

THE ASIAN AGE

NEW DELHI SATURDAY 29 MAY 2021



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Late Sushant Singh Rajput's flatmate Siddharth Pithani (left) after being arrested by the NCB in the drugs case linked to the Bollywood actor's death in Mumbai on Friday. **Full report on Page 4** — *PTI*

Domestic air travel to be costlier, govt hikes lower fare limit June 1

New Delhi: Domestic air travel is set to become costlier as the civil aviation ministry on Friday raised the lower limit on fares by 13 to 16 per cent, according to an official order. The increase in airfares will come into effect from June 1, it said. The upper limits on fares remain unchanged. The government has raised the lower limits to help the airlines amid a devastating second wave of Covid-19, which has reduced air travel significantly. — *PTI*

Dominica court halts 'removal' of Choksi

New Delhi: A court in Dominica has "restrained" authorities from "removing" fugitive businessman Mehul Choksi from the Caribbean island country till further orders, local media reported. The order came on a petition filed by the lawyers of Choksi, who was detained in Dominica for "illegal entry". — *PTI* **More on Page 3**

125 tiger cubs found in MP reserve forests

Bhopal: Tiger reserves in Madhya Pradesh are currently witnessing baby boom, literally. Tiger cubs trailing their mothers have almost become a common sight in the majority of the six tiger reserves in the state currently. **More on Page 4**



Now we can tweet only emojis, right?

WEATHER



Max: 39°C
Min: 28°C
RH: 36%
Rain: 0%

Forecast: sunny

ASTROGUIDE

Plava: Uttarayana
Tithi: Vaishakha Bahula Tadiya till 6.34 am
Star: Poorvashadha till 6.08 am
Variyam: Sesa Variyam till 6.22 am and 1.41 pm to 3.11 pm
Durmuhurtam: 5.44 am to 7.28 am
Rahukalam: 9 am to 10.30 am
SUNSET TODAY 8.07 PM
SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.29 AM
MOONRISE TOMORROW 10.27 PM
MOONSET TODAY 9.32 AM

■ GoM to take call soon ■ Import duty exemptions on Covid items ■ Small taxpayers to get 'late fees' relief

GST Council still undecided on tax cuts for Covid goods

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO
NEW DELHI, MAY 28

The Centre on Friday ruled out any immediate reduction of taxes on Covid essentials, as sought in many quarters, and no decision on this was taken at the GST Council's meeting, which remained inconclusive. The government, however, said a Group of Ministers (GoM) had been formed to submit a report on the reduction of rates on Covid-related items soop. The GST Council's 43rd meet, that took place after a gap of seven months, took several key decisions, including exemption of duty on the import of Covid-19 related items and an amnesty scheme for small and medium taxpayers to reduce the late fee burden on them.

Briefing the media after the GST Council meeting late on Friday evening,



Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman addresses the media after the GST Council's meeting in New Delhi on Friday. — *PTI*

finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said issues of Covid-related items was one item on the agenda that saw detailed discussions. "The decision over tax rates on Covid vaccines was referred to a Group of Ministers, which will be announced by June 8," she said. "The council has also

decided to exempt the import of relief items even if they are purchased, if these are meant for donating to the government, or on the recommendation of any state government to any relief agency. This exemption is extended till August 31, 2021," she said, adding

■ **Turn to Page 4**

Will vaccinate all by December, says govt after Rahul's 3% jibe

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI MAY 28

India will be fully vaccinated against Covid-19 by the end of 2021, Union minister Prakash Javadekar declared on Friday, as the government hit back at Congress MP Rahul Gandhi for pointing out that less than three per cent of the country's 130 crore people had received both doses of a vaccine till now. "India's vaccination will be completed before 2021. The health ministry has given a blueprint. 108 crore people — with 216 crore doses — will be vaccinated by December.

▶ **THE COUNTRY** has been recording less than 3 lakh daily new cases for 12 consecutive days and according to the Union health ministry, active cases are on a decline and have reduced by 76,755 in the last 24 hours with recoveries outnumbering them.

Rahulji... if you're concerned about vaccination then pay attention to Congress ruled states... there is a mess. They are not taking the quota given to them for 18-44 year old beneficiaries

from May 1," Mr Javadekar said.

India on Friday reported 1.86 lakh fresh Covid-19 cases, the lowest in 44 days. The country has been recording less than 3 lakh daily new cases for 12 consecutive days and according to the Union health ministry, active cases are on a decline and have reduced by 76,755 in the last 24 hours with recoveries outnumbering them.

The country's Recovery Rate has increased to 90.34 per cent as over 2.49 lakh people got discharged from medical supervision. The daily

■ **Turn to Page 4**

Delhi to start 'unlock' from Monday: Kejri

'Factories, construction sites to reopen first, keeping needs of daily wagers in mind'

BHASKAR HARI SHARMA
NEW DELHI, MAY 28

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal on Friday said there will be gradual unlocking of the national capital from May 31 as the Covid-19 situation is coming under control. But, he added, Delhi will take one step at a time and will not unlock all activities as there has to be a balance between

containment and the resumption of economic activities. Only construction activities and factories will be reopened from Monday keeping the interest of daily wagers in mind. Everything else will remain shut. A detailed guideline will be issued, the CM said, urging people to not come out of their houses unless absolutely necessary. "This doesn't mean the fight against the deadly



Arvind Kejriwal

the case that people escape coronavirus but die of hunger... We have to maintain a balance between controlling the spread of coronavirus and allowing economic activi-

disease has ended." Mr Kejriwal stressed.

"It is time to start the unlock process. It should not be the case that people escape coronavirus but die of hunger... We have to maintain a balance between controlling the spread of coronavirus and allowing economic activi-

ties," Mr Kejriwal said during an online press briefing.

"At a meeting of the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) on Friday, it was decided that the lockdown be lifted gradually. In this process, we have to take care of the lowest strata first... daily wagers, labourers, migrant workers who come to Delhi from far off areas in

■ **Turn to Page 4**



West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee takes stock of the damage caused by Cyclone Yaas in Digha on Friday. — *PTI*

■ **BJP leaders, mantris fume at CM 'boycott' over Suwendu**

Mamata asks PM for ₹20Kcr aid package, but skips review meet

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, MAY 28

West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee demanded a special relief package of ₹20,000 crores from Prime Minister Narendra Modi while meeting and briefing him separately on Friday afternoon on the damage caused in the state due to "very severe" Cyclone Yaas following his arrival at the Kalaikunda Air Force Station in West Midnapore after doing an aerial survey of the devastation here while flying from the neighbouring affected state Odisha.

WB chief secy is shifted to Centre

New Delhi/Kolkata, May 28: Barely four days after he was granted extension, the Centre on Friday night sought services of West Bengal chief secretary Alapan Bandyopadhyay and asked the state government to relieve the officer immediately with a direction to him to report in Delhi on Monday. — *PTI* **More on Page 3**

Submitting a preliminary report to Mr Modi,

Govt: Google, FB, WhatsApp share details, but not Twitter

New Delhi, May 28: Google, Facebook and WhatsApp have shared details with the IT ministry as per requirements under the digital rules but Twitter is still not following the new norms, government sources said on Friday.

The sources said Twitter has not sent details of COCO to the ministry and only shared details of a lawyer working in India as their nodal contact person and grievance officer.

This has been done when the rules require such designated officers of the significant social media platforms to be the employees of the company and resident in India, they pointed out. — *PTI* **More on Page 3**

Narada case: All 4 accused granted interim bail by HC

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, MAY 28

In a setback to the CBI in the high-profile Narada sting bribery case, the "larger bench" of five judges of the Calcutta high court on Friday granted interim bail on certain conditions to four prominent accused — including two sitting West Bengal ministers — who were under house arrest after being in judicial custody after a stay on their an interim bail from a lower court within hours of their arrest on May 17.

Acting Chief Justice Rajesh Bindal and Justices I.P. Mukerji, Harish Tandon, Soumen Sen and Arijit Banerjee of the "larger bench" ordered the interim bail against a bond of ₹2 lakhs for each of the accused

four —Firhad Hakim, state transport minister and outgoing Kolkata mayor; Subrata Mukherjee, state pan-chayat minister; Madan Mitra, Trinamul Congress MLA of Kamarhati; and Sovan Chatterjee, former TMC minister and a former Kolkata mayor.

The high court however directed all the four accused to appear before the CBI investigating officer in "virtual" mode if summoned for questioning and barred them from speaking to the media on the case.

The order came after an explosive letter by Justice Arindam Sinha of the high court to all other judges on May 24 — on the treatment of the CBI's plea as a writ petition for transfer of the Narada

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PM Oli pushes for all-party govt in Nepal ahead of fresh elections

Kathmandu, May 28: Embattled Nepal Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli on Friday urged all political parties to form an all-party government and hold fresh elections, as he tried to justify the controversial dissolution of the House of Representatives by the President, saying a "functionless" Parliament turned out to be the main source of instability in the country. Going for an election can never be a regressive act, PM Oli said in a televised address to the nation, a week after the House was dissolved by President Bidya Devi Bhandari.



The president dissolved the 275-member House of Representatives on Saturday for the second time in five months and announced snap elections on November 12 and November 19 on the advice of Prime Minister Oli, who is heading a minority government.

PM Oli, 69, called upon the political parties to form an all-party government and hold elections, My Republica.com portal quoted him as saying.

Addressing the nation as the chief executive of the country, Oli took

most of his time to criticise the moves taken by the Opposition parties and his fellow party leaders. He blamed the Opposition parties and dissident faction of the ruling CPN-UML for the dissolution of Parliament.

PM Oli said Parliament could not ensure stability in the country even after it was restored on February 23 through judicial intervention.

Though it was reinstated through the Supreme Court's verdict, it turned out to be functionless and the main source of instability in the country, he said. — *PTI*

Jaishankar holds talks with US Def Sec Austin & NSA

Washington, May 28: External affairs minister S. Jaishankar on Friday had a "warm meeting" with US defence secretary Lloyd Austin here during which they discussed further developing strategic and defence partnership between the two countries and exchanged views on "contemporary security challenges". Mr Jaishankar, who is on an official trip to the US, is the first Indian Cabinet minister to visit the country since Joe Biden became US President on January 20. — *PTI* **More on Page 4**



SHORT TAKES

Flight returns to Delhi after bat's carcass found

New Delhi: An Air India flight to Newark in the US had to return to the Delhi airport on the morning of May 27 as cabin crew saw a bat's carcass inside the business class area of the plane just half an hour after take off, sources said on Friday. The plane had departed from the Delhi airport at 2.20 am on Thursday and no one noticed the bat's carcass before the take off, they mentioned. The cabin crew members saw the carcass in the eighth row, which is in the business class area of the plane, and informed the pilots, the sources said. The pilot then informed the air traffic controller (ATC) about the carcass and the plane was turned back, they stated. The plane, with its crew and passengers, jettisoned its fuel and landed at the Delhi airport around 4.20 am on Thursday, the sources noted. The Boeing B777-300ER aircraft was cleaned and fumigated later, they said. — PTI

Student held for duping promising Remdesivir

New Delhi: An 18-year-old college student has been arrested by the Delhi Police from Madhya Pradesh for allegedly duping an attendant of a Covid-19 patient on the pretext of providing him Remdesivir injections. According to the police, the accused Vartika Rai hails from Seoni, Madhya Pradesh and is pursuing her graduation in Psychology from IGNOU University, Delhi. The accused had cheated altogether 11 persons of over ₹2 lakhs, the police alleged. Mobile phones used in the commission of crime, ATM cards and ₹32,400 were recovered from her, the police said. According to the complaint lodged at the Defence Colony police station, the victim was in urgent need of injection for his relative. While searching on the internet, he came across a mobile number promising to provide him five vials of injection for ₹32,400. The complainant alleged that after the amount was transferred, the accused stopped responding to his calls.

Young Hind Society campaigns for mass vaccination

New Delhi: Former Delhi University Students Union (DUSU) president Shakti Singh and NGO Young Hind Society have taken various initiatives across the nation to bolster the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, with the purpose of helping people get vaccinated. The covid vaccination linked initiative is helping those without internet access and unable to register online, as well as those who do not have the means to travel to their respective vaccination centres. Young Hind society and Shakti Singh's initiative is also helping dispel the myths and fears related to vaccination among the public through awareness drives. Shakti Singh, sharing the details of the campaign said: "Special efforts need to be made in a lot of areas to help speed up the Covid-19 vaccination drive. To do so is not just the responsibility of the government, but also the society. We are helping people get vaccinated at various places across the nation where our NGO has its reach. I appeal to the youth of the nation to come forward and help people around them register for and reach the vaccination center and to help us dispel the myths and rumours propagated about the coronavirus vaccine."



The Delhi Police have initiated 'YUVA scheme' for underprivileged youth of the national capital. They collaborate with various companies and hospital for their skill training and employment. The aim is to generate resource and talent to contribute in healthcare sector in the time of Covid pandemic.

Centre asked to give further details on situation It's a living hell, says HC on black fungus drug shortage

New Delhi, May 28: "We are living this hell. Everyone is living this hell. It's a situation where we want to help but we are helpless," the Delhi high court lamented on Friday while hearing pleas on the shortage of black fungus medicine and the problems faced by the patients.

While the Centre placed a report giving the steps taken by it to source the medicine and overcome shortages, the high court directed it to give further details on the current status of its imports.

The court, which was hearing two pleas seeking medicine vials for two patients admitted here for black fungus infection, expressed helplessness over the situation and said it cannot pass any order that a particular patient should be given preference for treatment while denying it to others.

The issue of shortage of the medicine for treating black fungus was raised by advocate Rakesh Malhotra, who said the black fungus cases affecting Covid-affected people are rising.

The court, which was



A black fungus infected patient at a hospital in Ghaziabad on Friday.

— PTI

informed that steps are being taken by the Centre to procure 2.30 lakh vials of Liposomal Amphotericin-B from six countries, asked the government to explain the reason behind choosing this figure as "the requirement of the medicine is much more."

Additional solicitor general Chetan Sharma said that as per the information updated on the portal, the number of patients under treatment for mucormycosis (black fungus) in India was

14,872 on May 28 (9.00 am) and this includes 423 patients in Delhi.

"Out of the sources that have been presently identified abroad, the ministry of health and family welfare (MoHFW), on May 24, has called upon the ministry of external affairs (MEA) to take steps to procure 2,30,000 vials of Liposomal Amphotericin-B from Australia, Russia, Germany, Argentina, Belgium, and China," Sharma said.

— PTI

Vaccination suspended for 18+ group for 5th day: Delhi govt

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MAY 28

As the national capital vaccinated about 39,000 people on May 27, Delhi MLA Atishi said on Friday that there was no stock of Covaxin available for vaccination in any age group. While the vaccination of the 18-44 age group remained suspended for the fifth day, she also alleged that states, including Delhi, were not receiving doses to vaccinate the youth, however, private hospitals are not short of it.

"It's been five days since vaccination of youth was suspended in Delhi. On

one side, states are not able to vaccinate their youth, on the other private hospitals are not short of it and are charging ₹900-1,350 for a jab," Atishi said in a virtual press conference.

The national capital recorded 1,141 new Covid-19 cases and 139 more fatalities on Friday, with a positivity rate of 1.59 per cent, even as Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal asserted that Delhi has somehow gained control over the second wave of the pandemic.

This is the third consecutive day when the daily cases count have stood below the 1500-mark.



Delhi deputy CM Manish Sisodia at a drive-in vaccination centre in New Delhi on Friday.

— PTI

HC declines to entertain plea to restrain 'media trial' of Sushil

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MAY 28

Two more associate of international wrestler-turned-murderer Sushil Kumar was arrested by Delhi Police in connection with the Sagar Dhankar murder case. This is the ninth arrest so far in the case. The 23-year-old Rohit Karor has been wrestling with Sushil for the past 14 years and was also present at Chhatrasal stadium on the day of the incident.

Meanwhile, the Crime Branch team also took Sushil and his aide Ajay to Punjab's Bathinda in connection with the ongoing investigation.

The Delhi High Court also on Friday declined to entertain a plea to restrain the media from 'sensationalis-



Sushil Kumar

ing' the trial of wrestler and Olympic medalist Sushil Kumar in connection with the death of a 23-year old wrestler, and seeking rules for reporting criminal cases, saying a PIL cannot be filed for an individual who is a "vigilant person".

According to a senior police official, Rohit and another accused Binder were nabbed on Thursday night from Delhi's Tikri

border after specific inputs were received regarding them by the police team of Crime Branch.

"Initially they have told police that they both present at Chhatrasal stadium with Sushil at the time of incident. Further they are being interrogated," he said.

Earlier, a video surfaced on social media on Thursday purportedly showing two-time Olympic medalist Sushil Kumar and his associates allegedly hitting another man with sticks. In the video, Kumar and his associates are purportedly seen carrying sticks in their hands while the man can be seen lying on the ground in an injured condition. A man can be seen carrying a pistol in the video.

New Delhi, May 28: A 65-year-old man from Delhi, having multiple co-morbidities, has become the first Covid-19 patient to receive monoclonal antibody therapy at the Apollo hospital here, the healthcare group said on Friday.

The patient responded well to the infusion of the antibody cocktail and went home after an hour of observation on Thursday, hospital authorities said.

As part of this single dose infusion-based treatment, patients with mild to moderate symptoms, are offered a cocktail of Casirivimab and Imdevimab, that is said to reduce their chance of hospitalisation by 70 per cent.

In a statement, Indraprastha Apollo Hospitals, Delhi on Friday announced that "Roche India's antibody cocktail (Casirivimab and Imdevimab) distributed by Cipla Ltd. is available for administration to patients with mild and moderate COVID-19 infection" at its facility.

The Antibody Cocktail was launched on May 24 in India by Roche India after receiving Emergency Use Authorisation (EUA) from the Central Drugs Standards Control Organisation (CDSO), it said.

The first patient to receive the therapy at Apollo hospital here is a 65-year-old Covid patient from Delhi who has mul-

multiple co-morbidities, including acute blood pressure, a spokesperson of the hospital said.

"We are glad to have launched a pan-India program to make available this advanced treatment comprising of neutralising monoclonal antibodies for our patients with Covid-19," said Anupam Sibal, Group Medical Director, Apollo Hospitals Group and seniors consultant, paediatric gastroenterology at the hospital.

Monoclonal antibodies bind to and 'neutralise' the SARS-CoV-2 virus, he said, adding, "we are confident that this treatment option will significantly boost our efforts to bring the pandemic under control and will help prevent

progression of the disease in those with mild to moderate Covid-19".

The therapy is most suited for "high-risk Covid-19 patients" who are within first ten days of symptom onset and meet any of the listed criteria, such as age being 65 years or above.

Other criteria include, obesity with BMI (Body Mass Index) of more than 35; or type 1 or type 2 diabetes mellitus; or chronic kidney disease, including those on dialysis; or chronic liver disease; or currently receiving immunosuppressive treatment; or if aged above 55, having either heart disease, or hypertension, or chronic lung disease.

— PTI

65-yr-old man 1st Covid patient to get antibody cocktail at Apollo in Delhi

Vaccination centre opened for differently abled in south Delhi

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MAY 28

A Covid vaccination centre dedicated for persons with disabilities (PwD) was opened on Friday at the Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya in Chhatrapur. As per a notice from the south Delhi district magistrate, the centre will cater to PwDs aged 45 or older for now. The centre will remain open from 9 am to 5 pm every day of the week, except on Sunday.

The visitors will be required to carry a proof of disability in the form of PwD identity card, or proof of residency in a PwD shelter/hostel/centre, or any other relevant PwD certificate, the notice said.

The Delhi government on Thursday had asked all district social welfare officers (DSWOs) to proactively coordinate with revenue and health department functionaries at the district level to facilitate timely treatment and vaccination of persons with disabilities against Covid-19.

The DSWOs have also been directed to actively coordinate with the office of the State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities and implement any directions received without delay.

IMPORTANT NOTICE

This is notified for the information of Rail passengers that Railways have decided to extend the stoppage of Train No. 04441/04442 Ghaziabad-New Delhi-Ghaziabad EMU Spl. upto Delhi Jn. station w.e.f. 01.06.2021 to 15.06.2021 as per details given below :-

Train No. 04441/04442 Ghaziabad-New Delhi-Ghaziabad EMU Spl. (Daily) extended upto Delhi Jn.					
Train No. 04441	STATIONS				Train No. 04442
ARR. DEP.	↓	↑	ARR. DEP.	↓	ARR. DEP.
----	No Change	GHAZIABAD	01.20	----	----
No Change	No Change	SAHIBABAD	01.00	01.01	
No Change	No Change	ANAND VIHAR (T.)	00.50	00.51	
No Change	No Change	TILAK BRIDGE	00.41	00.42	
No Change	No Change	SHIVAJI BRIDGE	00.36	00.37	
23.45	23.47	NEW DELHI	00.30	00.32	
00.05	----	DELHI JN.	----	00.15	

For any kind of information such as detailed Time-Table of stations enroute etc., passengers are requested to contact RailMadad Helpline No. 139 or visit Indian Railways website <https://enquiry.indianrail.gov.in> or NTES App.

All norms of the State and Central Government regarding COVID-19 including Social distancing, sanitization etc., must be followed in the trains and at the Railway stations. All other precautions associated with COVID-19 should also be ensured.

RailMadad Helpline No. 139

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IMPORTANT NOTICE

It is notified for the information of rail passengers that the East Coast Railway has decided to cancel/reduce the frequency of the following Rajdhani Special Trains due to low occupancy as per the following details:-

CANCELLATION/REDUCTION IN FREQUENCY OF SPECIAL TRAINS				
Train No. & Name	Existing Frequency	Revised Frequency	Dates of Cancellation	Days of Cancellation
02823 Bhubaneswar-New Delhi Rajdhani Special	Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri	Tuesday	03, 04, 07, & 10.06.2021	Mon, Thu, Fri
02824 New Delhi-Bhubaneswar Rajdhani Special	Tue, Wed, Thu & Sat	Wednesday	03, 05, 08, & 10.06.2021	Tue, Thu, Sat
02825 Bhubaneswar-New Delhi Rajdhani Special	Wednesday & Sunday	Sunday	02.06.2021 & 09.06.2021	Wednesday
02826 New Delhi-Bhubaneswar Rajdhani Special	Monday & Friday	Monday	04.06.2021 & 11.06.2021	Friday
02855 Bhubaneswar-New Delhi Rajdhani Special	Saturday	---	05.06.2021	Saturday
02856 New Delhi-Bhubaneswar Rajdhani Special	Sunday	---	06.06.2021	Sunday

These Special Trains will be having Fully Reserved Service.

For any kind of information such as detailed Time-Table and stations enroute etc., passengers are requested to contact RailMadad Helpline No. 139 or visit Indian Railways website <https://enquiry.indianrail.gov.in> or NTES App.

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SHORT TAKES

Ban on int flights extended till June 1

New Delhi: The coronavirus-induced suspension of scheduled international passenger flights has been extended till June 30, aviation regulator DGCA said on Friday. "However, international scheduled flights may be allowed on selected routes by the competent authority on a case-to-case basis," the Directorate General of Civil Aviation added. Scheduled international passenger services have been suspended in India since March 23, 2020 due to the pandemic. But special international flights have been operating under the Vande Bharat Mission since May 2020, and under bilateral "air bubble" arrangements with select countries since July 2020. India has formed air bubble pacts with around 27 countries, including the US, UAE, Bhutan and France. Under an air bubble pact between two countries, special international flights can be operated by their airlines between their territories.

UP vaccine goof-up: Officer transferred

Siddharthnagar, Uttar Pradesh: A health worker was suspended and a medical officer transferred two weeks after 20 villagers here were administered Covaxin after getting Covishield as their first dose. The goof-up took place on May 14 at the primary health centre in Barhni where people from Audahi Kala and another village received Covaxin shots. An inquiry was ordered and action taken against auxiliary nursing midwife (ANM) Kalavati was suspended and Shivesht Kumar, the medical officer, who was in charge of the centre, for negligence, chief medical officer (CMO) Sandeep Chaudhary said in a statement. The CMO also issued a recovery order of ₹7,500 against Immunisation Officer Shanti Singh after 50 doses of Covishield were found missing from the cold chain, it said. — PTI

Class 12 exams: SC to hear plea May 31

New Delhi: The Supreme Court on Friday deferred hearing to Monday on a public interest plea to cancel the Class 12 examination of the CBSE and the ICSE for the academic year 2020-21 to protect the lives of students in view of the current second wave of the Covid pandemic. Asking the PIL, petitioner advocate Mamta Sharma to serve the copy of her petition to the CBSE, ICSE, the Centre and to the office of attorney general, a bench comprising Justice A.M. Khanwilkar and Justice Dinesh Maheshwari observed that the government may take a decision on the fate of the exams by Monday. "We permit the petitioner-in-person to serve advance copy on the standing counsel for the respondent(s)," the court said while deferring the hearing for Monday.

INDIA BACKS CALL FOR STUDIES ON COVID-19 ORIGINS

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MAY 28

In what is being seen as a clear thinly-veiled blunt message to China to cooperate, India on Friday termed the WHO-convened global study on the origin of Covid-19 as an "important first step" and "stressed the need for next phase studies as also for further data and studies to reach robust conclusions", adding that the "follow up of the WHO report and further studies deserve the understanding and cooperation of all". The MEA said, "The WHO convened global study on the origin of Covid-19 is an important first step. It stressed the need for next phase studies as also for further data and studies to reach robust conclusions. The follow up of the WHO report and further studies deserve the understanding and cooperation of all." According to media reports, the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) is once again under the spotlight as in the past few days, the theory that the virus emerged from the WIV in China, which was once dismissed, has suddenly gained steam with US President Joe Biden ordering a review of Covid-19 origins.

'PM responsible for 2nd Covid wave'

Rahul says multiple waves to come if no vaccine strategy in place ■ Leader asks Modi to involve others too

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MAY 28

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi charged the Prime Minister Narendra Modi for being responsible for the second wave of Covid and said that the Prime Minister "did not understand Covid at all". Addressing a virtual press conference Mr Gandhi attacked the Prime Minister and said, "The first wave no one understood... but the second wave is the PM's responsibility. His stunts (*nautanki*)... His failure to fulfil his responsibilities is the reason for the second wave."

He also asked the Prime Minister to set up panel that would meet daily and interact with top experts over the issue.

Seeking wider consultation to address the Covid surge, Mr Gandhi asked the Prime Minister to involve others too.

"If (Chhattisgarh CM) Bhupesh Baghel, (West Bengal CM) Mamata Banerjee and Modi are on the same page, coronavirus can be kept out," he said.

He added, "Many people and I had been giving non-stop warnings against Covid. But the PM declared victory, saying Covid has been defeated. The problem is that the government and Prime Minister didn't even understand that corona is an evolving disease. The

The problem is that the govt and PM didn't even understand that corona is an evolving disease...

— Rahul Gandhi, Congress leader

more you give time and space to the virus, the more dangerous it becomes."

Attacking the Prime Minister on the vaccination strategy, he said vaccines were the only permanent solution to Covid and lockdowns, social distancing and masks were temporary ones.

Mr Gandhi stressed that without a proper vaccination strategy, India would witness multiple waves of infection. India, he said, had vaccinated only three per cent of its population, leaving the rest open to infection.

"I directly told the PM that if India does not sort out its vaccination strategy, there will be multiple waves since the virus adapts. The Prime Minister is the head of the country. He is responsible for its well-being. The buck stops with the Prime Minister. But the Prime Minister lives in a bubble... no one talks to him because of the way he handles things," he added.



Relatives perform last rites of a Covid-19 victim at a crematorium in Srinagar on Friday. — PTI

BJP hits back at Rahul, says he's stoking 'fears' as part of 'toolkit'

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MAY 28

Asserting that India will be fully vaccinated against Covid-19 by December 2021, Union minister Prakash Javadekar on Friday slammed Congress leader Rahul Gandhi for criticising Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the Covid vaccination programme.

Claiming that the usage of term "*nautanki*" by the Congress leader for the PM is "an insult to the PM's and people's efforts against

the pandemic" and also part of the Opposition party's "toolkit's script", the senior BJP leader

alleged that it has been confirmed that the "toolkit" was produced by the Opposition party to stoke "fears" and "spread misinformation" against India's efforts against the global pandemic.

The BJP had recently claimed that the Congress had come out with a "toolkit" for its leaders and supporters giving instructions on how to "defame India and the PM", including

in the foreign media, over the Covid-19 issue.

Rebutting Mr Gandhi's criticism about alleged slow pace of the vaccination drive, Mr Javadekar said over 20 crore doses have been administered so far and India is second in the world regarding vaccination, which is set to see a big jump from August.

The BJP leader said the Congress and its leaders have been spreading misinformation regarding the vaccination drive and also indigenous vaccine Covaxin since day one.

Pigs found eating youth's body in MP, probe ordered

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY
BHOPAL, MAY 28

In a gory incident, a youth's body was found to be nibbled by a herd of pigs in Bhopal. The body of the youth, identified as Mohan Meena (25), was recovered while being "eaten" by the pigs on the bank of Kolar river in the city on Friday, the police said.

Locals spotted the body being nibbled by the pigs and informed the police. The police rushed to the spot and recovered the body after chasing the marauding animals away, the police said.

The face and lower part of the body were completely eaten by the pigs. According to the police, the deceased fled home on Thursday night.

"He often fled home and returned a day later. Hence, the family members did not bother to search him after he left home on Thursday night," the police said.

The police suspects that the youth might have slept on the bank of the river under the influence of liquor and then fell victim to attack by pigs. The police also did not rule out foul play.

'Google, FB & WhatsApp have shared details, but not Twitter'

New Delhi, May 28: Google, Facebook and WhatsApp have shared details with the IT ministry as per requirements under the digital rules but Twitter is still not following the new norms, government sources said on Friday.

The sources said Twitter has not sent details of chief compliance officer to the ministry and only shared details of a lawyer working in a law firm in India as their nodal contact person and grievance officer.

This has been done when the rules require such designated officers of the significant social

media platforms to be the employees of the company and resident in India, they pointed out.

According to the sources, most of the large social media platforms have shared details of chief compliance officer, nodal contact person, grievance officer with the IT ministry as required under the new rules.

The sources said that significant social media intermediaries, including Google, Facebook, WhatsApp, Koo, Sharechat, Telegram and LinkedIn, have shared details with the ministry as per the requirements of the new rules.

Twitter is still not following the rules, the sources said.

After a strong response from the government on Thursday, Twitter sent a communication sharing details of a lawyer working in a law firm in India as their nodal contact person and grievance officer.

On Thursday, the row over Twitter's handling of certain messages escalated into an all-out war of words with the government saying the messaging platform was levelling baseless and false allegations to defame India and dictating terms to the world's largest democracy. — PTI

WB chief secy told to report to Centre Mon

New Delhi/Kolkata, May 28: Barely four days after he was granted extension, the Centre on Friday

night sought services of West Bengal chief secretary Alapan Bandyopadhyay and asked the state government to relieve the officer immediately with a direction to him to report in Delhi on Monday.

Mr Bandyopadhyay, a 1987-batch IAS officer of West Bengal cadre, was scheduled to retire on May 31 after completion of 60 years of age. However, he was granted a three-month extension following a nod from the Centre.

West Bengal chief min-

ister Mamata Banerjee had written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on May 12, urging him to grant Mr Bandyopadhyay an extension for at least six months in view of his experience of handling the Covid-19 pandemic.

In a communique to the state government, the personnel ministry on Friday said the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet has approved the placement of the services of Mr Bandyopadhyay with the Government of India as per provisions of the Indian Administrative Service (cadre) Rules, 1954, "with immediate effect". — PTI

Shift Fr Stan Swamy to a pvt hospital: Bombay HC

SHAHAB ANSARI
MUMBAI, MAY 28

The Bombay high court on Friday directed the jail authorities in Maharashtra to shift Stan Swamy, an accused in the Elgar Parishad case, to a private hospital in Mumbai for treatment for two weeks.

In an urgent hearing on Friday before the division bench of justices S.S. Shinde and N.R. Borkar, senior counsel Mihir Desai stated that Fr. Swamy had agreed to move to a private hospital and would bear his own expenses. In the earlier hearing when Fr Swamy had appeared before the HC via video conferencing and had directly spoken to the judges he had refused to get admitted to any hospital and had insisted that instead of shifting him to any hospital from jail the court should grant him interim bail.

At that time advocate Desai had sought time from court to explain and convince him that his bail plea would take time to decide and considering his health he should get admitted to a hospital.

On Friday, advocate Desai told the bench that his condition was not improving.

Gaza war crimes: India abstains in UNHRC vote

New Delhi, May 28: India was among 14 countries that abstained from voting on a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council to launch an investigation into alleged violations and crimes during the 11-day conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.

The resolution was adopted as 24 countries voted in favour of it while nine opposed it at the end of an all-day special session of the 47-member UN body at its headquarters in Geneva on Thursday.

THE RESOLUTION was adopted as 24 countries voted in favour of it while nine opposed it at the end of an all-day special session of the 47-member UN body

According to official details, India abstained from voting together with 13 other member nations of the grouping. China and Russia were among those voting in favour.

"The Human Rights Council this afternoon

adopted a resolution on ensuring respect for international human rights law and international humanitarian law in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and in Israel," the UN body said in a statement.

It said the international commission of inquiry has been established to investigate violations of international humanitarian law and all alleged violations and abuses of international human rights during the recent

conflict.

The special session of the council was called to discuss the "grave human rights situation" in the Palestinian territory including East Jerusalem.

India's permanent representative to the UN in Geneva Indra Mani Pandey said at the special session that New Delhi welcomes the diplomatic efforts of the international community and regional countries that have resulted in bringing ceasefire between Israel and

armed groups in Gaza.

"India calls on all parties to show extreme restraint, desist from actions that aggravate tensions and refrain from any further attempts to unilaterally change the existing status quo, including in East Jerusalem and its neighbourhoods," he said.

In a statement, Mr Pandey also expressed concern at the continuing violence in Jerusalem, especially at Haram Al Sharif and other Palestinian territories. — PTI

Voice chat rooms held on daily basis to discuss social, cultural issues & politics

Clubhouse, a new sensation for Kashmiris

YUSUF JAMEEL
SRINAGAR, MAY 28

"Clubhouse" is fast turning into a new social media sensation among of the people of Jammu and Kashmir particularly the Valley who feel deprived of the space to join up and interact on various issues of their concern-first due to frequently imposed curbs in volatile political situations and then by the Covid-19 driven logjams.

Over the past few weeks, dozens of voice chat rooms are being held on daily basis by groups of people from within the Valley and of near and far off places to discuss topics ranging from literature, social and cultural issues and problems, Kashmir's peculiar political conundrum apart from reciting poetry and reading out short stories mainly by budding poets and writers and admirers alike.

Syed Samreen, a media student, said, "When compared with other social

media platforms like Twitter, the Clubhouse is safe where while being in a chat room you are not petrified of any post-discussion unwarranted inferences or distorted expositions. Here if someone does screen-recording, he or she is immediately served with account suspension notification. You can discuss any and every topic in a Clubhouse room and anyone can become a moderator".

She said on Thursday as many as 150 people joined a chat room to discuss 'cultivation of sources and other challenges faced by Kashmiri reporters reporting India for international media'. "We discussed the topic absolutely freely for about two hours. It was very fruitful. Earlier I joined a discussion on Kashmir history. That too was very productive. I'm loving Clubhouse. It is not restricted to Kashmir... We can join any chat room starting from any part of the world and learn a lot from others

THE CLUBHOUSE guidelines prohibit recording, transcribing, reproducing or sharing the conversations without explicit permission

too. I can say anything... Whatever I want to and ask any question to people out there by raising my hand and people do respond and are helpful."

Another user Irshad Rasool said, "I love Clubhouse also because you don't fear online trolling here."

"Whenever I would speak out on Twitter on Kashmir and the issues we do face here I would be trolled by bigoted breed, mainly people from outside the Valley. I was getting sick of the trolling and abuse." He added that the Clubhouse has come a "reprieve".

The Clubhouse guidelines prohibit recording, transcribing, reproducing or sharing the conversations without explicit permission. However, complaints surfaced

recently that the platform has been used for bullying, harassment and racism. It has also been criticised for its inherent privacy issues.

Senior journalist and author Gowhar Geelani said, "Club House is relatively a new medium, a new platform, for the people of Kashmir. People are talking about literature; Holocaust and the Partition, Ghalib, Faiz, Manto, Parveen Shakir, Munir Niazi, Agha Shahid, journalism, music, love and loss. But its safety remains a mystery, especially when discussions are held in an open group". He added, "You have trolls and fake profiles even on Clubhouse. Nevertheless, the platform, for now, has allowed people to talk, gossip and give a vent."

A Clubhouse room accommodates groups of up to five thousand people. The audio-only application hosts live discussions with opportunities to participate through speaking and listening. It

was first introduced to iOS by Paul Davison and Rohan Seth of Alpha Exploration Co, a San Francisco-based internet company, in March 2020 with a beta launch for Android in May 2021. It actually began as a social media startup by the founders and was originally designed for podcasts under the name 'Talkshow' in Fall 2019 but was later rebranded as 'Clubhouse' in March last year.

Idrees Hassan, a political activist, said that Clubhouse is helping greatly towards discussing various issues concerning the people of Kashmir. "For past almost two years we have been completely deprived of a political space. We can't convene even indoors, not to speak about holding public meetings and similar gatherings. At Clubhouse, we can talk freely about anything including politics which I and some other users are doing twice a week now," he said.

NORTHERN RAILWAY TENDER NOTICE			
Chief Engineer/TMC, Northern Railway, Headquarter office, Baroda House, New Delhi-110001, for and on behalf of the President of India, invites 04 No tenders through E-Procurement system for supply of the following items.			
S. No.	E-Tender No.	Description of Item	Qty. Due Date Time
1	A21P90TMC2021	HEX BOLT, HEX NUT & COUNTER SUNK NIB BOLT FOR TRACK MACHINES.	03 Items 28.06.2021 at 11:30 hours
2	A22P90TMC2021	SPARE PARTS FOR T-28 MACHINES.	08 Items 28.06.2021 at 11:30 hours
3	A23P90TMC2021	CONVEYOR BELTS FOR BCM/FRM MACHINES.	05 Items 28.06.2021 at 11:30 hours
4	A24P90TMC2021	GLASS FILTER & PRESSURE FILTER FOR TRACK MACHINES.	03 Items 28.06.2021 at 11:30 hours

Note: 1. The complete information of above E-Procurement tenders are available on website "www.ireps.gov.in". The firms, who desire to participate against E-Tenders, are advised to electronically register themselves on the above website for which they would be required to have a class-III digital certificate from certifying agencies authorized under IT Act 2000, by Govt. of India. Manual offers against E-Tenders will not be accepted.

Tender Notice No.: 219-S/1/TMC/05/2021-22 Dated 28.05.2021 1147/21

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एसजेवीएन लिमिटेड SJVN Limited
(भारत सरकार एवं हिमाचल प्रदेश सरकार का संयुक्त उपक्रम)
(A Joint Venture of Govt. of India & Govt. of H.P.)
CIN No. L40101HP1988GG0108409

Expression of Interest (EOI)
The Expression of Interest for enlistment of Educational Institutions for "Running of School at NJHPS, Nathpa (PCD-2681)" is hereby invited on behalf of SJVN Ltd. Please visit websites www.sjvn.nic.in & www.eprocure.gov.in to know further details & EOI submission procedure w.e.f. 29.05.2021.
Last date for submission of EOI is **28.06.2021** (13:00 Hrs.).
Amendment (s), if any, shall be issued on above websites only.
For and on behalf of SJVN Ltd.
Dy. General Manager (P&C)
NJHPS, SJVN Ltd., Jhakri.

SHORT TAKES

11 die after drinking spurious liquor in UP

Aligarh: Eleven people died on Friday and some more were taken ill after allegedly consuming spurious liquor sold by a licensed vendor here, a senior official said. A time-bound magisterial inquiry has been ordered which will be conducted by an additional district magistrate-rank officer, district magistrate Chandra Bhushan Singh told media persons. The administration is likely to invoke the NSA against those found guilty in the inquiry, he said. Earlier in the day, DIG Dipak Kumar said that the Lodha police station was informed in the morning about the death of two people after consumption of country-made liquor bought from a vendor in Karsia. The victims were drivers who had gathered at a gas depot on the Aligarh-Tapaal highway for work, he said. — *PTI*

Militant shot dead in Shopian firefight

Srinagar: An unidentified militant was killed in an encounter with security forces in Shopian district of Jammu and Kashmir on Friday, the police said. Security forces launched a cordon and search operation in Ganovpora village of the district following information about the presence of militants there, a police official said. He said the search operation turned into an encounter after militants opened fire on the security forces, who retaliated. The official said one militant was killed in the exchange of fire. His identity and group affiliation were being ascertained, the official added. One AK rifle and some other incriminating material were recovered from the encounter site, he said. — *PTI*

Debt-ridden farmer kills self in Punjab

Hoshiarpur, Punjab: A debt-ridden farmer died by allegedly hanging himself from a pole in his fields in Chak Narial village, the police said on Friday. The police said Harmesh Singh (42) had taken a loan of ₹3.20 lakh from a bank in Mahipur here. But he was unable to repay the dues after which he went into depression, they said. Singh owned about 5 acres of land, but did not earn much from his agriculture practice. The police said he had also been getting treatment for depression from a psychiatrist at a private multi-specialty hospital in Rupnagar. On Thursday evening, locals saw that Singh's body was found hanging from a pole near a tubewell in his fields, they said. — *PTI*

GST Council still undecided on tax cuts for Covid goods

■ **Continued from Page 1**

that a GoM was being formed to submit report on reduction of rates on Covid-related items. The finance minister further said Amphotericin-B (commonly known as Black Fungus) has also been included in the exemption list for import tax relief. On the exemption on the import of Covid-related items, economic affairs secretary Tarun Bajaj clarified that the ad hoc exemption already available on Covid-related items acquired free had been extended till August 31. "The exemption will depend on the items you're importing," he said, adding the question was whether the benefit of GST reduction on Covid vaccines will go to the people. The same question was raised regarding ventilators, and the ministers wanted to look at the questions thoroughly. For small and medium taxpayers, she said that to provide

Delhi to start 'unlock' from Monday, says CM Kejriwal

■ **Continued from Page 1**

search of livelihood," he said. "Keeping this in mind, it has been decided to open factories and allow construction activities for one week from Monday," he said, adding the government will continue the unlock process every week based on the opinion of experts and the public. "However, if cases start rising again, we will have to stop the unlocking exercise," he added and appealed to people not to step out unless it is absolutely necessary. In the last 24 hours, Delhi

India dealing with China in 'firm, non-escalatory' manner: Army Chief 'No de-escalation without total disengagement at friction sites'

MANASH PRATIM BHUYAN
NEW DELHI, MAY 28

In a clear and unambiguous message to China, Army Chief Gen. M.M. Naravane on Friday said there can be no de-escalation without complete disengagement at all friction points in eastern Ladakh and that the Indian Army is prepared for all contingencies in the region.

In an exclusive interview to PTI, Gen. Naravane said India is dealing with China in a "firm" and "non-escalatory" manner to ensure the sanctity of its claims in eastern Ladakh, and that it was even open to initiating confidence-building measures.

It has been more than a

Sushant drug case: Actor's flatmate held in Hyderabad

SHAHAB ANSARI
MUMBAI, MAY 28

The Narcotic Control Bureau has arrested Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput's former roommate Siddhartha Pithani. He has been arrested on multiple charges like consumption of drugs, financing illicit traffic and harbouring offenders and punishment for abetment and criminal conspiracy.

An NCB team from Mumbai went to Hyderabad where they arrested Pithani. He was produced in the court in Mumbai on Friday and remanded in custody till June 1 for further investigation.

Pithani had been questioned by the NCB last year in connection with the probe. He had been living with the late actor for about a year at the time of his death.

According to Sameer Wankhede, the zonal director of NCB Mumbai Zonal Unit, Pithani was served with a notice under section 67 of NDPS Act, but he didn't join the investigation following which the NCB Mumbai had to gather intelligence about Pithani's whereabouts in Telangana.

Though we want peace and tranquillity at the LAC and are open to initiating confidence-building measures, we remain prepared for all contingencies

— Gen. M.M. Naravane, Army Chief



year since the military standoff between the two sides erupted in eastern Ladakh on May 5 during which there were fatalities on both sides for the first time in 45 years. They have made limited progress in achieving disengagement at the Pangong lake area while negotiations for similar steps at other points remained deadlocked.

Gen. Naravane asserted

that the Indian Army is currently holding onto all important areas in the high-altitude region and it has adequate personnel in the form of "reserves" to react to any contingencies. "We are very clear that no de-escalation can take place before disengagement at all friction points. India and China have signed a number of border agreements which have been

breached by the PLA," Gen. Naravane said.

"Though we want peace and tranquillity at the LAC and are open to initiating confidence-building measures, we remain prepared for all contingencies."

He also said the situation along the northern border is under control and that the coming rounds of military talks with China will focus on restoring the status quo ante of April 2020.

"The Indian Army is very clear that no loss of territory or unilateral change in status quo will be permitted. We are dealing with the Chinese in a firm and non-escalatory way, ensuring the sanctity of our claims in eastern Ladakh," he said. — *PTI*

PM announces ₹500 crore for state, ₹2 lakh to kin of deceased Modi surveys cyclone-hit Odisha

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO
BHUBANESWAR, MAY 28

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday conducted an aerial survey of the cyclone-hit pockets of Odisha and announced an immediate assistance of ₹500 crore for the state.

The ₹500-crore was part of an overall financial assistance of ₹1,000 crore. The remaining ₹500 crore has been announced for West Bengal and Jharkhand to carry out immediate relief activities.

The Centre would release more funds after

▶ **BEFORE HIS** survey, the PM upon his arrival in Bhubaneswar chaired a review meeting on the relief and rehabilitation measures undertaken

receiving the cyclone damage assessment reports from the affected states. Sources said the Centre would send an inter-ministerial committee to assess the damage basing on which financial assistance will be released.

He also announced an ex-gratia of ₹2 lakh to the next of kin of the deceased and ₹50,000 to

the seriously injured ones in the cyclone.

Mr Modi also made an aerial survey of cyclone-hit pockets of West Bengal and later reviewed the situation at a high-level meeting in Kolkata.

According to the PMO, Mr Modi undertook an aerial survey of Bhadrak and Balasore districts of Odisha; add and Purba Medinipur in Bengal.

Before his survey, the PM upon his arrival in Bhubaneswar chaired a review meeting on the relief and rehabilitation measures being undertaken by the state govern-

Jaishankar meets US Def Sec Austin, discusses ties

Leaders expected to have discussed situation in Indo-Pacific region

Washington, May 28: External affairs minister S. Jaishankar on Friday had a "warm meeting" with US defence secretary Lloyd Austin during which they discussed further developing strategic and defence partnership between the two countries and exchanged views on "contemporary security challenges".

Mr Jaishankar, who is on an official trip to the US, is the first Indian Cabinet minister to visit the country since Joe Biden became US President on January 20.

Earlier, on Thursday, he held wide-ranging discussions with US national security adviser Jake Sullivan.

"A warm meeting with



US @SecDef Lloyd Austin. A comprehensive conversation about further developing our strategic and defence partnership," Mr Jaishankar tweeted after the meeting, sharing a photograph of them together.

He further said they exchanged views on "contemporary security challenges".

The two leaders are expected to have discussed the situation in the strategic Indo-Pacific region where China has been increasingly flexing

its military muscles. Both India and the US have been advocating for a rules-based international order and a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

The Quad grouping of the US, India, Japan and Australia have already vowed to expand their cooperation in the Indo-Pacific amidst China's aggressive actions in the region.

The US has been favouring Quad as a security architecture to check China's growing assertiveness.

Mr Jaishankar also expressed appreciation of the US military role in responding to the coronavirus situation in India. — *PTI*

6 Bangla nationals arrested in B'luru for rape & torture

2 accused shot in leg as they try to flee

Bengaluru, May 28: The police fired at two of the six Bangladeshis arrested in the gangrape case and caught hold of the duo as they tried to escape by allegedly trying to attack them during the spot inspection of the crime scene here on Friday, officials said.

The two have been identified as Hridoy and Sagar, both in their early twenties, police sources said.

Four men among the arrested were taken to the rented house where they stayed in for the spot inspection of the crime scene, during which two of them tried to attack policemen and escape, it said.

According to sources, both were shot in their legs and caught, and are now undergoing treatment at a government hospital.

The Bengaluru police on Thursday arrested six illegal Bangladeshi migrants — four men and two women — in Ramamurthy Nagar for allegedly brutalising a woman and raping her, a video of which has gone viral.

On the basis of the contents in the video clip and facts as disclosed during their preliminary interrogation, a case of rape, assault and under other

▶ **DUE TO** financial dispute, they brutalised the victim, who is also said to be a Bangladeshi, brought to India for human trafficking, the police said

relevant provisions of law, has been registered against the accused in Ramamurthy Nagar Police Station, police had said in a statement last night.

As the victim is away in a neighbouring state, a police team has been dispatched to trace her, so that she could join the investigation, it said.

As per the information revealed so far, all of them are part of the same group.

Due to financial dispute, they brutalised the victim, who is also said to be a Bangladeshi, brought to India for human trafficking, the police said, adding that investigation is being carried out in full earnestness, under the supervision of senior officers.

Police sources said: "The victim was raped, battered and had a glass bottle shoved into her private parts and all this was recorded by one of the arrested."

The video first surfaced in Bangladesh. — *PTI*

Reserve forests across MP witness tiger boom, nearly 125 cubs spotted

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY
BHOPAL, MAY 28

Tiger reserves in Madhya Pradesh are currently witnessing baby boom, literally.

Tiger cubs trailing their mothers have almost become a common sight in the majority of the six tiger reserves in the state currently.

"More than 125 tiger cubs have been spotted in different tiger reserves in the state," principal chief conservator of forest of Madhya Pradesh Alok Nath said.

Ground level forest officers however say the num-



A tigress with her cubs in Bandhavgarh tiger reserve.

ber of tiger cubs in different reserve forests may cross 220.

"I would say even 220 is a modest estimate, considering the overwhelming growth of tiger population witnessed in the reserve forests in MP in the last one year," a senior forest officer, a key conservation strategist in the

state forest department, told this newspaper here on Friday requesting not to be quoted since he is not authorised to speak to media.

Bandhavgarh tiger reserve, known as tiger nursery of India, has literally been overflowing with the tiger cubs currently.

"At least 41 tiger cubs have been sighted in different forest ranges in Bandhavgarh tiger reserve in the past few months," the forest officer said.

MP piped Karnataka to earn the tag of "Tiger State" by housing the largest number of 526 big cats in 2018.

Didi asks PM for ₹20,000cr aid package, but skips meet

■ **Continued from Page 1** damage and losses to the PM at Kalaikunda. I told Mr Modi: 'This is our report. Now do whatever you think is best. So far we have ascertained a loss of ₹20,000 crores.'

She added: "There are two good schemes in our report to the PM. One is a package of ₹10,000 crores for Digha's development. Another is a package of ₹10,000 crores for Sundarbans' development. Though we may not get anything, I told the PM: 'I came here to meet you since you wanted to after traveling such a long distance. I also needed to visit Digha as per my schedule.' Taking his permission, I then left."

According to state government sources, the separate meeting by the CM with Mr Modi took place only after the PMO accepted a request for it. West Bengal governor Jagdeep Dhankhar and Mr Adhikari, who attended the review meeting, later expressed their anguish on Twitter over the CM's absence.

Mr Dhankhar said: "It would have served interests of state and its people for CM and officials @MamataOfficial to attend Review Meet by PM. Confrontational stance ill serves interests of the state or democracy. Non-participation by CM and officials not in sync with constitutionalism or rule of law. At the Review Meet by PM #CycloneYaas to assess damage caused. CM and officials @MamataOfficial did not participate. Such boycott not in consonance with Constitution and federalism. Certainly, by such actions, neither public interest nor interest of state has been served."

Mr Adhikari alleged: "Today is a dark day in India's long-standing ethos of cooperative federalism, a principle held sacred by PM @narendramodi. CM @MamataOfficial has shown once again that she is insensitive to the sufferings of the people of West Bengal. On previous occasions, PM

@narendramodi has reviewed floods, cyclone situations with different CMs who belonged to non-NDA parties. None of these CMs behaved the way Mamata Didi behaved today. There is a time for politics and a time for governance. Didi can't comprehend that."

Later, many senior BJP leaders and Union ministers attacked the TMC chief. Though Ms Banerjee on Thursday assured that she would attend the PM's review meeting, her mood changed when she came to know at night about the inclusion of Mr Adhikari's name in the meeting among others by the Centre, sources said.

The state government objected to it, but got no response from the Centre, sources claimed.

The state government objected to it, but got no response from the Centre, sources claimed. Before meeting the PM, Ms Banerjee made it clear that she would not attend the review meeting with Mr Modi.

Will vaccinate all by Dec, says Centre

■ **Continued from Page 1** positivity rate at present is 9 per cent. It has been less than 10 per cent for the last four consecutive days.

Mumbai reported 929 new cases of Covid-19 in the last 24 hours, which is

slowest since March 2, while Delhi's positivity rate dropped to 1.59 per cent as 1,141 fresh cases were detected.

The Union health ministry said every month 50 per cent of the total Central Drugs

Laboratory (CDL) cleared vaccine doses of any manufacturer would be procured by the Centre and would continue to make these doses available to the states free of cost as was being done earlier.



A dust storm engulfs the skyline of the walled city in Jaipur on Friday.

— *PTI*

Narada case: All 4 accused granted interim bail by HC

■ **Continued from Page 1** case by the first division bench headed by the acting CJ — had surfaced.

Justice Sinha said: "The Appellate Side Rules require a motion seeking transfer, either on the civil or criminal side, to be heard by a single judge. However, the first division bench took up the matter, treating it as a writ petition. The application, if the communication made on May 17, 2021 can be considered as one, is by the investigating agency/prosecution against accused persons. It could not and was not treated as a public interest litigation."

On the CBI's allegations of "mobocracy," he wondered: "The mob factor may be a ground on mer-

its, for adjudication of the motion, but could the first division bench have taken it up and continue to hear it as a writ petition, is the first question?"

The judge also pointed out that from May 17 the four accused "continued to be in custody (jail) though they had obtained bail from the designated court. On that day when, on the intervention of the high court, the said persons were deprived liberty, there was no application on the record of this court, since the communication was not supported by an affidavit..."

The next day, Justice Sinha noted, as the first division bench did not assemble, "the public were presented with the situation of the high

court having interfered with the liberty of their elected representatives..." He observed that on May 19, while Justice Banerjee of the first division bench favoured interim bail to the accused, the acting CJ's view of 'house arrest' "prevailed", to become an order on May 21.

Justice Sinha added: "The high court must get its act together. Our conduct is unbecoming of the majesty the high court commands. We have been reduced to a mockery. As such, I am requesting all of us to salvage the situation by taking such steps, including convening a full court, if necessary, for the purpose of reaffirming the sanctity of our rules and our unwritten code of conduct."

THE ASIAN AGE

29 MAY 2021

Only Centre can resolve vaccine mess, not states

The Central government's attempts to wash its hands of the serious crisis facing the vaccination programme against pandemic Covid-19 are despicable and the arguments contained in the statement of the chairperson of the National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration for Covid-19 seeking to "bust the myths around vaccination" defy facts, logic, law and ground realities. The statement basically seeks to refute the allegation that the Centre had abdicated its responsibility towards the states by saying health is a state subject and the liberalised vaccine policy was a result of the incessant requests being made by the states to give them more power. It may be remembered that the Centre had on March 14, 2020, declared the pandemic as a national disaster under the Disaster Management Act, 2005. The Act defines disaster management as "the continuous and integrated process of planning, organising, coordinating and implementing measures... for, inter alia, prevention of danger or threat of any disaster and mitigation or reduction of risk of any disaster or its severity or consequences". All the measures the Centre took and the guidelines the Union home ministry issued till now were based on the DM Act, and vaccination falls within that category.

A perusal of the Disaster Management Act would convince anyone that a national plan for vaccination is the responsibility of the Union government, and not the states. The position that the Centre made 50 per cent of the vaccine produced within the country accessible to the states has little merit as it only made the entire programme messier, not easier. The statement makes its own argument that "states are entitled to approach foreign manufacturers directly" weak when it goes on to state that the global tenders have given no results because vaccines are in short supply and it is not easy to procure them at short notice. At the same time, the statement conveniently omits the stand of several manufacturers that they will deal only with national governments and none else. The issue is of vaccine availability, and the statement skirts that issue. It says the administration of vaccines by the states leaves a lot to be desired but does not give specifics. On the contrary, field reports say several states have shut down their vaccination centres due to shortage of vaccine, and for nothing else.

The statement dismisses that compulsory licensing is not the "formula" to increase vaccine production but then says the government has ensured active partnership between Bharat Biotech and three other entities to enhance production of Covaxin. The government must get more such companies on board and make the facilities such as the Integrated Vaccine Complex in Tamil Nadu functional instead of getting into the technicalities. Inadvertently, the statement refers to the games vaccine manufacturers play and the priorities they have; the criticism against the government has been that it was nowhere to be seen when several other national governments and companies were making their moves last year. It's time the government stopped engaging in the exercise of finding excuses and does whatever it takes to enhance the supply of vaccines. For, it alone can do it.

Build storm-proof infra

It is the recurring nature of tropical storms that makes them pose frequent threats and peninsular India, with its long coastline, is most vulnerable to nature's fury. Experience gained over the last two decades seems to have worked well for the country, in particular for the eastern states of Odisha and West Bengal, that have made evacuation of a whole mass of people an annual exercise. How painful this is for the poorest is one of the great tragedies of our national life, more so in the two years of the pandemic in which such gatherings of people poses an additional hazard as spreading of the coronavirus is facilitated. The loss of dwellings for uprooted people makes Yaas as catastrophic to Odisha now as Amphan had proved last year to West Bengal.

The silver lining even as cyclones blow hot seasonally is we have at least learnt to minimise the loss of life by moving and securing the most vulnerable section of coastal people. Odisha made the point forcefully that greater planning is needed to mitigate cyclone problems by providing disaster resilient power systems and improving infrastructure to tackle storm surges. This may be easier said than done considering how a modern power grid like the one in Texas was knocked out by a cold snap. But a start must be made if the coastal power infrastructure is to be made storm-proof and storm shelters expanded in view of what crowding can do in pandemic times.

The greater loss of lives as Tauktae raged on the western coast may be owed to there being no rigorous discipline in securing vulnerable sections living by the sea in contrast to what the east coast states do in preparation to facing Bay of Bengal storms. Of course, the technical weaknesses of oil exploration support barges anchored mid-sea made the disaster many times worse, the blame obviously to be pinpointed on petroleum companies running offshore operations. Response to natural calamities cannot be confined to announcement of compensation for loss of life and dealing with after-effects on livelihoods but by how much the states can, between storms, invest in improving coastal infrastructure.

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Farrukh Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings



"If all the world's a stage
Then most of us are bit part players
Very few the Homeric sage
Even fewer the dragon slayers.

Exits, entrances, seven ages
With no audience for our drama
The script scribbled on destiny's
pages
The vale of sorrow's panorama..."

— From **Innocent Ney Ignorant**
by Bachchoo

Does UK have 'institutional racism'? The debate still on

Some attitudes here become platitudes and breed enquiries to look into them. Months ago, the UK government received the report on "institutional racism" throughout the British body politic. It concluded that there was room for reform in attitudes and workings of certain sectors but there was no organ of the State that could be labelled as institutionally racist.

Commentators who claimed that non-white people were subject to systematic discrimination called the report a "whitewash", even though almost all its authors were either black or Asian.

In October 2020, the Equality and Human Rights Commission published a report on anti-Semitism in

the Labour Party, focusing on the period of the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. It concluded that there was endemic anti-Semitism and Keir Starmer, who succeeded Mr Corbyn as the party leader, apologised for it and promised to stamp it out.

This week, following a relentless pursuit of the allegation by a former chairman of the Conservative Party, Baroness Warsi, a government commissioned report on Islamophobia in the party has been published. It was Sajid Javid, who as the home secretary debating Michael Gove and Boris Johnson on television in the party's last leadership election, had bounced the other candidates into agreeing to such an investigation. They couldn't very well publicly object.

The report, commissioned last July, was headed by Prof. Swaran Singh, a former Equality and Human Rights Commissioner. It concluded that there was no "institutional racism" in the party but there were incidents of councils, formal bodies and individual members manifesting some form of prejudice against Muslims.

The headline-catchers in the reports were the strictures against Boris Johnson himself and against another prominent Tory, Zac Goldsmith.

BoJo was sanctioned for columns he wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* likening Muslim ladies wearing burqas to letter boxes with round tops and slits below and then to Balacavaed bank robbers. He has since apologised but for what he regarded as a callous joke, but for "any offence it may have caused".

Zac Goldsmith, who stood as the Tory candidate for mayor of London against Labour's Sadiq Khan, made oblique allusions to Sadiq being a possible sympathiser of the Islamicist who had carried out terror attacks in London. These allusions were clear in their snide implications, though carefully delivered and of a nudge-nudge-wink-wink composition, so as not to incur heavy libel charges. Zac lost, but Prof. Singh's report treated this aspect of his campaign as evidence of Islamophobia at the top of the Tory Party. BoJo was rewarded not because of but in spite of his callous insult with the leadership of the party and consequently the keys to what his fiancé, "Carey Antoinette", regards as the shabby dwelling at No. 10. Zac Goldsmith, for no tangible achievement, was promoted to the Lords.

The report has been labelled a "whitewash" — the word is very popular in the UK — by Baroness

Sayeeda Warsi and by leaders of several Muslim organisations.

Lady Warsi said that the party's "processes, attitudes and behaviour" were at fault from its leadership to its grassroots... "On each of those counts it satisfies the definition of institutional racism ... the way I see it, if it looks like institutional racism, feels like institutional racism, fits the definition of institutional racism, then I'm afraid it is institutional racism." With these views, why does this daughter of a Pakistani immigrant family remain in the Tory Party and occupy prestigious positions within it? Perhaps she wants to remain inside and fight passionately for Tory policies on immigration, taxation, cuts to foreign aid, bumbles over Covid-19 lockdowns, which have caused the deaths of more per population than any other country etc. These Tory policies and acts may cause discrimination, devastation, disease, desperation and death, but so what? She'll stick with the Tories and be a baroness and fight with all her might against ill-thought-out, frivolous "jokes" about burqas and post-boxes.

Though I haven't read Prof. Singh's report, none of the commentary I have read on it mentions that it

makes a distinction between remarks about Islamicist terror acts and blatant remarks about people who follow the faith. The majority of Muslims don't support the Islamicist murderous contentions and condemn them as un-Islamic. Very many Muslims assert that there is no sanction in the Quran for the burqa or the niqab or even for the hijab, as God's word only enjoins women to be modest.

In the dispute about anti-Semitism in the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn and his associates attempted to make a clear distinction between the criticism and condemnation of Zionism and the actions of the Israeli government against the Palestinians and hate language and actions against Jews. Yes, there is a distinction, and it ought to be clearly made.

In all the ups and downs and instances of that episode, it was never pointed out that 13 current Labour MPs are Muslims elected by large numbers of Muslim immigrants. Three of these MPs have been accused of or disciplined for blatant anti-Semitism and there are no statistics available on the attitude of their Muslim constituents towards Jews. Perhaps the Labour Party should institute an enquiry into precisely that?

Subhani



Why govt's fudging of figures fools nobody...

Shobhaa De

Seriously... why do it? Why underplay death and play around with statistics. One can understand the logic behind the numbers being manipulated during elections (every administration is guilty). Or those stock market sharks who are trying to deceive investors by cooking the books and putting out misleading data before an IPO (due diligence be damned). The official Covid-19 charts have created a major credibility gap — it is getting harder and harder to believe what is being publicised on a regular basis, when grim reality stares us in the face. The thing is this: Does one go by what the *New York Times* states ("Just how big could India's true Covid toll be?")? Or accept our government's version? The *NYT* has suggested that India's death toll could be double the official count, in an "optimistic" scenario, and nearly 14 times higher in a worst-case scenario. Which is it? The *NYT* goes further, adding: "The undercount of cases and deaths in India is most likely even more pronounced for technical, cultural and logistical reasons." Admitting also that the official figures "miss deaths all over the world". The government has dismissed the report as "baseless and false". Dr V.K. Paul, member (health) of the Niti Aayog, said that the *NYT* report is based on "distorted estimates". Fair enough. Let me skip the charts and ask a straight-up question: What if our official channels decided to table numbers minus manipulation? Just be honest, guys! We can handle the truth... It's the

lies that insult every Covid-19 death that has taken place. Will citizens riot on the streets? Will there be a wave of fear and panic across the land? Both possibilities are unlikely. We are dealing with an unprecedented crisis. Citizens are aware of the gravity of the situation and are coping the best they can. They will continue to do so, regardless of the numbers game being played. This sounds like just another tawdry TRP scam — but in reverse. Instead of increasing the tally, we are busy minimising it, by issuing data that nobody buys.

A friend from Kolkata looking out of her window last week commented cryptically: "I can see eight to 10 hearses parked outside one of Kolkata's top hospitals, waiting to take Covid bodies to the crematorium. We are forced to say: 'You arrive at the hospital in your own fancy car as a patient — and leave in a hearse as a corpse'." This scene is being repeated across the cities of India. Let's not even get to what's happening in our villages — no hearses there to cart the dead. Just handcarts, cycles, and makeshift bamboo stretchers. I didn't have the stomach to look at the television clips of government-appointed volunteers, hastily removing temporary poles and saffron cloth left behind by thousands of mourners to mark the shallow, sandy graves of their loved ones, along the banks of India's holiest river: the Ganga. The optics were hastily altered — but did that alter the grim truth? Sweeping evidence under a carpet of sand — how awful!

As for those loyalists blabbing on about

"Brand India" getting tarnished due to the "hostile" coverage in the international media... hello! The smart thing to do is FIX the brand first! And the coverage will take of itself. Why shoot the messenger? Are any of the reports fabricated? Are all those disturbing photographs really morphed or photoshopped? And dear loyalists, the entire propaganda machinery is in the hands of the government. Why not get Praseon Joshi to write a lengthy poem — create a slo-mo video roping in all the BJP's Bollywood favourites, bombard social media with the same... and wait for the deaths to disappear by magic! How's that for a quick image fix?

Nobody, but nobody... has the time for any organised "India Bashing" at a sensitive time like this. Conversely, nobody has the time for b****s*** either. Deceiving your own people is deception at its lowest. Besides, such a strategy always backfires. If we are craving for global approval and want to improve our dismal ratings, it's time to do something more convincing than resorting to cheap slogans. Co-opting sympathetic industrialists to tweet about India getting unfairly trashed/bashed is a smart move but getting a reputed banker like Uday Kotak to say it like it is, works far better. Uday opened up in a recent interview and put it bluntly when he was asked whether we could have planned better for

Our leaders change the texture of their skin as and when it suits them — from acquiring a rhino's thick hide to behaving like fragile porcelain dolls, these cunning chameleons have played around with our sentiments for far too long

the second wave. Said Mr Kotak: "You are driving the car. So, look at the windshield and not the rearview mirror." His suggestions for the way forward were practical and candid. He urged the government to pay a "fair price" for the vaccination, plus "maximise production and distribution". We need to listen to more such voices from our other billionaires, but most have kept their mouths shut so far.

Yes, "Brand India" has taken a major hit. Other countries and their leaders have also gone through this and more (BoJo and Britain, for example). It is important to deal with criticism and dissent in an upfront manner. It is even more important to pay attention to sound advice and to implement it. Our leaders change the texture of their skin as and when it suits them — from acquiring a rhino's thick hide to behaving like fragile porcelain dolls, these cunning chameleons have played around with our sentiments for far too long. We need action heroes at a time like this, not self-pitying wimps pointing fingers at the mediawalas. One look at Barkha Dutt's relentless coverage on Mojo is enough for any viewer to get the full picture. Call her a "foreign agent" paid to "defame" India. But provide proof, first. She is perhaps the only anchor out there who is risking her own life and the lives of her compact team, to get the gruesome truth to us. Most other star anchors have stayed put in their studios and expended precious lung power in barking at their studio guests.

What do hapless citizens do to soothe their frayed nerves? Well, cuddling cows is the latest (and most ludicrous) global trend to cope with Covid stress. Perhaps Baba Ramdev can be roped in as Brand Ambassador?

Instagram handle: @ShobhaaDe; Twitter: @DeShobhaa

LETTERS

WE THE PEOPLE

This refers to Karan Thapar's article, "7 yrs. of PM Modi: Can he lead us out of the abyss?" (May 28). The fault lies with ourselves, not with our leaders. We were silent and willingly went down the abyss, step by step. Those who tried to warn us were denounced as anti nationals. It's going to do no good to expect our leaders, no matter to which party they belong, to lead us out of the abyss. We ourselves have to do it, one step at a time by making the leaders, institutions and the media accountable.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

HUMAN ERROR?

THERE IS NO SMOKE without fire. As China's demeanour and standpoint on the novel coronavirus have been dubious since its outbreak, a high-level probe was a global imperative. Circumstantial evidence for the outbreak originating as a laboratory accident elicited by the US intelligence agencies in recent days have also raised eyebrows. Also, one should not be forget that the World Health Organisation has expressed disappointment over China not finalising the permissions for the arrival of the team that was to investigate the origin of the virus in early January this year. If the theories surfacing are spurious as China claims, why not lending a helping hand to the agencies for the probe?

Tushar Anand
Patna

SELF-SERVING RULES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "Minimise curbs on social media" (May 28). Having used social media platforms to the hilt in its quest for power, it is ironic that the BJP is now trying to stifle criticism under the garb of regulation. Many in the Western world are bound to be aghast that India is on the way to becoming a nation acting on matters that concern freedom of expression.

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

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

SHORT TAKES

EX-COP JAILED FOR PLANTING DRUGS ON JOURNALIST

Moscow: A Moscow court on Friday sentenced five former police officers to lengthy prison terms for planting drugs on an investigative journalist, in a case supporters called a rare admission of wrong-doing from Russian law enforcement.

The arrest of prominent investigative reporter Ivan Golunov in June 2019 on trumped-up drug charges that could have landed him in prison for up to 20 years sparked an outcry with activists and Kremlin critics demanding for his release.

Golunov, 38, was released days later and the charges were dropped after an unprecedented campaign in his support.

The same month President Vladimir Putin sacked two senior police officers over the wrongful arrest.

In his work, Golunov investigated everything from Russia's shady funeral industry to corruption in Moscow city hall.

His supporters and employer — the independent Russian-language news site Meduza — said the drugs had been planted on him as revenge for his work.

The five officers who arrested Golunov were also dismissed and taken into custody in January 2020.

3 CREW MISSING AFTER SHIPS COLLIDE IN JAPAN

Tokyo: A freighter sank in a Japanese strait early Friday after colliding with another ship, and three crew members from the cargo ship are missing.

Nine of the 12 crewmembers from the Japanese freighter have been rescued, and the coast guard was searching for others in waters roughly 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) north of the coast of Imabari in Ehime prefecture.

The Byakko collided Thursday night with a chemical tanker operated by a South Korean company, and the collision caused the Byakko to sink.

Ulsan Pioneer tanker was run by South Korean firm Heung-A Shipping Co. with 13 crew members, including Korean and Myanmar nationals, the coast guard said in a statement. It departed a port in China on Tuesday for Osaka, Japan, conveying acetic acid.

None of the Ulsan Pioneer's crew members was injured.

The Byakko was operated by Kobe-based Prince Kaiun Co. and was carrying car parts overnight to Kanda, a town in Fukuoka prefecture.

On average, around 400 vessels a day pass through the Kurushima Strait in southern Japan where the collision occurred.



Mice scurry around stored grain on a farm near Tottenham, Australia. — AP

DESTRUCTIVE MICE TORMENTING AUSTRALIANS

Bogan Gate: At night, the floors of sheds vanish beneath carpets of scampering mice. Ceilings come alive with the sounds of scratching. One family blamed mice chewing electrical wires for their house burning down.

Vast tracts of land in Australia's New South Wales state are being threatened by a mouse plague that the state government describes as "absolutely unprecedented." Just how many millions of rodents have infested the agricultural plains across the state is guesswork.

"We're at a critical point now where if we don't significantly reduce the number of mice that are in plague proportions by spring, we are facing an absolute economic and social crisis in rural and regional New South Wales," Agriculture Minister Adam Marshall said this month.

Bruce Barnes said he is taking a gamble by planting crops on his family farm near the central New South Wales town of Bogan Gate.

"We just saw and hope," he said.

The risk is that the mice will maintain their numbers through the Southern Hemisphere winter and devour the wheat, barley and canola before it can be harvested.

Nato holds massive war games as tensions with Russia simmer

Aims to simulate 30-nation military organisation's response to attack on any of its members

Aboard HMS Queen Elizabeth, May 28: As tensions with Russia simmer, thousands of Nato troops, several warships and dozens of aircraft are taking part in military exercises stretching across the Atlantic, through Europe and into the Black Sea region.

The war games, dubbed Steadfast Defender 21, are aimed at simulating the 30-nation military organisation's response to an attack on any one of its members. It will test Nato's ability to deploy troops from America and keep supply lines open.

Already in recent years, the United States and its allies have deployed troops and equipment in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to try to reassure those members neighboring Russia that their partners will ride to the rescue should they come under attack.

Russia's decision last month to send thousands of troops to the border area with Ukraine has raised concern at the military alliance, which launched one of its biggest ever defense spending initiatives after Russian troops annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

Top Nato brass insist that the military exercises, involving some 9,000 troops from 20 nations, are not aimed at Russia specifically, but they focus on the Black Sea region, where Russia stands accused of blocking the free navigation of ships.

Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg says the exercises send an important message to any potential adversary: "NATO is ready."

"Nato is there to defend all our allies, and this exercise sends a message about our ability to transport a large number of troops, equipment across the Atlantic, across Europe and also to project maritime power,"



An F-35 jet takes off as military personnel participate in the Nato Steadfast Defender 2021 exercise on the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth off the coast of Portugal. As tensions with Russia simmer, thousands of Nato troops, several warships and dozens of aircraft are taking part in military exercises stretching across the Atlantic, through Europe and into the Black Sea region. — AP

Stoltenberg told The Associated Press aboard a British aircraft carrier off the coast of Portugal.

The ship, the HMS Queen Elizabeth, is the pride of the British Navy. It's making its maiden voyage and carrying 18 F-35 jets: the first ever deployment of so many of the 5th generation planes aboard an aircraft carrier.

The ship's presence, part of a 6-7 month deployment that will take it south past India, through Southeast Asia to the Philippines Sea, is aimed in part at restoring Britain's tarnished image as a major global power since it left the European Union.

— AP

Russia backs Belarus' Lukashenko

Moscow, May 28: Russia on Friday threw its weight behind Belarus's increasingly isolated regime, slamming a European overflight ban as President Vladimir Putin prepared to host strongman Alexander Lukashenko.

The meeting is an important show of support for the authoritarian Belarusian leader who is facing a global outcry after he forced a Ryanair jet to land in Minsk last Sunday and arrested an opposition activist onboard.

The European Union in

response urged carriers based in the bloc to divert flights from Belarusian airspace and promised a fresh wave of sanctions against Lukashenko and regime officials.

The overflight ban has led to several cancellations of flights between Russia and Europe, after Russian authorities rejected flight plans that would have skipped Belarusian airspace.

Air France for the second time this week had to cancel a flight from Paris to Moscow on Friday, after Austrian Airlines did the

same for a Vienna-to-Moscow flight on Thursday.

Russia insists the cancellations are purely "technical", but they have raised concerns that Russia could be systematically refusing to let European airlines land if they avoid Belarus.

With the Putin-Lukashenko talks due later Friday in Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi, Moscow hit out at the flight ban as politically motivated and dangerous.

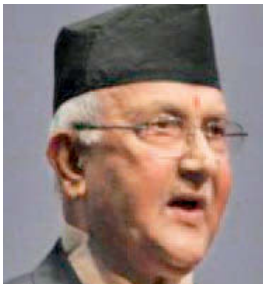
What the West has done... for political reasons is completely irresponsible

and endangers the safety of passengers," Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

"It is time for Brussels to learn how to take effective measures to protect citizens against real, not imaginary, threats," she said.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the bloc was monitoring whether this was a broader policy from Russia, but the Kremlin insisted the disruptions were in no way political.

— AFP



K. P. Sharma Oli

OLI CALLS UPON PARTIES TO HOLD ELECTIONS

Kathmandu, May 28: Embattled Nepal Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli on Friday urged all political parties to form an all-party government and hold fresh elections, as he tried to justify the controversial dissolution of the House of Representatives by the President, saying a "functionless" Parliament turned out to be the main source of instability in the country.

"Going for an election can never be a regressive act," Oli said in a televised address to the nation, a week after the House was dissolved by President Bidya Devi Bhandari. The president dissolved the 275-member House of Representatives on Saturday for the second time in five months and announced snap elections on November 12 and November 19 on the advice of Prime Minister Oli, who is heading a minority government.

Oli, 69, called upon the political parties to form an all-party government and hold elections, My Republica.com portal quoted him as saying. Addressing the nation as the chief executive of the country, Oli took most of his time to criticise the moves taken by the Opposition parties and his fellow party leaders. He blamed the Opposition parties and dissident faction of the ruling CPN-UML for the dissolution of Parliament. — PTI

Germany admits its role in Namibia genocide

Berlin, May 28: Germany for the first time on Friday recognised it had committed genocide in Namibia during its colonial occupation, with Berlin promising financial support worth more than one billion euros to aid projects in the African nation.

German colonial settlers killed tens of thousands of indigenous Herero and Nama people in 1904-1908 massacres — labelled the first genocide of the 20th century by historians — poisoning relations between Namibia and Germany for years.

While Berlin had previously acknowledged that atrocities occurred at the hands of its colonial authorities, they have repeatedly refused to pay direct reparations.

"We will now officially refer to these events as what they are from today's perspective: genocide," said Foreign Minister Heiko Maas in a statement.

He hailed the agreement after more than five years of negotiations with Namibia over events in the territory held by

● **GERMAN COLONIAL settlers killed tens of thousands of indigenous Herero and Nama people in 1904-1908 massacres — labelled the first genocide of the 20th century by historians — poisoning relations between Namibia and Germany for years.**

Berlin from 1884 to 1915.

"In light of the historical and moral responsibility of Germany, we will ask forgiveness from Namibia and the victims' descendants" for the "atrocities" committed, Maas said.

In a "gesture to recognise the immense suffering inflicted on the victims", the country will support the "reconstruction and the development" of Namibia via a financial programme of 1.1 billion euros (\$1.34 billion), he said.

The sum will be paid over 30 years, according to sources close to the negotiations, and must primarily benefit the descendants of the Herero and Nama.

However, he specified that the payment does not open the way to any "legal request for compensation".

Namibia was called German South West Africa during Berlin's 1884-1915 rule, and then fell under South African rule for 75 years, before finally gaining independence in 1990.

Tensions boiled over in 1904 when the Herero — deprived of their livestock and land — rose up, followed shortly after by the Nama, in an insurrection crushed by German imperial troops.

In the Battle of Waterberg in August 1904 around 80,000 Herero, including women and children, fled and were pursued by German troops across what is now known as the Kalahari Desert. Only 15,000 survived.

German General Lothar von Trotha, sent to put down the rebellion, ordered the peoples' extermination. At least 60,000 Hereros and around 10,000 Namas were killed between 1904 and 1908. — AFP

India, US discuss Covid-19, Kabul

Washington, May 28: External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar met US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan during which they held wide-ranging discussions and agreed that people-to-people ties and shared values are the foundation of the US-India strategic partnership that is helping to end the pandemic, supporting a free and open Indo-Pacific, and providing global leadership on climate change.

Jaishankar, the first Indian Cabinet minister to visit the United States under the Biden administration, met Sullivan on Thursday.

"Pleased to meet Jake Sullivan. Wide-ranging discussions including on Indo-Pacific and Afghanistan. Conveyed appreciation for US solidarity in addressing the Covid challenge. India-US vaccine partnership can make a real difference," Jaishankar said in a tweet after the meeting.

"Our people-to-people ties and our values are the foundation of the US-India partnership and

will help us end the pandemic, lead on climate, and support a free and open Indo-Pacific," Sullivan wrote on Twitter after the meeting. The US government and Americans across the country have delivered over \$500 million in Covid-19 relief supplies from the US federal and state governments, US companies and private citizens across America for the people of India, said Emily Horne, Spokesperson of the National Security Council, White House.

"They discussed a range of regional and global issues and agreed that the United States and India should continue working closely together to address common challenges throughout the Indo-Pacific region", she said. — PTI

HK TYCOON JIMMY LAI JAILED AGAIN

Hong Kong, May 28: Jailed Hong Kong media tycoon Jimmy Lai was among eight democracy activists handed new prison sentences on Friday for attending protests on the 70th anniversary of the founding of communist China that were followed by a sweeping crackdown.

Lai, who is already behind bars for taking part in earlier protests, was given 14 months after pleading guilty to organising an unlawful assembly on October 1, 2019.

He will now have to serve a total of 20 months for his multiple protest convictions.

Seven other leading activists, including 25-year-old youth campaigner Figo Chan, as well as former lawmakers Lee Cheuk-yan and Leung Kwok-hung, were also given new jail terms.

Some flashed "victory" hand signals on their way to court in a police van.

The new sentences are the latest in a relentless and successful campaign by China to smother dissent and dismantle Hong Kong's democracy movement.

The finance hub was convulsed by months of huge and often violent pro-democracy protests in 2019 in the most serious challenge to Beijing's rule since the city's 1997 handover. The clashes with police on China's October 1 National Day were some of the worst of that period. — AFP

SYRIA'S ASSAD RE-ELECTED WITH 95% OF VOTE

Damascus, May 28: Syria's President Bashar al-Assad has been re-elected with 95.1 percent of the votes cast, the parliamentary speaker announced on Thursday, following an election criticised by the opposition and Western nations.

The two other presidential candidates, former state minister Abdallah Salloum Abdallah and Mahmud Merhi, a member of the so-called "tolerated opposition", received 1.5 percent and 3.3 percent of the vote respectively, according to the official results of Wednesday's election.

In a country ravaged by war since 2011, 14.2 million people went to the polls, a turnout rate of 76.64 percent, according to the parliamentary speaker.

The election went ahead in the two-thirds of the country controlled by the government, and in some Syrian embassy overseas.

It was the second presidential election in the country since the start of the war which has cost over 3.88 million lives.

In 2014, Assad obtained 88 percent of the vote, according to the official results.

Assad has dismissed Western accusations that Wednesday's vote was neither "free nor fair". The United States, Britain, France, Germany and Italy have condemned the electoral process as "illegitimate". — AFP

FISHING | BAN

Efforts to salvage vessel enters ninth day, government bans fishing along coast

Lanka fights plastic from burning ship

Colombo, May 28: Tonnes of plastic pellets from a burning container ship swamped Sri Lanka's west coast on Friday, prompting a ban on fishing as international efforts to salvage the vessel dragged into a ninth day.

The government announced the ban along an 80-kilometre (50-mile) coastal area, including Colombo, fearing contamination with pollutants and plastic waste from the stricken ship. "We will compensate the owners of 5,600 boats affected by the

ban," fisheries minister Kanchana Wijesekera said while adding that seafood currently in the market was safe for consumption.

Millions of plastic granules washed up at the holiday resort of Kalutara — 43 kilometres south of Colombo — on Friday, a day after similar pollution at Negombo, a tourist and fishing area 40 kilometres north of the capital.

Sri Lankan authorities meanwhile deployed hundreds of security personnel in hazmat suits to clean the beaches of plas-

tic waste and other debris from the Singapore-registered MV X-Press Pearl burning since May 20.

Sri Lanka navy chief Vice Admiral Nishantha Ulugetenne said the fire was largely under control and the risk of the vessel breaking up had diminished. "Right now there is no threat of the ship breaking up, but we don't know how much of oil is still left," Ulugetenne told reporters in Colombo.

Sri Lanka's Marine Environment Protection Authority (MEPA) said a

possible oil leak was the biggest threat, but the ship's plastic cargo had already caused extensive damage. The impact on mangroves and lagoons was still being estimated while a beach clean up was already underway. Harm to marine wildlife and birds is also being assessed.

"Sri Lanka is one of the best bio-diverse countries in Asia and this type of plastic pollution, especially from microplastics can have long term repercussions," MEPA chairperson said. — AFP



Sri Lankan Navy soldiers work to remove debris washed ashore from the Singapore-registered container ship MV X-Press Pearl, which has been burning for the ninth consecutive day, in Colombo on Friday. — AFP

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	51,422.88	0.60
Nifty 50	15,435.70	0.64
S&P 500*	4,217.09	0.39
Dollar (₹)	72.43	0.22
Pound Sterling (₹)	102.74	-0.24
Euro (₹)	88.28	0.23
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	47,910*205	0.42
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	69.78	0.46
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.003	0.27
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.599	-0.011

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Tata Digital buys majority stake in Bigbasket

Tata Digital Ltd has acquired a majority stake in online grocery platform Bigbasket. Tata Digital is a 100 per cent subsidiary of Tata Sons. "Grocery is one of the largest components of an individual's consumption basket in India, and Bigbasket as India's largest e-grocery player, fits in perfectly," Pratik Pal, CEO of Tata Digital, said in a statement. Specific details about the deal were not disclosed.

Forex reserves hit lifetime high, rise to \$592.89 bn



The country's foreign exchange reserves rose by \$2.865 billion to a record high of \$592.894 billion for the week ended May 21, boosted by gold and currency assets, RBI data showed. The previous all-time high was \$590.185 billion for the week ended January 29, 2021. Foreign currency assets swelled by \$1.649 billion to \$548.519 billion. Gold reserves rose by \$1.187 billion to \$36.841 billion.

Gold bond issue opens on Monday, price at ₹4,889/gm

The issue price for Sovereign Gold Bond Scheme 2021-22, which will open for subscription for five days from Monday, has been fixed at Rs 4,889 per gram of gold, the RBI said. The Sovereign Gold Bond Scheme 2021-22- Series-III or the third tranche will be open for subscription from May 31 to June 4. For investors applying online and paying through digital mode, the issue price of gold bond will be Rs 4,839 per gram.

Economy added 16.9 lakh less jobs in FY21: SBI arm

Net job creation in the economy fell by 16.9 lakh in FY21 over the previous fiscal, shows an SBI Research analysis of EPFO payroll data. However, the FY21 numbers are better than the FY20 net job creation, which had declined by 28.9 lakh, further cementing the view that the economy is not creating new employment opportunities. The latest EPFO data shows that net new EPF subscribers stood at 94.5 lakh in FY21.

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Apex bank finds irregularities in auto loan portfolio RBI fines HDFC Bank

FALAKNAAZ SYED MUMBAI, MAY 28

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has imposed a penalty of Rs 10 crore on the country's largest private sector lender, HDFC Bank, for irregularities in the bank's auto loan portfolio. The central bank in a statement on Friday said that it had received a whistleblower complaint regarding these irregularities and its investigations found that the lender had breached the banking regulations.

"An examination of documents in the matter of marketing and sale of third-party non-financial products to the bank's customers, arising from a whistleblower complaint to RBI regarding irregularities in the auto loan portfolio of the bank, revealed, inter alia, contravention of the...provisions of the (Banking



Regulation) Act and the regulatory directions."

The RBI had issued a show cause notice to the bank asking why a penalty should not be imposed on it for violating certain rules.

"After considering the bank's reply to the show cause notice, oral submissions made during the personal hearing and examination of further clarifications/documents furnished by the bank, RBI came to the conclusion that the aforesaid charge of contravention of provisions of the Act was sub-

stantiated and warranted imposition of monetary penalty," the statement said.

The RBI said that the lender had breached Section 6(2) and Section 8 of the Banking Regulation Act. Under Section 6(2) a bank isn't allowed to enter into any business, which doesn't fit into the list of activities allowed. Under Section 8, a bank cannot enter into any buying, selling or bartering of goods, except in connection with any security given or held by it.

According to reports, HDFC Bank sold GPS devices bundling them with auto loans to achieve sale targets between the years 2015 and 2019. The cost of such devices was added to the loan amount.

Last July, HDFC Bank had conducted a probe into allegations of improper lending practices and conflicts of interests in its vehicle loan operation involving the unit's former head Ashok Khanna. The investigations revealed personal misconduct by some of its employees and six of them were fired.

Also, last year, in September, US-based Rosen Law Firm and Schall Law Firm had filed class-action lawsuits against HDFC Bank, accusing the private lender of failing to reveal to investors about improper lending practices at its vehicle loans unit and making misleading statements.

Microfinance collections dip 20% with second wave

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, MAY 28

Microfinance collections, which had returned to pre-Covid levels by March, have dropped 20 per cent with the second wave of the pandemic. Disbursements too have come down by more than half.

MFIs had gradually reached close to pre-Covid levels in terms of collection by March. Overall collection rate in March 2021 was at 95-98 per cent. In a few weeks since then, the situation has altered drastically with the onslaught

of a second wave of the pandemic. Collections have dropped by 10 to 20 per cent in April-May 2021 as the lockdown was imposed in various key states across the country, finds Sa-Dhan.

"In the first wave, there was a moratorium, but this time there is no moratorium. Though microfinance is considered as an essential service, our personnel are not able to meet the customers within the small time window available for them. However, digital payments are taking care of 70 to 80 per cent of the collections," said Manoj

Nambiar, chairperson, MicroFinance Institutions Network (MFIN).

Emergence of digital collections through cards, QR code and Bharat Bill Payment System have helped collections to improve gradually.

The localised lockdowns have also affected the disbursements. "Disbursements in April-May would be lesser than March levels by 50 per cent or more. Businesses are closed and MFIs are also cautious that they do not overburden the customers with additional credit. However, as the

lockdowns get lifted, disbursements would improve," said Nambiar.

However, Portfolio at Risk for over 180 days has increased to 6.70 per cent in the March quarter from 4.75 per cent in the previous quarter, though short-term buckets have registered improvement. "This is certainly a worry as these are customers who are really in distress. Unemployment levels are once again up and incomes have been affected both in rural and urban areas. Savings have been depleted in the first wave itself."

INDIAN IMMUNOLOGICAL TIES UP WITH BB

FC BUREAU HYDERABAD, MAY 28

Hyderabad-based state-run vaccine maker Indian Immunological Limited (IIL) has tied up with Bharat Biotech Ltd for the supply of drug substance required for manufacturing the Covaxin vaccine.

The company, which comes under the National Dairy Development Board, said it would start the production of drug substance from June 15 and send out the first batch to Bharat Biotech by July.

The company's managing director, Dr K. Anand Kumar, said "IIL is expected to produce the drug substance for about 10-15 million doses per month. Initially, it will produce 2-3 million doses and will scale up to 6-7 million per month later in the year."

"We are converting the Karakapatta manufacturing unit of IIL near Hyderabad into a Bio-Safety Level-3 (BSL3) facility for the production of the drug substance and will take up construction of another block," Dr Kumar said.

Tyre-makers seek infra, time to meet new norms

MICHAEL GONSALVES PUNE, MAY 28

The Automotive Tyre Manufacturers Association (Atma) on Friday sought more time to meet the new norms on rolling resistance, wet grip and rolling sound emission of tyres to enable the industry to test a large number of stock keeping units (SKUs).

The apex body also sought time for setting practical threshold limits that suit the Indian conditions.

As per a draft notification by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) the proposed standards will become applicable for all new tyre designs from October 1, 2021, and for all other existing tyre designs for passenger cars, light commercial vehicles (LCVs), and heavy commercial vehicles (HCVs) by October 1, 2022.

The Atma said implementation of the notification hinges largely on the test infrastructure, as tests like wet grip and rolling sound emission are per-

INDIAN BANK POSTS ₹1,709 CR NET PROFIT IN Q4

New Delhi, May 28: Indian Bank on Friday reported a net profit of Rs 1,708.85 crore in the March quarter. The lender had posted a net loss of Rs 217.74 crore in the year-ago quarter.

Sequentially, the bank had posted a net profit of Rs 514.29 crore in the December quarter of the financial year 2020-21.

The bank said figures of March 31, 2020, are related to standalone Indian Bank financials for the pre-amalgamation period, hence not comparable with the post amalgamation financials of December 2020 and March 2021.

The erstwhile Allaha-bad Bank was amalgamated into Indian Bank on April 1, 2020.

Total income during the January-March quarter of 2020-21 increased to Rs 10,647.87 crore. It was Rs 6,334.37 crore in the same period of 2019-20, Indian Bank said in a regulatory filing.

For the full year of the financial year 2020-21, the net profit of the bank was recorded at Rs 3,004.68 crore. In the previous financial year, the bank had a total income of Rs 753.36 crore. The total income for the year was Rs 45,185.04 crore. Income in the preceding fiscal was at Rs 24,717.43 crore.

On the asset quality front, the bank's gross non-performing assets (NPAs) or the bad loans stood at 9.85 per cent of the gross advances by end of March 31, 2021. It was 6.87 per cent by March 2020. — PTI

M&M expects chip crunch, pandemic to hurt first quarter

MICHAEL GONSALVES PUNE, MAY 28



Rajesh Jejurikar

Mahindra and Mahindra, the farm equipment and utility vehicles specialist, on Friday warned that a global chip shortage, rising commodity prices and pandemic-induced lockdowns threatened its business in the first quarter of the current financial year (FY22).

The maker of popular Scorpio and Bolero models said apart from the chip shortage triggered by factors including pandemic-driven supply-chain disruptions, the auto industry is under pressure from the severe second wave of Covid-19 infections that have led to a fresh round of lockdowns. However, the Mumbai-based automaker expects demand to rebound in June and July as states open up in a phased manner.

"We are ramping up production and we believe there will be a strong demand rebound as we get out of lockdowns between June-July," Rajesh Jejurikar, executive director at Mahindra and Mahindra said, adding that the auto sector could take a month or two longer to rebound.

He said the company has not seen any cancellations in bookings despite a large number of people waiting for their orders. Mahindra on Friday posted a consolidated profit after tax (PAT) from continuing opera-

tions of Rs 1,635 crore for the fourth quarter.

The company had reported a consolidated net loss of Rs 588 crore in the same period last fiscal, M&M said in a regulatory filing.

The company's board also gave its nod to the highest-ever dividend of Rs 8.75 per share for the financial year 2020-21 to commemorate its 75th year in business.

The consolidated revenue from operations stood at Rs 21,456 crore during the January-March quarter under against Rs 16,315 crore in the corresponding period of the last fiscal.

For the entire 2020-21 fiscal year, the company reported a consolidated PAT of Rs 3,702 crore as compared with Rs 2,713 crore in 2019-20.

Revenue from operations stood at Rs 74,278 crore for the financial year, as against Rs 75,382 crore in 2019-20.

On a standalone basis, the automaker reported a PAT of Rs 48 crore for the fourth quarter. The firm reported a net loss of Rs 2,502 crore in the year-ago quarter.

PANDEMIC SPURS BICYCLE DEMAND

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, MAY 28

The pandemic has spurred demand for bicycles owing to improving fitness consciousness and leisure requirements.

"The bicycle industry is witnessing a decadal-high demand and growth of 20 per cent this fiscal, with sales likely to touch 1.45 crore units compared with 1.2 crore units last fiscal, said a Crisil report.

India is the world's second-largest manufacturer of bicycles.

The resultant improvement in cash flows will improve the financials of bigger bicycle manufacturers, which account for around 60 per cent of industry volume, it said.

In the five fiscal years through 2019, bicycle sales volume logged a modest compound annual growth rate of around 5 per cent. In fiscal 2020, it contracted a massive 22 per cent as government purchases plunged and a large bicycle manufacturer downed shutters, however, last fiscal saw a turn for the better," Crisil said.

The momentum is likely to continue this fiscal, too, the report said.

UP AGAINST A CYCLONE 'It was a 15-hour battle between life and death in the raging sea. I confronted death several times'

Survivors tell a harrowing tale of lapses in sea disaster

DEBJIT CHAKRABORTY & DHWANI PANDYA MAY 28

When India's weather office sent out cyclone warnings on May 13 and most vessels moved to safety, one barge working on Oil and Natural Gas Corp's field off the Mumbai coast stayed put.

That decision would prove fatal when Tauktae, a storm with the intensity of a category 3 hurricane, struck on the evening of May 16. It tore apart the Papaa 305's anchors and slammed it into an offshore platform, taking down 261 people on board. Since May 17, 186 have been rescued, 70 bodies have been retrieved and five people remain missing. The storm left over 100 dead overall across several states.

India's oil ministry has

ordered an investigation led by a group of senior government officials into the accident, and wants a report within a month. State-run ONGC, and its billionaire offshore engineering contractor are under growing pressure to explain their roles in one of the world's worst offshore oilfield disasters in recent memory.

Interviews with survivors, rescue officials and executives from ONGC suggest that a serious misreading of the weather, as well as human error and safety lapses led to the tragedy.

It was a busy time in the Arabian Sea on India's western coast when the cyclone hit the area.

Thousands of welders, painters and engineers had come from all over the country to work on renovating the giant metal structures ONGC



used for pulling out oil from the seabed. They lived in the barges hired by Afcons Infrastructure, an engineering company owned by billionaire Pallonji Mistry's Shapoorji Pallonji Group. Afcons was the main contractor for the jobs of fixing decays and painting rusted pipes and metals in order to protect the structures

from the corrosive onslaught of the sea.

The monsoon was closing in for arrival early next month, and the contractors were in a rush to complete as much work as they could on the platforms.

While most of the vessels returned to anchorages close to the coast, Papaa 305 anchored very near its original location, some 70 km from the coast. The weather deteriorated rapidly from the evening of May 16.

After the cyclone pushed the barge into a platform and caused it to sink on the evening of May 17, hundreds of the people on board clambered onto life rafts to escape. But almost all the rafts were in damaged condition, leaving them with no option but to jump into the sea, according to three survivors. Battling

strong winds and high waves, the surviving crew drifted in their life jackets miles away from the barge.

"It was a 15-hour battle between life and death in the raging sea," said Agnel V. Varkey, a 25-year-old engineer who survived the disaster. "I confronted death several times. The waves would sweep me away every time I tried getting closer to the rescue ships."

Varkey and other survivors, who did not want to be identified fearing consequences to their jobs, pinpoint the decision by barge master Rakesh Ballav—who wasn't among those rescued—not to move Papaa 305 closer to the coast as the reason for the tragedy. Some of them said Ballav's decision was the result of pressure on the barge to complete

pending work on the offshore platform before the monsoon rains.

M.R.H. Shaikh, a 49-year-old engineer working on Papaa 305, filed a police complaint against Ballav in Mumbai alleging that he ignored the cyclone warnings. The barge master told the workers that the storm would pass in a few hours and it would be safer if the barge stayed anchored where it was near the platform, according to the complaint.

As the investigation into the tragedy continues and the survivors await answers, Varkey, now recuperating at his parental home in Kozhikode, says he isn't sure he'll ever return to the sea.

"Everyone is telling me, don't go back there."

—Bloomberg

SHORT TAKES

PCB gets UAE nod for players' travel

Karachi: The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) is all set to hold the remaining PSL matches in Abu Dhabi next month after getting permission from UAE authorities to land its chartered flights from Mumbai and Johannesburg carrying members of the broadcasting crew, players and officials. "The Abu Dhabi sports council has now written a letter to its immigration authority to allow the landing of the chartered flights from Mumbai and Johannesburg," a PCB official said.

He said after that clearance, chartered flights will be allowed to fly for Abu Dhabi. The PCB faced a long delay getting visas for the Indian and South African broadcasting crew members but finally got visas for them on Thursday before the landing permission issue cropped up. — PTI

Games look like a fan-free event

Tokyo: The president of the Tokyo Olympic organising committee hinted on Friday that even local fans may be barred from venues when the games open in just under two months. Fans from abroad were ruled out months ago as being too risky during a pandemic. The prospect of empty venues at the postponed Olympics became more likely when the Japanese government decided Friday to extend a state of emergency until June 20 as Covid-19 cases continue to put the medical system under strain. "We would like to make a decision as soon as possible (on fans), but after the state of emergency is lifted we will assess," organising committee president Seiko Hashimoto said at her weekly briefing. — AP

Allegri is back as Juventus coach

Rome: Massimiliano Allegri has returned to Juventus after the Turin giants sacked coach Andrea Pirlo following a single season in charge, the deposed Italian champions announced on Friday. "Welcome back home, Maxi!" Juventus said in a tweet to announce the re-appointment of the coach who won five straight Italian league titles with the club between 2014 and 2019. "Now we are ready to begin again with Allegri, to build our future together; with his enormous professionalism, his moral strength, with the brilliant ideas of a coach capable of shuffling the cards, both on and off the pitch," Juventus said in a statement. The 53-year-old led Juve to four consecutive league and cup doubles with Italian Cup triumphs in 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018. — AFP

Novak saunters into Belgrade final

Belgrade: Novak Djokovic eased into the final of the ATP tournament in Belgrade on Friday despite losing his form in the second set, beating Slovakia's Andrej Martin. He saw off his 119th-ranked opponent 6-1, 4-6, 6-0 to set up a Saturday final against either Argentine Federico Delbonis or another Slovakian, Alex Molcan. It will be the Serbian's third final of the year after his Australian Open triumph and his final loss to Rafael Nadal at the Italian Open last week, but his first on home soil since 2011. "I'm super excited to play in front of a Serbian crowd. This is my home town. I'm always excited, but also nervous, coming out on the court and playing in front of my home crowd," Djokovic said. — AFP

Lakers cool off Phoenix Suns

Los Angeles: Anthony Davis scored 34 points and 11 rebounds and LeBron James delivered 21 points and nine assists as the Los Angeles Lakers defeated the short-handed Phoenix Suns 109-95 in a heated Western Conference playoff game Thursday. Davis is looking like his old self again as the Lakers grabbed a 2-1 series lead in the opening round of the playoffs. — AFP

FAIR SHARE OF THE GAME

India, NZ to be adjudged joint winners in case of draw or tie

Dubai, May 28: India and New Zealand will be adjudged joint winners of the inaugural World Test Championship if their final clash in Southampton ends in a draw or tie, the International Cricket Council (ICC) said on Friday. According to the playing conditions unveiled by the global body, "a draw or a tie will see both teams crowned as joint winners..."

The ICC has also allocated a Reserve Day to make up for any lost time during the regular days of the Final, scheduled to be played from 18 to 22 June, with 23 June set aside as the Reserve Day.

"Both of these decisions were made in June 2018, prior to the commencement of the ICC World Test Championship," ICC stated. The Reserve Day has been scheduled to ensure five full days of play, and it will only be used if lost playing time cannot be recovered through the normal provisions for each day. "There will be no additional day's play if a positive result is not achieved after five full days of play and the match will be declared a draw in such a scenario," the ICC added.

In the event of time being lost during the match, the ICC match referee will regularly update the teams and media about the way in which the Reserve Day may be used. The final decision on whether the Reserve Day needs to be used will be announced at the scheduled start of the last hour on the fifth day. While India play at home

with SG Test and New Zealand use Kookaburra at home, the final will be played with Grade 1 Dukes balls. The final will also feature the implementation of three changes to international playing conditions, which were brought into effect with the ongoing World Cup Super League series between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka: Short Runs — The Third Umpire will automatically review any call of a 'short run' by the on-field umpire and communicate

the decision prior to the next ball being bowled. Player Reviews — The fielding captain or the dismissed batsman will be able to confirm with the umpire whether a genuine attempt has been made to play the ball prior to deciding whether to initiate a review for LBW. DRS Reviews — For LBW reviews, the height margin of the wicket zone has been lifted to the top of the stumps to ensure the same Umpire's Call margin around the stumps for both height and width. — PTI



Indian allrounder Deepti Sharma gets her first dose of Covid-19 vaccine ahead of the England tour.

— Twitter

Women cricketers get the jab

New Delhi, May 28: All members of the UK-bound Indian women's cricket team have been administered the first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine ahead of their upcoming away series against England beginning June 16.

The Indian team, which is currently in quarantine in Mumbai, will begin its UK tour with a one-off Test in Bristol from June 16. It will be followed by two T20Is on July 9 and 11 in Northampton and three

ODIs beginning June 27. "All the players of the women's team have got their first dose of vaccination. Most of them got it in their respective cities, while a few who didn't, got their first jabs on Thursday," a BCCI source said.

Spin allrounder Deepti Sharma on Thursday shared a picture of her taking the jab on Twitter. "Though I am a little scared of needles, but I still got myself vaccinated today. I urge people to please get vaccinated as

soon as they can! #GotTheDose #We4Vaccine #CovidVaccine," she had tweeted. The source said most of the players received Covishield vaccine and they will be administered their second dose by the UK health department.

The Indian women's team will depart for UK along with the men's squad, led by skipper Virat Kohli, in a chartered flight on June 2. The members of Indian men's team, including Kohli, Mohammed

Shami, Ajinkya Rahane, Cheteshwar Pujara, Umesh Yadav, Ishant Sharma, Jasprit Bumrah and Rishabh Pant, have taken the first jab of Covid-19 vaccine at different centres in the country. The players are expected to take their second dose of Covishield in the UK.

Kohli and Co. will face New Zealand in the World Test Championship final in Southampton on June 18 before taking on England in a five-Test series. — PTI

PERERA TON GUIDES SL TO VICTORY vs BANGLA

Dhaka (Bangladesh), May 28: Sri Lanka avoided being swept by Bangladesh in their one-day international series when they won the third match by 97 runs with a Kusal Perera century and Dushmantha Chameera's maiden five-for on Friday. Perera struck a 122-ball 120 to lead Sri Lanka to a respectable 286-6. The fast bowler Chameera then took 5-16 to undermine the reply by Bangladesh, which was all out for 189 in 42.3 overs.

The victory marked Sri Lanka's first in the ODI Super League. Captain Perera and Danushka Gunathilaka opened with an 82-run stand after they won the toss. Perera drove Taskin to sweeper cover for a single in a bulletproof 50 off 44 balls, but the skipper needed luck three times to reach his sixth ODI century. — AP

Brief scores: Sri Lanka 286/6 in 50 overs (K. Perera 120, D. de Silva 55 n.o.; T. Ahmed 4/46) bt Bangladesh 189 in 42.3 overs (Mahmudullah 53; D. Chameera 5/16).

I didn't realise importance of pace early on: Bhuvneshwar

New Delhi, May 28: Indian seamer Bhuvneshwar Kumar says he never realised the importance of adding pace to his bowling in his formative years but once he did, it helped him "maintain that swing" which keeps batsmen guessing.

"To be honest, first couple of years I didn't realise pace is something that needs to be added," he said in a video posted by his IPL team SunRisers Hyderabad on its Twitter handle. "As I kept playing,



Bhuvneshwar Kumar

I realised with swing I need to improve my pace because bowling in late 120kph or just 130kph, batsmen were adjusting to the swing. So, I wanted to increase the pace, but I

didn't know how to do it..." Bhuvneshwar said. The 31-year-old has so far taken 63 wickets in 21 Tests, 138 and 45 scalps in 117 ODIs and 48 T20Is.

"Fortunately, I was able to improve the pace and that really helped me in the later stages. So yes, when you have pace, not the express 140-plus, but bowling in the mid-130kph helps maintaining that swing and keep the batsman guessing," he further added. — PTI

Panghal, Thapa make title bouts

Dubai, May 28: Defending champion Amit Panghal (52kg) and Shiva Thapa (64kg) stormed into the Asian Boxing Championship finals with resounding victories in the last-four stage on Friday.

While Panghal out-punched familiar foe Saken Bibossinov of Kazakhstan 5-0, Thapa, the first Indian boxer in the tournament history to secure five medals, dominated top-seeded defending champion Bakhodur Usmonov of Tajikistan to make the finals with a 4-0 verdict.

However, tournament debutant and national champion Varinder Singh (60kg) settled for the bronze medal after a high-intensity clash against Iran's Daniyal Shabbakhsh. The Indian lost 2-3 after fighting his heart out.

Panghal was in top form as he took control of the bout with his sharp counter-attacks against the defensively weaker Bibossinov. The Indian played the waiting game to perfection as the third-seeded Bibossinov's plan to dazzle him with early aggression fell flat as the bout progressed.

The World No.1 from Haryana became the aggressor in the final round as Bibossinov ran out of steam.

Earlier on Thursday night, Indian boxer Sakshi

● **Tournament debutant and national champion Varinder Singh (60kg) settled for bronze after a high-intensity clash against Iran's Daniyal Shabbakhsh.**

Choudhary (54kg) has lost her final spot in the Asian Championships after her rival, top-seeded Kazakh Dina Zholaman successfully challenged the narrow victory that the two-time youth world champion had clinched in the last-four stage.

Sakshi had prevailed 3-2 in the regulation bout but the decision was challenged by the Kazakh team and eventually overturned.

"Kazakhstan's Dina Zholaman defeated India's Sakshi Choudhary at the women's bantamweight (54kg)," the Asian Boxing Confederation announced. Zholaman was declared winner in the official result sheet that came out at the end of the day's proceedings late on Thursday night.

Earlier, six-time world champion M C Mary Kom (51kg), Lalbuatsaihi (64kg), Pooja Rani (75kg) and Anupama (+81kg) entered the finals after winning their respective bouts on Thursday. — PTI

TIGER SILENT ON FUTURE, TALKS 'PAINFUL' REHAB

Los Angeles, May 28: Tiger Woods described his rehabilitation from injuries sustained in a February car crash as the most "painful" experience of his career and declined to comment on his possible return to the sport, *Golf Digest* reported Thursday.

In a brief interview on the magazine's website, Woods said he is targeting being able to walk on his own as he recovers from multiple fractures in his right leg suffered in the crash in California three months ago.

The former World No.1 and 15-time major winner is no stranger to rehab, having undergone multiple surgeries on his back and knee over the years in order to extend his career.

However the 45-year-old told *Golf Digest* that his previous stints in recovery paled in comparison to his present situation. "This has been an entirely different animal," Woods told *Golf Digest*.

"I understand more of the rehab processes because of my past injuries, but this was more painful than anything I have ever experienced," he added.

The report said it was unclear whether Woods would require additional procedures or whether he would be able to regain full strength and mobility in his leg.

The magazine said Woods declined to comment when asked about his hopes of playing golf again, responding that his immediate priority focused on walking unassisted. — AFP

Saina, Srikanth's Tokyo hopes end

New Delhi, May 28: Kidambi Srikanth and Saina Nehwal's slim hopes of qualifying for Tokyo Games ended after the game's governing body (BWF) on Friday made it clear there will not be any change in the current ranking list and no further tournament will be held inside the qualification period.

Former World No.1 Srikanth and London Games bronze-medallist Saina's hopes were all but dashed when the last of the Olympic qualifiers in Singapore was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

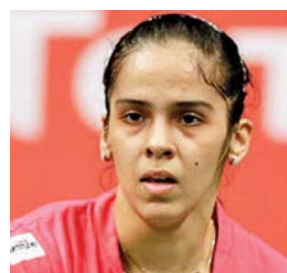
The duo had hung on a slim hope when the governing body said it "will issue a further statement on Tokyo Olympics qualifying at a later date".

"The Badminton World Federation (BWF) can confirm no further tournaments will be played inside the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games qualifying window," the apex body said in a statement on Friday.

"As such, while the qualification period officially closes 15 June 2021 as per the Revised Tokyo 2020 Qualification System, the current Race To Tokyo rankings list will not change," it added.

Owing to the health crisis, the world body had earlier revised the qualification period, extending it by nearly two months to June 15 after postponement of three important events.

However, with no respite from the pandemic, BWF was forced to cancel or



Saina Nehwal

● **Owing to the pandemic, BWF was forced to cancel or postpone the last three qualifiers — India Open, Malaysia Open and Singapore Open, leaving players, including Srikanth and Saina, with no chance to earn a qualification.**

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"The Olympic qualification process is in effect closed as there are no additional opportunities for players to earn points," BWF secretary general Thomas Lund said.

"However, we still need to receive confirmations from National Olympic Committees and Member Associations, followed by any possible reallocations, and this will take a number of weeks to complete," he further added. — PTI

Man City, Blues eye continental Cup

Porton (Portugal), May 28: Pep Guardiola's Manchester City are 90 minutes away from the trophy they so desperately crave but a Chelsea side transformed in recent months stand in their way in Saturday's all-English Champions League final in Porto, the Portuguese city which was named as a last-minute host.

It is the third final of Europe's elite club competition to be played between two Premier League sides, and the second in just three seasons,

and so this is a match-up that underlines the strength of the cash-rich English game.

And these are the two clubs whose own transformations in the last two decades under mega-rich foreign owners have done the most to change forever the landscape of the Premier League. Not so long ago, the idea of Chelsea and City meeting in the biggest club game of all would have been laughable. Their only previous encounter in a final came in 1986 in the short-lived

Full Members Cup, when Chelsea won 5-4 at Wembley.

City, though, have never made it this far but are finally here, after 13 years of enormous investment from the Gulf and four previous years of disappointment under Guardiola, the man who was hired principally to win them the European Cup. Chelsea, though, have beaten City twice in the last six weeks, first in the FA Cup semis and then at the Etihad Stadium in the league. — AFP



Manchester City coach Pep Guardiola in this file photo.