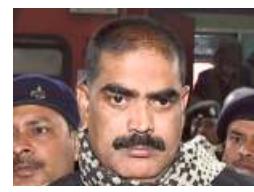




Sonia asks Centre to evolve a national policy on COVID-19
page 7



Former RJD MP Shahabuddin dies of COVID-19
page 7



First consignment of Sputnik V vaccine doses arrives from Russia
page 8



Pollard takes MI home in last-ball thriller against CSK
page 14

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NEARBY



CEC moves SC against Madras HC's comments

NEW DELHI
The Chief Election Commissioner of India has appealed to the Supreme Court against the oral comments attributed to the judges of the Madras High Court on the poll body and its officials, portraying them as responsible for the surge in the COVID-19 pandemic.

NEWS ▶ PAGE 7

Five die in Gurugram due to 'oxygen shortage'

GURUGRAM
Five COVID-19 patients died at a private hospital in Gurugram on Saturday. The family members of the deceased alleged that the deaths were caused due to short supply of oxygen and negligence of the doctors. Calls to hospital authorities to seek their response on the matter went unanswered.

CITY ▶ PAGE 2



MAGAZINE ▶ 8 PAGES

CLASSIFIEDS ▶ PAGE 4

12 more lives lost in Delhi oxygen crisis

Supply was disrupted for more than an hour at a private hospital; doctor among those who died

STAFF REPORTER
NEW DELHI

Twelve patients, including a doctor, died without oxygen at a hospital in south Delhi on Saturday as multiple hospitals in the national capital raised alarm bells over dwindling stocks of the life-saving gas.

Sudhanshu Bankata, executive director of Batra Hospital, said the patients died due to "oxygen shortage and the hospital not receiving oxygen on time".

"We ran out of LMO (liquid medical oxygen) at 12:15 p.m. and we received LMO supply at 1:35 p.m. In between we had some oxygen cylinders, but they cannot support ventilators. Eight people died either due to shortage of oxygen or not receiving oxygen on time," Dr. Bankata said. Six of the eight patients were admitted in the intensive care unit, he said.

"Four more persons died later from complications due to lack of oxygen, taking the death toll to 12," he said. He said that lack of oxygen could lead to complications for the patients in future too. "Once the patient destabilises, death can happen later also," he added.

Dr. Bankata made a desperate appeal at 12:15 p.m. that the oxygen situation was "extremely critical" and that the hospital was not being able to "support ventilated patients".

The doctor who died was identified as R.K. Himthani, head of the department of gastroenterology at the same hospital.

Families shocked

"We read on Twitter that there is an oxygen shortage and we phoned the hospital in the morning. They said his condition is not that good and asked us to come. We had two oxygen cylinders at home and we took them to the hospital," said Asha, whose husband Sanjay Seth, 57, died in the afternoon.

"If they had warned us, we would have reached 10 minutes before," another family member said.

"What is the use in talking about it? Did the situation (of oxygen) improve in the past two weeks?" asked Amit, whose relative Prakash Dutt, 62, also died.

The incident comes less than a fortnight after 20 COVID-19 patients died without oxygen at Jaipur Golden Hospital and 25 at Sir Ganga Ram Hospital in the national capital.

On Saturday, several hospitals across the city put out SOS messages over acute oxygen shortage. Kin of patients could be seen rushing oxygen cylinders to some of the smaller hospitals.

Aam Aadmi Party leader



In grief: The kin of a patient who died without oxygen mourning outside a south Delhi hospital on Saturday. ■ V.V. KRISHNAN

Delhi HC warns of contempt

The Delhi High Court on Saturday warned the Union government of contempt proceedings if it failed to supply the 490 metric tonnes of oxygen a day allocated to the national capital from Saturday. "We direct the Central

government to ensure that NCT of Delhi receives its allocated supply of 490 MT positively today, by whatever means," the order said.

"Much water has gone above the head. Now we mean business. Enough is enough." ▶ PAGE 7

Raghav Chadha claimed on Twitter that oxygen had reached Sir Ganga Ram Hospital in the evening.

"Let us pray that oxygen supplies to Delhi improve, and what is committed by Centre is actually delivered – in time," Mr. Chadha said in a tweet.

He also claimed that an oxygen tanker had been sent to Rajiv Gandhi Super Speciality Hospital.

"Our cryogenic tanker carrying 2 metric tonne of LMO for GTB [Guru Tegh Bahadur] Hospital is about to reach the hospital premises. We will spare no effort to secure lives of Delhites, despite deprivation of oxygen to the NCT of Delhi," he said.

OVER 3.92 LAKH NEW CASES, 3,673 DEATHS REPORTED ▶ PAGE 8

GOVERNMENT REDUCES GST ON OXYGEN CONCENTRATORS ▶ PAGE 7

14 die in A.P. due to 'snag' in oxygen supply

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
ANANTAPUR

At least 14 COVID-19 patients died at Government General Hospital in Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh, on Saturday due to a "snag" in the oxygen supply pipeline.

Six of the victims were in the orthopaedic ward and four in the chest ward. The four others were among the 180 patients on oxygen support in the intensive care unit. Unconfirmed reports, however, said the number of dead could be higher.

Collector denies

Even as reports of deaths of patients in the hospital flooded social media and were reported by local television channels, Collector Gangnam Chandru denied that 10 persons had died by 1 p.m. due to lack of oxygen.

In a late night press conference, he denied that there was a problem with the oxygen supply and said all the deaths were due to COVID-19 complications.

CONTINUED ON ▶ PAGE 6



Grim reminder: A charred hospital bed is seen at Welfare Hospital in Bharuch on Saturday. ■ AFP

18 killed in Gujarat COVID-19 hospital fire

2 nurses among dead, probe ordered

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
AHMEDABAD

At least 16 COVID-19 patients and two nurses were killed in a fire that engulfed the intensive care unit of a hospital in Bharuch, Gujarat, in the early hours of Saturday.

Officials said the fire broke out around 1 a.m. in the ICU of the four-storey Welfare Hospital, where more than 50 COVID-19 patients were undergoing treatment. There were more than 27 patients in the ICU, including some on ventilator support, they said.

The police and the fire brigade officials rushed to the spot and brought the fire under control within an hour. Local people and hospital staff helped in the evacuation of patients. The police said the deaths were caused due to burns and asphyxiation.

"More than 20 patients

were rescued and were rushed to other private hospitals" a press release issued by the district police said.

The cause of the fire is yet to be ascertained, officials said, adding that the deceased included 11 women and seven men.

Expressing grief over the incident, Chief Minister Vijay Rupani announced an ex gratia of ₹4 lakh each to the kin of the deceased.

He also appointed two senior bureaucrats – Additional Chief Secretary (labour and employment) Vipul Mittra and Commissioner (municipalities) Rajkumar Beniwal – to conduct an inquiry into the incident.

The incident comes less than a week after five persons were killed in a fire at a private COVID-19 hospital in Surat.

CONTINUED ON ▶ PAGE 6

Record GST mop-up of ₹1.41 lakh cr. in April

'Sign of sustained economic recovery'

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Gross revenues from the Goods and Services Tax hit a record high of ₹1.41 lakh crore in April by 14%, and mark the seventh month in a row since October last year that GST revenues have crossed ₹1 lakh crore.

The GST collections surpassed the previous highest collections of ₹1.24 lakh crore in March by 14%, and mark the seventh month in a row since October last year that GST revenues have crossed ₹1 lakh crore.

In April last year, as economic activities ground to a halt amid a national lockdown, the indirect collections had dipped to ₹32,172 crore. This April, revenues from domestic transactions, including services imports, grew 21% over March 2021.

CONTINUED ON ▶ PAGE 6

Sunday showdown



Countdown begins: Security personnel keep vigil outside Netaji Indoor Stadium on the eve of counting day for the West Bengal Assembly election in Kolkata, on Saturday. ■ PTI (REPORT ON PAGE 6)

Private hospitals begin COVID-19 vaccination for 18+

Supply constraints hamper State immunisations

JACOB KOSHY
NEW DELHI

On Saturday, when vaccinations were opened to all above 18, the overall number of immunisations dipped to a weekly low of 1.3 million. While private hospital chains – such as Max Super Specialty Hospitals, Apollo Group and Fortis Hospitals – announced the roll-out of their paid vaccination programmes, none gave information on how many doses were administered.

However, the slots that were made available for vaccination by these hospitals filled up rapidly. While there were 45 million registrations on the CoWIN portal on Saturday, it was not clear how



Virus shield: A young woman getting her COVID-19 shot in Ahmedabad on Saturday. ■ VIJAY SONEJI

many of them were in the 18-44 age bracket.

According to data scientist Pratap Vardhan, an API-based check on the CoWIN portal revealed that there were around 48,000 slots for those in the 18-44 age group for the week ahead. These, however, were restricted to 15 States with a wide varia-

them to anyone above 18, for free, at government centres. All vaccinations for those 45 and above continue with stocks available from the Central quota.

Symbolic roll-out

In other States which do not have supplies, token vaccination drives were launched.

The BJP-ruled Karnataka, on Saturday, saw a "symbolic" inauguration of the phase-3 drive by Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa. State Health and Medical Education Minister K. Sudhakar on Friday asked people in this category not to turn up at vaccination centres and said the roll-out would start only after vaccine stocks arrive.

Apart from the private hospitals, some States, which have procured a tranche of Covishield and Covaxin doses, are offering

stocks" boards by afternoon. There were no data available as to how many people were administered the shot. Four branches of Apollo Hospitals in the State – three in Bengaluru and one in Mysuru – have started the new phase of vaccination.

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath inaugurated a drive for free vaccination of those above 18 at a government hospital in Lucknow. The drive is to cover the seven most-affected districts – Lucknow, Gorakhpur, Meerut, Prayagraj, Kannpur, Varanasi and Bareilly – in the first phase through 85 centres.

Maharashtra vaccinated 11,492 individuals in the 18 to 45 age category in 26 districts of the State at government centres till 6 p.m.

The symbolic roll-out took place at a few government centres only in Bengaluru. Several primary health centres displayed "no

Kejriwal extends lockdown till May 10

Second extension prompted by no let-up in Capital crisis

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Saturday announced that the ongoing lockdown in Delhi would be extended by one more week.

Restrictions related to the lockdown will now be in place till May 10, instead of May 3. This is the second extension of the lockdown, which came into force on April 19 midnight to contain the sudden surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths.

Mr. Kejriwal made the announcement on Twitter.

The Delhi Disaster Management Authority, in its order on the extension of the lockdown, stated that a review of the pandemic situation showed that the numbers of positive cases, test positivity rate as well as bed occupancy (oxygen-support



People waiting to get the COVID-19 vaccine in Delhi on Saturday.

■ SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

ed or ICU beds) in the dedicated COVID-19 hospitals are very high. Therefore, in order to contain the spread of the virus and break the transmission chain, the curfew needs to be extended for another week in Delhi (except for essential activities and services)," it read.

Mr. Kejriwal had earlier said that the COVID-19 situation in the Capital was "very

critical" with tens of thousands of daily cases putting the city's health system under "great stress".

The city has been battling an acute shortage of beds and medical oxygen for the past few weeks.

At the start of the lockdown last month, Mr. Kejriwal had appealed to migrant workers to repose their faith in the Delhi government during "this short lockdown". He asked them not to leave the city and assured them that they would be taken care of despite the restrictions on daily activities.

"We will utilise the period of the lockdown to ramp up medical infrastructure, beds, oxygen and medicine supplies," he had said.

CAPITAL RECORDS HIGHEST COVID DEATHS SO FAR ▶ PAGE 2

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Telangana Minister loses portfolio, CM takes over

Medak Collector confirms the encroachment of land by Rajender

RAVI REDDY
N. RAHUL
HYDERABAD

On a day of fast-paced developments, Telangana Minister for Health Eatala Rajender was stripped of his portfolio just 24 hours after a few beneficiaries of assigned lands to weaker sections at Atchampet village in Masai-pet mandal of Medak district complained to Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao that their lands were encroached by the Minister for the expansion of his poultry farm and hatchery.

A press communique released from the Raj Bhavan said: "On the advice of the Chief Minister of Telangana,

the Governor has approved the transfer of Medical, Health and Family Welfare portfolio from Eatala Rajender to the Chief Minister with immediate effect."

Highly placed sources said a letter from the Chief Minister's office was sent to the Governor's office on Saturday morning. The e-file was immediately forwarded to Governor Tamilisai Soundararajan. The Governor immediately approved the file and sent it back to Hyderabad.

The ouster of Mr. Rajender topped a day of significant political developments, which unfolded with Medak Collector A. Harish leading a team of Revenue officials to



Tensions run high: Eatala Rajender interacting with his supporters at his residence on Saturday. ■ RAMAKRISHNA G.

survey the lands in question and digitise measurements in the hatchery at Atchampet. Within a few hours, the Collector, who inspected the land records in the tahsildar

office at Moosapet, told presspersons that the existence of the assigned lands in the custody of Mr. Rajender was confirmed.

Mr. Rajender confined

himself to his house at Shamirpet here throughout the day as supporters from his constituency of Huzurabad converged in large numbers. None of his Cabinet colleagues, MLAs and MLCs of the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) reportedly tried to contact him. MLAs, including Rasamai Balkishan who is a regular at his house, were also not seen.

'Better healthcare'

Mr. Rajender told presspersons that his portfolio might have been withdrawn to extend better healthcare services to the people. He said the Chief Minister had the authority to allot or withdraw any subject from a Minister.

He said he was targeted in a planned manner to defame Hakimpet.

him. He hoped the truth would be out soon. Such acts would not be appreciated by the people and the perpetrators would pay a price, he added.

Mr. Rajender refused to bridge the gap with the Chief Minister, adding that he would respond after the full report was out.

Jamuna Hatcheries, which is involved in the construction of hatcheries, in a release denied that it had grabbed land. The company purchased land to build 12 breeder-laying farm sheds, in addition to two brooding farms, in seven survey numbers at Atchampet.

The erection of a poultry feed plant was in the final stages in another survey number in adjoining Hakimpet.

WEATHER WATCH

RAINFALL, TEMPERATURE & AIR QUALITY IN SELECT METROS YESTERDAY



TEMPERATURE DATA: IMD; POLLUTION DATA: CPCB; MAP: INSAT/IMD (TAKEN AT 18.00 HRS)

Forecast for Sunday: Thunderstorm with lightning and gusty wind at isolated places over west Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Kerala and with lightning at isolated places over Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi, east Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Goa, coastal Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Karnataka.

CITY	RAIN	MAX	MIN	CITY	RAIN	MAX	MIN
Agartala	0.3	37	28	Kozhikode	...—	34.3	27.4
Ahmedabad	41.9	34	26.2	Kurnool	...—	39.4	26.2
Aizawl	59	27.8	14.1	Lucknow	...—	39.6	24.9
Allahabad	...—	41.8	24	Madurai	...—	38.6	27.1
Bengaluru	...—	33.4	22.5	Mangaluru	...—	36	25.8
Bhopal	...—	41.3	25.2	Mumbai	...—	34.2	28
Bhubaneswar	4.6	38.1	21.4	Mysoor	...—	34.5	21
Chandigarh	...—	40.7	25.5	New Delhi	...—	41.5	28.2
Chennai	...—	34.8	24	Patna	...—	38.6	24.6
Coimbatore	...—	36.3	25.4	Port Blair	...—	32.9	25.3
Dehradun	...—	35.7	21.7	Puducherry	...—	35.2	26.2
Gangtok	6.8	23.7	14.1	Pune	0.3	36.8	20
Goa	...—	34.5	26.6	Raipur	...—	40.6	27.2
Guwahati	...—	34.8	21.5	Ranchi	...—	37.8	20.1
Hubballi	...—	35	24	Shillong	9.9	23.8	13.1
Hyderabad	...—	38.8	26.2	Shimla	...—	28.9	18.4
Imphal	9	31.3	16.9	Srinagar	...—	24.7	9.4
Jaipur	...—	41	28.6	Thiruvananthapuram	0.8	34.1	25.2
Kochi	9.8	31.8	24	Tiruchi	...—	39.9	28.2
Kohima	...—	36	21.5	Vijayawada	...—	33	28.2
Kolkata	...—	36.5	25.5	Visakhapatnam	5	33	28.2

(Rainfall data in mm; temperature in Celsius)

Pollutants in the air you are breathing

CITIES	SO ₂	NO ₂	CO	PM2.5	PM10	CODE	Yesterday
Ahmedabad	57	54	.35	.134	.101	...	In observation made at 4.00 p.m., Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh recorded an overall air quality index (AQI) score of 334 indicating an unhealthy level of pollution. In contrast, Puducherry recorded a healthy AQI score of 33
Bengaluru	3	84	.45	.83	.110	...	
Chennai	4	17	.21	.28	.205	...	
Delhi	28	45	.35	.222	.286	...	
Hyderabad	4	58	.42	.79	.114	...	
Kolkata	16	19	.61	.85	.99	...	
Lucknow	13	54	.174	.233	.161	...	
Mumbai	46	14	.13	.34	.111	...	
Pune	...—	76	.42	.42	.42	...	
Visakhapatnam	16	40	.23	.50	.83	...	

Air Quality Code: ■ Poor ■ Moderate ■ Good (Readings indicate average AQI)

SO₂: Sulphur Dioxide. Short-term exposure can harm the respiratory system, making breathing difficult. It can affect visibility by reacting with other air particles to form haze and stain culturally important objects such as statues and monuments.

NO₂: Nitrogen Dioxide. Aggravates respiratory illness, causes haze to form by reacting with other air particles, causes acid rain, pollutes coastal waters.

CO: Carbon monoxide. High concentration in air reduces oxygen supply to critical organs like the heart and brain. At very high levels, it can cause dizziness, confusion, unconsciousness and even death.

PM2.5 & PM10: Particulate matter pollution can cause irritation of the eyes, nose and throat, coughing, chest tightness and shortness of breath, reduced lung function, irregular heartbeat, asthma attacks, heart attacks and premature death in people with heart or lung disease

Karnataka, Kerala, A.P. add over 96,000 cases

Telangana, with low testing, sees 7,754 new cases

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Kerala's COVID-19 case growth trend seemed to slow, in what is seen as the result of stringent lockdown-like restrictions and the public response to the crisis.

"The case numbers will grow but the epidemic curve is slowing, except may be in two or three districts. It effectively means that while the graph will continue to rise, the peak will not be as steep as we thought it would be," a senior public health professional said.

But the situation continued to be grim, as oxygen beds and ICUs were filling up. Rise in ICU admissions was evident with 118 more critically ill persons in intensive care on Saturday.

The State added 35,636

Gasping for air
As COVID-19 cases rise across States, hospitals are dealing with a lack of essentials, including oxygen, medicines and beds. The graph shows the spread of the pandemic in the southern States



new cases on Saturday from 1,46,474 samples. The average test positivity rate (TPR) had not gone beyond 25% over the past three-four days and dipped to 24.33%.

On Saturday, the State ad-

ded 48 deaths from the past few days. Kozhikode reported the maximum new cases at 5,554 cases, Eranakulam 5,002, Thrissur 4,070, Malappuram 3,354 and Thiruvananthapuram 3,111.

The TPR for the day stood at 23.03%. The State con-

ducted 1,77,982 tests, including 1,64,703 RT-PCR tests.

Andhra Pradesh had a fresh new daily high of 19,412 infections on Saturday, and 61 patients succumbed to the disease.

During the past day, 98,214 samples were tested, the highest number and a majority of them were RT-PCR tests. The positivity rate was 19.77%.

Telangana had comparatively low testing for the fourth day, and fewer cases. On Friday, the State recorded 7,754 cases after testing 77,930 samples.

At 51 deaths, fatalities re-

mained above the 50 mark.

Tamil Nadu saw a further surge in COVID-19 cases on Saturday with 19,588 persons testing positive, taking the tally to 11,86,344. In the last 24 hours, 147 persons died, taking the toll to 14,193.

(With inputs from Bengaluru, Vijayawada, Hyderabad and Chennai bureaus)

Unprecedented caseload in Punjab govt. hospital

37 deaths reported in 24 hours, show data

VIKAS VASUDEV
CHANDIGARH

Thirty-seven patients died in the past 24 hours at the COVID-19 isolation facility in Patiala's Rajindra Hospital, according to official data released on Saturday.

"Earlier this week, too, the same number of patients died in a span of 24 hours. We are seeing an unprecedented increase in patient load. The situation is twice as worrying in comparison to the last peak of COVID-19. During the last wave (mid August-September 2020), we peaked with severely patients (L3) at 90, but currently we have cumulative L3 patients at 210.

The number of confirmed positive cases so far have reached 3,77,990 across the State. The Health Department said the active cases number 58,229, and 3,10,601 patients have so far been cured.

J&K govt. teacher dismissed under Article 311 without inquiry

PEERZADA ASHIQ
SRINAGAR

In the first such order, a J&K government teacher – who in the police records is a Tehrik-e-Hurriyat (TeH) supporter – was terminated from his services without holding any inquiry in the interest of the security of the State.

The Lieutenant Governor is satisfied under sub-clause (c) of the proviso to clause (2) of Article 311 of the Constitution of India that in the interest of the security of the State, it is not expedient to hold an enquiry in the case of Idrees Jan, Teacher, Government Middle School, Kralpora, Kupwara," reads an order of the General Administration Department.

The J&K government on April 21 constituted a Special Task Force to identify and scrutinize the government employees and lodge cases against those involved in any cases related to posing threat to the country's security.

the information available that the activities of Mr. Jan, a teacher posted at the Government Middle School, Kralpora, Kupwara, are such as to warrant his dismissal from service.

Sources in police said Mr. Jan was a supporter of the Tehrik-e-Hurriyat, which remains headless in Kashmir since Syed Ali Geelani resigned from its top post last year.

FROM PAGE ONE

14 die in A.P. due to 'snag' in oxygen supply

Mr. Chandrudu said the District Administration will institute an inquiry into the several messages sent out on the deaths in the Government General Hospital on Saturday and alleged that some people were doing it deliberately.

Anantapur Urban MLA Anantha Venkatarami Reddy, who received several calls from patients com-

plaining about the low pressure in oxygen supply, however said he had raised the issue with hospital authorities. It was only at 7 p.m. that Joint Collector Nishant Kumar and other district officials reached the hospital and tried to fix the snag.

The Joint Collector also reiterated that the deaths were not caused by a snag in the oxygen supply.

18 killed in Gujarat COVID-19 hospital fire

"Pained by the loss of lives due to a fire at a hospital in Bharuch. Condolences to the bereaved families," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Twitter.

A statement from the Chief Minister's Office said Mr. Rupani was also contemplating setting up a judi-

cial inquiry into the incident. Welfare Hospital, located on Jambusar Bypass Road, has been treating COVID-19 patients since the beginning of the pandemic last year. In similar hospital accidents in the State in 2020, eight persons died in Ahmedabad and six in Rajkot.

Record GST mop-up of ₹1.41 lakh crore in April

"However, with certain parts of the country facing lockdown due to the surge in COVID cases, the collections may experience a decline in the coming months," he said.

'Remarkable resilience'

"Despite the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic affecting several parts of the country, Indian businesses have once again shown remarkable resilience by not only complying with the return filing requirements but also paying their GST dues in a timely manner during the month," the Finance Mi-

nistry said. "Closer monitoring against fake-billing, deep data analytics using data from multiple sources including GST, Income-tax and Customs IT systems and effective tax administration have also contributed to the steady increase in tax revenue," the Finance Ministry said.

Of the ₹1,41,384 crore GST collected in April, Central GST (CGST) collections were ₹27,837 crore, State GST (SGST) ₹35,621 crore, Integrated GST (IGST) ₹68,481 crore and Cess collections of ₹9,445 crore.

SC refuses to defer U.P. panchayat poll counting

"The State Election Commission has also agreed to notify the names of persons who will be in-charge of the counting centres and who will be made accountable for any lapse regarding compliance of the guidelines and the assurances recorded herein, at the given centres."

These designated officials should be the nodal officer whom the candidates or anyone interested in giving suggestions for improvising

the facilities could be in touch with.

Needless to observe that the norms specified for candidates and authorised representatives of the candidates to produce RT-PCR or Rapid Antigen Test report or COVID-19 vaccination completion report would also apply to officials deployed or entering at counting centres as in the case of the candidates and their authorised representatives," the Bench said.

Private hospitals begin vaccination for 18+

According to the State Public Health Department, a total of 132 vaccination sessions were arranged.

Maharashtra has purchased three lakh doses of Covishield from the Serum Institute of India (SII) which have been distributed across the State. Pune recorded the highest number of vaccinations, with 1,316 doses administered on Saturday, while Mumbai vaccinated 1,004 persons. Gadchiroli and Yavatmal in Vidarbha recorded the lowest number of vaccination with 83 and 90 respectively. Vaccination will take place in the remaining 10 districts on May 2.

In Chennai, Apollo Hospitals began administering vaccines to individuals aged 18 to 44 years but did not disclose how many were administered the shot on Saturday. The group had procured the vaccine directly from the manufacturers as per the government directive, a statement from the hospital said. The hospital has also proposed to organise special camps for corporates. Officials said the vaccines were priced as per the guidelines issued by the Centre. While Covishield is priced ₹850 per dose, Co-

vinax is priced ₹1,250 per dose.

Kerala has not started vaccinating people in the 18-44 age group. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said in his evening briefing that phase-3 would be delayed.

The State government was still exploring the possibility of direct purchase from manufacturers, but both SII and Bharat Biotech have prior commitments to the Centre.

SII has reportedly conveyed that it cannot release stocks to the State soon. But Bharat Biotech may be able to give limited stocks in May, official sources said.

The new phase did not commence in Andhra Pradesh as the government decided to take it up only after ensuring that all the persons above 45 get vaccinated.

The State has over 2.04 crore population in the age group of 18-44 and it needs 4.08 crore doses which is far from the current supply.

The government has decided to inoculate the remaining people under the 45+ category as and when vaccines are available.

(With inputs from Bagheshree S., Tharun Kumar, Alok Deshpande, Nandakumar T., Omar Rashid)

Counting to be taken up at 108 centres in West Bengal

With more EVMs deployed in view of COVID-19, results may be delayed

SHIV SAHAY SINGH
KOLKATA

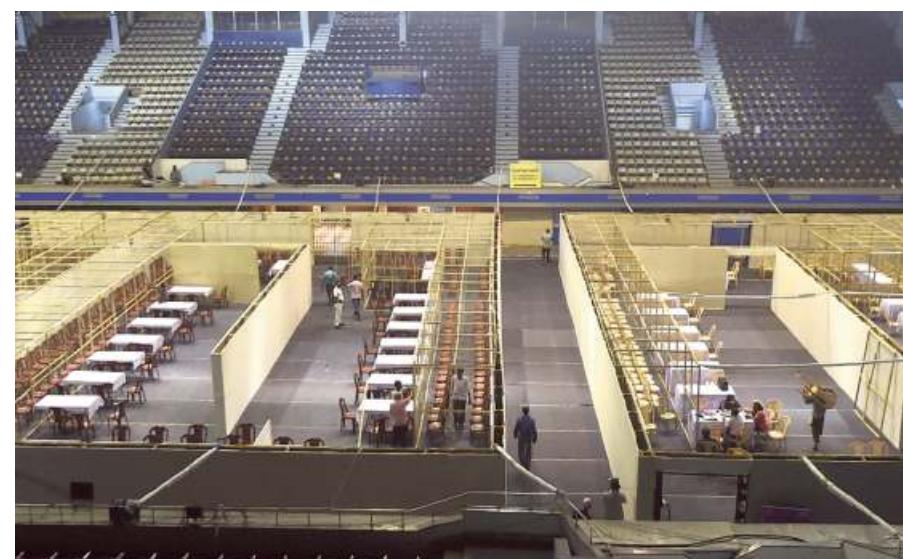
Counting of the votes cast in the Assembly election will start at 8 a.m. on Sunday in 700 halls at 108 centres in West Bengal.

The Election Commission of India has specified seven tables for smaller counting halls and up to 14 in bigger ones.

Polling was held for 292 of the 294 seats in the State to decide the fate of 2,116 candidates. Polling has been postponed in Shamshernganj and Jangipur in Murshidabad district following the death of candidates.

Elections to the 292 Assembly seats across 23 districts were held in eight phases from March 27 to April 29.

The commission has made arrangements for three-tier security at each counting centre. The premises will be guarded by personnel of the West Bengal police and the Central armed police forces. Every



Big count: Preparations are on at the Netaji Indoor Stadium in Kolkata on the eve of the counting day of the West Bengal Assembly election, on Saturday. ■PTI

counting agent has to produce a COVID-19 negative certificate before entering the counting centres. About 30% of the counting staff have been kept as reserve.

Officials said that considering the COVID-19 outbreak, more EVMs and

counting centres had been allowed and the results may be delayed.

Even hours before the counting begins, sporadic violence was reported in the State. Supporters of the Trinamool Congress and the BJP clashed at Katwa in Bard-

haman. At Narendrapur in South 24 Parganas, two personnel of the bomb disposal squad sustained serious injuries while defusing crude bombs. The bombs were being carried in an ambulance and were intercepted by the local people.

Rival camps in Assam upbeat ahead of result

Exit polls have given an edge to BJP

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
GUWAHATI

"Mahajot will win at least 75 seats," he said.

Among the key constituents of the Mahajot are exuding confidence about forming the next government in Assam ahead of the counting of votes in the Assam Assembly election on Sunday.

Mitrajot is a four-party alliance headed by the BJP that hopes to retain power and **Mahajot** comprising 10 parties is headed by the Congress.

The exit polls have given an edge to the BJP and its regional allies Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) and Rabha Jyothi Mancha.

"Our assessment is that our alliance will win 83 of the 126 seats, our party bagging 70 of them," BJP State president Ranjeet Kumar Dass said.

He is contesting the Patacharkuchi seat in western Assam.

His Congress counterpart and Rajya Sabha member Ripun Bora was equally confident. "Exit polls mean nothing. The people have voted for a change and our

Daniel Smith is interim U.S. envoy to India

SRI RAM LAKSHMAN

Shortly on the heels of its announcement that more than \$100 million in assistance was being directed to India, the Biden administration announced the appointment of Daniel Smith, the Director of the Foreign Service Institute, as the new interim Chargé d'Affaires at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi.

Mr. Biden has not yet appointed an Ambassador to India.

Mr. Smith was Acting Secretary of State for a few days after the Trump administration's Mike Pompeo demitted office and before Antony Blinken was sworn in Secretary of State.

"Ambassador Smith carries the highest Foreign Service rank of Career Ambassador," a State Department statement said.

Mr. Smith's appointment was announced on the same day the White House issued travel restrictions for India. The timing was possibly to soften the impact.

On a practical level, the interim appointment is also likely to facilitate U.S.-India cooperation on fighting COVID-19.

Sitar player Chaudhuri is no more

STAFF REPORTER
NEW DELHI

Renowned sitar player Debu Chaudhuri passed away on Saturday in Delhi.

"My father, The Legend of Sitar, Pandit Debu Chaudhuri... is no more. He was admitted with COVID along with dementia complications and was put in ICU on ventilator around midnight today [May 1] after which he suffered a heart attack and could not be revived," his son Prateek Chaudhuri said in a Facebook post.

ducting the four P-8Is contracted under the offset clause in 2016.

The Navy had procured eight P-8Is in a \$2.2-billion deal in 2009 with the optional clause for four more. The aircraft are part of the 312A Naval Air Squadron based at Arakkonam in Tamil Nadu.

With India having signed the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) foundational agreement with the U.S., the six aircraft will come fitted with encrypted systems, as reported by *The Hindu* earlier.

These systems were replaced with commercial off-the-shelf systems in the earlier deals.

The P-8I is based on the Boeing 737 commercial aircraft and India was its first international customer.

CBSE announces formula for Class 10 results

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) on Saturday announced a policy for tabulation of marks for the cancelled Class X board exams. According to that, 20 marks for each subject will be for internal assessment, and 80 marks will be calculated on basis of the students' performance in

exams throughout the year.

"The weightage of maximum marks for schools which have conducted the exams through the year will be: periodic test/unit test (10 marks), half-yearly exam (30 marks) and pre-board exams (40 marks)," CBSE Examination Controller S. Bhardwaj said. The board said the results will be announced by June 20.



Eye in the sky: A file photo of a P-8I aircraft participating in the biennial air show in Bengaluru. ■ BHAGYA PRAKASH

through the Foreign Military Sale route and requires that the U.S. Congress be notified, a process that was completed on Friday. Lawmakers have statutory 30 days to raise any objections.

The original proposal was for 10 more aircraft but was cut down to six due to budgetary constraints as well as because the Navy had adopted some fleet rationalisation measures and was considering long-endurance unmanned platforms.

The possible sale comes

Distribution System-Joint Tactical Radio Systems 5 (MIDS-JTRS 5) (6 installed, 2 spares); forty-two (42) AN/AAR-54 Missile Warning Sensors (36 installed, 6 spares); and fourteen (14) LN-251 with Embedded Global Positioning Systems (GPS)/Inertial Navigation Systems (EGIS) (12 installed, 2 spares). Also

included are CFM56-7 commercial engines; Tactical Open Mission Software (TOMS) variant for P-8I; Electro-Optical (EO) and Infrared (IR) MX-20HD; AN/AQ-2(V)1 Acoustic System; ARES-1000 commercial variant Electronic Support Measures; AN/APR-39D Radar Warning Receiver; AN/ALE-47 Counter Measures Dispensing System; support equipment and spares; publications; repair and return; transportation; aircraft ferry; training; U.S. Government and contractor engineering, software, technical, and logistics support services; and other related elements of logistical and program support," the State Department said in a statement on Friday.

The Indian Navy is currently in the process of in-

Modi govt. failed to tackle pandemic: Rahul

The entire world is shaken by what is happening here

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

As India logged a world record of over four lakh coronavirus infections on Saturday, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said the entire world is shaken by what is happening here and accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of

"dropping the ball and throwing it to States" after prematurely taking credit for having "won against COVID-19" when the second wave was already under way. "Rely on yourself is the motto. No one will come to help you. Definitely, not the Prime Minister," Mr. Gandhi said, while alleging that the COVID-19 situation has gone completely out of control for the Modi government, and wondered whether it was

their way of making the States and the citizens truly "Atmanirbhar". He alleged that the government completely failed to understand or to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic right from the beginning, despite repeated warnings.

Mr. Gandhi termed the story of vaccine pricing in the country as one of "discount sales" and a "complete eyewash" alleging that the vaccine makers first increased the prices and then reduced, making a show of the entire exercise.



Rahul Gandhi

Remdesivir allocation tweaked again

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI

The government changed the allocation of Remdesivir vials to States for the second day in a row on Saturday, and said it would now arrange for 34.5 lakh doses in the period between April 21 and May 9.

The government had earlier allocated 16 lakh vials of Remdesivir for the 10 days from April 21 to 30. On Friday, it raised the same to 18 lakh vials over the April 21 to May 2 period and told *The Hindu* that the 16 lakh vials target had not been met due to issues with placing orders and transportation.

Under the new plan shared on Saturday, 70,000 vials will be reserved for central allocation (from 20,000 as per Friday's allocation), leaving 33.8 lakh for the States and Union Territories. The plan has been firm up by the Health and Family Welfare Ministry and the Department of Pharmaceuticals in the Chemicals and Fertilizer Ministry.

Help pours in from several countries

IAF, Navy ramp up operations to augment transport of medical supplies from many nations

KALLOL BHATTACHERJEE
DINAKAR PERI
NEW DELHI

Emergency medical supplies poured in on Saturday as part of the international solidarity to help India fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar received calls of support from his Norwegian and Spanish counterparts, Ine Eriksen Soreide and Arancha Gonzalez.

The U.S. sent a National Airlines Boeing 747-400 cargo aircraft to Delhi, carrying the biggest aid till date from the U.S. to India of around 100 tonnes including oxygen concentrators, oxygen cylinders, medicines and other COVID-related medical products. Six or seven flights will be coming in the next few days via the National Airlines cargo flights, an airlines official said.

World-class supplies

French Ambassador Emmanuel Lenain said 28 tonnes of medical equipment would be flown in by the French government on Sunday. The cargo will include "8 world-



Helping hand: A shipment containing 120 oxygen concentrators arriving from the U.K. • AP

class oxygen plants that will make 8 Indian hospitals oxygen autonomous for 10+ years," Mr. Lenain said in a social media message.

Substantial cargo arrived from Thailand on Saturday with 30 oxygen concentrators, of which 15 were from the Thai government and 15 donated by the Indian community there.

"Discussed the COVID-19

challenge and international cooperation with Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai. Appreciated the supplies of cryogenic tanks and other oxygen-related equipment. Confident that we can continue to count on our partnership with Thailand," Mr. Jaishankar said on social media.

The IAF has deployed an

IL-76 transport aircraft to carry three empty cryogenic oxygen containers from Singapore to Panagarh.

The U.K. is also working on a combined plan with the IAF to airlift additional emergency supplies expected to be finalised shortly. The Navy has deployed seven ships *Kolkata*, *Kochi*, *Talwar*, *Tarabar*, *Trikand*, *Jalashwa* and *Airavat* for shipment of li-

quid medical oxygen-filled cryogenic containers and associated medical equipment from various countries.

INS Talwar headed back
INS *Kolkata* and INS *Talwar*, mission deployed in Persian Gulf, were the first batch of ships that were immediately diverted for the task and entered port of Manama on Friday.

INS Talwar, with 40 metric tonnes of liquid medical oxygen, is headed back home, the Navy said in a statement.

INS Kolkata has proceeded to Doha for medical supplies and will head to Kuwait for liquid oxygen tanks. Similarly, on the eastern seaboard, *INS Airavat* has been diverted for the task, while *INS Jalashwa* was pulled out of maintenance, readied and sailed out to augment the effort, the Navy said.

INS Airavat is scheduled to enter Singapore for embarking liquid oxygen tanks and *INS Jalashwa* is standing by in the region to embark medical stores at short notice," the statement added.

Evolve national policy on COVID-19: Sonia

Congress launches national helpline

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI

Congress president Sonia Gandhi, in a video message on Saturday, asked the Centre to evolve a national policy on COVID-19 through a political consensus, and said it was time the Union and the State governments "woke up" to their responsibilities.

The party launched a medical advisory helpline and a link for COVID-19 recovered patients, including party workers, to register as plasma donors. While the former party chief Rahul Gandhi took to Twitter to invite doctors and medical professionals to provide consultation and handle mental health issues through the helpline, the party created a link for recovered people to register themselves as plasma donors and create a data bank.

The link to plasma donation will be shared on all social media platforms of the party, Indian Youth Congress chief B.V. Srinivas, who has been providing COVID relief to patients, said at a virtual press conference.

"It is time for the Central and State governments to wake up and fulfil their duties. I urge the Central government to evolve a national policy to deal with the COVID crisis in the country and a strategy to bring about a political consensus over it," Ms. Gandhi said in her video message.

The Congress chief said that COVID-19 vaccines should be provided free of cost to all citizens, the government should invoke compulsory licensing to scale up vaccine production and cover the entire population in a short time. "First, think about the poor and provide them with ₹6,000 each to the bank accounts of all to stop their migration, till the end of the pandemic," she said.

Ms. Gandhi also called for increased testing and check-



G The Congress will stand with the Centre in the fight against the pandemic

SONIA GANDHI
Congress president

ing the black marketing of essential life-saving drugs besides providing oxygen, medicines and other equipment to hospitals on a war footing. She said her party will stand with the Centre in the fight against the pandemic and appealed to all Indians to unite in these testing times.

"Our country is facing the pandemic and lakhs of our citizens have been affected by coronavirus everyday. This crisis is the testing time for all of us and we have to hold each other's hands, support each other and be their strength. The current times have shattered humanity, with many States facing shortage of beds, oxygen and life-saving medicines," she said, urging everyone to stay in their homes.

Launching the helpline, Mr. Gandhi tweeted, "India needs together and help our people. We have launched 'Hello Doctor' a medical advisory helpline. Please call +919983836838 for medical advice. Dear doctors and mental health professionals, we need your help. Please enroll on bit.ly/3xAlZB."

Separately, former Finance Minister P. Chidambaram tweeted to demand the resignation of Health Minister Harsh Vardhan as many States including BJP-ruled ones could not roll out the vaccination programme for everyone above 18 years.

Supply oxygen or face contempt: HC

'We mean business. Enough is enough'

STAFF REPORTER

NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Saturday warned the Union government of contempt proceedings if it failed to supply the 490 metric tonnes (MT) of oxygen a day allocated to the national capital from Saturday.

"We direct the Central government to ensure that NCT of Delhi receives its allocated supply of 490 MT positively today, by whatever means," the HC order said. "Much water has gone above the head. Now we mean business. Enough is enough."

You [the Centre] made an allocation, you fulfil it. Do you mean we will shut our eyes to people dying in Delhi? Enough is enough now. Who is asking for a gram more of oxygen than is allocated," the Bench of Justice Vibin Sanghi and Justice Rekha Palli asked.

Allocation not fulfilled
"Pertinently, the allocation to Delhi, which was earlier of 480 MT (since April 20, 2021), and now is of 490 MT has not been fulfilled even for a single day," the Bench said.

"In case this order is not implemented, the concerned officers of the Central Government, Mr. Piyush Goyal and Ms. Sunita Daware, shall remain present during the hearing on May 3," the court ordered.

"Looking to the situation, we make it clear that we may even consider initiating contempt proceedings in case of non-compliance."

The court gave the direction after taking a serious view of a statement made by S. Bankata, executive director of Batra Hospital, that there was a delay in supply of oxygen due to which sup-



ply was interrupted for about an hour-and-a-half, which led to the loss of eight lives, including of a doctor of the hospital.

Senior advocate Rahul Mehra, representing the Delhi government, informed the court at 3.05 p.m. that he had received an SOS message from Mr. Bidhuri, the officer tasked with the job of ensuring supply to hospitals in Delhi, that the city's reserves had been exhausted.

Mr. Mehra said there had been no supply or minimal supply from the plants of Linde and Air Liquide on Saturday. He expressed serious concern over how the capital would tide over the shortage on Saturday as many hospitals and nursing homes had run out of medical oxygen or would do so in the next few hours.

During the hearing, the High Court remarked that Delhi was not an industrial State and did not have cryogenic tankers of its own, which could have been requisitioned under the Disaster Management Act, as other States had done.

"It falls upon the Central government to arrange the tankers as well, so that the allocation made to Delhi could be fulfilled, lest it remains only a paper allocation," the HC said.

CEC moves SC against Madras HC's comments

Petition asks whether HC was justified in saying the ECI alone was responsible for surge in pandemic

KRISHNADAS RAJAGOPAL

NEW DELHI

The Chief Election Commissioner of India has appealed to the Supreme Court against the oral comments attributed to the judges of the Madras High Court on the poll body and its officials, portraying them as responsible for the surge in the COVID-19 pandemic.

A special leave petition urged the top court to direct the police not to register cases for murder against Election Commission officials or take any coercive action on

the basis of media reports on oral observations attributed to the High Court judges.

The petition follows a bid by the Election Commission to obtain an order from the Madras High Court to gag the media from reporting oral observations made by judges during the hearing of elections-related cases. The High Court, however, refrained from passing any such order on April 30.

In its petition in the apex court, the Commission said the oral comments were disparaging and derogatory. The petition asked whether it was justified in the least for an independent constitutional authority to make alle-

gements against another which would effectively tarnish the image of the latter.

The ECI said the oral observations have led to the filing of a criminal complaint against the officer(s) of the Election Commission of India.

The petition said the Bench of the HC should have given the ECI an opportunity to place the entire factual position on record before making the allegations orally. It amounted to a violation of the principles of natural justice.

er the Division Bench of the High Court was justified in observing that the Election Commission of India (ECI) was alone responsible for the surge in the pandemic and officers "should be put up for murder charges".

No evidence
The ECI said the HC should have refrained from making such allegations without evidence.

The petition asked whether it was justified in the least for an independent constitutional authority to make alle-



the masses in the poll body and the democratic process.

The Commission said the oral comments would impact or lower the faith of

DRDO to set up 4 oxygen plants in Delhi

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI

The first four of 380 medical oxygen plant being set up under PM CARES fund will be deployed in hospitals in New Delhi by next week, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) Chairman Dr. Satheesh Reddy told Defence Minister Rajnath Singh at a review meeting on Saturday. The plant is based on technology developed for onboard oxygen generation on the Light Combat Aircraft Tejas.

The petition said the Bench of the HC should have given the ECI an opportunity to place the entire factual position on record before making the allegations orally. It amounted to a violation of the principles of natural justice.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

(GOVERNMENT OF INDIA)

NEEDS

DIRECTOR FOR SCHOOL OF PLANNING & ARCHITECTURE (SPA), VIJAYAWADA

Applications are invited from suitable candidates below the age of 65 years for appointment to the post of Director in the School of Planning & Architecture (SPA) at Vijayawada (Andhra Pradesh), an institution of national importance under the Ministry of Education, Government of India, in the pay scale of Rs.75,000/- plus Special Allowance of Rs.5000/- (Pre-revised) plus other allowances as admissible under the rules of the School (Revised to Rs.2,10,000/-) on contract basis for a period of five years. The applications in the prescribed format typed on plain paper furnishing complete Curriculum Vitae with detailed educational & professional qualification & experience should be sent by registered/speed post to Under Secretary (TS-VI), Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, Room No. 523, 'C' Wing, Shastri Bhawan, New Delhi - 110001 so as to reach him within 6 weeks of the publication of the advertisement in the Employment News/ Rozgar Samachar. Persons employed in Government Department/Autonomous Organizations and Public Sector Undertakings should submit their applications through proper channel. Complete details including format of application are available at: www.mhrd.gov.in and www.spav.ac.in

RECRUITMENT OF SECURITY OFFICER

(Advt. No. REC 01/2021)

CSIR-Central Food Technological Research Institute (Council of Scientific & Industrial Research, Govt. of India, New Delhi) MYSURU - 570 020, INDIA

Commencement Date: 03.05.2021, 10:00 AM

Closing Date: 03.06.2021, 05:00 PM

Controller of Administration

GOVERNMENT OF ANDHRA PRADESH HIGHER EDUCATION (UE) DEPARTMENT

NOTIFICATION

Applications are invited for the post of Vice-Chancellor of the Universities mentioned below:

1. Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University, Kakinada

2. Vikram Simhapuri University, Nellore

3. Dr. Abdul Haq Urdu University, Kurnool

Applications along with bio-data, filled in proforma and other requisite documents may be sent on or before 21-05-2021 by 5:00 PM, by registered post to The Chairman, A.P. State Council of Higher Education, 3rd, 4th and 5th floors, Neelakanti Towers, Sri Ram Nagar, 6th Battalion Road, Atmakur(V), Mangalagiri(M), Guntur-522 503, Andhra Pradesh. Please visit www.apscbe.org for more details.

Date : 23.04.2021

Registrar

Raj.Samwadi/C21/1047

Corrigendum

Reference NIB No : 07/2020-21 Date : 30-03-2021 (UBN No. SUS2021GLOB0010)

In above referred NIB due to some amendments and COVID-19 pandemic Sealed Technical and Financial Bids in Single Stage are invited upto extended time 03.00 PM of 10.05.2021 for procurement of Furniture for Administrative, Academic & Library Building. Amended details may be seen at our office or at website of the State Public Procurement Portal <http://sppp.raj.nic.in> or <http://eproc.rajasthan.gov.in> or <http://www.shekhauni.ac.in> and may be downloaded from there or obtained from our office.

Raj.Samwadi/C21/1047

Registrator

Reference NIB No : 07/2020-21 Date : 30-03-2021 (UBN No. SUS2021GLOB0010)

In above referred NIB due to some amendments and COVID-19 pandemic Sealed Technical and Financial Bids in Single Stage are invited upto extended time 03.00 PM of 10.05.2021 for procurement of Furniture for Administrative, Academic & Library Building. Amended details may be seen at our office or at website of the State Public Procurement Portal <http://sppp.raj.nic.in> or [http://eproc.rajasthan](http://eproc.rajasthan.gov.in)

U.P. panchayat polls led to deaths: Cong.

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Saturday alleged that over 700 teachers have died of COVID-19 because of holding panchayat elections in Uttar Pradesh as cases were surging. She said it is "nothing less than a crime against humanity" and charged the State Election Commission (SEC) with "playing along".

The party in-charge of U.P. claimed that a pregnant woman was among the victims. The State government's actions amounted to 'terrorising' the people and hiding the truth from them, she said. The polling for the four-phase elections ended on Thursday with a turnout of 75% in the final phase.

"These elections have been conducted in almost 60,000 gram sabhas of U.P. without any thought of the catastrophic onslaught of the second wave. Meetings were conducted, campaigning continued and the spread of COVID-19 in U.P.'s villages is now unstoppable," Ms. Vadra tweeted.

Over 3.92 lakh new cases, 3,673 deaths reported

Maharashtra records the most deaths

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI

India reported 3,92,603 new COVID-19 cases and 3,673 deaths till 11.15 p.m. on Saturday.

The country has so far reported a total of 1,95,49,943 cases and 2,15,454 deaths.

Maharashtra reported 63,282 infections, accounting for over 16% of the new cases, followed by Karnataka (40,990) and Kerala (35,636).

Maharashtra also recorded the most number of casualties (802) on Saturday. Delhi followed with 412 new deaths, while Uttar Pradesh registered 303 new casualties.

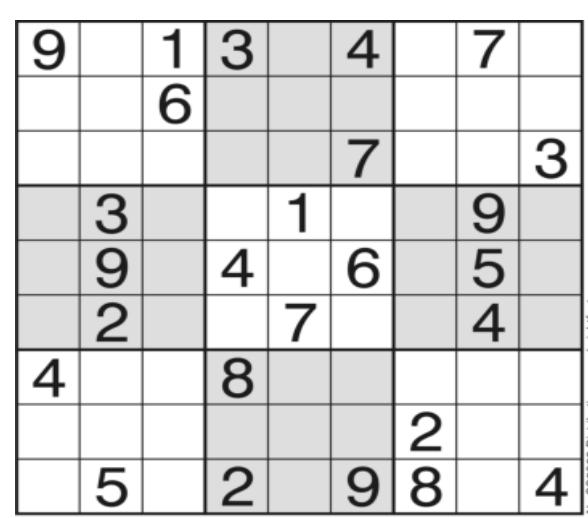
The figures do not include cases and deaths from Ladakh.

The data are sourced from covid19india.org, an independent aggregator of daily COVID-19 figures.

As many as 19,45,299 samples were tested in the country on Friday (results of which were made available on Saturday), the highest number of tests conducted in a single day. For the second consecutive day, the number of daily tests conducted have crossed the 19-lakh mark.

A total of 28.83 crore samples have been tested in the country since the beginning of the pandemic last year.

SUDOKU



Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

6	2	4	8	7	9	1	3	5
3	1	9	5	2	4	8	7	6
5	7	8	1	3	6	9	4	2
4	6	1	3	9	7	2	5	8
2	3	5	6	1	8	7	9	4
8	9	7	4	5	2	3	6	1
1	4	6	9	8	3	5	2	7
9	8	2	7	4	5	6	1	3
7	5	3	2	6	1	4	8	9

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★☆

U.S. to restrict travel from India

There is a list of exemptions and the order will be reviewed every 30 days

SRI RAM LAKSHMAN
WASHINGTON DC

In view of the very high numbers of COVID-19 cases and multiple strains of the virus in India, the United States will restrict travel of non-citizens from the country, starting on Tuesday, Eastern U.S. time.

U.S. President Joe Biden issued a proclamation on Friday afternoon prohibiting the entry of non-citizens (the administration has done away with the term 'alien') who have been physically present in India for 14 days prior to their entry or attempted entry into the U.S. There is a long list of exemptions and the order will be reviewed every 30 days. H-1B and L visa holders and their dependents are not automatically exempt from the restrictions.

The entry restrictions do not apply to lawful permanent residents (LPRs) or green card holders; non-citizens married to Americans or green card holders; non-citizen parents or legal guardians of minors (under 21) who are U.S. citizens or green card holders; siblings of unmarried citizens or



Fresh curbs: H-1B and L visa holders and their dependents are not automatically exempt from the restrictions. ■ AFP

LPRs, provided they are both under 21 and unmarried and other categories of travellers.

Those travelling on immigrant visas are also exempt from the restrictions, a State Department spokesperson confirmed to *The Hindu*.

Others whose entry is not restricted include foreigners travelling at the invitation of the administration for the containment of the virus, those whose entry is in its national interest, diplomats of various categories, crew members and a few other categories.

Journalists, certain exchange visitors and students are also potentially covered by the national interest exception, the State Department said in a media note issued on Friday.

"Secretary Blinken decided today to apply the same set of National Interest Exceptions to India that he had previously applied to all other regional travel restrictions currently in effect as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic," the note said.

"Students seeking to commence studies in the fall, certain academics, journal-

ists and individuals who provide critical infrastructure support in countries affected by a geographic COVID-19 restriction may qualify for a National Interest Exception. This includes qualified applicants who have been present in India, Brazil, China, Iran, or South Africa," the statement said.

Significantly, the order also states that the rights of individuals to claim asylum shall not be diminished by the order.

"After reviewing the public health situation within the Republic of India, the CDC has concluded that proactive measures are required to protect the nation's public health from travellers entering the United States from that jurisdiction," Mr. Biden said in his proclamation.

"All routine visa appointments at the U.S. Embassy New Delhi and the consulates in Chennai, Hyderabad and Kolkata are cancelled until May 15 and at the consulate in Mumbai until May 28" due to COVID-19 and unrelated to Friday's proclamation, a State Department spokesperson said.

The decision was based on the proportion of over-

Australia imposes travel ban on even its own citizens

They face 5-year jail, fines of up to 66,000 Australian dollars

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
MELBOURNE

Australian citizens could face a five-year jail term or hefty fines of up to 66,000 Australian dollars if they try to return home from India after Canberra made the journey temporarily illegal in an effort to curb the spread of the deadly viral infection in this country.

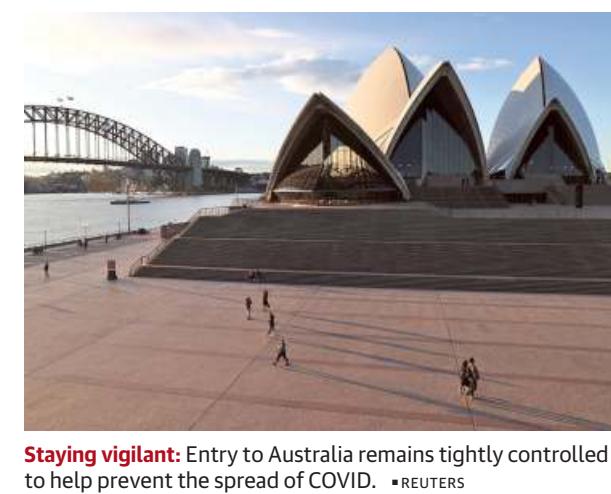
Significantly, the order also states that the rights of individuals to claim asylum shall not be diminished by the order.

The temporary ban begins on Monday and applies to any travellers who have visited India within 14 days of their intended arrival date in Australia.

There are an estimated 9,000 Australians in India and over 600 of them are classified as vulnerable, according to *The Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper.

The decision was announced by the Australian Health Ministry on Friday after a meeting of the National Cabinet. The move aims at keeping the coronavirus spread in check in Australia as India is facing a surge in cases.

The move was due to an "unmanageable" number of arrivals from the country who have tested positive to COVID-19, he was quoted as saying by the state-run Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).



Staying vigilant: Entry to Australia remains tightly controlled to help prevent the spread of COVID. ■ REUTERS

seas travellers in quarantine in Australia, who have contracted the infection in India, Health Minister Greg Hunt said.

Act, 2015 may incur a civil penalty of 300 penalty units, five years' imprisonment or both," the Health Ministry said in a statement.

Australia's borders have been closed since March last year and, this week, the government clamped down even further, banning all flights.

According to the ABC, it is for the first time that Australia has made it a criminal offence for its own citizens to enter the country.

Man who aided patients faces action

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
LUCKNOW

The Jaunpur police on Saturday said they were taking legal action against a person who was allegedly helping provide free oxygen cylinders to patients globally.

The Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) was among the first to announce the arrival of the Sputnik consignment. Retweeting its "Hyderabad Customs, @cgscgushyd facilitated expedited clearance of Sputnik V Vaccine imported from Russia", Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said it was an appropriate timely response and need of the hour.

External Affairs Ministry spokesman Arindam Bagchi said Sputnik V would add to India's arsenal to fight the pandemic. "This third option will augment our vaccine capacity and accelerate our vaccination drive," he said.

The district medical department accused the youth of violating COVID-19 safety norms and lodged a complaint with police. The man identified as Vicky was reportedly helping the patients by arranging oxygen cylinders for them outside the district hospital.

The chief medical superintendent of the hospital in the complaint to the police said Vicky was providing oxygen to many people without a COVID-19 test, in an unsafe manner, without sanitisation and other medical precautions.

1.5 lakh doses of Sputnik V land in India

Roll-out will start after the necessary clearances over the next few days, says Dr. Reddy's Laboratories

N. RAVI KUMAR
HYDERABAD

India moved a step closer to having a third vaccine in its immunisation drive against COVID-19 when the first consignment of Russia's Sputnik V landed in Hyderabad on Saturday.

"We are pleased to announce that the first consignment of 15,000 doses of the Sputnik V vaccine has landed in Hyderabad from Russia," Dr. Reddy's Laboratories CEO-APAC and Services Deepak Sapra said.

It came on a day when India began a vaccination programme for those aged 18-44 years – till now those 45 years and above were covered – even as some States reported a shortage of vaccine.

Sputnik V will join Covishield and the indigenous Covaxin that are being used in the country since January.

Based on the human adenoviral vector platform, the



Vaccine touchdown: A shipment of Sputnik V arrived in Hyderabad on Saturday. ■ PTI

Russian vaccine received emergency use authorisation in India last month. The efficacy of Sputnik V has been reported to be 91.6%.

A statement from Dr. Reddy's, which is the marketing partner of the Russian Direct Investment Fund for Sput-

nik-V in India, said the rollout of the consignment would be subject to getting the necessary clearances, which will be processed over the next few days.

"This initial quantity will be used across different channels as a pilot to line up

our supply chain for the larger vaccination programme roll-out. Subsequent consignments will arrive in the next few weeks," Mr. Sapra said.

Some top-level executives of the company recently said the vaccine looked set to join

the immunisation programme by May. But clarity on the price at which Sputnik V will be made available is yet to emerge. The two-dose vaccine sells at around \$10 a shot in other markets globally.

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"We have done the best we can without cutting corners or doing anything wrong or profiteering. I'll wait for history to judge," he said.

"I'm staying here (London) for an extended time because I don't want to go back to that situation. Eve-

rything falls on my shoulders but I can't do it alone," Mr. Poonawalla told the newspaper.

On the charge of profiteering as the cost of Covishield was recently hiked, he termed it "totally incorrect", and added that Covishield will still be the "most affordable vaccine on the planet" even at a higher price.

"We have done the best we can without cutting corners or doing anything wrong or profiteering. I'll wait for history to judge," he said.

Bhaskar Khulbe, adviser to Prime Minister wrote to Mandeep Bhandari, Joint Secretary, Health Ministry that the machines fitted

with GPS devices be provided on loan to Sardar Patel Covid Care Centre (SPCCC) for six months and extend the period further if required.

ITBP Director General S.S. Deswal had earlier requested the PMO for 150 ventilators to address the needs of critical patients. "I also request you to organise immediate installation of these ventilators by the selected vendor(s)," Mr. Khulbe wrote.

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has asked the Union Health Ministry to allot 150 ventilators purchased from the PM-CARES fund to a CO-VID-19 centre jointly run by the Indo Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) and the Delhi government.

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U.S. begins final phase of Afghan pullout

The military is deciding on what to ship back, what to hand over to the Afghan forces ahead of Sept. 11

ASSOCIATED PRESS
KABUL

The final phase of ending America's "forever war" in Afghanistan after 20 years began on Saturday, with the withdrawal of the last U.S. and NATO troops by the end of summer.

President Joe Biden had set May 1 as the official start of the withdrawal of the remaining forces — about 2,500-3,500 U.S. troops and about 7,000 NATO soldiers. He had set September 11 as the deadline for withdrawal.

Even before Saturday, the herculean task of packing up had begun.

The military has been taking inventory, deciding what is shipped back to the U.S., what is handed to the Afghan security forces and what is sold as junk in Afghanistan's markets. In recent weeks, the military has been flying out equipment on massive C-17 cargo planes.

The U.S. is estimated to have spent more than \$2 trillion in Afghanistan in the



Constant threats: Security personnel and residents at the site of a truck bomb attack in Logar province on Saturday. • AFP

past two decades, according to the Costs of War project at Brown University, which documents the hidden costs of the U.S. military engagement.

According to defence department officials and diplomats, the withdrawal has involved closing smaller bases over the last year. They said that since Mr. Biden announced the end-of-summer withdrawal date in mid-April, only roughly 60 military personnel had left

the country.

The U.S. and its NATO allies went into Afghanistan together on October 7, 2001 to hunt the al-Qaeda perpetrators of the 9/11 terrorist attacks who lived under the protection of the country's Taliban rulers. Two months later, the Taliban had been defeated and al-Qaeda fighters and their leader, Osama bin Laden, were on the run.

In his withdrawal announcement last month, Mr. Biden said the initial mission

was accomplished a decade ago when U.S. Navy SEALs killed bin Laden in his hideout in Pakistan. Since then, al-Qaeda has been degraded, while the terrorist threat has "metastasised" into a global phenomenon that is not contained by keeping thousands of troops in one country, he said.

The insurgent group continues to accuse Washington of breaching the deal it signed with Mr. Biden's predecessor more than a year ago. In that agreement, the U.S. said it would have all troops out by May 1.

In a statement on Saturday, Taliban military spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said the passing of the May 1 deadline for a complete withdrawal "opened the way for (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) Mujahideen to take every counteraction it deems appropriate against the occupying forces."

However, he said fighters on the battlefield will wait for a decision from the lead-

ership before launching any attacks and that decision will be based on "the sovereignty, values and higher interests of the country."

Mounting toll

Violence has spiked in Afghanistan since the February 2020 deal was signed. Peace talks between the Taliban and Afghan government quickly bogged down. On Friday, a truck bomb in Logar province killed 21 people, many of them police and students.

Afghans have paid the highest price since 2001, with 47,245 civilians killed, according to the Costs of War project. Millions more have been displaced inside Afghanistan or have fled to Pakistan, Iran and Europe.

Afghanistan's security forces are expected to come under increasing pressure from the Taliban after the withdrawal if no peace agreement is reached in the interim, according to Afghan watchers.

Three months on, Myanmar protesters continue march

UN envoy warns crisis could bring administration to a halt

REUTERS
YANGON

Protesters against military rule marched in Myanmar on Saturday three months after a coup ended a democratic transition, with several small blasts compounding a sense of crisis that a UN envoy warned could bring state administration to a halt.

The military has tried to end dissent and impose its authority on a people largely opposed to the return of rule by the generals after 10 years of democratic reforms that included a government led by democracy champion Aung San Suu Kyi.

Despite a relentless crackdown, in which at least 759 protesters have been killed, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAP), crowds come out day after day to reject the junta. "Our cause, democracy, our cause, a feder-



On the move: Protesters taking part in a demonstration against the military coup in Dawei on Saturday. • AFP

al union. Free arrested leaders," protesters chanted at one of two rallies in the main city of Yangon.

Ms. Suu Kyi, 75, has been detained along with many other members of her party. The AAP says more than 3,400 people have been detained.

People also rallied in the second city of Mandalay and the southern town of Dawei, media reported.

There were no immediate

reports of violence.

Media reported several small blasts in different places, including Yangon, late on Friday and on Saturday.

The UN special envoy on Myanmar told the Security Council on Friday that in the absence of a collective international response to the coup, violence was worsening and the running of the state risked coming to a standstill, according to diplomats.

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan agree to a ceasefire after deadly clashes

Working groups to ensure truce is observed; toll reaches 34

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BISHKEK

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on Saturday claimed another breakthrough in their bid to end the worst clashes at their shared border in memory as several thousand Kyrgyz demonstrators rallied against what they called an invasion attempt by their Central Asian neighbour.

Clashes between communities over land and water along the long-contested border are regular occur-

rences, with border guards often getting involved. However, this week's violence was by far the most serious during the Central Asian pair's 30 years of independence.

Kyrgyzstan's Health Ministry said that its death toll from the shooting that began between the two militaries on Thursday had reached 34, with a hundred injured.

The two Presidents spoke by telephone Monday in a bid to preserve the ceasefire made" during bilateral talks.

Progress noted at envoys meet on Iran nuclear deal

'Discussions have reached a maturity'

ASSOCIATED PRESS
VIENNA

High-ranking diplomats from China, Germany, France, Russia and Britain made progress at talks on Saturday focused on bringing the U.S. back into their landmark nuclear deal with Iran, but said they need more work and time to bring about a future agreement.

After the meeting, Russia's top representative, Mikhail Ulyanov, tweeted that members of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,

or JCPOA, "noted today the indisputable progress made at the Vienna talks on restoration of the nuclear deal."

Abbas Araghchi, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister, participated in the Vienna talks. "I can say that now our discussions have reached a maturity, both in the disputed topics and in the sections that we are agreed on," he said. "Although we cannot yet fully predict when and how we will be able to reach an agreement, it is moving forward, although slowly."

Pakistan has decided to reduce inbound international flights to 20% of the current numbers from May 5 as part of measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 in the country, authorities said on Saturday.

"Pakistan has decided to reduce inbound international travel from May 5 to May 20. International flights to Pakistan will be reduced to 20% during this period," the National Command and Operation Center (NCOC) said.

WHO approves Moderna vaccine for emergency use

Two Chinese vaccines likely to get nod

ASSOCIATED PRESS
GENEVA

The greenlight for Moderna's vaccine, announced late on Friday, took many months because of delays that WHO faced in getting data from the manufacturer.

Many countries without their own advanced medical regulatory and assessment offices rely on the WHO listing to decide whether to use vaccines.

The announcement, however, wasn't likely to have an immediate impact on supplies of Moderna's vaccine for the developing world.

Pentagon chief calls for 'new vision' for American defence

'U.S. military must use its existing capabilities, build new ones'

ASSOCIATED PRESS
HAWAII

In his first major speech as Pentagon chief, Lloyd Austin on Friday called for developing a "new vision" for American defence in the face of emerging cyber and space threats and the prospect of fighting bigger wars.

Reflecting President Joe Biden's promise to put diplomacy first in dealing with foreign policy problems, Mr. Austin said the military should provide leverage that diplomats can use to prevent conflict. His comments suggested a contrast with what critics call the militarisation of U.S. foreign policy in recent decades.

"U.S. military isn't meant to stand apart, but to buttress U.S. diplomacy and advance a foreign policy that employs all of our instru-

ments of national power," Austin said.

Mr. Austin cautioned that the U.S. military cannot be satisfied with believing it is the strongest and most capable military in the world today — "not at a time when our potential adversaries are very deliberately working to blunt our edge." He appeared to be referring to China, which other officials say has accelerated its military

modernisation and sped up its construction of a wide range of sophisticated weaponry while the U.S. was focused for two decades on combatting extremists.

"The way that we fight the next major war is going to look very different from the way that we fought the last ones," he said. "We all need to drive toward a new vision of what it means to defend our nation."

Mr. Austin said U.S. defence will continue to rest on maintaining deterrence.

The U.S. military must use existing capabilities, develop new ones, and use all of them in new and networked ways — "hand in hand with our allies and partners."

"It's always easier to stamp out a small ember than to put out a raging fire," he said.

On N. Korea, Biden to chart his own course

He seeks a shift from Trump's 'grand bargain', Obama's 'strategic patience' approaches

ASSOCIATED PRESS
WASHINGTON

The White House says President Joe Biden plans to veer from the approaches of his two most recent predecessors as he tries to stop North Korea's nuclear programme, rejecting both Donald Trump's deeply personal effort to win over Kim Jong-un and Barack Obama's more hands-off approach.

Press secretary Jen Psaki announced on Friday that administration officials had completed a review of U.S. policy toward North Korea, seen as one of the greatest and most vexing national security threats facing the U.S. and its allies. Ms. Psaki did not detail findings of the review, but suggested the administration would seek a middle ground between Mr.



Policy review: North Korean troops marching during a military parade in Pyongyang on January 14. • REUTERS/KCNA

Trump's "grand bargain" and Mr. Obama's "strategic patience" approaches.

"Our goal remains the complete de-nuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula with a clear understanding that the efforts of the past four administrations have not achieved this objective," Ms. Psaki told reporters on Air

"Our policy will not focus on achieving a grand bargain, nor will it rely on strategic patience," she said.

Mr. Biden, like his old boss Mr. Obama, has confirmed that he sees North Korea as perhaps the most delicate foreign policy quandary for the U.S. and its allies. But Ms. Psaki's comments suggest distancing from Mr. Obama's dual-track policy that kept engagement open for its good behaviour while seeking to impose sanctions for its bad behaviour.

The Biden administration also appeared to signal it is trying to set the stage for incremental progress, in which denuclearisation steps by the North would be met with corresponding actions, including sanctions relief, from the U.S.

My Very Eager Mother Just Served Us Nuggets

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SNAPSHOTS



Wandering poles

The locations of the North and South Poles change as the Earth's axis spins. Global warming and melting glaciers could have redistributed the global water fronts to such an extent that they have redefined the 'polar wander' or the drifting of the Earth's axis, finds a study published in *Geophysical Research Letters*.



Blow-away galaxy

Astrophysicists using the Gemini telescope have spotted the first 'blow-away' galaxy, in which the hydrogen clouds have been stripped off exposing high-energy light. This finding could give a clue to solving the puzzle of the reionisation of the universe. The research was published in *The Astrophysical Journal*.

Vaccine shortage will affect all eligible groups

This comes at a time when daily new cases and deaths are scaling new peaks and new cases touched 4.01 lakh on April 30

R. PRASAD

From May 1, 595 million adults aged 18-44 years were officially eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. The State governments and private hospitals are to vaccinate this group of adults. However, based on the number of vaccine doses that will become available in the following days and weeks, it is likely that only a very small percentage of adults aged 18-44 years will receive a vaccine, if at all.

The two private vaccine manufacturers - Serum Institute and Bharat Biotech - are required to supply 50% of vaccine produced to the Central government and the balance to State governments and private hospitals. The Central government will be vaccinating for free the 300 million people belonging to three priority groups - healthcare workers, frontline workers and those above 45 years. With two doses to be administered per person, this would mean 600 million doses to be administered to 300 million people.

But as on May 1, three-months after the mass vaccination programme began on January 16, only 160.37 million doses have been administered. Of these, over 120.5 million have received the first dose and the remaining have

received the second dose as well. Only 2.7% of adults are fully vaccinated and 12.9% given a single dose. This would mean that another 450-odd million doses have to be administered for free to fully cover the three priority groups.

As per a PIB release, as on May 1, nearly eight million doses are currently available with the States and Union Territories. With 1.2 million, Uttar Pradesh has the highest number of vaccine doses available, followed by Bihar (0.61 million), Maharashtra (0.14 million), Delhi (0.44 million), Karnataka (0.19 million), Assam (nearly 0.44 million), and Gujarat (0.34 million). Tamil Nadu has just 0.30 million doses, while Telangana has a meagre 90,480 doses. But these doses are to be used only in adults aged over 45 years.

Distribution of doses

Seven States will receive 1.7 million vaccine doses by May 4. With nearly 0.4 million, Bihar will receive the most doses followed by Uttar Pradesh (0.35 million), Haryana (0.3 million), Madhya Pradesh (0.28 million), Rajasthan (0.2 million), and Jammu & Kashmir and Goa (0.1 million each). These doses too are to be used only in adults aged over 45 years.

While the mass vaccination pro-



Dosage crunch: Coinciding with vaccine shortage, the daily vaccination numbers have been dropping further till it plummeted to 2.2 million on April 29. ■ GETTY IMAGES

gramme began on January 16, the daily uptake of vaccines was low. At 0.8 million, February 25 recorded the most vaccinations before the third and fourth priority group of those above 60 years and those over 45 years with comorbidities began from March 1. The uptake of vaccines increased and touched a peak of 3.4 million doses on March 22.

But with the government making anyone over 45 years immaterial of comorbidity status eligible for a vaccine, the uptake increased

sharply touching 4.2 million on April 2. While daily vaccinations hovered around 4 million for several days, a sharp dip began since mid-April, coinciding with shortages in vaccine supplies. For the last 10 days, the daily vaccination numbers have been dropping further; it plummeted to reach 2.2 million on April 29.

Supplying private hospitals

While private hospitals too are allowed to vaccinate adults aged 18-44 years according to government

policy, in a letter dated April 28, Serum Institute has told a Community Medicine specialist at Hamdard Institute of Medical Sciences & Research, Delhi that it is constrained to supply vaccines to private hospitals. "Our current obligation to meet the Government's existing requirements and to meet the additional demand emanating from State governments under liberated and accelerated vaccination, it is challenging to meet independently the requirement from large numbers of private hospitals," the letter says.

The letter adds: "We urge you to access the vaccine when it becomes available in the private market supply chain channels, which will take about five-six months from now. In the meantime, it is suggested to approach the State government for vaccine supplies, which was provided earlier for the category of citizens over 45 years of age."

However, Apollo and Max Hospitals had rolled out vaccines for the 18-44 age group on May 1.

Only six States - Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat and Odisha - have received small quantities of vaccines to immunise adults aged 18-44 years from May 1. As a result,

the vaccination drive will be more of a token affair limited to a few districts in each of the six States.

Serum Institute currently manufactures 60-65 million doses a month, and the production will be ramped up only by June-July when about 100 million doses will be produced a month. Bharat Biotech too is increasing capacity. According to the government release, Covaxin production will be increased from the current 10 million doses a month to 100 million doses by September. A six-seven-fold increase is expected by July-August.

Overflowing registrations

While expanding the eligibility to include adults 18-44 years is a welcome move, vaccine shortages are likely to persist for a few months. According to the government, 20.45 million beneficiaries have registered on CoWIN as on April 29. And with the Central government set to receive only 50% supplies and State governments to compete with one another for a share of the balance 50% supplies, vaccination of all priority/age groups is set to be affected for at least a few months. This when the daily new cases and deaths are scaling new peaks; new cases touched 4.01 lakh (0.4 million) on April 30.

Herpetologist Deepak Veerappan has a snake named after him

Xylophis deepaki has iridescent scales and is just 20 cm long

ASWATHI PACHA

In the first four months of 2021, the Western Ghats presented new butterflies, frogs, fruit flies, and even a freshwater crab. Joining the list is a tiny snake of just 20 cm length with iridescent scales - *Xylophis deepaki*, first stumbled upon in a coconut plantation in Kanyakumari, is now reported to be an endemic species of Tamil Nadu and has been sighted in a few locations in the southern part of the Western Ghats. The species is named in honour of Indian herpetologist Deepak Veerappan for his contribution in erecting a new subfamily Xylophiinae to accommodate wood snakes. The team suggests the common name Deepak's wood snake.

Wood snakes

Wood snakes are harmless, sub-fossorial and often found while digging soil in farms and under the logs in the Western Ghats forests. They feed on earthworms and possibly other invertebrates. Interestingly, their close relatives are found in



Sinuous grace: Wood snakes are often found while digging soil. ■ SURYA NARAYANA

northwest India and Southeast Asia and are known to be arboreal.

Drier habitat

"This new species is found in the drier regions and in lower altitudes around Agasthyamalai hills. The other *Xylophis* were reported from cold higher altitudes, of 1,700 m and above, in the Nilgiris and the Anaimalai. Its close relative, Captain's wood snake, is known from the western slopes of the Western Ghats in the Kerala," explains Surya Narayanan, from Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, Bengaluru, and first author of the paper recently published in *Vertebrate Zoology*.

The snake was previously confused with *X. captaini*, but detailed morphological studies showed that it had a broader off-white collar and more ventral scales. Further, DNA studies indicated that it was indeed a new species and was a close relative to *X. captaini*.

The new find increases the total number of currently recognised wood snakes to five species. The paper adds that very little information is available on the precise distributions of each species, their natural history, population status, feeding and reproductive ecology, and conservation status.

"These are burrowing snakes and we have planned to carry out more studies to understand its geographical distribution," adds Pratyush P. Mohapatra, Scientist at the Zoological Survey of India, who is based in Jabalpur. He adds that as the snake was found from rubber, banana, and coconut farms, it seems to be well adapted to moderate habitat changes, but more studies are needed to ascertain its status.

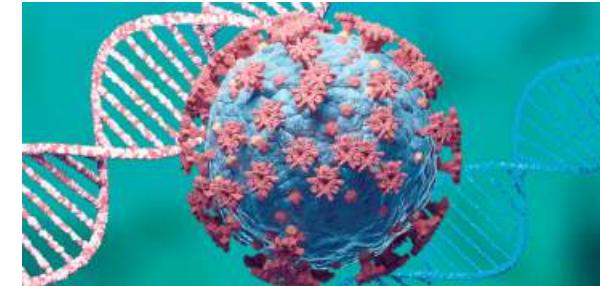
Our COVID-19 connection with primitive cavemen

Some genes inherited from Neanderthals help defy the virus, others carry a risk of getting critically ill

BINAY PANDA

Viruses can only survive and multiply in host cells. Therefore, studying SARS-CoV-2 virus will require studying the host. As the viral genome takes the help of host machinery, understanding the host genome is paramount to studying both susceptibility and protection against the virus in a given population. This is the main aim of multiple groups and international consortia of researchers like the Severe Covid-19 genome-wide association study Group, the COVID-19 Host Genetics Initiative, and the Genetics of Mortality in Critical Care (GENOMICC).

A series of published studies from these consortia shed light on the host genome's role in viral infection. These studies, published in *NEJM*, *Nature* and *MedRxiv*, provide cues on how certain host genome regions confer an increased risk of developing the severe disease while others protect against the virus. Thus, studying the genomes of individuals in a group (for example, a particular genetic population group in India) can make us predict whether



Hosting a virus: Understanding the host genome is paramount to studying both susceptibility and protection against the virus in a given population. ■ GETTY IMAGES

the individuals in that group are more or less likely to develop severe disease.

Crucial genes

The recent papers pointed out that a region on host chromosome 3 acts as a significant genetic risk factor towards getting seriously ill and, at the same time, a group of genes on chromosomes 6, 12, 19, and 21 protect against the virus. Enzymes coded by the OAS gene family on chromosome 12, a component of the interferon-induced antiviral system, are of particular importance as they can act as a drug target against the virus. An independent study from Canada in *Nature Medicine* corroborated this by show-

ing that a protein from the same component in blood protects against getting severely ill among European ancestry people.

Interestingly, evolutionary biologists in Sweden and Germany showed that the regions of host genomes that increase the risk of getting severely ill and protect against the virus were inherited from Neanderthals. How can Neanderthal genes both increase the risk of getting the severe disease and at the same time protect against the virus?

Once, Neanderthals and modern humans came in contact with each other, and they interbred. As a result, genetic content between Neanderthals and humans

got mixed in their offspring.

In their first paper, published in *Nature*, the researchers showed that modern-day humans share a stretch of 50,000 nucleotides (nucleotides are the basic building blocks of DNA) in chromosome 3 with Neanderthals. It is this stretch that increases their risk of getting severely ill. As Indians are a diverse genetic group, the above risk was determined using samples used previously in an international consortium called the 1,000 genome project. The project is represented by Indian Gujaratis and Telugus, Pakistani Punjabis, and Bangladeshi Bengalis in the South Asian group. These recent studies only validate what the legendary evolutionary biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky wrote in his famous essay, "nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution," and makes perfect sense when one thinks about the evolution of host genomes concerning SARS-CoV-2 infection.

(Binay Panda is a Professor of Biotechnology at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.)

Coronavirus: What are variants of concern?

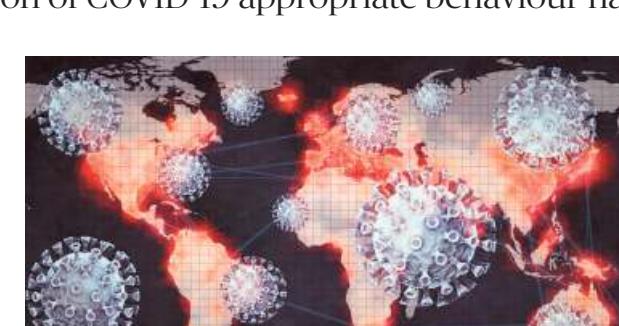
Variants of concern, widespread relaxation of COVID-19 appropriate behaviour have kicked off new waves of transmission

T. JACOB JOHN
MAHESH MOORTHY

If manuscripts are copied by hand repeatedly, spelling errors are common. Similarly, when 'genetic scripts' encoded in DNA or RNA are copied repeatedly for virus replication, errors do occur. RNA viruses are more error-prone than DNA viruses. SARS-CoV-2 genome is single-stranded RNA, and errors - in biology, mutations - occur frequently.

SARS-CoV-2 is new in humans and as it spreads, mutations are very frequent. Emerging variants with higher transmission efficiency become dominant, tending to replace others. Such front-runners emerge in different geographic communities where the virus is epidemic, spreading widely. Variants were detected in the U.K. and South Africa because genetic studies were systematically done. Brazil variant was discovered in Japan, in travellers from Brazil, and its origin traced back.

The ability to detect and track variants hinges on laboratory capacity for whole genome sequencing of viruses. Globally, over 1 million SARS-CoV-2 genomes have been sequenced to date, providing a



Keeping track: Detecting variants relies on whole genome sequencing. Globally, over 1 million SARS-CoV-2 genomes have been sequenced to date. ■ GETTY IMAGES

high resolution, spatio-temporally granular readout of virus evolution. More importantly, this has allowed the identification and documentation of variant viruses with altered properties compared to the virus that started the pandemic. As the importance of 'variants of concern' (VOC) was appreciated, the Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomic Consortium (INSACOG), a network of ten competent public-sector laboratories for genomic surveillance, was established, and the genetic variant landscape is being surveyed in India.

Nomenclature schemes
There are three different schemes of nomenclature for SARS-CoV-2 variants. The widely used one is the 'Phylogenetic Assignment of Global Outbreak Lineages' (PANGOLIN) that uses a hierarchical system based on genetic relatedness - an invaluable tool for genomic surveillance. It uses alphabets (A, B, C, P) and numerals starting with 1. Variant lineages are at the emerging edge of the pandemic in different geographies. Lineage B is the most prolific. The variants in circulation are B.1; B.1.1; B.1.351; B.1.427 and B.1.429. Lineage P.1 has deviated from the original B.

For convenience, the three most frequent ones are named by their geography of origin - 'U.K. variant' for B.1.1; 'South Africa variant' for B.1.351; and 'Brazil variant' for P.1. They had been detected in 2020 - September (U.K.), October (South Africa) and December (Brazil). Variants in India include the so-called double mutant B.1.617 spreading in Maharashtra and B.1.618 spreading in West Bengal.

Mutations can be pinpointed using the nucleotide position on the genome and the switched amino acids consequent to mutation. The

original pandemic virus (founder variant) was Wu.Hu.1 (Wuhan virus). In a few months, variant D614G emerged and became globally dominant.

Matters of concern
The 'concern' in VOC comprises three sinister properties - transmission efficiency, disease severity and escape from immunity cover of vaccination.

In many countries, including India, the VOC, by virtue of increased transmissibility, have kicked off new wave(s) of epidemic transmission.

Unfortunately, at that precise time, as case counts were low, there was widespread relaxation of COVID-appro-

priate behaviour. Together, this has contributed to a rapidly ascending second wave - daily numbers far exceeding those during the earlier wave.

Regarding virulence (propensity to cause severe/life-threatening disease), the U.K. variant is worse. The South Africa and Brazil variants do not seem to have higher virulence.

The third concern is regarding the immunity cover offered by vaccination using antigens made from D614G variant - which applies to most vaccines in current use. Lowered efficacy of vaccines was found more with the South African and less with the Brazil variant. Hence, reinfection can occur in spite of immunity by earlier D614G infection or vaccination. Vaccine efficacy may be lower now than what was determined in phase-3 trials as VOC were not then widely prevalent.

Fortunately, mRNA (Pfizer and Moderna) vaccines have broader immunity for different reasons, and they protect better against these two variants.

Karolinska Institute in Sweden created an antigen using new variant RBD peptide with adjuvant, and inocu-

lated monkeys already primed with an older vaccine. The resultant booster response was not only high but also broad, covering new variants. This approach, called 'hetero boosting' by a different vaccine, offers a way to manage the 'vaccine-escape' variants until newer vaccines become available.

Lessons learnt
An important lesson the pandemic has taught us in India is the critical importance of biomedical research and capacity building - for saving lives and economic growth. We need a foundation of broad-based research, in universities, medical colleges and biotechnology companies, all of which must be funded, encouraged, appreciated, and talent rewarded. While some endeavours have been initiated, they must take off in a big way, and India must invest heavily in biosciences. After a decade, its products and profit will make us healthier and wealthier.

T. Jacob John is retired professor, and Mahesh Moorthy currently professor, Department of Clinical Virology, Christian Medical College, Vellore.

By using gas chromatography in combination with olfactometry and mass spectrometry, researchers at the Technical University of Munich, Germany identified 57 molecules that made up the scent profiles of both normal and musty/mouldy smelling cocoa beans. Of these compounds, four had higher concentrations in off-smelling samples.

The researchers determined that geosmin - associated with mouldy and beetroot odours - and 3-methyl-1H-indole - associated with faecal and mothball odours - are the primary contributors to the musty and mouldy scents of cocoa beans.

According to a release from American Chemical Society, they found that geosmin was mostly in the beans' shells, which are removed during processing, while the latter was primarily in the bean nib that is manufactured into chocolate. The researchers say that measuring the amount of these compounds within cocoa beans could be an objective way to detect off-putting scents and flavours.

Readers may send their questions / answers to questioncorner@thehindu.co.in



Question Corner

The smell of chocolate

What makes chocolate smell musty and mouldy?

Cocoa beans, when fermented correctly, have a pleasant smell with sweet and floral notes. But they can have an off-putting scent when fermentation goes wrong, or when storage conditions aren't quite right and microorganisms grow on them. If these beans make their way



A long queue outside the BKC Jumbo vaccination centre in Mumbai on April 24. ■ EMMANUEL YOGINI

Vaccine crunch

Amid the severe shortage being faced by States, how far can people delay taking the second shot?

RAMYA KANNAN

The story so far: Despite a massive shortage of COVID-19 vaccines across the country, the Central government announced that vaccination for everyone above 18 years of age would begin from May 1. But several State governments expressed their inability to kick off the programme citing a shortage of vaccines. They have postponed the drive to when required stocks arrive in each State. This could have a deep impact on the epidemiological health of a population seized by a deadly second wave of infections.

What is the extent of the shortage? India is currently producing roughly 2 million vaccines a day, and according to data on the Co-WIN portal, the number of vaccines being administered daily is roughly 2.3 million to 2.5 million. The shortage is stark. Technically, the production capacity falls below even the daily requirement.

As of April 29, 9.1 % of the population had received one dose of the vaccine, and only 1.9 % had been "fully vaccinated". That leaves out a huge share of the population that is still not inoculated.

Chandrakanth Lahariya, vaccinologist and epidemiologist, says the maths behind it is incontrovertible. "Even at the current production levels, the demand is higher. The vaccination has been opened to the additional population and the demand has increased three-fold, while supply remains the same."

He reasons that even with other manufacturers being allowed to produce vaccines and a few million doses of the Russian vaccine Sputnik expected shortly, increasing production will take time. The Serum Institute of India, the maker of Covishield, looks to scale up production to 100 million doses per month soon, and Bharat Biotech, which manufactures Covaxin, is talking of producing 50-60 million doses a month. But even in the next few months, the production is unlikely to go far beyond 150 million doses a month.

Immunologically, it is understood that when a person has been given a vaccine (even one dose), the immune system is activated. This means the system can mount a better response than a naive immune system in someone who is not vaccinated

Can people prolong the interval for their second dose? Both vaccines available in India have a two-dose schedule. For Covishield, the AstraZeneca vaccine, T. Jacob John, renowned virologist, formerly with Christian Medical College, Vellore, said, "Phase 3 trials were conducted across many countries with varying intervals. They figured that a second dose 12 weeks later offered the best protection. Studies with a six to eight-week interval also found a linear relationship, with efficacy improving over time." In times of urgency, the best option is to take the second shot at 12 weeks, but in the face of the second wave, however, he cautions that patients should take the vaccine on time to reduce the risk to themselves.

The second dose of Covaxin can be taken four to six weeks after the first.

Dr. Lahariya says that India should increase the gap for Covishield to 12 weeks. Any immunisation schedule is based on technical and operational feasibility, he says. In routine immunisation for children, most vaccines are administered at a four-week gap in India, while in many countries abroad, they are given after an eight-week gap. "Here, the operational reason is that coverage is already low. If we increase the vaccine gap, it might unnecessarily delay vaccination, especially for DPT. So, we have to design our vaccination programme based on scientific evidence and operational needs." In Covishield, the higher the gap, the greater is the proven efficacy. And several million doses will be saved to allow people to take at least one shot.

However, this scenario cannot be extrapolated for Covaxin, adds Dr. Lahariya. At this point, the advice would be to encourage people to get doses whenever they can. "Irrespective of when the second dose is taken, it counts," he says.

Immunologically, it is understood that when a person has been given a vaccine (even one dose), the immune system is activated. This means the system can mount a better response than a naive immune system in someone who is not vaccinated, says Dr. Lahariya.

If a person contracts COVID-19 after the first dose, when should they get the next shot?

Dr. Lahariya says according to the broader principle, it is appropriate to delay vaccination. "Natural infection provides some protection for a few months. If a person has already received one shot within a month, then the natural infection becomes some sort of a booster infection. Given the operational challenges, delaying the second shot can be done fairly confidently. However, the decision should be left to people."

Dr. John points to the evolving guidelines released by the United States' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "Originally, CDC came up with a three-month gap, and later changed it to a one-month gap, and finally, we have, I think, an advisory to take it any time after full recovery, or after the person becomes completely asymptomatic."

Oxygen deficit amid mounting COVID-19 cases

Was the preparation for the second wave inadequate and what is being done to bridge demand and supply?

SURESH SESHADRI

The story so far: A shortage of medical oxygen at hospitals in many parts of the country in the wake of the ongoing second wave of COVID-19 infections has caused multiple deaths, including in the capital city, and led to the Delhi High Court asking the Central government to explain its approach to the allocation of the critical resource to various States and Delhi. On Thursday, it questioned the Centre on why States like Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra were allotted more oxygen than what they had asked for, while Delhi was not given even its projected requirement to treat COVID-19 patients. On Saturday, Batra Hospital in New Delhi reported that 12 patients had died as it ran out of oxygen. On April 30, India crossed the 4 lakh-mark for daily new COVID-19 cases.

How much oxygen does India produce?

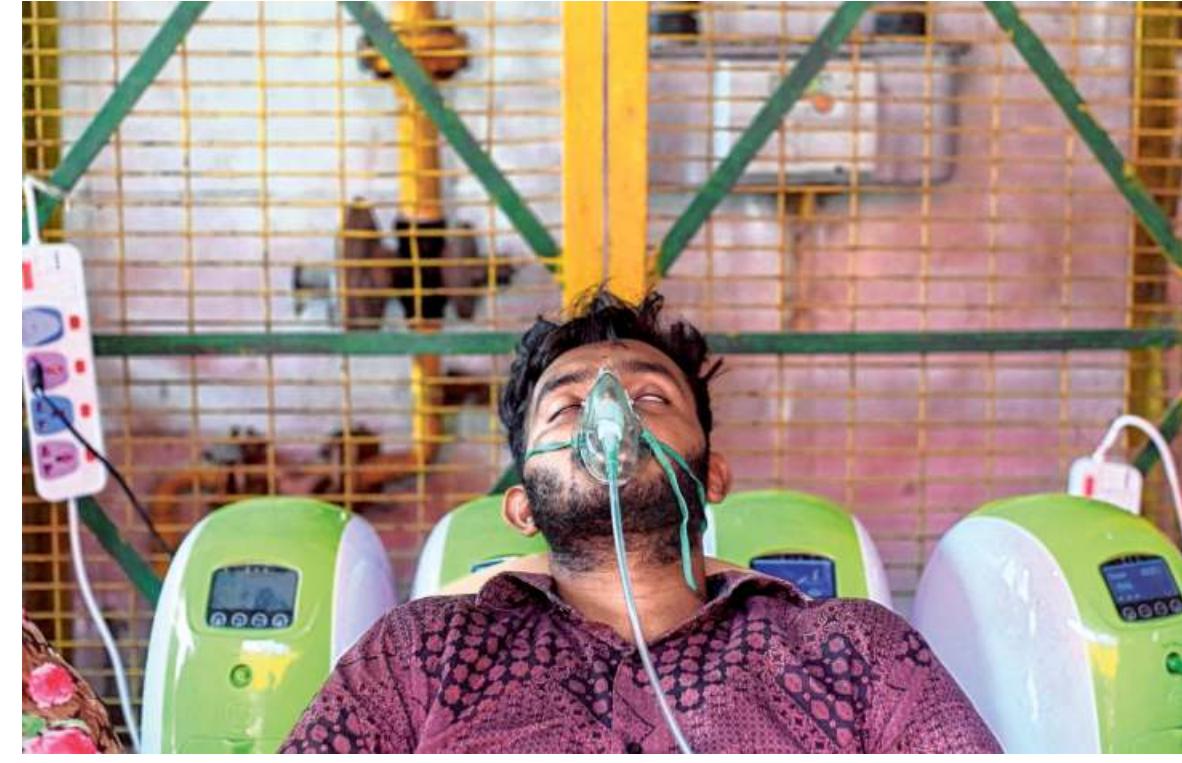
In a release on April 15, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare acknowledged at the outset that "medical oxygen is a critical component in the treatment of COVID affected patients" and said that India had a daily production capacity of 7,127 metric tonnes (MT) of oxygen, which it asserted was sufficient given that the countrywide medical oxygen consumption as of April 12 was 3,842 MT. While the 7,127 MT capacity that the Ministry referred to was the overall oxygen-producing capacity, including the volumes produced for industrial use, the fact that the Centre has restricted the supply of oxygen for all non-medical purposes, except a list of exempted industries that includes pharmaceuticals, food, oil refineries and oxygen cylinder makers, has meant that the major share of output has been earmarked for medical use.

Subsequently, in a statement shared by the Press Information Bureau on its website on April 27, the Prime Minister's Office said: "The production of LMO [liquid medical oxygen] in the country has increased from 5,700 MT/day in August 2020 to the present 8,922 MT (on April 25, 2021). The domestic production of LMO is expected to cross 9,250 MT/day by the end of April 2021."

What led to the shortage?

The demand for medical oxygen, which prior to the onset of the pandemic last year was at about 10% of overall output, or 700 MT/day, has skyrocketed in recent weeks with the incidence of patients suffering acute respiratory distress having sharply spiked during the current wave. While the Union government did constitute an inter-ministerial Empowered Group (EG2) of senior officers in March 2020 to ensure the availability of essential medical equipment, including medical oxygen, to the affected States, the group appears to have been caught off guard, along with most of the country's health sector by the sheer scale and speed of the rise in infections. As a result, oxygen demand projections have woefully lagged behind actual requirements.

For instance, in an affidavit filed in the Supreme Court last month, the Union government pointed out that soon after it had passed an order for allocation of oxygen to 12 high-burden States on April 15, some of them promptly ended up considerably revising their projections for medical oxygen requirements for April 20. So, while Uttar Pradesh doubled its requirement forecast to 800 MT from 400 MT earlier, Delhi said it would need 700 MT as of April 20, a 133% increase from the 300 MT it had previously sought. Three other States, which had previously not been a part of the list, also sought allocations from the Centre, thus pushing up the demand forecast for April 20 to a total of 5,619 MT, from the 4,880 MT estimated earlier. The sharp revisions on the part of



A patient breathing with the help of oxygen provided by a gurudwara in Ghaziabad on Saturday. ■ AFP

With just 1,224 cryogenic tankers available for transporting LMO, there have not been enough vehicles to carry medical oxygen in quick time to the locations where it is urgently required

Association observed that its members such as Air Liquide and Linde were experiencing five to 10 times the usual demand for medical oxygen, and this at a time when some countries, including in Europe, were experiencing their second wave. Add to this the unique logistic challenges facing the distribution of medical oxygen to hospitals in India, and we had a perfect storm of supplies running out with replenishment not reaching on time and many seriously ill patients gasping to death.

Why are we facing supply challenges?

Prior to the pandemic, a bulk of the health sector's medical oxygen requirement had been met with supplies delivered either in form of oxygen cylinders containing the element as a high-purity gas or through dedicated cryogenic tankers that transport the oxygen in liquid form and deliver them to storage tanks at hospitals.

The stand-alone facilities for the production of oxygen, including the medical variant, have so far been geographically concentrated mainly in clusters in the eastern, southern and western parts of the country, thus necessitating the transportation of the element over distances by road. With just 1,224 cryogenic tankers available for transporting LMO, according to the affidavit filed in the Supreme Court, there have not been enough vehicles to carry medical oxygen in quick time to critical locations. This despite the fact that some tanker fleet owners have deployed at least two drivers with each vehicle to improve on-road and turnaround times between each delivery. With cylinders and tankers scarce, the authorities are now eyeing other ways to urgently redress the situation.

What is being done to boost supply?

The Centre is taking a multi-pronged approach to address the crisis. For one, it has decided to deploy surplus stocks of the element available with steel plants across the country, including Public Sector Units. Also, the movement of transport tankers for LMO is now being closely monitored and the Indian Railways and the Indian Air Force have been roped in to help ferry tankers by both rail and air (though aircraft are mainly transporting empty tankers as it is hazardous to transport filled cryogenic vessels). The PESO (Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation) has also issued directions to oversee the conversion of argon and nitrogen tankers for use as oxygen tankers. Production of additional cryogenic tankers is also underway to augment fleet capacity. Separately, industrial cylinders have been permitted to be used for medical oxygen after due purging, and the Health Ministry is placing orders for another one lakh oxygen cylinders.

The Ministry is also expediting on "a war footing" the commissioning of 162 Pressure Swing Adsorption (PSA) plants that can generate oxygen from the air at various hospitals across the country, according to its affidavit. And for now, the government is also accepting assistance from abroad with several countries, including Russia and Singapore, despatching oxygen equipment.

What lies ahead?

The efforts to boost output and improve supplies notwithstanding, there are still multiple challenges. For the relatives of patients struggling to procure an assured supply of oxygen either at home or once admitted to a hospital, real-time information on availability has been hard to come by. Hence, they have mostly had to rely on volunteer networks disseminating data via social media platforms. Here again, the Supreme Court had to step in to warn authorities against initiating any punitive action against volunteers and those putting out appeals for help.

Further, the allocation of oxygen to the States by the empowered group appears to be uneven, with the Delhi High Court pointing to the fact that against the local government's request for 700 MT, it had only been allocated 490 MT, while Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra had been sanctioned more supply than they had sought. The wrinkles in matching supply and demand both at the institutional and individual level need to be ironed out without further delay.

Public buildings and fire safety rules

What has led to a spate of hospital fires and why aren't State governments strictly following regulations?

G. ANANTHAKRISHNAN

The story so far: Fires occur in many public buildings in India every year, killing a large number of people and injuring many. Over the past year, there have been deadly fires in hospital buildings, including those treating COVID-19 patients. Recent infernos in hospitals at Bharuch in Gujarat, Virar, a suburb of Mumbai, and Mumbra near Thane, killed at least 37 people. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) says 330 people died in commercial building fires in 2019, while fatalities for residential or dwelling buildings were much higher at 6,329. Electrical faults are cited as the leading cause of fires but State governments are widely criticised for being lax with building safety laws and for failing to equip public buildings with modern technology. Hospital ICUs (intensive care units) are a great fire risk because they are oxygen-suffused, and need to meet high standards.

What fire safety compliance is expected in public buildings, including hospitals?

At the centre of all standard-setting is the National Building Code of India. Part 4 of the Code deals with Fire and Life Safety. The document provides specifications and guidelines for design and materials that reduce the threat of destructive fires. Under the Code, all existing and new buildings are classified by nature of use, such as residential, educational, institutional, assembly (like cinemas and auditoria), business, mercantile, industrial, storage and hazardous.

Hospitals come under the institutional category. The Union Home Ministry's Directorate-General for Fire Services, Civil Defence & Home Guards says on its website that the National Building Code (NBC), published by the Bureau of Indian Standards, is a "recommendatory document", and States have been asked to incorporate it into their local building bylaws, making the recommendations a "mandatory requirement". Evidently, fire safety rules exist in every State, but the provisions of the Code are ignored in practice, and even mandatory certifications do not reflect compliance.

Queries on hospital fires prompted the Centre to announce in Parliament on March 23 this year that a Fire Safety Committee conducts periodical audits on fire installation, heating, ventilation and air-conditioning, electrical sub-stations and other electrical equipment in the Union government's hospitals. The Health Ministry said it had circulated strict guidelines in September 2020 stipulating third-party accreditation for fire safety and that a fire response plan should be in place.



A man inspecting an ICU ward damaged in a fire at a hospital in Mumbai. ■ AP

The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) has also stipulated requirements for fire safety in public buildings, including hospitals, which incorporate elements of the NBC, besides design guidelines on maintaining minimum open safety space, protected exit mechanisms, dedicated staircases, and crucial drills to carry out evacuations.

What does the Code specify?

At the macro level, the NBC recommends the location of buildings by type of use in specific zones to ensure that industrial and hazardous structures do not coexist with residential, institutional, office and business buildings. It specifies, among other things, the technical requirements for special buildings, high rises, educational and institutional buildings higher than 9 metres, and those with an area of over 300 square metres.

Next, the Code drills down into the specifics of fire resistance based on the materials used – exterior walls, interior bearing walls, floor, roof, fire check doors, fire enclosure exits, and so on. Technologies to sound alerts in case of a fire and also to fight it are expected to be incorporated into buildings. Examples given in the Code are automatic fire detection and alarm system, down-comer pipelines connected to a roof tank, dry riser pipelines that fire-fighters can use to douse upper floors, automatic sprinklers and water sprays, fireman's lift, fire barriers, escape routes, markings, and so on.

Incorporating these into a proper design and ensuring that certified fire-resistant materials are used in the construction can avert deadly fires, giving occupants sufficient time to exit safely.

However, the NBC also says that for various types of buildings, "in case of practical difficulty or to avoid unnecessary hardship, without sacrificing reasonable safety, local head, fire services may consider exemptions

from the Code".

Do State governments follow the Code?

Maharashtra, which has been hit by a series of fires, has a Fire Prevention and Life Safety Measures Act since 2008. Section 3 of the Act makes the provisions of the NBC

mandatory and Schedule I of the State's law is borrowed from the Code.

However, reports in the wake of recent fire accidents indicate that the authorities have been unable to keep up with inspection requirements for thousands of buildings. A Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report for the period 2010 to 2015 noted that in Maharashtra, after a "joint physical inspection by audit of 53 government buildings/hospitals/educational institutions/commercial establishments in eight selected MCs [municipal corporations] revealed that only fire extinguishers were installed in 11 of 53 buildings and the remaining 42 buildings were not equipped with any of the fire-fighting installations". Fire department professionals had earlier demanded third-party audits by licensed professionals.

In Kerala, obtaining an NOC [no objection certificate] from the fire department, given in Form H-3 for hospitals that are between 15 metres and 24 metres high, requires furnishing exhaustive information on design and infrastructure. The rules prescribe firefighting equipment and installations that meet "Indian Standards", but do not contain a direct reference to the NBC.

Tamil Nadu's form for a fire licence, required under the Fire Service Act read with municipal law, is even broader, and no reference is found for compliance with the Code.

What is the future course?

In December last year, the Supreme Court directed all States to carry out fire safety audits of dedicated COVID-19 hospitals. It has become evident that State forces lack the manpower to inspect and ensure compliance with safety codes, including the NBC, where it is mandatory. One option is to make heavy fire liability insurance compulsory for all public buildings, which would offer protection to occupants and visitors and bring about external inspection of safety.

ICMR

Weathering India's coronavirus storm

The govt.-funded body that has been at the centre of the fight against the virus is under the spotlight as a second wave is sweeping through the country

JACOB KOSHY

India is in the middle of a second wave of COVID-19 infections that is seeing nearly 4,00,000 new cases being added every day. Unlike the first wave that peaked in September, the ongoing one is characterised by high infectivity – a result that is attributed to the possibility of newer variants firmly establishing roots in India and a *carte blanche* for massive public gatherings, including the Kumbh Mela, election rallies and farmer protests – that has brought the health infrastructure in several metros to its knees.

As India is in the middle of a crisis with attention almost entirely focused on putting out the fire, it will be a while before some serious soul searching begins on how those at the helm of the country's COVID-19 management strategy failed to gauge the size and impact of the second wave.

While analysts, in the future, may attribute faults to various actors such as the political leadership and state administrators, an organisation that is certain to come for reckoning is the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

As an apex council of government-funded medical research institutions that has expertise in a range of infectious-disease analyses and with experience that stretches back well over a century, it was natural that the ICMR has been playing a pivotal role in India's defence against the coronavirus. One of its labs, the Pune-based National Institute of Virology (NIV) that traces its origin to 1952, sequenced the virus in February 2020, almost as

soon as the genome sequence of the virus was made globally available by China. The first COVID-19 patient in India, a medical student who returned from Wuhan, was laboratory-confirmed by the NIV on January 30. Two more adults from Kerala were also confirmed positive within a few days. The lab developed the assays needed to detect the presence of the virus by targeting specific regions of its genome. Soon enough, the organisation was able to grow the virus in the lab, a necessary step to being able to develop a vaccine. This strain was eventually transferred to the Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech from which Covaxin eventually came to be.

Niche expertise
Infectious diseases lie at the heart of the conception of an organisation such as the ICMR. It has, over the years, nurtured several laboratories and research organisations with niche expertise in several other aspects of disease spread. Given its history, it was expected that the NIV would play a prominent role in tackling the virus. The ICMR's institutes have expertise in tuberculosis, leprosy, cholera and diarrhoeal diseases, viral diseases including AIDS, malaria, kala-azar, vector control, nutrition, food and drug toxicology, reproduction, immuno-haematology, oncology and medical statistics.

One of these is epidemiology or the study of how infectious diseases spread in a society. Enter the National Institute of Epidemiology (NIE), an ICMR research body based in Chennai. Again in February 2020, epidemiologists of the NIE, along with other scientists of the ICMR and experts from the Imperial College in London, wrote in the *Indian Journal of Medical Research*, published by the ICMR itself, that a coronavirus (COVID-19) epidemic in India "was inevitable" and the most aggressive airport screening would have delayed India's first 1,000 cases by at most 45 days. India's health system should have focused early on finding transmission in the community and quarantining, instead of border control. This

report became public a day after India had closed its airports to international passengers and a day before Prime Minister Narendra Modi imposed a national lockdown.

Though that report lacked detail on what the projected number of affected could be or what the probable mortality rate from being infected was likely to be, it said, in as measured a tone, that the virus was unlikely to treat India any different from other countries in the world. This was around the time that Europe's health systems had buckled under the weight of the coronavirus, and China – after being assailed – had imposed a stringent lockdown.

In May last year, the organisation undertook another important endeavour. The NIE epidemiologists conducted what was perhaps among the largest such serology surveys in the world. These involve choosing groups of adults across a representative number of districts and testing blood samples for the presence of

antibodies that generally form within two-three weeks of an infection.

The serosurvey found that from its analysis of 69 districts across 21 States suggested that an estimated 7,00,000 may have been infected by the SARS-CoV-2 virus in these districts even in early May. This was when the official count was around 35,000.

However, for all its expertise, resources, institutional memory and geographical spread – it has 26 national institutes and six regional research centres to investigate and recommend policy measures for a range of communicable and non-communicable diseases – its critics say the ICMR is an extremely bureaucratic organisation. Being almost entirely dependent on government funds, its scientists do not have the independence to share their knowledge and expertise without being overtly controlled by the government in power and this was on display through the pandemic.

In the early days of the

pandemic, the ICMR leadership, in spite of the evidence being proffered by its own scientists of the cataclysm that was emerging, sought to play down – and actively encouraged the impression – that India would not see the kind of devastation the pandemic had wreaked on many other countries of comparable size. While it exhorted the public to mask up and follow COVID-19 appropriate behaviour, it was rarely forthcoming or extremely tardy with results and analysis of investigations into the course of the pandemic.

Data sharing

Independent scientists recently petitioned Prime Minister Narendra Modi to get the ICMR to be more forthcoming with sharing data. As a government organisation, the ICMR has access to a trove of medical data, patient history, test results from surveys and much of these, if made available more widely, would have aided a better understanding in the trajectory of the coronavirus,

these scientists say. Currently, the NIV, along with some other labs, is in the process of checking if Covaxin provides protection against newer strains of the virus.

India has expertise in making vaccines but limited expertise in conducting large Phase 3 trials that can assess vaccine or drug efficacy. The ICMR was a partner of Bharat Biotech but so far, the organisation has not released a proper peer-reviewed journal describing the Phase 3 trials. This, after the company was given emergency use authorisation without such efficacy trials being complete and ICMR Director-General Balram Bhargava was found to have been goading clinical trial investigators, last year, into readying a vaccine before Independence Day in August. Currently, India is in a pandemic nightmare without enough vaccines and the ICMR is largely silent on the evolution of the second wave. What portion of the blame it must shoulder will be known only in the years ahead.



In Focus

■ The Pune-based National Institute of Virology, an ICMR lab, sequenced the virus in February 2020, almost as soon as the genome sequence of the virus was made globally available by China

■ The ICMR has 26 national institutes and six regional research centres to investigate and suggest policy measures for communicable and non-communicable diseases

■ These institutes have expertise in TB, leprosy, cholera and diarrhoeal diseases, and viral diseases including AIDS

CHLOE ZHAO

Far from home

The Oscars winner has a complicated relationship with her country of birth

ANANTH KRISHNAN

When Chloe Zhao on April 25 ascended the steps of a makeshift stage in Union Station – the railway station in Los Angeles serving as the temporary home of the Academy Awards – she became the first non-white woman to win Best Director, and only the second woman recipient of the award.

Ms. Zhao recorded another first. In her acceptance speech, she quoted a well-known classical Chinese poem, recalling her childhood in China. "When I was growing up in China, my dad and I would play this game where we would memorise classical Chinese poems and texts, and recite it together and try and finish each other's sentences," she said. "One I remember so dearly, 'Ren Zhi Chu, Xing Ben Shan', means, 'people at birth are inherently good'. Those six characters had such a great impact on me and I still truly believe them today."

Both firsts would have ordinarily been headline-making in China and lapped up by a country that, not unlike India, is hungry to claim successes of her own, even from those who long left her shores. Yet Ms. Zhao's Oscars success has been relatively muted. News of her prize has been played down, in some quarters even censored, underlining her troubled relationship with her country of birth.

On Douban, a popular so-



cial media platform, videos of the award and speech were removed, the Washington Post reported, while the Twitter-equivalent Weibo was also censoring posts about her. "One blogger wrote in frustration," the Post reported, "that the only Oscar-related content they could find was that of a singer named Oscar Wang who had been unexpectedly eliminated from a boy band contest."

Ms. Zhao's film, meanwhile, ran into trouble with the regulators. Originally scheduled for an April release, *Nomadland* is yet to hit the theatres. And not only that, for the first time since 2003, China's official television station CCTV did not even broadcast the Oscars. Ms. Zhao's involvement was seen as one reason, the other being the nomination of a documentary on the Hong Kong protests.

Born in Beijing, Ms. Zhao grew up in the Chinese cap-

ital until 14, and then moved to England and then the U.S. for school. After attending film school at NYU, her major breakthrough was her 2015 drama *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* about a Native American brother and sister and life on a reservation.

Critical success
The critical success of *Nomadland* last year, which was quickly seen as an Academy Awards-favourite, initially went down well with the Chinese media and Ms. Zhao was warmly acclaimed. That quickly soured when comments she made in a 2013 interview surfaced and spread like wildfire. Ms. Zhao had spoken about growing up in "a place where there are lies everywhere". Widespread outrage quickly followed, and a director who was hailed by China's film community – and remains celebrated among her fellow directors there – quickly faded from attention of the

state media, underlining the decreasing tolerance in China for the slightest criticism. That anger has somewhat dissipated following her win.

On one level, there is some irony in the controversy, as Chinese regulators have much to enjoy about *Nomadland*, which follows the story of Fern (played by Frances McDormand), and her journey across America in her trusted van as she finds both work and a sense of belonging in the wake of losing her job and her husband. Based on the 2017 non-fiction book by journalist Jessica Bruder, the film offers a searing look at America and those that have been left behind, themes that, one might have assumed, would be welcomed by Chinese authorities who are usually all-too-eager to shine the light on the flaws of the U.S.

On another level, Ms.

Zhao's success is also a reminder of why she perhaps chose to make her home elsewhere in the first place. *Nomadland* is also a story of freedom, and of pursuing it at any cost. "The last free place in America," we are told, "is a parking spot". In the film, Fern resents being asked if she is "homeless". "I'm homeless," she retorts, "which is not the same thing". A Chinese filmmaker offering an unsparing and critical look at Chinese society in today's China, let alone a foreign-born one, would probably not have gotten very far.

ZABULON SIMENTOV

The last Jew in Afghanistan

The carpet merchant is ready to leave the country amid fears of Taliban's return

STANLY JOHNY

He withstood a communist revolution, the Soviet intervention, the mujahideen civil war, the Taliban takeover and the American invasion. When all of his friends and family left Afghanistan as the country fell from one crisis to another, he stayed. But now, with the U.S. troops withdrawing from Afghanistan and the fear of the Taliban's second coming rising, Zabulon Simentov, Afghanistan's one-man Jewish community, is preparing to leave the country for Israel. "After our important festivals [Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in September], I will leave Afghanistan," he told Radio Free Afghanistan recently. "If the Taliban return, they are going to push us out with a slap in the face."

Born in the 1950s in Herat when Afghanistan was ruled by King Mohammed Zahir Shah, Mr. Simentov's story is that of persecution, exodus and patriotism. A carpet merchant who had served in the Afghan army, Mr. Simentov left the country briefly in the 1990s when the country was gripped by sectarian violence, but returned against all advice from friends and family. His wife, two daughters and sisters all live in Israel. In 2013, when he was asked by a journalist if he wanted to go to Israel, he said, "What do I want in Israel? This is my home. This is where I belong." For nearly 16 years, he has been

the only known Jew in Afghanistan. He lived alone in Kabul's Flower Street, next to the city's lone synagogue. He read Torah alone from the pulpit of the synagogue. And he made his own kosher meat.

The tale of Jews in Afghanistan is one of the many tragedies of the country. Afghanistan's links with Judaism go back in at least 1,500 years. One of the legends about the origins of the Pashtuns, the dominant ethnic group in the country, is that they were the offspring of a lost tribe of Israel. The country had some 40,000-strong Jewish community in the mid-20th century, mostly in Herat, Mr. Simentov's home region. When Israel was created in 1948, many Jews left Afghanistan. The exodus continued in the 1980s, following the 1979 Soviet intervention. Most of the remaining Jewish families left the country during the mujahideen fighting. By the early 1990s,

when the communist government of Mohammed Najibullah was battling for its survival, there were hardly 15 Jews left in Kabul. They would also leave during the civil war that followed the fall of Najibullah.

Two-men community
During the Taliban regime, two men made up the country's Jewish community – Mr. Simentov and Isaac Levy. They lived in the synagogue compound in Kabul, but hardly got along. They accused each other of violating the tenets of Judaism. Levy said Mr. Simentov was trying to send him off to Israel so that he could take over the synagogue. Mr. Simentov said he was concerned about Levy's health. Their infighting caused a headache even for the Taliban's anti-minority regime. Levy died in 2005. And since then, Mr. Simentov and the synagogue have been the last vestiges of Judaism in Afghanistan. If he

leaves for Israel later this year, the synagogue would likely be closed.

He lost the synagogue's most important possession, a 15th century Torah, when the Taliban were in power. He blamed the Taliban for the loss. The Taliban's 1996-2001 rule was infamous for the persecution of religious minorities and women. Many of them, especially Hindus and Sikhs, fled to India. After the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan adopted a Constitution that offered equal rights and protection to the minorities. But the situation on the ground remained grim, and with the rise of the Islamic State in Afghanistan that targets minorities and the prospect of the return of the Taliban, many started fleeing the country in recent months.

"Peace talks are making people worried that if the Taliban come and if they behave the same as they used to during their regime then people will be worried," Mr. Simentov said in 2019. His fears are coming true. The U.S. signed an agreement with the Taliban in February 2020 as part of which American troops were scheduled to leave Afghanistan by May 1. President Joe Biden delayed the pullout to September 11. And after September, many fear that the Taliban could make rapid advances on the battlefield. Mr. Simentov is not staying back to see that. "I will watch on TV in Israel to find out what will happen in Afghanistan," he says.

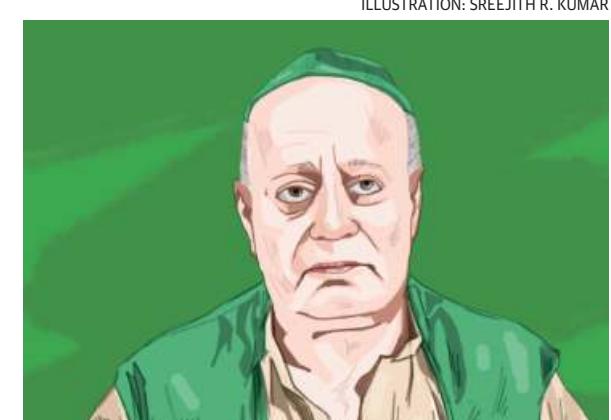


ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Auto firms log subdued April sales amid COVID

Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai Motor, Tata Motors and Kia all post sequential declines; M&M, Honda Cars post growth from March

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

NEW DELHI

Major automobile manufacturers Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai Motor, Tata Motors and Kia on Saturday reported a sequential decline in passenger vehicle sales in April compared with March as the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic hit dispatches.

However, Mahindra & Mahindra along with Honda Cars India posted sequential growth in their passenger vehicle sales last month.

Sales in April this year are not comparable with that of the corresponding month a year earlier as companies had reported zero sales due to the nationwide lockdown imposed to curb the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

The country's largest carmaker Maruti Suzuki India reported a 4% decline in total

sales to 1,59,691 units in April as compared to 1,67,014 units in March this year.

Similarly, Hyundai Motor India Ltd. (HMIL) posted total sales of 59,203 units in April, a decline of 8% from the 64,621 units it had sold in March 2021.

Hyundai sales dip

HMIL Director (Sales, Marketing and Service) Tarun Garg said, "In these challenging times, we stand in solidarity with the nation and are continuing all efforts to support the affected... While our efforts presently focus primarily on supporting the lives and livelihood of people, we have also received positive sales results in April."

Homegrown auto major Tata Motors said its passenger vehicle sales in the domestic market stood at 25,095 un-



Slow lane: There will be some impact this quarter due to low customer movement, says M&M's Nakra. ■PTI

its last month, up 9% from 29,654 units in March.

Supply chain challenges

However, Mahindra & Mahindra said its passenger vehicles sales in the domestic market stood at 18,285 un-

sion CEO Veeraj Nakra said. "While demand remains good, there would be some impact in the first quarter as a result of low customer movement and dealership activity due to the lockdown restrictions," he added.

Honda sees 28% jump

Honda Cars India also reported a 28% increase in its domestic sales to 9,072 units last month as compared to 7,103 units in March.

"The current health calamity has struck the entire nation and at this time nothing is more important than the health and well-being of our countrymen," Honda Cars India Senior VP and Director (Marketing & Sales) Rajesh Goel said. "Of course, it has had an impact on the business and deliveries in the marketplace," he added.

Toyota Kirloskar Motor

(TKM) said its dispatches to the dealers last month stood at 9,622 units.

Mobility needs'

"Despite the challenges, we continue to witness good demand owing to personal mobility needs and the same has helped us clock 9,622 units of wholesales in the month of April," Toyota Kirloskar Motor's Senior Vice President Naveen Soni said.

Kia India reported a 16% decline in dispatches to dealers at 16,111 units in April, while MG Motor India said its retail sales last month stood at 2,565 units.

MG Motor said its production and vehicle dispatches to dealers last month was significantly higher than retail sales although it currently has an order backlog of more than three months across its product lines.



but new restrictions and COVID-wave-2 has temporarily reduced demand equivalent to about 10% of March demand for both personal mobility and industrial goods movement," Mr. Singh said.

He said the local fuel consumption would 'start to look up' in June, by when the second wave was expected to weaken.

Analysts expect a sharper slump in May due to more impending restrictions.

SBI cuts home loan interest rate to 6.7%

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

MUMBAI

State Bank of India (SBI) has announced lower interest rates on home loans, starting from 6.7% for loans up to ₹30 lakh.

The lender will charge 6.95% for loans above ₹30 lakh and up to ₹75 lakh. Loans above ₹75 lakh will attract interest of 7.05%.

Women borrowers will get a special 5 bps concession. Customers applying via YONO can avail additional interest concession of 5 bps, SBI said. "Affordability increases immensely with the present interest offerings that reduce EMI amounts substantially," said C.S. Setty, MD (Retail & Digital Banking).

Jet fuel price soars 6.7%, petrol increase seen soon

ATF raised by ₹3,885 per kilolitre



unchanged for the 16th day on Saturday, but oil company officials indicated a rate increase in the near term.

Despite concerns about rising COVID-19 cases in India denting demand, international crude oil prices continue to rise on account of strong U.S. demand recovery and a weak dollar.

Govt. extends time for ITR filing to May 31

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

NEW DELHI

The government on Saturday extended timelines for various income tax compliances, including the filing of belated or revised return for the 2019-20 fiscal, till May 31.

"In view of the adverse circumstances arising due to the severe COVID-19 pandemic and also in view of the several requests received from taxpayers, tax consultants and other stakeholders from across the country, requesting that various compliance dates may be relaxed, the government has extended certain timelines today," the Central Board of Direct Taxes said in a statement.

Cotton production estimated to be lower at 360 lakh bales

COVID spread may affect mill consumption, exports: SIMA

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

COIMBATORE

The Committee on Cotton Production and Consumption expects production during the current season (October 2020 to September 2021) to be at 360 lakh bales, slightly lower than the 2019-2020 season estimate of 365 lakh bales.

At a meeting held on Friday, the committee estimated cotton exports in the current season to be at 70 lakh bales and consumption by textile mills at 288 lakh bales. The closing stock is projected to be almost 119 lakh bales.

In its previous meeting



held in January this year, the committee estimated 2020-2021 production to be 371 lakh bales, textile mill consumption at 312 lakh bales, and exports to be at 75 lakh bales.

According to K. Selvaraju,

secretary general of the

Power consumption grows 41%

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

NEW DELHI

Power consumption grew 41% in April 2021 to 119.27 billion units (BU) over the same month last year, showing robust recovery in industrial and commercial demand of electricity, according to ministry data.

Power consumption in April last year was recorded at 84.55 BU. During April this year, peak power demand met, on the highest supply in a day, touched the highest level of 182.55 GW and recorded a growth of nearly 38% over 132.73 GW in April 2020.

Consumption in April last year had dropped to 84.55 BU from 110.11 BU in the same month in 2019.

SPORT

TV PICKS

Sri Lanka vs Bangladesh: 2nd Test: Sony Six (SD & HD), 9.45 a.m.

IPL: Star Sports 1 & SS Select 1 (SD & HD), 3.30 p.m. & 7.30 p.m.

Serie A: Sony Ten 2 (SD & HD), 4 p.m., 6.30 p.m., 9.30 p.m. & 12.30 a.m. (Monday)

Premier League: SS Select 2 (SD & HD), 6.30 p.m., 9 p.m. & 11.45 p.m.

Formula One: Portuguese GP, Star Sports 2 (SD & HD), 7.30 p.m.

Impressive debut by Jaywickrama



Spinning a web: Praveen Jaywickrama picked up six wickets to help Sri Lanka dismiss Bangladesh for 251. ■AP

The left-arm spinner puts Sri Lanka in command

BANGLADESH IN SL

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

PALKELEKE

Sri Lanka left-arm spinner Praveen Jaywickrama took six wickets on his debut to dismiss Bangladesh for 251 and put the hosts in a strong position on day three of the second Test on Saturday.

Jaywickrama, a replacement for the injured Lasith Embuldeniya, has had a modest record in First Class cricket, but im-

pressed with six for 92 to give Sri Lanka a healthy 242-run first-innings lead.

He was backed by off-spinner Ramesh Mendis who took two wickets.

Sri Lanka took the new ball soon after it was available and Suranga Lakmal polished off the tail taking the last two wickets in successive overs.

Sri Lanka, which declared earlier on 493 for seven, did not enforce the follow-on and was 17 for two.

The first Test in the two-match series ended in a draw.

The scores: Sri Lanka 493/7 decl. and 17/2 vs Bangladesh 251 (Tamim Iqbal 92, Mominul Haque 49, Mushfiqur Rahim 40, Jaywickrama 6/92).

Carlsen takes on Nakamura in final

NEW IN CHESS CLASSIC

RAKESH RAO

NEW DELHI

As anticipated, World champion Magnus Carlsen and a fiercely competitive Hikaru Nakamura set up the final of the New in Chess Classic online rapid tournament after taking contrasting routes on Friday.

Carlsen, held 2-2 by Levon Aronian in the first match of their semifinal, won the second 3-1.

Nakamura, needing a draw to reach the final, was all at sea against Shakhriyar Mamedyarov. Shakhriyar won 3-0 to force the blitz tie-breaker. After both blitz games ended in draws, Nakamura.

The results: Semifinal: Match Two: Magnus Carlsen (Nor) bt Levon Aronian (Arm) 3-1; Shakhriyar Mamedyarov (Aze) bt Hikaru Nakamura (USA) 3-0.

Tie-breaker: Blitz games: Mamedyarov drew with Nakamura 1-1; Armageddon game: Mamedyarov lost to Nakamura.

Innings win for Pakistan

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

HARARE

Pakistan defeated Zimbabwe by an innings and 116 runs in the first Test on the third day here on Saturday, taking a 1-0 lead in the two-match series.

Zimbabwe was bowled out for 134 in its second innings.

The scores: Zimbabwe 176 and 134 (T. Musakanda 43, Hasan 5/36) lost to Pakistan 426 (Imran Butt 91, Abid Ali 60, Fawad Alam 140, Mohammad Rizwan 45, Muzarabani 4/73, Tiripano 3/89).

Munda lauds archers

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

KOLKATA

Archery Association of India (AAI) president Arjun Munda, on Saturday, lauded the recurve archers for putting up a fine show in the World Cup Stage-1 in Guatemala amid adversity.

Speaking at an online felicitation, Munda, also the Union Tribal Affairs Minister, praised the archers who bagged three gold medals and a bronze despite facing issues such as flight connectivity, waiting a day in Guatemala and spending about 23 hours in Paris to catch a return flight to India.

He thanked the support of the Sports Ministry, Sports Authority of India, Indian Olympic Association and its sponsor NTPC Limited.

The archers, including Atanu Das – who won an individual gold in men's section after 11 years – and his wife Deepika Kumari, shared their experiences – including facing COVID-19 protocols and health-related guidelines – during the World Cup.

IN BRIEF

Marquez crashes heavily again, but races on

JEREZ DE LA FRONTERA
Six-time world champion Marc Marquez escaped "major injury" after a high speed crash in the Spanish MotoGP practice here on Saturday and is fit to continue racing. "After his check, marquez93 has been declared FIT for the remainder of the SpanishGP," his Honda team tweeted. AFP

FIH Pro League: India opens against NZ

BENGALURU
The Indian men's hockey team will open its campaign in the third edition of FIH Pro League against New Zealand on February 5 next year as the world governing body released the schedule of the prestigious tournament. India will then take on Australia on February 12 and 13 before facing Spain (Feb. 26 and 27). India will play against Germany (March 12, 13) and Argentina (March 19, 20) at home. The next month, India will face England (April 2, 3) at home, followed by away games against Belgium (June 11, 12) and Netherlands (June 18, 19). PTI

Riya in doubles final

OERIAS (PORTUGAL)
Riya Bhatria's partnership with Gabriela Ce of Brazil beat the fourth seeds Valeriya Strakhova and Shalimar Talbi 7-5, 6-1 in the doubles semifinals of the \$25,000 ITF women's tennis tournament in Portugal.

Indian team aims to have long training

SHOOTING



After its overwhelming performance in the World Cup here in March, Indian shooting has lost a precious month planning the preparation for the Tokyo Olympics. The National Rifle Association of India (NRAI) maintained that the discussions were on between the stakeholders and the Sports Authority of India (SAI) to finalise the course of action.

The cream of Indian shooting has been reduced to home training after the World Cup. Some like Divyansh Singh Panwar, Manu Bhaker, Sanjeev Rajput and Abhishek Verma have been training at the Dr. Karni Singh range here in their individual capacity.

Rifle coach Deepali Deshpande conceded that it was

hard to finalise training as so many aspects tended to divert the plans.

"We finalise something and in a day or two some new restrictions come in and we have to change our plan. We are on the edge now. We must decide and start working," said Deepali.

Quite thoughtfully, SAI has tweaked the quarantine rules in such a way that shooters would be able to start training "in small groups" straight-away.

In about a week's time, the Indian shooters are expected to start firing away as a team till they depart for Tokyo.

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Pollard's stunning heist leaves Super Kings shell-shocked

His unbeaten 87 (34b, 6x4, 8x6) scripts Mumbai Indians' best-ever chase; du Plessis, Moeen and Rayudu's efforts in vain as Chennai's streak ends

IPL 2021

S. DINAKAR

It was Power Play by Kieron Pollard. The big man freed his arms and the ball took flight. In this heavyweight contest, he delivered the knock-out blow. It was a brutal onslaught.

In one of IPL's greatest innings, Pollard, 87 no. off 34 balls with six fours and eight sixes, fired Mumbai Indians, chasing a mammoth 219, to a heart-stopping last-ball four-wicket win over Chennai Super Kings in their clash at the Feroz Shah Kotla ground in New Delhi on Saturday.

After several twists, the contest boiled down to 16 of the last over. After a dot ball, Pollard flicked Lungi Ngidi to the fence. The third ball was swng to the fence but the fourth was a dot.

The fifth was sent flat over square-leg for a six and a hectic brace off the last ball settled the issue. Mumbai had pulled off an incredible win.

As tension mounted, Faf du Plessis put down Pollard - on 68 - at long-on off Shardul Thakur. The heavy-hitting Pollard waded into Ravindra Jadeja with some rousing hit-

ting; three sixes in an over. He also ruthlessly dismissed Lungi Ngidi for two on-side sixes while Thakur was bludgeoned for a straight six. The West Indian zoomed to 50 off just 17 deliveries.

Sam Curran struck for CSK, trapping Krunal Pandya leg-before with a yorker. The combative Curran sent down an excellent 17th over, conceding just two runs.

Hardik Pandya, however, whipped two successive sixes of Curran in the 19th before falling to the left-arm.

Earlier, Rohit Sharma and Quinton de Kock gave their side a brisk start. Thakur struck for CSK after Dhoni bowled out Deepak Chahar who struggled with cramps. Rohit was held at sweeper cover. Then Jadeja had Suryakumar Yadav caught behind by one that held its line. And Moeen Ali consumed de Kock.

In CSK's innings, Ambati Rayudu's captivating 72 not out off 27 balls was a compelling blitzkrieg. Rousing straight sixes, pulls over mid-wicket, scorching shots through covers after Rayudu made room were the gems that studded his innings. Moeen delighted after Rutu-

raj got a leading edge to Trent Boult.

His 58 was an innings with nonchalant pick-up shots, searing straight drives, glorious cover-drives and dismissive pulls. du Plessis played his part, twice pulling Bumrah for the maximum.

The wily Pollard struck with his medium pace, sending back du Plessis - falling to a ramp shot - and Suresh Raina, in his 200th IPL game, held at mid-wicket to trigger a mini collapse.

As the night wore on, Pollard threw in the killer blow.

C Probably one of the best T20 games that I've been part of. It was one of the best innings from Polly

ROHIT

C It was a brilliant wicket. The difference was the execution and we were off-target

DHONI

Next assignment

MI: May 4 vs. SRH, Delhi, 7.30 p.m.

CSK: May 5 vs. RR, Delhi, 7.30 p.m.



Blitzkrieg: Pollard's phenomenal hitting saw Mumbai Indians chase down a mammoth 219-run target against archrival Chennai Super Kings. • SPORTZPICS/IPL

SCOREBOARD

CHENNAI SUPER KINGS

Ruturaj Gaikwad c Hardik b Boult 4 (4b, 1x4), Faf du Plessis c Bumrah b Pollard 50 (28b, 2x4, 4x6), Moeen Ali c de Kock b Bumrah 58 (36b, 5x4, 5x6), Suresh Raina c Krunal b Pollard 2 (4b), Ambati Rayudu (not out) 72 (27b, 4x4, 7x6), Ravindra Jadeja (not out) 22 (22b, 2x4); Extras (lb-2, w-7, nb-1): 10; Total (for four wkts. in 20 overs): 218.

FALL OF WICKETS

1-4 (Gaikwad, 0.4 overs), 2-112 (Moeen, 10.5), 3-116 (du Plessis, 11.5), 4-116 (Raina, 11.6).

MUMBAI INDIANS BOWLING

Boult 4-0-42-1, Kulkarni 4-0-48-0, Bumrah 4-0-56-1, Rahul Chahar 4-0-32-0, Neesham 2-0-26-0, Pollard 2-0-12-2.

MUMBAI INDIANS

Quinton de Kock c & b Moeen 38 (28b, 4x4, 1x6), Rohit Sharma c Gaikwad b Shardul 35 (24b, 4x4, 1x6), Suryakumar Yadav c Dhoni b Jadeja 3 (3b), Krunal Pandya lbw b Sam Curran 32 (23b, 2x4, 2x6), Kieron Pollard (not out) 87 (34b, 6x4, 8x6), Hardik Pandya c du Plessis b Curran 16 (7b, 2x6), James Neesham c Shardul b Curran 0 (1b), Dhawal Kulkarni (not out) 0 (0b); Extras (w-8): 8; Total (for six wkts. in 20 overs): 219.

FALL OF WICKETS

1-71 (Rohit, 7.4), 2-77 (Suryaku-

mar, 8.4), 3-81 (de Kock, 9.4), 4-170 (Krunal, 16.3), 5-202 (Hardik, 18.4), 6-203 (Neesham, 18.6).

SUPER KINGS BOWLING

Deepak Chahar 4-0-37-0, Sam Curran 4-0-34-3, Ngidi 4-0-62-0, Shardul 4-0-56-1, Jadeja 3-0-29-1, Moeen 1-0-1-1.

Toss: MI; MoM: Pollard.

MI won by four wickets off the last delivery.

Innings scan

CSK	MI
37	Dots
14	Fours
16	Sixes
49/1	PP
10.90	RR

Top of the charts

ORANGE CAP

K.L. Rahul (PBKS)

Matches: 7 | Runs: 331

HS: 91 no. | SR: 136.21

PURPLE CAP

Harshal Patel (RCB)

Matches: 7 | Wickets: 17

BB: 5/27 | Econ: 9.17

After the MI-CSK match on May 1

Can Williamson breathe fresh life into SRH?

Sunrisers' new captain will look to lift his side against fellow strugglers Royals

AYAN ACHARYA

Bottom-placed Sunrisers Hyderabad will hope a change of captain brings a change in fortune when it takes on seventh-placed Rajasthan Royals at the Feroz



Making an impact: Miller would like to bat higher up while Pandey will hope to push on after rediscovering his touch.

RR ropes in SA pacer Gerald Coetze

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

NEW DELHI

Rajasthan Royals on Saturday signed South African pacer Gerald Coetze as a replacement for England batsman Liam Livingstone for the remainder of the In-

terval.

Coetze has played eight T20 matches so far and has taken nine wickets at an average of 23.33 in the format.

Shah Kotla in Delhi on Sunday. Kane Williamson took over SRH's captaincy from David Warner for the remainder of IPL 2021 on Saturday.

The franchise also announced there will be a change in its overseas

combination.

The manner of SRH's five defeats has highlighted the frailty of its middle-order. The side is over-reliant on Williamson and Jonny Bairstow. Manish Pandey's 46-ball 61 in the last match (vs. CSK) will provide hope, but Warner's laborious fifty didn't soothe nerves. It is possible Jason Holder or Jason Roy could replace Warner.

The bowling will again revolve around Rashid Khan. Bhuvneshwar Kumar, who has missed back-to-back games, is yet to be passed fit.

For RR, skipper Sanju Samson is back among runs (42 no. vs KKR, 42 vs MI) and the hope is for it to rub off on the likes of Jos Buttler, who has only 130 runs in six innings (SR: 127.45).

RR's decision to send Shiva

m Dube ahead of David

Miller against MI backfired. It needs Miller batting higher up.

The left-arm trio of Jaydev Unadkat, Mustafizur Rahman and Chetan Sakariya has been crafty but inconsistent. Chris Morris has become a good death-bowling option.

Both sides are desperate for a win to revive their playoff pursuits.

TODAY'S MATCHES



vs.



DELHI, 3.30 P.M.

HEAD-TO-HEAD

Played: 13

RR 6 | SRH 7

FORM GUIDE

RR L W L W L W

SRH L W L W L W

STAR SPORTS 1 & STAR SELECT 1 (SD & HD)



vs.



AHMEDABAD, 7.30 P.M.

HEAD-TO-HEAD

Played: 27

PBKS 15 | DC 12

FORM GUIDE

PBKS W L W L W L

DC W L W L W L

STAR SPORTS 1 & STAR SELECT 1 (SD & HD)

tle. However, its vulnerable middle-order will face scrutiny.

Explosive batsmen

This 'Northern Derby' promises to be a high-scoring encounter. The teams are capable of shifting gears, courtesy their explosive frontline batsmen. Leading contenders for the Orange Cap – PBKS leader K. L. Rahul and DC's Shikhar Dhawan and Prithvi Shaw – will resume the race.

With Chris Gayle and Shimron Hetmyer making no secret of their desires to be in the mix, and Nicholas Pooran desperate to end his poor form (four ducks so far), a few bowlers could come under the pump.

With seven games left to play, DC has five victories and PBKS three. Clearly, the result assumes more import-



Contrasting fortunes: While Pooran is yet to find his feet, Hetmyer has fired on all cylinders. • SPORTZPICS/IPL

tance for the Punjab side. It needs a winning run like the one in IPL 2020, where it notched up five successive triumphs in the second half of the competition.

Since PBKS will play its

last five matches in Bengaluru, providing a sense of homecoming for Karnataka lads Rahul and Mayank Agarwal, and former RCB star Gayle, it can stay optimistic of its qualifying prospects.

Elche hands Atletico a lifeline with a missed penalty

EURO LEAGUES

AGENCIES

LONDON

Manchester City is within touching distance of the Premier League title after Sergio Aguero and Ferran Torres sealed a 2-0 win at Crystal Palace on Saturday.

Pep Guardiola's side sits 13 points clear at the top and will be crowned champion if second-placed Manchester United loses against Liverpool on Sunday.

After a tepid first half in south London, it was fitting that Aguero – the architect of so many big moments in City's history – should open the scoring with a typically lethal finish.

Torres killed off Palace two minutes later as City eased to an 11th successive away victory in the Premier League, equalising the English top-flight record.

Christian Eriksen and Achraf Hakimi scored in the second half as Inter Milan beat Crotone 2-0 to move to the brink of the Serie A title on Saturday.

Rifling in: Sergio Aguero, second right, thunders in a volley for City's first. • AP

Antonio Conte's side is 14 points ahead of second-placed Atalanta and can claim its first Scudetto since 2010 if the Bergamo side fails to win at Sassuolo on Sunday.

Atletico Madrid stayed in charge of LaLiga's four-way title race by grinding out a 1-0 win at struggling Elche on Saturday but rode its luck to the extreme when the hosts missed a penalty in stoppage time.

The results: Premier League: Crystal Palace

Maradona got 'deficient' health care

ASSOCIATED PRESS