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Rafael Nadal makes Italian Open final for the 12th time  
page 14

### NEARBY



Adityanath, Amarinder in spat over new district

CHANDIGARH  
A day after Punjab declared Malerkotla a new district, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh on Saturday got into a verbal spat over the announcement. Mr. Adityanath termed the decision of declaring its only Muslim-majority town a district "a reflection of the divisive policy of the Congress".

NEWS ▶ PAGE 6

Delhi riots: court denies bail to Tahir Hussain

NEW DELHI  
A court here on Saturday dismissed the bail applications of former AAP Councillor Tahir Hussain in connection with two north-east Delhi riots cases, saying he used his muscle power and political clout to act as a kingpin in planning and instigating the communal conflagration.

CITY ▶ PAGE 3

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## Two killed in Kerala as cyclone intensifies

Tauktae expected to cross the Gujarat coast on Tuesday

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI

Cyclonic storm Tauktae (pronounced Tau'te) in the Arabian Sea is expected to intensify into a very severe cyclonic storm by Sunday, with winds speeds expected to touch 160 kmph by Monday.

Heavy rain accompanying the storm claimed two lives in Ernakulam and Kozhikode districts of Kerala and forced more than 2,000 to move to 71 camps. The State recorded an average rainfall of 145.5 mm on Saturday, Chief Minister, Pinarayi Vijayan said, citing data from the India Meteorological Department (IMD), with the power and agriculture sectors reporting heavy damage.

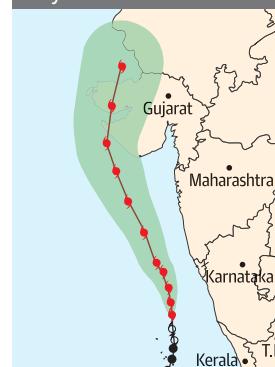
The storm moved northwards and lay about 250 km southwest of Panjim-Goa and 620 km south-southwest of Mumbai. The Lakshwadeep Islands and the Ghat districts of Tamil Nadu also received significant rain.

Rain is expected to intensify in coastal Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat over the next 48 hours, causing damage to plantations, thatched houses and roads. Fishermen have been warned to stay off the sea.



In torrents: A two-wheeler rider braving heavy rain in Thiruvananthapuram on Saturday. ■ MAHINSHA S.

**Bracing for storm**  
The expected path of the cyclonic storm Tauktae



The IMD expects Tauktae to touch the Gujarat coast between Porbandar and Naliya around May 18 afternoon or evening, with wind speeds increasing to 175 kmph.

Current forecasts show heavy rain in the coastal districts of Gujarat, including

### Navy teams deployed

The Navy on Saturday deployed relief teams which undertook rescue operations in areas affected by Cyclone Tauktae in Kerala. The Air Force has kept 16 transport aircraft and 18 helicopters on operational readiness in peninsular India in preparation for the cyclone. ▶ PAGE 6

extremely heavy rainfall in Junagadh and Gir Somnath and heavy to very heavy rain in Saurashtra, Kutch and Diu, Junagadh, Porbandar, Devbhoomi Dwarka, Amreli, Rajkot, and Jamnagar.

CONTINUED ON ▶ PAGE 6

## Israel strikes media building, refugee camp in Gaza City

At least 10 Palestinians from a family killed

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
GAZA CITY

An Israeli air strike targeted and destroyed a high-rise building in Gaza City that housed the offices of The Associated Press, Al-Jazeera and other media outlets hours after another Israeli air raid on a densely populated refugee camp killed at least 10 Palestinians from an extended family, mostly children, on Saturday.

The strike on the high-rise came nearly an hour after the military ordered people to evacuate the 12-storey building, which also housed other offices and residential apartments.

The strike brought down the entire structure, which



Falling to pieces: A building housing the offices of media outlets in Gaza City collapsing after an airstrike on Saturday. ■ AP

collapsed in a gigantic cloud of dust.

There was no immediate explanation for why it was attacked.

The air strike on the refugee camp was the deadliest single strike of the current conflict between Israel and the militant group Hamas.

MORE REPORTS ON ▶ PAGES 9 & 12

### Cairn moves U.S. court to attach AI assets

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI

Cairn Energy confirmed on Saturday that it had taken fresh legal steps to enforce the \$1.2 billion international arbitration award it won against India in a tax dispute involving retrospective taxation, by seeking to make the country's national carrier Air India liable for paying the damages in a U.S. court.

"This decision was taken by the Board of Cairn Energy last week to protect shareholders' interests – it is a preliminary step," a Cairn official told *The Hindu*.

"Cairn is taking the necessary legal steps to protect shareholders' interests in the absence of a resolution to the arbitral award."

CONTINUED ON ▶ PAGE 6

## As administration clamps down, Unnao's poor struggle to conduct funerals

Discovery of bodies in the Ganga has led to a ban on burials

OMAR RASHID  
UNNAO

Having travelled 30 km from his village Parsana with the body of his teenage niece in an open mini-truck without any fuel or wood for cremation, Bachu Lal was caught in a fix when the cleaners at the Baksar Ghat informed him he would not be allowed to bury the body following new directions from the administration.

The ghat came under official spotlight earlier this week after visuals showed a large number of bodies believed to be of COVID-19 victims buried there, allegedly due to scarcity of cremation resources and rise in fatalities due to the infection – a

claim yet to be officially acknowledged.

Since the girl was unmarried, Bachu Lal's family, as per customs, had planned to bury the body instead of cremating it. Cremation with the proper rituals would cost the family around ₹6,000-8000, a sum they could ill afford amid the lockdown.

A distraught Lal said just a month ago, the family had buried the body of a relative at the same site without any hindrance.

Baksar Ghat is located in Unnao along the Ganga but is very close to the borders with Rae Bareli, Kannur and Fatehpur districts.

The administration recently launched a probe after an unknown number of bodies were allegedly found buried in the sand at two locations by the Ganga – one of them Baksar.

At the ghat on Saturday, half-a-dozen bodies have al-



Last rites: Families cremating bodies at the Baksar ghat in Unnao.  
■ OMAR RASHID

ready arrived for cremation though it is not even 10 in the morning. Three pyres have been lit. There is hardly any physical distancing as kin and friends of the dead prepare for their turn.

Beyond the cremation sheds, mounds in the sand are marked with saffron or

white cloth. Clothes, broken objects and dirt are strewn on the uneven ground as dogs and crows scan the landscape for possible remains. Some dogs can be seen digging aggressively in sandbars in the river where a few bodies were recently buried after the main ghat ran

out of space. It is difficult to estimate how many bodies may have been buried at the site but locals say the figure is above 200.

Rakesh, one of the many cleaners on the ghat, has spent two decades of his life digging the pits and clearing the surface of the cremation

ghat.

He says that while the ghat usually received 15-20 bodies or fewer daily, during the peak of the COVID-19 in April, as many as 70-80 bodies arrived for final rites on a single day. Of these, children and those from poor families were buried as many could not afford the cost of firewood, he said. "Nobody cremates their little children," he explained.

Prakash, another cleaner, says there had been a long queue at the cremation site last month. "We tell the people to not throw the body into the river but bury them instead," he said.

The number of bodies coming to the ghat has dropped over the past week and none of them were buried since the controversy broke out, said Rakesh.

Asked if those buried died of COVID, both Rakesh and Prakash said they did

not know. "The relatives don't even take the name of corona. Some say death happened due to fever, others say it was a 'sudden death; breathing, TB, heart attack...,'" said Prakash.

**No abandoned bodies**  
Bighapur sub-divisional magistrate Daya Shankar Pathak said not a single body was found in the open on the ghat. "All were found buried," he said, when asked what the probe had found so far. Asked if instructions had been given banning burials after the matter came to light, Mr. Pathak said, "No, people who are conducting the last rites are doing it as per their customs."

District Magistrate Ravinder Kumar said not a single body was found floating in the Ganga. There are several sites in Unnao where, as per customs, bodies are either cremated or buried, he said.

### 24 arrests in Capital over posters

STAFF REPORTER  
NEW DELHI

At least 25 FIRs have been lodged in connection with posters that surfaced across Delhi questioning Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the vaccination policy. The police said at least 24 persons had been arrested in connection with the cases.

Earlier this week, posters were found pasted on walls and boards with the message: "Modiji humare bacchon ka vaccine videsh kyon bhej diya?" (Why did you send our children's vaccines abroad?). FIRs under relevant sections of the IPC, defacement of property Act, and Delhi disaster management Act were lodged in all districts where the posters were found.

DETAILS ON ▶ PAGE 6

### Fish eye



For a good catch: Fishermen venturing out into the sea in colourful catamarans near Visakhapatnam on Saturday. The traditional boats are exempted from the ongoing fishing ban. ■ K.R. DEEPAK



# Pandemic and priorities

Even as the Narendra Modi government pushes ahead with its redevelopment plan for the Central Vista amid a lockdown in the national capital, all eyes are on the Delhi High Court. Nudged for an urgent hearing by the Supreme Court, a Bench led by Chief Justice D.N. Patel is scheduled to take up a petition seeking a halt on all ongoing construction activity for the project.



Labourers continue to work at the Central Vista redevelopment project site despite the lockdown. Defending the ongoing work, the government told the Delhi High Court that the petition seeking to stop the construction is "sheer abuse of the process of law and is one more attempt to stall the project".



PHOTOS BY: R.V. MOORTHY, SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR AND SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

## OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE ENGINEER Special Sub Division Gurez email: eeguraispwd@gmail.com

### Notice Inviting e-Tender

#### Fresh E-NIT S. No.07/SSDG of 2021-22 Dtd.05-5-2021

For and on behalf of the Lt. Governor UT of J&K e-tenders (Two cover System) on Item Rate Basis including the maintenance cost for a period of Three Years which includes 12 months of DPL are invited from Reputed and resourceful contractors/ Firms/Companies/Joint Venture of repute in PWD or Equivalent in CPWD/ Railways and other state Governments for the following works, which should be uploaded on the Procurement web portal <http://jkntenders.gov.in> for the subject(s) referred below to be received by the Executive Engineer Special Sub Division Gurez and as per the details mentioned in this e-tender notification and to whom all the terms and conditions of detailed e-NIT/Tender Documents/PWD Form No-25 are accepted.

The cost of tender documents (Non-refundable/Non-Transferable) should be in the shape of e-Challan or Treasury Challan/Receipt in favour Executive Engineer Special Sub Division Gurez

S. No	Name of Work	Estimated Cost (₹ in lacs)	Cost of TD (in ₹)	Time of completion	Class of Contract	Accord of AAA
1	Providing/laying and fitting of GI pipes including Construction of protection works, Intake Chamber near head site, 0.04 lac gallon SR, Sluice Chamber, supporting pillars for RWM at spots, Chain Link fencing around structures, Cattle troughs, for Retrofitting of WSS Banjara for 100% coverage of FHTCs ("Under JMM")	53.29	1600	(06) Months	AAY	SE/Hyd/Spr/ 39 of 03/2020-21 Dated, 10-03-2021
2	Providing/laying and fitting of GI pipes including Construction of protection works, Intake Chamber near head site, 0.25 lac gallon SR, Sluice Chamber, supporting pillars for RWM at spots, Crate work, Chain Link fencing around structures, Cattle troughs, PST near head site for Retrofitting of WSS Gulshapura for 100% coverage of FHTCs ("Under JMM")	60.48	1600	(06) Months	AAY	SE/Hyd/Spr/ 42 of 03/2020-21 Dated, 10-03-2021
3	Providing/laying and fitting of GI pipes including Construction of protection works, Intake Chamber near head site, 0.04 lac gallon SR, Sluice Chamber, supporting pillars for RWM at spots, Crate work, Chain Link fencing around structures, Cattle troughs, additional storage tank for Retrofitting of WSS Jumrah Dutt Tulail for 100% coverage of FHTCs ("Under JMM")	151.28	2600	(12) Months	AAY	SE/Hyd/Spr/ 41 of 03/2020-21 Dated, 10-03-2021
4	Providing/laying and fitting of GI pipes including Construction of protection works/ head works at head site, crate protection work at sports, Intake Chamber near head site, 0.06 lac gallon SR, Sluice Chamber, supporting pillars for RWM at spots, Chain Link fencing around structures, cattle trough for Retrofitting of WSS Javanda 1st for 100% coverage of FHTCs ("Under JMM")	87.00	1600	(08) Months	AAY	SE/Hyd/Spr/ 33 of 03/2020-21 Dated, 10-03-2021
5	Providing/laying and fitting of GI pipes including Construction of protection works, Intake Chamber near head site, 0.03 lac gallon SR, Sluice Chamber, supporting pillars for RWM at spots, Crate work, Chain Link fencing around structures, Cattle troughs, PST near head site for Retrofitting of WSS Grath Nullah Badgam Tulail for 100% coverage of FHTCs ("Under JMM")	57.30	1600	(07) Months	AAY	SE/Hyd/Spr/ 45 of 03/2020-21 Dated, 10-03-2021
6	Providing/laying and fitting of GI pipes including Construction of spring protection/ head works at head site, crate protection work at sports, Intake Chamber near head site, 0.25 lac gallon SR, Sluice Chamber, supporting pillars for RWM at spots, Chain Link fencing around structures, cattle trough for Retrofitting of WSS Reflu 1st for 100% coverage of FHTCs ("Under JMM")	60.10	1600	(07) Months	AAY	SE/Hyd/Spr/ 38 of 03/2020-21 Dated, 10-03-2021
7	Providing/laying and fitting of GI pipes including Construction of protection works/ head works at head site, Intake Chamber near head site, 0.02 lac gallon SR, Sluice Chamber, supporting pillars for RWM at spots, Chain Link fencing around structures, cattle trough for Retrofitting of WSS Sudi Kilshay Tulail for 100% coverage of FHTCs ("Under JMM")	51.60	1600	(07) Months	AAY	SE/Hyd/Spr/ 29 of 03/2020-21 Dated, 10-03-2021

#### Position of Funds:- Available:

Major Head of Account: Jai Jeevan Mission (JJM)

The Bidding documents consisting of eligibility criteria, specification, drawings, bill of quantities (B.O.Q) set of terms & conditions of contract and other details can be seen/ downloaded from the e-procurement Portal "<http://jkntenders.gov.in>" as per schedule of dates given below:-

S.No	Description	Date			Time
		DD	MM	YY	
1	Publishing date of NIT	11	05	2021	1000 Hrs
2	Download start date	12	05	2021	1000 Hrs
3	Bid submission start date	12	05	2021	1000 Hrs
4	Bid submission end date	17	05	2021	1600 Hrs.
5	Bid opening date (Technical Cover)	18	05	2021	1000 Hrs.

#### TERMS AND CONDITIONS:

- The tenderer should in his own interest inspect and examine the site, its surroundings/topography, nature of ground, climatic conditions, accessibility or other relevant information at his own expenses and responsibility to satisfy himself before tendering for the advertised work. The bidder will have to execute each part of the work i.e. Civil / Electro-Mechanical part under the close supervision of the respective Engineer-in-Charges of Civil & Mechanical wings In-charge of the Scheme.
- If L1 fails to start the work within 15 days of the issuance of letter of intent or allotment, whichever is earlier, the department shall allot the work to the other willing Lowest bidder like L2, L3, L4 and EMD of the lowest bidder including the additional Security Performance shall be forfeited, besides debarring the Contractor for a period of two years for participating in the e-Nit issued by the kmr, PHE Department Srinagar.

For and on behalf of the Lt. Governor UT of Jammu & Kashmir.

No: -SSDG/213-19,  
Dated: -05-5-2021

DIPK-1591/21

Sd/-  
Executive Engineer,  
Special Sub Division Gurez,

## Himachal Pradesh Public Works Department Phone No.01903-221031 Fax: 091903-221031

### INVITATION FOR BIDS (IFB)

The Executive Engineer, Banjar Division, HP.PWD, Banjar, on behalf of Governor of Himachal Pradesh invites the item rate bids in electronic tendering system from the eligible Class of Contractors registered with HPPWD for the works as detailed in the table:-

Sr. No.	Name of work	Estimated cost (Rs.)	Starting Date for down-loading Bid	Ernest Money	Deadline for submission of Bid
1.	Construction of Langni to Chhawani road Km.0/0. (SH:- Formation Cutting, Riwalls, B/walls, Cross Drainage work and Wire Crates for dumping) under NABARD RIDF-XXVI	5,25,53,791	20.05.2021	1051000	27.05.2021

The Bidders are advised to note other details of tenders from the department website [www.hptenders.gov.in](http://www.hptenders.gov.in)

Executive Engineer,  
Banjar Division,  
HP.PWD, Banjar 175123  
Phone No.01903-221031  
Fax: 091903-221031  
E-mail: ee-kul1-hp@nic.in  
On behalf of Governor of HP

HP / 0786/21-22

# With dip in cases, beds free up in city hospitals

Admission process smoother compared to previous weeks

#### SHINJINI GHOSH

NEW DELHI

Around 12.30 p.m. on Saturday, the display board outside the COVID-19 ward at Lok Nayak Hospital flashed 240 vacant ICU beds and around 746 vacant oxygen-supported beds of a total of 1,750 beds in the hospital.

With the dip in daily cases in the national capital, the crowds outside the hospital have reduced now.

While ambulances and patients in private cars kept coming to the hospital every few minutes, families of those already admitted said that the admission process had not been difficult this week.

Laxmi, a resident of Najafgarh, got her 60-year-old mother admitted to the hospital five days ago.

even if we want to drop a few things for her, facilities have been made to give it at the designated counters. While most of the times we return at night, at times, we stay back as the tents here are well-managed with coolers, etc.," said Ms. Laxmi.

Rajveer Singh, an ambulance driver waiting outside the hospital said, "The scenario is much better now. These days, we only get 3-4 calls on a given day. When the oxygen crisis happened in the city, we were on duty for 24 hours and the pressure was immense. The rush was so bad that it was difficult to get the patients admitted. However, things have improved a lot now and patients get admitted quite easily."



**Signs of improvement:** A scene outside Lok Nayak Hospital in Delhi on Saturday. ■ SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

# Man arrested for cheating woman on pretext of arranging Remdesivir drug

He was out of work due to the ongoing lockdown: police

The police said that a woman identified as Pooja Gupta approached the police stating her sister-in-law was a COVID patient and her condition was critical. There was an urgent need of the drug for her treatment. Through a WhatsApp group, the complainant found the number of the accused who assured her to provide six Remdesivir injections for ₹9,000 each. He demanded

₹20,000 in advance for the same and remaining ₹3,400 after delivery.

"The complainant transferred ₹20,000 to his bank account on May. The accused then shared a number stating that the injections will be delivered. However, Sunny who was supposed to deliver them kept making excuses," the officer said.

Efforts are being made to nab Sunny, Mr. Meena said.

**Timings**

**DELHI**

SUNDAY, MAY 16	RISE 05:31 SET 19:06
MONDAY, MAY 17	RISE 08:42 SET 23:11
TUESDAY, MAY 18	RISE 05:30 SET 19:07
	RISE 09:37 SET 23:58
	RISE 10:34 SET 00:00

**Delhi Weather**

max min

Delhi City 39 23

Safdarjang 39 23

Palam 40 24

**Delhi Palam Today**

40°C Mainly dry weather and rise in temperature likely. Day would turn hot and warm evening likely.

**Delhi Palam Tomorrow**

39°C A comfortable morning and hot day. Thunder clouds development likely at few parts.

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**THE HINDU**

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## 'Govt. took credit for Centre's free ration scheme'

**SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT**

**NEW DELHI**  
The Bharatiya Janata Party on Saturday accused the Delhi government of seeking to take credit for the Centre-sponsored free rations scheme intended to benefit 72 lakh ration cardholders in the Capital.

Entailing an expenditure of ₹250 crores, Delhi BJP president Adesh Gupta and Leader of Opposition in the Delhi Assembly Ramvir Singh Bidhuri demanded that the Lieutenant Governor intervene to ensure that beneficiaries received free rations under the scheme, which were yet to be distributed by the Delhi government.

It was "shameful", they stated, that the Delhi government's Food and Civil Supplies Department was stating that the free rations were being provided by the Delhi government.

# Kejriwal announces oxygen concentrator banks for patients

Chief Minister says govt. has reached out to Dr. Reddy's for Sputnik V vaccines

**SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT**

**NEW DELHI**

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Saturday said both COVID cases as well as the positivity rate were declining steadily across the city but reiterated that citizens should not let their guard down.

He also announced that the Delhi government was setting up oxygen concentrator banks (OCB) to provide oxygen concentrators to patients recovering either under home isolation or who might need oxygen post-recovery.

"Today, even lesser cases of COVID have been recorded in Delhi. In the past 24 hours, 6,500 cases have come up. Yesterday [Friday], we had 8,500 cases. In the last 24 hours, the infection rate has declined even further to 11% while it was 12% yesterday. The virus is reducing in Delhi slowly and steadily however, we are not going to become negligent in any way," he said in a video message.

"From today, we are going to begin another important service – Oxygen Concentrator Banks. It has been often observed that whenever a person gets infected with the virus, their oxygen levels drop. It is imperative that COVID patients get timely oxygen. For such patients, we have created the oxygen concentrator bank (OCB) and have set up 200 oxygen concentrators in each bank in every revenue



Civil defence personnel transport COVID vaccines to a centre near Anand Vihar on Saturday. ■ R.V. MOORTHY

district of Delhi," Mr. Kejriwal said.

### Delivery in two hours

If patients under home isolation require oxygen, he said, the Delhi government's team will ensure the oxygen concentrator reaches their home within two hours. A technician will also accompany the team who will explain to the family members how to use the oxygen concentrator. Patients who are not enrolled under the home isolation can call 1031 and avail of the facility.

An Integrated Command and Control Centre (ICCC) to manage COVID on a real-time basis in the city is also being established, Mr. Kejriwal said, adding that the government was in the process of procuring the Sputnik V COVID vaccines

for Delhi's citizens. "We have contacted Dr. Reddy's company for the Sputnik vaccine, we have written to them but have not received a complete response as to how many vaccines they can provide. We have asked for 67 lakh Covishield doses and asked them how much and when they can provide us the vaccines," he also said.

Also, several people in recovery too are advised to take oxygen at home for a few days. For such people too, oxygen concentrators will be provided from the OCBs, he said.

"Our doctors will stay in touch with all those who are being given oxygen concentrators. If the need arises to send them to a hospital, it will be taken care of and when they recover, the oxy-

The virus is reducing in Delhi slowly and steadily, however, we are not going to become negligent in any way

ARVIND KEJRIWAL  
Chief Minister

gen concentrators will be taken back from them, sanitised, and given to another patient for use. OLA Foundation and Give India are helping us deliver oxygen concentrators to every house. We are very grateful for their support. We can overcome this enormous epidemic only if we are together. This is not possible if we are alone," he also said.

Meanwhile, the ICCC, which will collate real-time data regarding hospitals, ICU beds, availability of oxygen and vaccines is being launched for what "efficient decision-making" related to the pandemic.

### COVID information

The data, he said, will be made available to government officers through an application and will be inclusive of information of private hospitals as well as COVID care centres.

"A variety of COVID-related data across the city will be collected on a real-time basis. What I mean by real-time basis is that it will capture whatever is happening at this point in time. This will be made more robust as and when we collect more and more data," he said.

# Riots: court denies bail pleas of ex-AAP councillor Tahir Hussain

'He used muscle power in planning communal conflagration'

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**

**NEW DELHI**

A court here on Saturday dismissed the bail applications of former AAP councillor Tahir Hussain in connection with two north-east Delhi riots cases.

The court said that Mr. Hussain did not use his hands and fists but rioters as "human weapons" who on his instigation could have killed anybody, and denied him relief citing the gravity of the offence and his influence in the locality.



Tahir Hussain

last year.

"It is prima facie apparent that he used his muscle power and political clout to act as a kingpin in planning, instigating and fanning the flames of communal conflagration," the ASJ said.

### 'Rioters used his house'

"Even if there were no direct acts of violence attributable to the applicant, he cannot shy away from the fact that

his building became the hub for the rioters and rabble-rousers to unleash the worst riots since Partition in Delhi," the court remarked.

The cases were registered on separate complaints filed by one Ajay Kumar Jha and Prince Bansal who claimed that they sustained injuries after a riotous mob, from the terrace of Hussain's house, fired upon them on February 25.

Dismissing the pleas, the judge stated that Mr. Hussain permitted his house to be used by rioters to play havoc upon the persons of other community. He said that there is enough material on record to presume that Mr. Hussain was "very well present" at the spot of crime and was exhorting the rioters of a particular community.

# Capital reports 6,430 fresh infections, 337 deaths; positivity rate dips further

Over 6,000 fresh cases recorded, 56,811 tests conducted

**STAFF REPORTER**

**NEW DELHI**

Currently, there are 66,295 cases in the city and 11,592 have either been discharged or recovered in 24 hours, taking the total number of deaths to 21,244, according to the health bulletin released by the Delhi government on Saturday.

With 6,430 new cases being reported, the total number of cases is now at 13,87,411. The test positivity rate dipped to 11.32% from the 12.40%, which was re-

corded the previous day. vacant beds in dedicated COVID Care Centres. The number of vacant beds at dedicated COVID health centres stands at 547, the bulletin added.

While the cumulative positivity rate stands at 7.61%, the case fatality rate was recorded at 1.53%, as per the health bulletin.

According to the Delhi government, there are 42,484 people in home isolation currently.

## Jabs for 45 plus: AAP says fresh stock of doses has arrived in city

**SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT**

**NEW DELHI**

Fresh stock of COVID vaccination doses, including 1,73,760 doses of Covishield, arrived in the Capital on Saturday for those above 45 years of age and healthcare/frontline workers, AAP senior leader and MLA Atishi said while presenting the vaccination bulletin through a video address on Saturday.

According to Ms. Atishi,

for 45-plus and healthcare/frontline workers Covaxin doses are in stock for 3 days and Covishield for 6 days. She added that Covaxin stock for the 18-44 category is over and the stock of Covishield doses is available for 8 days.

"Yesterday [May 14], no vaccines were administered on account of Id. Hence, the total doses administered remains at 43,72,747 doses.

Out of them, a total of 10,08,620 people has received both their shots and are fully vaccinated," she said.

"For those above 45 years and healthcare/frontline workers, the total doses of Covishield we have received have now increased to 31,02,450, and for Covaxin the total doses received are now at 13,91,800," she added.

For this category, she said, Delhi has received a total of 44,94,250 doses.

### Next instalment

Ms. Atishi said she was hopeful that the next instalment of Covaxin will arrive for this segment from the central government soon. For those in the 18-44 age group, she said, the Delhi government received about 8,17,690 doses of which 1.5 lakh doses

were of Covaxin and nearly 6,67,690 of Covishield. The Covishield's stock for this category, she said, was left for about the next 8 days.

"Like always, we are hoping that the Centre will supply a sufficient stock of vaccines at the earliest to Delhi, post resolving the constraints of vaccine supply. Fortunately, the COVID cases have been declining. However, it does not mean that the cases cannot increase now, or an impending third wave may not arrive in Delhi," she said.

"We are aware of the fact that Delhi has been one of the most severely affected states in the pandemic and is still grappling with the virus.

It is my humble appeal to the Centre to supply sufficient vaccines, especially for those in the 18-44 age group," she also said.

## Shopkeepers advised to follow odd-even in Shahdara

Vegetable vendors in the district asked to maintain social distancing, says DCP

**HEMANI BHANDARI**

**NEW DELHI**

To prevent the exodus of migrants and also to enforce lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus – Shahdara district advised odd-even to shopkeepers in its markets, and they agreed.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (Shahdara) R. Sathiyasundaram said there are three main markets in the district, including Geeta Colony, Gandhi Nagar, and the main Shahdara market where they advised the shopkeepers to open in accordance with the odd-even rule.

"We asked adjacent shops to open on alternate days. Shops with even address to open on even days and

shops with odd address to open on odd days. These are shops selling essentials like vegetables, groceries and dairy products. We advised them and they agreed," he said.

Another measure taken by the district is to ask veget-

able street vendors to not stand close to each other as they do in the mandis in several places in Shahdara.

"This serves two purposes – they adhere to lockdown guidelines on not gathering and those in residential areas also do not have to travel to mandis," Mr. Sathiyasundaram said, adding that in an area like Shahdara with cramped lanes, people also crowd outside shops and odd-even would reduce that.

"It's better not to prosecute and close such vendors which may lead to exodus due to no earning. Instead advise them to spread out, do their business and follow covid appropriate behaviour," he added.

More challans were made in the second week as opposed to first week as more efforts were made to enforce lockdown, the officer said.

## Over ₹1K cr. given to civic bodies: Sisodia

North body Mayor questions 2-month delay in fund disbursal

**SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT**

**NEW DELHI**

Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia on Saturday said the Delhi government had issued assistance of ₹1,051 crore for the Capital's three municipal bodies so that the salaries of employees such as medical staff, doctors and nurses confronting the COVID pandemic on the frontlines could be paid.

Mr. Sisodia, who also holds the finance portfolio, alleged the civic bodies had not been able to disburse salaries so far due to "incompetence and corruption".

North body Mayor Jai Prakash questioned the two-month delay in the disbursal of funds, which were to be issued by the Delhi government for the first financial quarter.

To cope and emerge from this pandemic, Delhi government has issued assistance of ₹1,051 crore for civic bodies in such a manner that they can effectively disburse salaries to employees who have not been able to receive it until now. We hope that civic bodies' leadership will guarantee this assistance is not used for any other activi-

ties but used only to pay salaries of employees involved in COVID-19 duty," he also said.

According to Mr. Sisodia, the total financial assistance earmarked for the civic bodies was ₹1,051 crores out of which ₹366.9 crore would be given to the East body, ₹432.8 crores to the North and ₹251.6 crores to the South.

Mr. Prakash said the three corporations were continuously writing letters to the Delhi Chief Minister and the L-G for their first quarter fund.

The Mayor said this is the second such facility in the city and will go a long way in ensuring that citizens do not face an inconvenience at funeral venues.

North body Mayor opens cow dung plant

**STAFF REPORTER**

**NEW DELHI**

North body Mayor Jai Prakash on Saturday inaugurated a "Goparali" or cow dung-stubble manufacturing plant at Bawana, which will supply the material to the city's crematoria to reduce their dependence on firewood.

The Mayor said this is the second such facility in the city and will go a long way in ensuring that citizens do not face an inconvenience at funeral venues.

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# Heavy rain, strong winds lash parts of Kerala

Crops and buildings damaged, many people are relocated to relief camps

**SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT**  
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Torrential rainfall and strong winds lashed several Kerala districts on Saturday under the influence of Cyclone Tauktae, causing extensive damage to crops and buildings, and forcing district administrations to relocate more people to relief camps.

As of Saturday, 2,094 people from 543 families had been evacuated to 71 camps opened in the State this month, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said. Two people from Ernakulam and Kozhikode districts have lost their lives to the rain havoc in the past two days.

During the two days, the State recorded an average rainfall of 145.5 mm, while Kochi and Peermade stations recorded above 200 mm in a 24-hour period, Mr. Vijayan said, citing India Meteorolog-



**Nature's fury:** A coastal area in Thiruvananthapuram district after heavy rainfall due to the impact of Cyclone Tauktae on Saturday. ■ PTI

stretches of Cherthala, Ambalappuzha and Karthikapally talukas.

The Irrigation Department opened the Thottappally *pozhi* mouth to drain floodwaters from Kuttanad into the sea. The shutters of the Thanneermukkom bund

also have been opened.

In Thiruvananthapuram district, 1,128 people from 293 families were relocated to relief camps. The district also reported 11 houses as destroyed and 228 houses damaged in the rain havoc. Pathanamthitta district re-

ported crop damage in 248 hectares.

Low-lying areas of Kottayam municipality and the adjoining villages of Kumarakom, Aymanam and Aruppokkara have been inundated by runoff water from the high ranges.

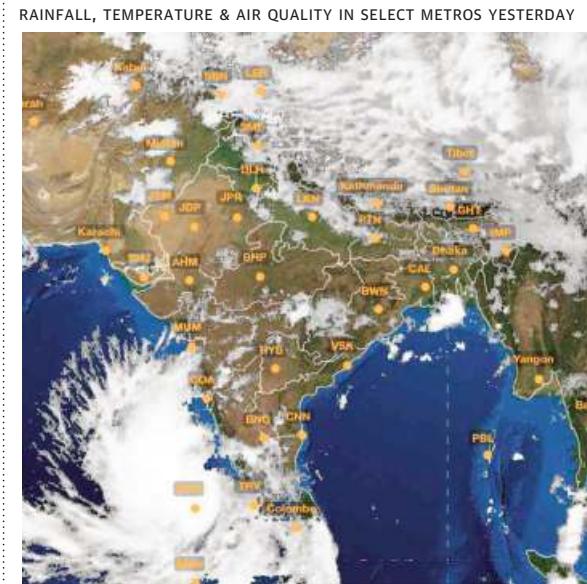
## Cyclone hits Karnataka coastal areas

**SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT**  
MANGALURU

Cyclone Tauktae hit the Karnataka coast on Friday night bringing in heavy rain with gusty winds that caused massive sea erosion, damaged some houses, and inundated residential localities. The cyclone however, did not cause extensive damage as predicted by the administration.

Dakshina Kannada and Udupi received over 100 mm average rainfall since Friday midnight even as it continued to pour beyond Saturday evening. Several houses were damaged on account of landslip in Monkeystand, Padil, Bajal, Kabubail, Pragathinagara, and surrounding areas in Mangaluru.

## WEATHER WATCH



TEMPERATURE DATA: IMD; POLLUTION DATA: CPCB; MAP: INSAT/IMD (TAKEN AT 17.00 hrs)

**Forecast for Sunday:** Heavy/very heavy rainfall likely at a few isolated places over central Maharashtra, Konkan & Goa, Karnataka, coastal Andhra Pradesh, Yanam, Rayalseema, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Kerala, Mahe and Lakshadweep. Thunderstorm with lightning/gusty wind likely at isolated places over Rajasthan, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and Kerala

CITY	RAIN	MAX	MIN	CITY	RAIN	MAX	MIN
Agartala	... 3...	23.2	25.2	Kozhikode	... 128...	29.2	23.4
Ahmedabad	... 42.4	28.4	28.4	Kurnool	... 37.3	27.8	27.8
Aizawl	37...	26.3	19.8	Lucknow	... 38.5	24.6	24.6
Aligarh	... 39.3	23.4	23.4	Madurai	0.7...	33.0	24.4
Bengaluru	... 28.0	22.2	22.2	Mangaluru	62.3...	26.1	23.2
Bhopal	... 27.5	25.8	25.8	Mumbai	... 36.9	28.8	28.8
Bhubaneswar	... 37.3	27.5	27.5	Mysuru	15...	34.4	20.4
Chandigarh	... 27.7	22.7	22.7	New Delhi	... 39.3	23.0	23.0
Chennai	... 35.3	29.4	29.4	Patna	... 40.0	23.6	23.6
Coimbatore	8...	22.4	22.4	Port Blair	31...	33.9	26.2
Dehradoon	... 34.3	19.8	19.8	Puducherry	... 37.2	26.0	26.0
Gangtok	21...	13.4	13.4	Pune	1.8...	36.9	24.0
Goa	7...	34.8	25.0	Raipur	... 38.5	25.2	25.2
Guwahati	7...	32.0	25.3	Ranchi	... 36.2	23.4	23.4
Hubballi	... 29.0	24.0	24.0	Shillong	... 23.4	15.0	15.0
Hyderabad	1...	34.3	24.8	Shimla	... 28.2	16.4	16.4
Imphal	0.8...	26.3	17.8	Srinagar	... 24.0	9.8	9.8
Jaipur	... 40.0	27.2	27.2	Thiruvananthapuram	63...	29.1	23.5
Kochi	209...	28.0	23.8	Tiruchi	... 36.1	26.0	26.0
Kohima	... 24.2	13.8	13.8	Vijayawada	2...	37.0	28.4
Kolkata	... 36.9	27.4	27.4	Visakhapatnam	... 36.4	27.6	27.6

(Rainfall data in mm; temperature in Celsius)

**Pollutants in the air you are breathing**

CITIES	SO <sub>2</sub>	NO <sub>2</sub>	CO	PM2.5	PM10	CODE
Ahmedabad	15...	29.53	63	100	... 100	■■■
Bengaluru	... 6	60.35	... 9	... 36	... 36	■■■
Chennai	16...	4.6	... 125	... 125	... 125	■■■
Delhi	10...	21.51	150	165	... 165	■■■
Hyderabad	... 5	40.31	... 23	... 41	... 41	■■■
Kolkata	10...	20.9	78	75	... 75	■■■
Lucknow	... 8	67.44	168	124	... 124	■■■
Mumbai	13...	2.58	215	106	... 106	■■■
Pune	... 37	77	66	57	... 57	■■■
Visakhapatnam	16...	37.12	... 28	53	... 53	■■■

Yesterday

In observation made at 4.00 p.m., Jodhpur, Rajasthan recorded an overall air quality index (AQI) score of 257 indicating an unhealthy level of pollution. In contrast, Shillong, Meghalaya recorded a healthy AQI score of 17

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

**SO<sub>2</sub>**: Sulphur Dioxide. Short-term exposure can harm the respiratory system, making breathing difficult. It can affect visibility by reacting with other air particles to form haze and stain culturally important objects such as statues and monuments.

**NO<sub>x</sub>**: Nitrogen Dioxide. Aggravates respiratory illness, causes haze to form by reacting with other air particles, causes acid rain, pollutes coastal waters.

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

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

## Kerala moves into total shutdown from tomorrow

**SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT**

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Even as Kerala moves into a lockdown from midnight on May 17, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on Saturday said Thiruvananthapuram, Ernakulam, Thrissur and Malappuram districts will go into a highly restrictive "triple lockdown" to curb the rise in COVID-19 infections.

Mr. Vijayan said the triple lockdown entailed a clampdown on life, mobility, socialising, production, and retail business.

The police would close all entry and exit points into the districts, except one. The government has sus-



**Easy drive:** An ambulance rushes through a deserted flyover during a lockdown imposed in Kochi on Saturday. ■ AP

pended public transport and banned non-essential travel.

Autorickshaws and taxis would remain off the roads.

Citizens could engage them only in a medical emergency or to travel to and from airports or railway stations.

Passengers should carry proof of the reason for travel.

The police have divided the triple lockdown regions into zones for focused enforcement with a senior officer heading each zone.

## Famed Sanskrit scholar Lakshmithathachar dead

**SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT**

MYSRUR

Renowned Sanskrit scholar and founder-director of the Academy of Sanskrit Research, M.A. Lakshmithathachar, 85, passed away at Melkote in Mandya district on Saturday. He is survived by two sons.

Born on August 22, 1936, Dr. Lakshmithathachar studied Sanskrit and specialised in literature, Navya Nyaya system of philosophy and various systems of Vedanta with special reference to Vishistadvaita Vedanta.

Comparative studies of Sanskrit with modern schools of thought, study of scientific subjects in Sanskrit like phonetics etc.

Dr. Lakshmithathachar headed the Academy of Sanskrit Research for 18 years. He was among the first to harness computer software to study ancient manuscripts. Dr. Lakshmithathachar had received the Presidential award. He also played the lead role in the film *Ramanujacharya*, directed by G.V. Iyer.

their houses were "ransacked by the TMC goons".

**Pay attention here**

"The CM should understand the plight of people. She should also give attention to the post-poll violent situation here and elsewhere," the Governor said.

The Trinamool Congress on Saturday hit out at the Governor, saying he is not being taken seriously by the political parties in the State any more due to his conduct to work in favour of one political party, even putting to the backburner the all important fight against Coronavirus.

TMC MP Sougata Roy said instead of being on the side of people to create COVID awareness, "he is working to deflect attention from the fight against the pandemic".

People at the camps claimed to have fled their homes in Nandigram after the poll results were out on May 2. They also alleged that

## Dhankhar hits out at Mamata over Nandigram violence

Why is the CM silent on the cries of children and women rendered homeless?



West Bengal Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar visiting Nandigram on Saturday to meet the victims of post-poll violence. ■ PTI

Central forces in Cooch Behar's Sitalkuchi in which four persons were killed as "genocide" but she is "silent over the situation in Nandigram", Mr. Dhankhar said.

"You described the Sitalkuchi incident as cold-blooded murder and genocide. Have you heard the cries and screams of the children and women in Nandigram, where

lakhs of people are homeless? We feel bad to see the situation of West Bengal. India has never seen such a situation previously. The State is virtually sitting on a volcano," he said.

People at the camps claimed to have fled their homes in Nandigram after the poll results were out on May 2. They also alleged that

keeping the future challenges in mind," said Suresh Chandra Mohapatra, State Chief Secretary.

The high power committee would have renowned doctors, public health experts and scientists including Devi Prasad Shetty, noted cardiac surgeon and founder of Narayan Health, and Ramakant Panda, Managing Director of Asian Heart Institute.

The committee will advise the government on strengthening health infrastructure with quality equipment available globally, best practices and deployment of personnel.

The high power committee will advise the State on steps to be taken from now

The high power committee will have doctors, scientists, experts

keeping the future challenges in mind," said Suresh Chandra Mohapatra, State Chief Secretary.

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The committee will advise the government on strengthening health infrastructure with quality equipment available globally, best practices and deployment of personnel.

## Police appeal to Maoists to surrender

**STAFF REPORTER**

BHUBANESWAR

The Odisha police have appealed to the Left Wing Extremists to lay arms and get themselves treated for COVID-19. Director General of Police Abhay, who reviewed the situation at Malkangiri on Saturday, reiterated his appeal for the CPI (Maoist) cadres

## FROM PAGE ONE

## 2 killed in Kerala as cyclone intensifies

The IMD also warned of storm surges that could inundate coastal areas of Morbi, Kutch, Devbhoomi Dwarka and Jamnagar districts.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday reviewed the preparedness of States, central ministries and agencies concerned and asked them to ensure all were safely evacuated.

At a meeting that included Home Minister Amit Shah, Mr. Modi directed officials to ensure special preparedness on COVID-19 management in hospitals, vaccine cold chain and other medical facilities on power back up and storage of essential medicines and to

plan for unhindered movement of oxygen tankers, said a statement from the PMO.

Storms are common in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea in May, ahead of the monsoon onset though climatologists have said there is an increase in the number of such storms in the Arabian Sea in recent years. Tauktae is the fourth cyclone in as many years over the Arabian Sea in the pre-monsoon months. This is being attributed to a rise in average sea surface temperatures driven by global warming.

(with inputs from Tiki Rajwi and PTI)

## Over 4,500 'missing deaths' in Delhi

"The government has been hiding (death) figures since the pandemic started. Not only did they ignore our request for help in procuring firewood for cremations so citizens do not face inconvenience, they are sitting on funds meant to pay salaries of doctors and sanitation workers engaged everywhere from COVID hospitals to funeral venues," Jai Prakash, Mayor, North MCD, alleged.

**Technical reasons'**  
A senior MCD official, cited other "technical reasons" for the mismatch. "There are two main reasons: the government excluding suspected COVID cases, patients with life-threatening illnesses and non-Delhi residents from the death tally. For us, the last rites of all designated COVID bodies are performed as per protocol irrespective of these reasons," the official said.

"The other reason is bodies of COVID patients are not being laid to rest on the day of their death. Many

times families refuse to claim such bodies for one reason or another; these are then brought to funeral venues for last rites in batches of multiple bodies by the police, NGOs and Good Samaritans," the official said.

The Delhi government has denied such charges and said the mismatch is commonly due to the deaths of COVID-19 patients occurring either on their way to hospitals or outside one as they could not get admission on time.

"We are completely transparent in all matters and especially the pandemic, all deaths are accounted for. In many instances, patients also die due to comorbidities aggravated by COVID after testing negative either at a hospital or at home," a Delhi government source said.

The cumulative death toll since the outbreak last year breached the 20,000-mark on May 11, standing at 20,010; 63% of the deceased were cremated or buried in the past 24 days.

## Extending gap between doses scientific: Paul

Dr. Paul said it was "sad" that there were "narratives" that the decision was taken ad hoc and due to shortages.

"The standard protocol of vaccine administration is 4-6 weeks. When the U.K. decided to delay their second dose, there was little scientific evidence to justify it at that time. That's why our own recommendation was first 4-6 weeks and based on newer evidence, it was increased to 6-8 weeks. However, evidence from there has shown that their decision to delay the second dose upto three months has seen 65%-85% protection against severe disease. Also, there was a definite break in transmission of the disease.

So that's the evidence considered by the committee to expand dosage interval," he said during a press briefing.

Dr. NK Arora, who heads the expert group tasked with recommending the appropriate interval between doses, seconded Dr. Paul.

Delaying a second dose by a month or two wasn't a solution to address the shortage if the overall supply didn't improve, he told *The Hindu* in a phone conversation. He said he expected a significant increase in supply only by August.

"However we've recommended a vaccine 'sparing strategy' and it is likely to be announced by the government next week," he stated.

## Cairn moves U.S. court to attach AI assets

"Cairn remains open to continuing constructive dialogue with the Government of India to arrive at a satisfactory outcome to this long-running issue," he added, suggesting the company is still open to talks with the government to resolve the dispute.

Earlier, Reuters reported that Cairn had filed a lawsuit on Friday in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, seeking to make Air India liable for the judgment it was awarded. The lawsuit argued that the carrier, as a state-owned company, is "legally indistinct from the state itself".

The nominal distinction between India and Air India is illusory and serves only to aid India in improperly shielding its assets from creditors like (Cairn)," the filing said.

The action against Air In-

dia could put a roadblock on its disinvestment process as the government was hoping to conclude the debt-ridden carrier's sale by September this year. Timelines may also get affected in the proposed transaction by the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The government or public sector entities have not received any such notice," said a source when asked about the Cairn filing against Air India. "As and when any such notice is received, the Government or concerned organisation shall take all necessary steps to defend against any such illegal enforcement action," he said.

The Centre has challenged the December 2020 arbitration tribunal award in favour of Cairn in an appropriate court in The Hague.

The action against Air In-

dia

## Navy teams deployed in Kerala amid rain

Ahead of Cyclone Tauktae along the west coast, the IAF and Navy deploy aircraft, vessels, personnel

DINAKAR PERI  
NEW DELHI

The Indian Navy on Saturday deployed relief teams from the Southern Naval Command which undertook rescue operations in areas affected by Cyclone Tauktae on the Chellanam coast in Kerala. The Indian Air Force (IAF) has kept 16 transport aircraft and 18 helicopters on operational readiness in peninsular India in preparation for the cyclone which is expected to cause very heavy to extremely heavy rain along the western coast in the next few days.

"Towards providing assistance to flood-hit villages of Malagapadi, Kampanipadi and Maruvakad in Chellanam, three Naval diving teams and one Quick Reaction Team from Southern Naval Command swung into action," the Navy said in a statement. The teams undertook rescue of personnel,



Rough weather: Waves lash the coast at Ullal in Mangaluru, as cyclonic storm Tauktae hit the Karnataka coast on Friday night. ■ MANJUNATH H.S.

provisioning of food and water and shifting of people trapped in houses to relief camp at St. Mary's High School Chellanam in the harsh weather conditions, it added. The Navy has also put ships, aircraft and helicopters on standby in coordination with district administration.

One IL-76 aircraft has airlifted 127 personnel and 11 tonnes of cargo from Bhatinda to Jamnagar. A C-130 aircraft has airlifted 25 personnel and 12.3 tonnes of cargo from Bhatinda to Rajkot.

Two C-130 aircraft have airlifted 126 personnel and 14 tonnes cargo from Bhubaneswar to Jamnagar," an IAF statement said on Saturday.

In addition, the IAF said COVID-19 relief operations have been focused in these coastal areas for the coming

few days, as bad weather is likely to affect air operations later. The cyclone relief operations are in addition to those under way for COVID relief, it added.

According to the Navy's Information Fusion Centre for Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), the cyclone in the Arabian Sea is likely to intensify into a severe cyclonic storm and further intensify into very severe cyclone storm late hours of May 15 or early hours of May 16.

## Oxygen transport

On the ongoing transportation of emergency oxygen and other medical supplies, both within the country and from abroad, the IAF said that as on Saturday morning domestically it had carried out 778 sorties accumulating 1,147 hours and airlifted 490 tankers with 8,343 MT capacity and 209 MT of other equipment.

## NGMA virtual workshop from May 17

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

The National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), New Delhi, will be starting its virtual summer workshops for children and adults from May 17, it said on Saturday.

Nainisha 2021 would go on till June 13 and include workshops and other events to spark the participants' imagination, the statement said.

"The idea behind designing and delivering online interactive programmes is to provide a creative outlet to children, and indeed all interested adults. Lead artists have joined the programme as teachers and mentors to add zest to this unique pedagogic carnival," it said.

The workshops would include painting, sculpting, printmaking, videography and puppeteering.

## Elephant carcasses found in 2 groups

The 'freak' lightning theory being corroborated based on weather reports: govt.

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
GUWAHATI

The carcasses of the 18 elephants reportedly killed in lightning strikes in Nagaon district of central Assam on May 13 were found in two groups 1 km apart, an official statement said Saturday.

The State government also said the "freak natural incident" was being corroborated based on meteorological reports while the samples collected by a team of experts after a post-mortem were being "further examined for microbiological and toxicological aspects" in the laboratory.

According to the statement, the assistant manager of Topajuri Tea Estate had at



Jumbo loss: The carcasses of two elephants at one of the sites where the deaths occurred, in Nagaon district on Friday. ■ PTI

1.45 p.m. on May 13 informed the officials at the Kathiatoli Range of Nagaon Forest Division about four carcasses.

The local forest officials later found 14 more strewn in

the foothills of the Bamuni Hill within the Konduli Proposed Reserve Forest about 1 km away.

"After thorough investigation of the carcasses and

based on circumstantial evidence, the team of experts and officials suggested that the cause of death of these elephants, which appeared to be part of a herd, could be due to the strike of lightning," the statement said.

The statement added the microbiological and toxicological report received from the forensic laboratory would be made public at an appropriate time.

Experts from the College of Veterinary Science in Guwahati, veterinarians from the Assam State Zoo and the Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation in Kaziranga were among the team that collected samples and conducted the autopsy.

## Taloja jail conditions very grim'

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
MUMBAI

The condition of inmates inside the Taloja jail is very grim, say friends and family members of those arrested for their alleged involvement in the Bhima Koregaon violence of 2018.

Father Joseph Xavier, who spoke to Fr. Stan Swamy, one of the accused, on May 14, told the media that the 84-year-old Jesuit priest had cough, fever and an upset stomach.

Harshali Potdar, activist, Republican Panthers Jatiya Antachi Chalwal, said the majority of staff and canteen members at the Taloja jail had tested positive for COVID-19. She said jail authorities were only testing the fit and leaving out the sick. She added co-accused Sudhir Dhawale and Vernon Gonsalves were in the same barracks where eight others had tested positive, but they were still not being tested.

## Adityanath, Amarinder in spat over new Punjab district

They accuse each other of pursuing a divisive policy

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
CHANDIGARH

A day after Punjab declared Malerkotla a new district, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh on Saturday were embroiled in a verbal spat on the announcement.

Mr. Adityanath termed the Punjab government's decision of declaring its only Muslim-majority town a district "a reflection of the divisive policy of the Congress". Capt. Singh hit back saying Mr. Adityanath's remark was an attempt to incite communal hatred in the peaceful State as part of the BJP's divisive policies.

Captain Singh asked the U.P. Chief Minister to stay out of his State's affairs, which he said are in much better shape than those in U.P. under the divisive and destructive BJP government

that has been actively promoting communal discord for the past over four years.

"What does he [Mr. Adityanath] know of Punjab's ethos or the history of Malerkotla, whose relationship with Sikhism and its Gurus was known to every Punjabi? And what does he understand of the Constitution, which is being brazenly trampled upon every day by his own government," Capt. Singh asked.

Mr. Adityanath, in his

tweet, said: "Any distinction on the basis of faith and religion is contrary to the basic spirit of the Constitution. The formation of Malerkotla is a reflection of the divisive policy of the Congress."

Captain Singh had on Friday declared Malerkotla as the 23rd district of the State.

In a tweet, he said, "Happy to share that on the auspicious occasion of Id-ul-Fitr, my govt. has announced Malerkotla as the newest district in the State. The 23rd district holds huge historical significance. Have ordered to immediately locate a suitable site for the district administrative complex."

On the U.P. Chief Minister's comment, Captain Singh said given Yogi Adityanath's government and the BJP's track record of spreading communal hate, such a remark was ridiculous, unwarranted and uncalled for.

The session ended with advocate and cyberlaw expert N.S. Nappinai sharing some ethical and legal aspects of cybersecurity. She spoke of the mistakes people made online and the methods used by attackers. He reiterated that the best way was to follow the A.B.I.D.E principle: Anti-malware, Backup your data, Identity security, Data privacy, and Enhance and update.

The session ended with advocate and cyberlaw expert N.S. Nappinai sharing some ethical and legal aspects of cybersecurity. She spoke of the threats that young adults face and their lack of awareness about cyber laws to protect themselves. She emphasised the need to act fast in case of a cyber attack and reminded the audience to be responsible citizens and students of cybersecurity.

All three panellists pointed out that cybersecurity is an interdisciplinary subject and affects everyone, regardless of their field of interest.

The two sessions can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/shovrJIE2oY> and <https://youtu.be/d43iprRpQ0>, respectively.

## Kuwait to deliver more medical oxygen: envoy

75 metric tonnes reach Mumbai

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

Kuwait is expected to deliver a total of 1,400 metric tonnes of liquid medical oxygen to India, its envoy told *The Hindu* on Saturday.

Ambassador Jasim Al Najm said Kuwait had emerged as one of the largest contributors of oxygen-related support to India. Kuwait on Saturday sent 75 mt of liquid medical oxygen and 1,000 oxygen cylinders to the Mumbai port by using the sea-bridge agreement with India.

A statement from the Embassy of Kuwait informed Saturday's delivery was car-

ried on MV *Capt Kattelmann*. This was the fourth ship that carried Liquid Medical Oxygen to Indian hospitals that are dealing with the rush of COVID-19 affected patients.

Three more Indian Navy ships, INS Kochi, INS Tabar and INS Kolkata brought oxygen supplies to Mangalore port earlier in the week.

"We are doing our best to help India with the bilateral sea-bridge agreement. We produce a huge quantity of oxygen for Iraq and Jordan. So now we are also producing for India because of the emerging health crisis," said Ambassador Jasim Al Najm.

The action against Air In-

ULFA-I declares three-month ceasefire citing pandemic

This is the second such cessation of hostilities after 2005

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
GUWAHATI

The outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam-Independent (ULFA-I) has declared a three-month unilateral ceasefire with immediate effect.

The announcement on Saturday came less than a week after Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma appealed to extremist groups in Assam to shun violence and pursue talks.

ULFA-I to "unilaterally suspend all military operations in Assam for three months from May 15".

Paresh Baruah, the outfit's self-styled commander-in-chief said in an Assamese statement that the COVID-19 situation prompted the Indian se-

curity forces as well as the Assam police of hatching "some clandestine plan to malign" his outfit. This was in reference to two grenade blasts that killed three people, including a 12-year-old boy in eastern Assam's Tinukia within four days.

This is the second instance of the anti-talks faction of the ULFA declaring a unilateral ceasefire. The outfit had in 2005 suspended operations to facilitate a team of mediators headed by the late author Mamoni Raisom Goswami to broker a peace deal.

Mr. Baruah had served as the Governor of Kerala and Bihar from 2004 to 2008 and 2008 to 2009, respectively. He had also served as the Minister of State for External Affairs in 1992.

## R.L. Bhatia, former Union Minister, dead

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
AMRITSAR

Senior Congress leader and six-time MP from Amritsar Raghuvaran Lal Bhatia passed away after a brief illness, his family said on Saturday. He was 100.

Mr. Bhatia died at a private hospital here on Friday night. He is survived by his son Ramesh Bhatia,

## Journalist, activist held for FB post

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
GUWAHATI

The Manipur police have arrested Imphal-based journalist Kishorechandra Wangkhem and political activist Erendro Leichombam for their Facebook posts allegedly criticising the government.

They were arrested on Thursday evening from their homes on the basis of a complaint filed against them by State BJP general secretary P. Premananda Meetei and BJP vice-president Usham Deban for allegedly offensive Facebook posts related to the death of State BJP president Saikham Tikendra Singh.

Alluding to Mr. Singh's death, the duo had posted similar comments saying cow dung and cow urine did not work. An Imphal West police officer said the duo would remain in police custody till May 17.

## 24 arrests in Delhi over posters

Posters across the capital questioned the Prime Minister on the vaccination policy

STAFF REPORTER  
NEW DELHI

At least 25 first information reports (FIR) have been registered in connection with posters that surfaced across the capital questioning Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the vaccination policy. The police said at least 24 persons had been arrested in connection with the cases.

Earlier this week, posters were found pasted on walls and boards with the message: "Modiji humare bachon ka vaccine videsh kyon bhej diya?" (Why did you send our children's vaccines abroad?), after which all the districts where the posters were found registered FIRs under relevant Sections of the Prevention of Defacement of Property Act, the Delhi Disaster Management Act and the Indian Penal Code. Information sought from each district stated that



**Message on the wall:** The posters surfaced across Delhi last week. ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

tions under the Press and Registration of Books Act, and Sections 269 (whoever unlawfully or negligently does any act which is, and which he knows or has reason to believe to be, likely to spread the infection of any disease dangerous to life) and Section 34 (common intention) of the Indian Penal Code. Information sought from each district stated that

four FIRs had been registered in North West district; three each in North East, East, West and Outer districts; two each in South, Rohini and Central districts; and one each in North, South West, Dwarka, Shahdara, East and South East districts, respectively.

Senior officers said four persons each had been arrested from Central and East

districts; two persons each were arrested from North East, West, North West and South West districts; and one person each was arrested from the North and Dwarka districts, respectively. No arrests were made from South, Rohini, Outer, Shahdara and South East districts.

### In two districts

No posters apparently surfaced in two districts - New Delhi and Outer North - and no FIRs were registered here.

Sources said most of those held were released on bail. They were interrogated on whether they were hired to paste the posters or if it was a voluntary decision. Technical investigation was also under way, they said, adding that posters and banners had been recovered from the possession of some of the accused.

## Virus takes a big toll on Central staff

Nearly 50 officials succumbed to COVID-19 in the national capital in one month

VIJAYA SINGH  
NEW DELHI

Nearly 50 government officials across Ministries and departments in the national capital have died of COVID-19 in just the past one month, according to a representation sent by the employees to the Centre.

The forum representing the officials of the Central Secretariat Service (CSS) has said at least 30 who died were under 40 years of age.

### Vaccination camps

It demanded that the government organise vaccination camps for all the CSS employees similar to those run for frontline workers on priority.

On May 4, Minister for Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions Jitendra Singh tweeted that the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) was organising a vaccine camp at North Block.

A CSS official, however,



**Dire situation:** A COVID-19 patient being brought to a ward at a hospital in New Delhi on Saturday. ■ SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

said such camps were not enough. "North Block comprises the offices of the Ministries of Finance, Home and Personnel. It [the camp] is barely enough for them. Many fear going to other government buildings to get the shots; this should be held at every government building," said the official on condition of anonymity.

The Cabinet Secretariat will be organising a vaccination camp at the President's

House on May 17 for those above 45 years and on May 18 for employees in the 18-45 age group.

On April 19, the DoPT had asked all Central government offices to reduce the strength of under-secretary and equivalent ranks to 50% in office. The deputy secretaries have, however, been asked to report daily.

The order has been extended till May 31. Pregnant women, persons with dis-

ability and those who live in containment zones have been exempted.

"In the age of digital India, why cannot government employees work from home? Hundreds of those who were infected were going to the office daily, many have died, leaving behind young children. We are demanding work from home as it will not impact productivity," another CSS official said.

On May 6, the CSS forum tweeted: "It is disheartening that GoI [Government of India] has lost 50+ hard working CSS Officers in the span of just one month... We have requested @DoPTGoI on several occasions vide letters dated 27 & 29 April to implement Work From Home (WFH). In view of the dreadful situations in India and it being the World's worst hit nation, but due to insensitive behaviour, we are losing the precious jewels of our bureaucracy and hard working officers every day."

The crackdown comes a day after the Padshahi Bagh and Safa Kadal areas in Srinagar witnessed small and non-violent protests.

Among those booked and arrested included a graffiti artist who drew a crying Palestinian woman and wrote the slogan "We Are Palestine".

An April 28 Press Information Bureau (PIB) release

## 'Public, govt. had become inattentive after first wave'

Time for everyone to work as a team, says Bhagwat

DAMINI NATH  
NEW DELHI

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat on Saturday said everyone - society, the government and the administration - had become inattentive after the first wave of COVID-19.

Dr. Bhagwat was speaking during the online lecture series organised by RSS Delhi's COVID-19 response team titled "Positivity Unlimited".

The RSS chief said he had been asked to speak about positivity, which was a tough ask as times were tough and many families had lost their loved ones, including sole breadwinners. He said while nothing could be done about those already lost, those surviving were left to deal with



ing signals. But we all became inattentive. Now, they are talking of a third wave. Do we have to be scared? No, we don't have to be scared," he said, adding that there was a need to prepare for the next wave. He said now was the time for everyone to work as a "team" and that the time for assigning blame would come later. Citing the example of stakeholders in Pune coming together, he said the same should be replicated all over. "Doesn't matter if you woke up late," he said, adding that the efforts should be sped up now.

The RSS chief also cautioned people against believing anything without verification and suggested they keep themselves busy by spending time with their families.

the circumstances.

"We don't need negationism, to say that nothing happened and everything is fine... We have to keep our minds positive, the bodies co-rona-negative," he said.

He said though times were tough, there was still hope. "It is time to fight," he said.

"After the first wave, we all became inattentive, whether the public, the government or administration. We knew, doctors were giving

## 'Maximum ego, minimum empathy,' says Cong. leader

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

Former Union Minister Jairam Ramesh on Saturday took a dig at Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the latter's slogan of "minimum government, maximum governance".

"He promised Maximum Governance, Minimum Government. The reality is only ME - Maximum Ego, Minimum Empathy," he tweeted.

Earlier, reacting to Congress-ruled

Chhattisgarh halting all construction work on a new Assembly complex, Mr. Ramesh had tweeted to ask Mr. Modi when the Centre would "prioritise" human lives. "Dear PM @narendramodi, This how a responsive and responsible government works in a democracy. Chhattisgarh Govt is prioritising lives of its people above everything else... When will you learn and stop this Central Vista madness?" the Congress leader asked.

## 2.92 lakh fresh infections, 3,807 deaths reported

Number of vaccinations given continue to decline

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
CHENNAI

India recorded 2,92,092 new COVID-19 cases until 9.50 p.m. on Saturday. As many as 3,807 more deaths were also registered. The country has so far reported a total of 2,46,43,693 cases and 2,69,598 deaths.

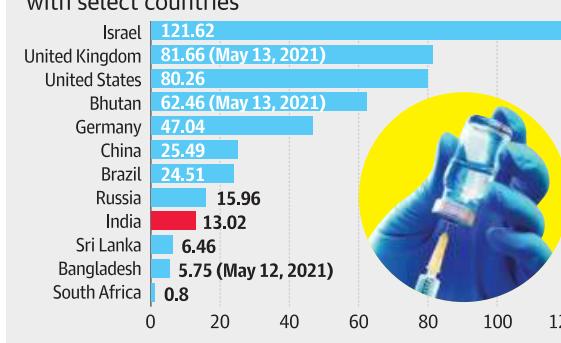
Karnataka has moved ahead of Maharashtra with 41,664 infections. Maharashtra reported 34,848 cases, followed by Tamil Nadu (33,658). However, Maharashtra recorded the most casualties (960), followed by Karnataka (349) and Delhi (337). The figures do not include cases and deaths from Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh and Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The data are sourced from the respective States' health bulletins.

### Over 9 lakh doses less

Only around 11.6 lakh daily vaccine doses were administered in the country in the 24 hours ending 7 a.m. on Saturday, over 9.25 lakh doses lower than what was recorded in the previous 24 hours. It was also over 9.35

### Vaccination rate

Till May 14, about 13 vaccine doses have been administered per 100 people in India. A comparison with select countries



lakh doses lower than that recorded one week ago.

The number of daily doses has been declining since mid-April. The seven-day average of daily doses administered by May 14 stood at 18.7 lakh, significantly lower than the 34.7 lakh recorded a month ago.

As of May 14, only 13 vaccine doses have been administered per 100 persons in India.

Around 16.93 lakh tests were conducted on Friday (the results for which were made available on Saturday), which was 1.82 lakh

tests fewer than the previous day. India's test positivity rate (number of positive cases upon tests) has been declining this week. From 22.6% last Saturday, it has dropped to 19.7% a week later. India continued to lead the world in the number of daily average recorded deaths. It now accounted for one in every three daily deaths reported globally.

The country also leads in the number of daily average reported cases. It now accounted for one in every two daily cases reported worldwide.

## AI begins zeolite cargo service

Govt. begins process of importing zeolite for oxygen plants

MURALI N. KRISHNASWAMY  
CHENNAI

National carrier Air India (AI) has begun the first of its "zeolite cargo flights", with the Central government having commenced the process of importing zeolite from across the world for use in medical oxygen plants.

The government has appointed the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) as the charterer for these consignments. Under the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM CARES) Fund, the DRDO is to set up these medical oxygen plants.

Among those booked and arrested included a graffiti artist who drew a crying Palestinian woman and wrote the slogan "We Are Palestine".

An April 28 Press Information Bureau (PIB) release

said the medical oxygen plant technology being developed by the DRDO would now help in supplementing oxygen supplies for COVID-19 patients, with the transfer of technology having been made to Tata Advanced Systems Ltd., Bengaluru, and Trident Pneumatics Pvt. Ltd., Coimbatore. The technology uses the pressure swing adsorption process and molecular sieve zeolite in oxygen generation.

### On-site generation

The release said the technology would be especially useful in urban, remote and rural settings with the on-site generation of medical oxygen

gen in a cost-effective manner. The airline said the first set of seven chartered flights, from Rome to Bengaluru, would start from May 15-18. Two aircraft, with 35 tonnes of the substance, would land on Sunday, at 4.45 a.m. (Delhi-Frankfurt-Rome-Bengaluru, AI 1152; 13 tonnes) and 6.45 a.m. These would be followed by eight charter flights, from Korea to Bengaluru between May 19-22.

There would be uplifts, too, from the U.S. on its scheduled flights from Newark Liberty airport between May 20 and 25. The airline has planned these flights from Brussels, Tokyo and the U.S. again later.

**Odisha State Medical Corporation Limited**  
In front of Ram Mandir, Convent Square, Unit-III,  
Bhubaneswar-751007  
Tel.: (0674) 2380660; Website: www.osmcl.nic.in ; Email: logistics.osmcl.od@nic.in

**NOTICE INVITING BID**  
**Bid Reference No.: OSMCL/2021-22/SHORT-SYRINGE/17**

Online Bids through e-Tender portal (<https://tendersodisha.gov.in>) are invited from eligible bidders for Supply of S02415 - Auto disable syringes sterilised 0.5 ml as per the particulars mentioned below:

Sl. No.	Particulars	Date and time
1.	Date & time of release of bid	15/05/2021, 3 PM
2.	Date & time of Online bid submission	Start Date & Time 15/05/2021, 3 PM End Date & Time 21/05/2021, 11 AM
3.	Date & time of Online Technical bid Opening	21/05/2021, 11:15 AM
4.	Date of opening of Price Bid	To be informed to the qualified bidders

The bid document with all information relating to the bidding process including Prequalification criteria and terms & conditions are available in the websites: [www.osmcl.nic.in](http://www.osmcl.nic.in) and <https://tendersodisha.gov.in>. OSMCL reserves the right to reject or modify any conditions of the tender or cancel the tender or cancel the issued purchase order at any stage without assigning any reason thereof.

sd/-  
Managing Director,  
OSMC Ltd., Odisha  
OIFR-10112/1/10012/2/122

CAD-290

**NOTICE INVITING BID**  
**Odisha State Medical Corporation Limited (OSMCL)**  
In front of Ram Mandir, Convent Square, Unit-III,  
Bhubaneswar-751001  
Tel.: (0674) 2380950; Website: www.osmcl.nic.in ; Email: logistics.osmcl.od@nic.in

**Bid Ref. No.: OSMCL/2021-22/GLOBAL/COVID-19/16 Date:14/05/2021**

Online Global Bids through e-Tender portal (<https://tendersodisha.gov.in>) are invited from eligible bidders for Supply of Covid-19 Vaccine (Storage Condition : 2°C to 8°C) as per the particulars mentioned below :

Sl. No.	Particulars	Date and time
1.	Date & time for Pre-Bid Meeting	19/05/2021, at 11:00 Hrs (IST) online mode . Link of the online meeting will be announced on the OSMCL website.
2.	Date & time of Online bid submission	Start Date & Time 20/05/2021, 15:00 Hrs (IST) End Date & Time 28/05/2021, 10:00 Hrs (IST)
3.	Date & time of Online Technical bid Opening	28/05/2021, 11:30 Hrs (IST)
4.	Date of opening of Price Bid	28/05/2021, 17:00 Hrs (IST)

# Gujarat fatality figures reveal discrepancies

Massive under-counting in villages, say Opposition leaders

MAHESH LANGA  
AHMEDABAD

Though the pace of increase in coronavirus infections has slowed down as have the number of COVID-19 deaths in Gujarat, the State continues to see a sharp mismatch in the number of COVID-19 deaths reported by the health authorities. Now, with the number of deaths emerging from rural and remote districts, official figures appear lower by as much as 20 times in some districts.

The Hindu had earlier reported on the large-scale under-reporting of deaths in major cities such as Ahmedabad, Surat, Rajkot, Vadodara, Jamnagar, Bhavnagar and Gandhinagar.

However, the figures from rural districts reported in local media based on information from cremation grounds and local government offices from the State's north, south and central regions, and Saurashtra and Kutch, bring out the horror of the pandemic's devastating second wave.

For example, in Surendranagar district, there were 814 deaths in March



**Precious minutes:** A COVID-19 patient being taken for admission at the Civil Hospital in Ahmedabad. ■ VIJAY SONEJI

2020 and 957 deaths in March 2021.

In April 2020, there were 784 deaths while in the month this year (2021), the total deaths in the district stood at a high 3,140.

But as on May 15, the official death toll in Surendranagar district has been around 130 since the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020.

"There is a massive under-counting of deaths in our villages. In Tapi district alone, more than 1,500 people have already died of COVID-19. Unfortunately, the Gujarat government is not recognising it," said former Union minister and Congress leader Dr. Tushar Chaudhary.

district. He added that there was a difference of more than 3,000 deaths in a less than 70-day period in the years 2020 and 2021.

He added that there was a difference of more than 3,000 deaths in a less than 70-day period in the years 2020 and 2021.

On May 2020, 756 deaths were reported from the district whereas only till May 8, 2021, that figure stood at 1,739.

"I have obtained the month-wise figures from the district panchayat and other agencies and compiled them to show how much under-counting of deaths is being resorted to by the Gujarat government," said Congress legislator Naresh Solanki from Surendranagar.

# Samyukt Kisan Morcha plans to observe May 26 as 'black day'

It appeals to people to raise black flags at houses and shops

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
NEW DELHI

The Samyukt Kisan Morcha, an umbrella body of over 40 farmers' unions, on Saturday announced that it will observe May 26 as 'black day', marking six months of their protest at Delhi's borders against the Centre's three farm laws.

In a virtual press conference, farmer leader Balbir Singh Rajewal appealed to the people to raise black flags at their houses, vehicles and shops on May 26 to protest against the contentious farm legislations.

"On May 26, we will complete six months of this protest and it also happens to mark seven years since Prime Minister Narendra Modi formed the government. We will observe it as black day," Mr. Rajewal said.

A large number of farmers reached Delhi's borders on November 26 after facing water cannons and police barriers as part of their 'Delhi Chalo' march against the Centre's farm laws. Thousands of farmers from across the country joined the protest in the following months at Tikri, Singhu and Ghazipur borders around the na-



Women farmers at the ongoing protest against the farm laws at the Delhi border. ■ FILE PHOTO

tional capital.

Mr. Rajewal appealed to the people to support the call for observing 'black day' on May 26.

## Demands not heard

"We appeal to people of the country and also Punjab to hang black flags at their house, shops, trucks and other vehicles. We will also burn effigies of (PM) Narendra Modi as a form of protest," he added.

He said that the government has not heard the farmers' demands to repeal the three farm laws and "with increasing prices of fertilisers, diesel and petrol, the farming business is not possible".

Hundreds of farmers have been camping at Delhi's borders since November 2020 demanding that the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020; and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020, be rolled back and a new law made to guarantee minimum support price for crops.

However, the government, which has held multiple rounds of formal dialogue with the protestors, has maintained that the laws are pro-farmer.

# Maharashtra BJP claims MVA is fudging data

Fadnavis writes to Sonia; Cong. hits back

STAFF REPORTER  
MUMBAI

While the BJP-led Central government's agencies praise the 'Mumbai model' of fighting the coronavirus, BJP's Maharashtra leaders seem to think otherwise. The party, which is in the Opposition in the State has once again alleged that the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) is fudging data.

Former Maharashtra Chief Minister and BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis has written to Congress president Sonia Gandhi, claiming the State hid 9,603 deaths in 2020 and the practice is still prevalent.

"Mumbai has not only reduced the number of COVID tests, but increased the rapid antigen test in a bid to develop new model. Mumbai has registered 40% deaths in the category of 'deaths due to other reason' when other districts stand at 0.8% only. Every method is being used to hide the number of deaths," said Mr. Fadnavis in his letter, which came in response to Ms. Gandhi's letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Congress said that since Mr. Fadnavis cannot dare to question Mr. Modi over the misgovernance of BJP-ruled States, he has cho-

sen to target Opposition leaders like Ms. Gandhi.

## People struggling

Mr. Fadnavis claimed that out of 4,000 deaths in the country, 850 are in Maharashtra alone. Complaining that MVA government, of which Congress is a part, has left regions like Marathwada, Vidarbha and north Maharashtra to fend for themselves, he claimed that people were struggling for Remdesivir, oxygen and medical treatment. Mr. Fadnavis said that the Centre has provided maximum help to the State.

The Congress shot back at Mr. Fadnavis, calling his letter an attempt to hide Mr. Modi's failure. "Mr. Fadnavis has lied on every possible count in his letter. Be it about the aid from the Centre or number of deaths. Courts had to intervene on every step to force the Centre to provide aid to Maharashtra. While pointing fingers at number of tests in Maharashtra, he is conveniently ignoring BJP-ruled States like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar where no tests at all are being conducted," said Maharashtra Congress president Nana Patole.

# Odisha expanding cremation capacity

The move indicates that the average daily COVID-19 deaths in the State is not recorded correctly

SATYASUNDAR BARIK  
BHUBANESWAR

Odisha, which has been reporting an average of 20 COVID-19 deaths every day, has nevertheless started expanding cremation capacity across the State, which indicates an under-reporting of fatalities.

Though the State has been adding on an average over 10,000 cases to its daily COVID-19 tally, the daily death toll has remained around 20.

According to government data, Khordha district, of which State capital Bhubaneswar is a part, is losing four COVID-19 patients daily. Most of the bodies are cremated at the Satya Nagar crematorium.

The government, which has remained tight-lipped about revealing the number of persons who died while



**Last rites:** Cremations have increased at the Satyanagar cremation ground in Bhubaneswar. ■ BISWARANJAN ROUT

undergoing treatment for COVID-19, admitted that the Satya Nagar crematorium is unable to handle the increased pressure on the facility. There have been long queues of bodies waiting to be cremated late in the evening at the crematorium.

The newly appointed Bhu-

baneswar Municipal Commissioner has instructed officials to get ready another crematorium near Patia by May 25. This facility will be operated with LPG, speeding up the process of incineration. The Commissioner said the Patia crematorium has been designated for the cre-

mation of COVID-19 victims.

He, however, attributed the rush at the Satya Nagar crematorium to restrictions on performing funerals at Swargadwar, a crematorium at Puri. The corporation also intends to make another crematorium operational at Bharatpur in the city.

Cremation of COVID-19 patients, which was hitherto performed at one place in Sambalpur, is now conducted at four new places (one at Sambalpur and three at Burla). The Rajghat crematorium in Sambalpur has, however, been shut down.

Siddheswar Naik, who helps at the crematorium at Keonjhar district, said, "I have been instructed to keep mum over the number of bodies being disposed. In the last one month, on an average, 12 or 13 bodies are being

brought for cremation every day. All bodies are brought by people draped in PPE (personal protection equipment) kits."

Contradictory figures have been reported from Nuapada district. While the government's bulletin says 38 persons have succumbed to COVID-19 since last year, there were reports of over 70 deaths at the COVID-19 hospital at Nuapada alone in the second wave of COVID-19.

In Sundargarh, another district devastated by the second wave of the pandemic, bodies are sent to the respective panchayats for burial, as a sizeable population belongs to the Christian community. However, facilities designated for COVID-19 victims at Sundargarh and Rourkela have recorded increased cremations.

He argued that the increase in death certificates between last year and this year could not be explained

# COVID-19 deaths are being under-reported, says Cong.

There is a suspicion that numbers are being suppressed'

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

The Congress has alleged under-reporting of COVID-19 deaths in some States, especially Gujarat, and demanded an explanation from both the Centre and the State governments.

Former Union Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, addressing a virtual press conference along with Rajya Sabha member Shaktisinh Gohil, questioned the alleged huge discrepancy between the number of death certificates issued by authorities and the official data on COVID-19 deaths.

He argued that the increase in death certificates between last year and this year could not be explained



P. Chidambaram

as a natural increase. He asked the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to call for the data on deaths from every State.

Talking about the data on the deaths in Gujarat, Congress leaders claimed that the deaths in the State this year had doubled compared with 2020 and the substan-

tial increase could only be attributed to the pandemic.

"We have a strong suspicion that the Government of India, in conjunction with some State governments, is suppressing the true numbers of new infections and COVID-related deaths. If our suspicions are true, this is a grave misdeed apart from being a national shame and a national tragedy," Mr. Chidambaram said.

Former Congress chief Rahul Gandhi questioned the government's vaccine strategy and said a "flawed policy" would now ensure a third wave in the country.

"It can't be repeated enough – India needs a proper vaccine strategy," he said on Twitter.

# Mamata Banerjee's brother passes away

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
KOLKATA

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's brother Ashim Banerjee, who was undergoing treatment for COVID-19 at a hospital here, died on Saturday, his family

# Stranded Australians finally fly home

Repatriation flight from India carrying 80 passengers landed at Darwin

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
MELBOURNE

The first repatriation flight carrying Australians stranded in India landed in Darwin on Saturday following the end of the federal government's controversial ban on their return home.

The repatriation flights facilitated by the Australian government for its stranded citizens in India resumed from Friday, following a two-week ban due to the COVID-19 health crisis in India.

The Qantas jet touched down at the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) base shortly before 9 a.m. local time.

It was scheduled to carry up to 150 passengers but, in the end, only carried 80 people back to Australia.

"Many passengers on the first flight on Friday were grounded due to COVID-19 positive test results," Australian High Commissioner to India Barry O'Farrell was quoted as saying by ABC News.

A total of 70 people were barred from boarding. Of them, 46 tested positive for the coronavirus, while 24 others were identified as close contacts.

The arrivals will be taken to the Howard Springs Centre.

Passengers on this flight had to undergo and return a negative result on two tests before they could get on the plane – an RT-PCR test in the two days beforehand and then a rapid antigen test.

The Australian govern-

ment had introduced the travel ban for its residents and citizens a fortnight ago to mitigate the risk of a high infection rate at its quarantine facilities, including the Howard Springs Centre in Darwin.

The repatriation flight was the first flight after the Australian government imposed a temporary ban with the threat of criminal sanctions, including five years in jail

and fines of up to 66,000 Australian dollars for people who tried to return from India.

The next flight from India is scheduled in just over a week.

Almost 10,000 Aus-

# West Bengal to impose a 15-day lockdown

Private vehicle movement curbed

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
KOLKATA

West Bengal will go under a complete lockdown from Sunday till May 30, the State government announced, as it put in place a host of stringent measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, including prohibiting vehicular movement and disallowing all kinds of gatherings.

Chief Secretary Alapan Bandyopadhyay said the lockdown would take effect from 6 a.m. on Sunday till 6 p.m. of May 30.

"Additional restriction measures to cut down mobility of people and limiting human contact is essential to cut the transmission chain of the virus and to

contain the pandemic," he said.

During this period, all government and private offices, shopping complexes, malls, bars, sports complexes, pubs, cinema halls and beauty parlours will remain closed. Work relating to emergency and essential services, including healthcare, law and order, courts, power, drinking water and media, will be allowed to continue.

Movement of private vehicles, taxis and autorickshaws will be prohibited except to and from hospitals, diagnostic and vaccination centres, airports and media houses, the top government official said.

# M.P. extends ban on bus movement till May 23

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
BHOJPAL

The Madhya Pradesh government on Saturday extended the ban on the movement of passenger buses to and from Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan till May 23, as a measure to contain the spread of coronavirus.

The State government had on May 7 issued an order banning interstate

movement of passenger buses, which was effective till Saturday.

As per the new order, the ban on bus movement to and from the COVID-19 affected States of Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan has been extended till May 23. Additional Commissioner Transport Arvind Saxena said.

The ban also covers vehicles that have All India tourist permits, he added.

LEGAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

A petition has been filed in the Supreme Court to direct the authorities to cancel the examination of Class 12 and devise an objective methodology to declare the result within a specific time-frame," advocate Mamta Sharma, who filed the petition, urged.

He said the CBSE and the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations notifications deferring the exams to an unspecified date should be quashed. Students cannot be made to suffer uncertainty in the midst of an unprecedented

mus direc-

public health crisis posed by the COVID pandemic. There should not be any uncertainty on exams crucial to the future academic study of Class 12 students, the plea stated.

# Violence rocks Gaza, Israel and West Bank

Ahead of UNSC meet, U.S. envoy Hady Amr flies in with an aim to 'work towards a sustainable calm'

REUTERS  
GAZA/JERUSALEM

Israeli planes renewed air strikes in Gaza early on Saturday and Hamas militants responded by firing rockets into Israel as their battle entered a fifth night and U.S. and Arab diplomats sought an end to the violence.

Palestinian medics said at least four people were killed in one of several air strikes in northern Gaza. Residents said Israeli naval boats fired shells from the Mediterranean though none may have hit the strip.

The Palestinian Religious Affairs Ministry said Israeli planes destroyed a mosque. A military spokesman said the Army was checking the report.

Sirens sounded in two major southern Israeli cities warning of incoming fire from Gaza. Hamas claimed



**Showdown continues:** A member of the Palestinian civil defence walking in the rubble of a building, which housed the Intaj Bank linked to Hamas, in Gaza City on Saturday. ■ AFP

responsibility for launching rockets.

With no sign of an end to the fighting, casualties spread further afield, with Palestinians reporting 11 killed in the occupied West Bank amid clashes between

protesters and Israeli security forces.

At least 132 people have been killed in Gaza since Monday, including 32 children and 21 women, and 950 others wounded, Palestinian medical officials said.

Among eight dead in Israel were a soldier patrolling the Gaza border and six civilians, including two children, Israeli authorities said.

Ahead of a session of the UN Security Council on Sunday to discuss the situation,

Biden administration envoy Hady Amr, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Israel and Palestinian Affairs, flew in on Friday.

The U.S. Embassy in Israel said the aim was "to reinforce the need to work toward a sustainable calm."

Israel launched attacks on Friday to destroy what it said were several kilometres of tunnels, launch sites and weapons manufacturing warehouses used by the militants in an effort to halt the rocket attacks.

Across central and southern Israel, from small towns bordering Gaza to metropolitan Tel Aviv and southern Beersheba, people have adjusted to sirens wailing, radio and TV broadcast interruptions and the beeps of cellphones bearing red alerts that send them rushing for cover.

# Mars landing gives China's space programme a leg-up

Third country to achieve this feat after Soviet Union, the U.S.

ANANTH KRISHNAN

China landed a spacecraft on Mars carrying its first Mars rover in a big boost to its space ambitions, the country's space agency said on Saturday.

China had in July last year launched its first Mars mission, called Tianwen-1, meaning Questions to Heaven, carrying a lander and rover. Tianwen-1 had been in orbit since February, and on Saturday, a lander descended successfully on to the surface of the red planet carrying a rover named Zhurong, named after a god of fire for a planet known in Chinese as the planet of fire. Only the Soviet Union and the U.S.

had previously carried out a successful landing on Mars. China's official media described "nine minutes of terror" during the descent – the hardest part of the mission. The descent "was extremely complicated with no ground control, and had to be performed by the spacecraft autonomously," Geng Yan, an official at the China National Space Administration (CNSA) Lunar Exploration and Space Program Center, was quoted as saying by state media. "Each step had only one chance, and the actions were closely linked. If there had been any flaw, the landing would have failed," he said.

The rover will provide "first-hand materials for research on the planet's space environment, surface topography, and soil structure", the CNSA said. China's leadership sees the space programme as an important part of China's ambitions to close the technological gulf with the U.S.

President Xi Jinping on Saturday described the Mars landing as "an important step in China's interstellar exploration" and said it had "left a Chinese mark on Mars for the first time" and was "another landmark progress in China's space industry development".

China had previously tried to launch a Mars orbiter along with Russia in 2011, but that failed to enter orbit. This attempt, on its own, hit the target.

China's Mars mission, along with lunar mission and space station, is key to its space programme.

In 2019, the fourth lunar probe, Chang'e-4, carried out the world's first landing on the far side of the moon.

The Mars mission was launched the following year. China is also investing

**Strides in space |** China successfully landed a spacecraft on Mars for the first time on Saturday. Here is a timeline of key moments to this feat



**Great leap:** An artistic depiction of the Chinese Mars rover and lander. ■ XINHUA/AP

lunar probe makes world's first landing on "far side" of the moon

**July 2020:** Launch of first Mars mission, Tianwen-1, carrying orbiter, lander and rover

**April 29, 2021:** Long March-5B rocket carries Tianhe module into space, first of three parts of space station set to be completed in 2022; debris falls in Indian Ocean

**May 15, 2021:** Zhurong lander touches down on Mars, third country to achieve Mars landing after Soviet Union and the U.S.

**January 2019:** Chang'e-4

## Neera Tanden appointed White House senior adviser

She had earlier faced opposition from GOP over key appointment

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
WASHINGTON

Indian-American policy expert Neera Tanden has been appointed as a senior adviser to U.S. President Joe Biden, two months after she withdrew her nomination as Director of the White House Office of Management and Budget due to stiff opposition from Republican Senators.

Ms. Tanden has two tasks ahead of her – launch a review of the U.S. Digital Service, and plan contingencies that could result from the Supreme Court's consideration of Republican lawsuits seeking to annul the Affordable Care Act.



Neera Tanden

Ms. Tanden, 50, is currently the president and CEO of a progressive think-tank, Center for American Progress (CAP).

"Neera's intellect, tenacity, and political savvy will be an asset to the Biden administration," CAP founder

and director John Podesta said.

He said the White House has made remarkable progress combating numerous once-in-a-generation challenges – from vaccinating millions of Americans to delivering real economic relief from the coronavirus pandemic, and from strengthening the Affordable Care Act to tackling climate change.

"Many of these bold policy solutions, which have bipartisan support from voters, were developed and led by Neera at CAP over many years. The administration's efforts will be magnified with Neera Tanden on the team," he added.

The fighting in Mindat, Chin state, underlines the growing chaos in Myanmar as the junta struggles to impose its authority in the face of daily protests, strikes and sabotage attacks after overthrowing elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

"We are running for our lives," one resident told Reuters from Mindat, a hill town

## Myanmar Army battles rebels in northwest town

'20,000 people are trapped in Mindat'

REUTERS  
YANGON

Myanmar's army battled local militia fighters in the northwestern town of Mindat on Saturday, residents said, to try to quell a rebellion that has sprung up to oppose the junta which seized power in the Southeast Asian country in February.

The fighting in Mindat, Chin state, underlines the growing chaos in Myanmar as the junta struggles to impose its authority in the face of daily protests, strikes and sabotage attacks after overthrowing elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

"We are running for our lives," one resident told Reuters from Mindat, a hill town

just over 100 km from the border with India.

"There are around 20,000 people trapped in town, most of them are kids, old people," the resident added. "My friend's three nieces were hit by shrapnel. They are not even teens."

The junta imposed martial law in Mindat on Thursday and then stepped up attacks on what it called "armed terrorists". Fighters of the Chinland Defence Force retreated as military reinforcements advanced.

Five civilians had been killed in Mindat in the past two days, said Doctor Sasa, Minister of International Cooperation in a shadow National Unity Government set up to rival the junta.

heavily in its manned space programme, as plans accelerate for its first space station, set to be functional by the end of next year and only the second space station after the International Space Station. Last month, a Long March-5B Y2 rocket carried out the first of three components for the space station, called the Tianhe or Heavenly Harmony module.

Thomas Zurbuchen, of NASA's Science Mission Directorate, congratulated China. "Together with the global science community," he said, "I look forward to the important contributions this mission will make to humanity's understanding of the Red Planet."

## Iran heavyweights Larijani, Raisi bid for presidential race

Guardian Council to approve list of candidates by May 27

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
KINSHASA

Thirty people were sentenced to death in the Democratic Republic of Congo on Saturday for their role in anti-police violence marking the end of Ramadan in the capital Kinshasa.

A policeman was killed on Thursday as rival Muslim groups fought over the right to mark the end of Ramadan at a major sports stadium in the capital, officials said.

The government has also confirmed that one police woman is in critical condition and 46 others were injured with eight in a serious state.

About ten police vehicles were damaged including one that was completely incinerated.

A total of 38 people who had been arrested appeared at Friday's trial.

The trial was broadcast live on public television and lasted until the early hours of Saturday.



Ebrahim Raisi

leading rival in 2017 elections, to announce his own candidacy.

While several other hopefuls have thrown their hats into the ring, "the main clash will be between Mr. Raisi and Mr. Larijani," Mansouf Bastani, a Tehran-based journalist said.

"The first represents the ultraconservative faction and part of traditional conservatives ... and the second the traditional conservatives and moderates, and by proxy, reformists," he added.

Then it was the turn of judiciary chief and one-time presidential hopeful Mr. Raisi, who was Mr. Rouhani's

Since registration to run in the election began on Tuesday, more than 300 hopefuls have submitted bids to stand, according to the Interior Ministry.

Others who registered on Saturday included secretary of the Expediency Council and ex-commander of Revolutionary Guards General Mohsen Rezai, Iran's ultra-conservative former nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, and Rouhani's first Vice-President Eshaq Jahangiri.

All the hopefuls will be vetted by the conservative-dominated Guardian Council, which will publish a list of approved candidates by May 27, after which campaigning begins.

Mr. Larijani threw the first jab at Mr. Raisi, in a press conference. "The economy is neither a garrison nor a court that would be managed with shouts and orders," he told reporters.

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR,

BUT FROM 6 FEET AWAY.



When the pandemic hit us first, we braved it together.

Sadly, the times are once again challenging. While we do our best to support one another, we need to stay cautious too. Let us bring back all the habits we practised religiously last year. The virus has not gone anywhere. Neither should our precautions.

## China nixes bids to climb Everest over virus fears

Nepal is experiencing a surge in cases

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
BEIJING

China has canceled attempts to climb Mount Everest from its side of the world's highest peak because of fears of importing COVID-19 cases from neighboring Nepal, state media reported.

The closure was confirmed in a notice on Friday from China's General Administration of Sport, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

The move reflects the abundance of caution China has taken in dealing with the pandemic. While China

has mostly curbed domestic transmission of the coronavirus, Nepal is experiencing a surge with record numbers of new infections and deaths.

China had issued permits to 38 people, all Chinese citizens, to climb the 8,849-meter high mountain this spring. Nepal has given permission to 408 people.

Climbing was not allowed from either side last year because of the pandemic.

In Nepal, several climbers have reported testing positive for COVID-19 after they were brought down from the Everest base camp.

## Two tornadoes strike China, killing at least 12

Around 30 homes destroyed in Wuhan

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
BEIJING

Two tornadoes that struck central and eastern China killed at least 12 people and injured more than 400, authorities said Saturday.

Violent winds of more than 260 km per hour blasted the central city of Wuhan on Friday night.

Eight people died and more than 280 were injured there, authorities said, adding that around 30 homes had collapsed.

Vehicles were crushed by falling objects, trees uprooted, buildings partially destroyed and electricity pylons felled, leaving more than 26,000 homes without power.

The gale damaged two construction cranes, one of which toppled onto the site below, causing significant damage.

In Suzhou, near Shanghai, another tornado with winds of more than 200 km per hour wreaked havoc.

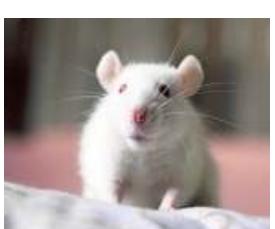
Four people were killed and one remains missing, according to local authorities.

Images shared on social media showed a black whirlwind which left a trail of destruction.

THE HINDU

#KeepTheHabit

## SNAPSHOTS



## Curious mice

By examining mice in different situations, researchers from Netherlands have discovered a new brain circuit that is related to curiosity and novelty-seeking behaviour. The study, published in *Science*, found that increasing activity in a brain region called Zona Incerta caused increase in interaction with novel objects. They discovered a whole path involving different regions that converts curiosity into action in mice.



## For global wellbeing

The risk of over-reliance on technological innovation to support global growth was highlighted in a comparison of 'degrowth' scenarios with established pathways. The findings, published in *Nature Communications*, focus on the global North and growth is defined as an equitable, democratic reduction in energy and material use while maintaining well-being.

## IITM develops algorithms for lensless cameras

These are used in smart wearables

## PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

A team of researchers from Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IITM) and US-based Rice University have together developed algorithms for lensless and miniature cameras.

The lensless cameras have numerous vision applications in sectors including augmented reality, virtual reality, security, smart wearables and robotics where cost, form-factor and weight become major constraints. A spokesperson for IITM said in a release, "IIT Madras and Rice University researchers have developed a deep learning algorithm for producing photo-realistic images from the blurred lensless capture."

## For elephant seals, it is hard work to stay fat

They feed 1,000 to 2,000 times daily

## REUTERS

For elephant seals - one of the most distinctive of the 33 species that comprise the world's seal family - it is hard work to stay fat.

Scientists have conducted the most thorough study to date of the unique feeding behaviour of northern elephant seals, focusing on the females of the species during arduous two-month post-breeding migrations in the northeastern Pacific Ocean.

The seals were found to spend upwards of 20 hours every day - and sometimes a full 24 hours - in continuous deep-diving to feed on multitudes of small fish, rather than the larger prey favoured by other deep-diving marine mammals, to gain the body fat essential for successful reproduction and insulation in the frigid depths. They fed 1,000 to 2,000 times daily.

"It is not easy to get fat," said marine biologist Taiki Adachi of the University of St Andrews in Scotland, who led the study published this week in the journal *Science Advances*.

The researchers tracked 48 female elephant seals from Año Nuevo State Park in California, site of an important breeding colony. .

They based their findings on data obtained from 2011 and 2018 using three small removable devices: one at-

## Testing and the importance of low positivity rate

Although the second wave came more than a year after the first, India's testing infrastructure remained insufficient and underprepared

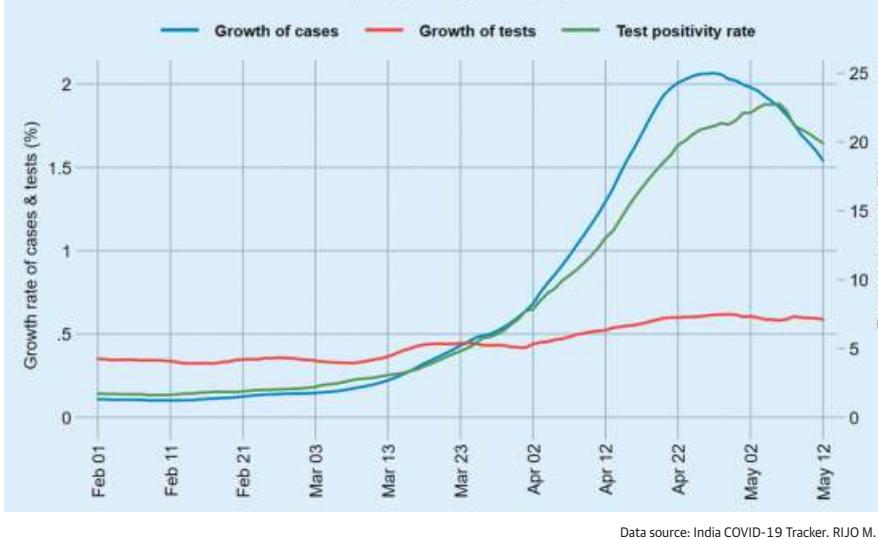
## RIJO M. JOHN

confined to symptomatic airport travellers and contacts with known sources.

India went into a complete nationwide and staggered lockdown starting March 25, 2020. However, our testing strategy for SARS-CoV-2 was still being evolved. A closer look at the different revised testing guidelines from the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) throughout the period of the pandemic shows the scope of testing got gradually expanded to include different population subgroups only as new incidences of novel coronavirus infection were reported from those groups. Instead of using it as a pre-emptive strategy, our testing strategy appeared to be a game of catch-up with the spread of the virus. Naturally, the virus always outsmarted this testing strategy.

A complete lockdown is widely perceived as a tool to expand resources including ramping up testing infrastructure along with other healthcare infrastructure instead of being a solution in itself. However, an analysis of the progression of India's COVID-19 cases and testing reveals that the growth of testing lagged behind that of cases during the pre-peak phase of both the first and the second wave. The second

## Trends in daily test positivity rates &amp; daily growth of COVID19 cases &amp; tests in India (7-day rolling averages)



Data source: India COVID-19 Tracker. RIJO M. JOHN

wave saw daily new cases growing three-to-four times higher than the growth of tests.

## Vastly underprepared

Although the second wave came more than a year from the onset of the first wave, it appears that India's testing infrastructure remained highly insufficient and vastly underprepared. This becomes obvious when we see that average daily new cases recorded during the second wave grew more than four-fold compared to that during the peak of the first wave, while the daily average test-

ing grew only by 60% during the same time.

At the end of the first wave of COVID-19, in early February 2021, India was doing about 63 tests per detected case while the daily testing has decreased to 4.5 tests per each detected case during recent times.

Even at the peak of the first wave, India was doing about 11.4 tests per detected case. The average daily test positivity rate was only 8.5% at the peak of the first wave, whereas, the average positivity rate reached 22.8% a few days ago when India was reporting close to 400,000 daily new cases. The WHO, on the other hand, recommends raising daily testing enough to bring the test positivity rates below 5% level.

## Glaring statistic

Yet another glaring statistic points to the serious deficiency of testing during the current wave of this pandemic. India reported a total of 108 lakhs COVID-19 cases with the help of 20.3 crore tests, during the first wave that lasted about 375 days. However, for the second wave so far, in 95 days, India already reported 130 lakh new cases by conducting on

cases may be inadvertently interpreted as a peak of the present wave, the pandemic will continue unabated whether we detect more cases or not. The downside to this would be an unnecessarily prolonged pandemic straining our healthcare system and the economy even further while putting more lives at risk.

## Combined capacity

Dr. Balram Bhargava, the chief of ICMR in a press conference on May 11, stated India has a daily capacity of doing 16 lakh RT-PCR tests and 17 lakh Rapid Antigen Tests.

**BALRAM BHARGAVA**  
ICMR, DELHI

by 10.6 crore tests.

At about 229 tests per 1000 people, India's testing remains below that of 112 other countries. There has been wide variation in testing across states in India too, ranging from a low of only 76 tests per 1,000 people in Nagaland to 1,314 tests per 1,000 people in Lakshadweep. Among the larger states, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh carried out the lowest number of tests per 1,000 people while Delhi, Jammu & Kashmir, Kerala and Karnataka did the highest.

In recent days, however, several states including Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Chandigarh and Arunachal Pradesh have been decreasing their daily new tests even as their test positivity rates are still rising. If the tests are reduced while the cases are still rising, it will manifest in an increased test positivity rate. While the reduced number of reported

(Rijo M. John is Health Economist and Adjunct Professor, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Kochi, Kerala.)

## New approach combines biologics, antibody-drug conjugates

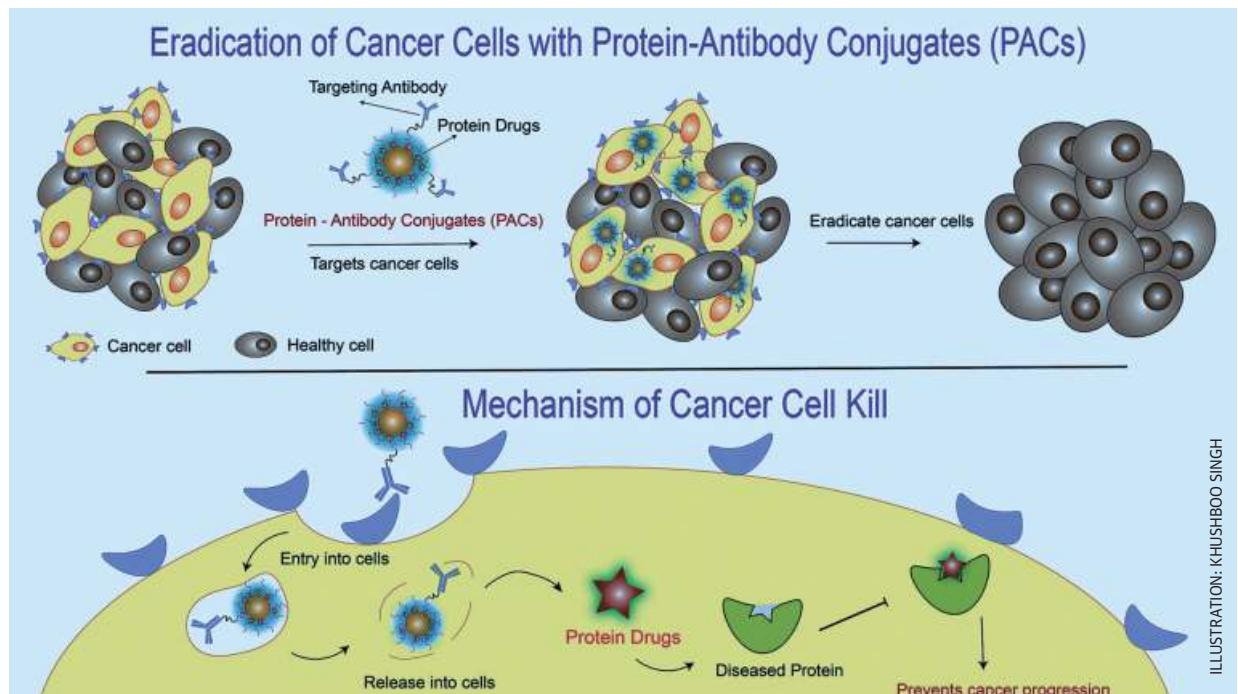
This could have impact on incurable diseases, so-called undruggable ones like pancreatic cancer

## SHUBASHREE DESIKAN

A nanoparticle designed by researchers from University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in the U.S., offers a new, potentially revolutionary approach to treating diseases. This combines concepts of biologics and antibody-drug conjugates to produce protein-antibody conjugates that can be used for targeted drug delivery, in pancreatic cancer, for example. The team has tested the mechanism in cell lines in the lab. Their research is published recently in the journal *Angewandte Chemie*.

The new concept, Protein-Antibody Conjugates or PACs, combines two different approaches to drug delivery. One is biologics, where the idea is to target a defective protein in the system by delivering proteins to it. An example of this is the case of insulin treatment. If a person is short of insulin, which is a protein, they are given a shot of this to balance the system.

The reason this works is because we need a circulation of insulin outside the cells. "Now, we have 20,000 proteins and when one of these is malfunctioning, we have no way of taking that



protein specifically inside the cell. That is a big problem in biologics," explains Sankaran Thayumanavan, Distinguished Professor of Chemistry at Department of Chemistry, University of Massachusetts, who led the research.

"It will be a gamechanger if we can take the protein inside the cell. So, people have been looking at protein delivery for a while."

**Antibody conjugates**  
The other approach is to use antibodies for drug delivery. Antibodies are something the body produces to detect a foreign substance inside the body. "We can develop antibodies to recognise anything that does not belong in our bodies. That includes cancer cells as well. If

there is something different on the surface of a cancer cell compared to a healthy cell, you can design the antibody that recognises it and selectively goes to the cancer cell," he explains. Drug molecules can be attached to the antibody, forming drug-antibody conjugates.

Protein-antibody conjugates or PACs, developed by the group, which have a pro-

tein attached to the antibody, can zero in on, say, pancreatic cancer cells. and it cannot function. But some of the proteins have an open structure, it is difficult to design a drug that can bind to it, because it is so wide. However, using a protein molecule, which is typically large, can solve this problem.

## Undruggable cases

Pancreatic cancer is an example. "There are [types] that are considered undruggable... We know what we should target but we do not know how to design drugs that will bind. But with proteins we know we can design molecules that will bind to the target," says Prof. Thayumanavan.

He compares the PAC to an addressed envelope containing the drug. The antibody plays the role of the address and indicates the cell where the drug should precisely be delivered.

Biology involves complexity and this method may well fail if it is not tuneable. "In our lab we are already developing three different polymer platforms, each of which has its own tuneability... the concept is real, and it is important at the molecular level we understand how to tune it," he says.

## New skink species from Western Ghats

The inconspicuous limbs of skinks make them resemble snakes

## ASWATHI PACHA

In September 2019, a group of herpetologists gathered at Anaimalai hills in Coimbatore for the South Asian Reptile Red List Assessment organised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). When Achyuthan Srikanthan from the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, suggested an impromptu night visit to a nearby private farm, little did they know they would stumble upon a new species: an Asian gracile skink.

**Slender and slight**  
Named *Subdoluseps nilgiriensis*, the reptile has a slender body of just about 7 cm and is sandy brown in colour. ▀

**Subdoluseps nilgiriensis is currently considered a vulnerable species**  
need to change the notion that high biodiversity can be found only in the wet and evergreen forests," adds Aniruddha Datta Roy, corresponding author of the paper recently published in *Zoology*.

**Secretive habits**  
Most skinks are diurnal and are usually secretive. Being elusive, not much is known about their natural and evolutionary history. "This species is only the third skink species discovered from mainland India in the last

millennium. Such discoveries give us an understanding of how we underestimate our reptile species diversity truly is," adds Prof. Roy.

Skinks are non-venomous. They resemble snakes because of the often-inconspicuous limbs and the way they move on land. Such resemblance has led to confusion often resulting in humans killing this harmless creature.

"We are yet to study the breeding and feeding habits of this new species. Other skinks are known to feed on insects such as termites, crickets and small spiders, and we assume our new species has a similar diet," adds Avrajal Ghosh, one of the authors of the paper.

*Subdoluseps nilgiriensis* is currently considered a vulnerable species as there are potential threats from seasonal forest fires, housing constructions and brick kiln industries in the area. Rapid urbanisation, which has increased the road networks in the area, has also threatened its small geographical range.



## Question Corner

## Chewing practice

## Why do herbivores have strong jaws?

Herbivores, or plant-eaters, are known to have strong jaws with broad, flat back teeth which help them grind and eat tough plant tissues. Some of the early herbivores including plant-eating dinosaurs also had strong jaws. A new study (*Nature Communications*) has shown that herbivores developed strong jaws after the mass extinctions that happened millions of years ago. They had to eat different kinds of plants and chew harsher materials, so they evolved stronger jaws.

The team measured hundreds of fossil jaws and compared their shapes with living animals. They tried to understand the bite force, mechanical advantage and how fast the jaws shut. The researchers note that as plants diversified during the Triassic era (252-201 million years ago) the herbivores also evolved to eat the new kinds of plants. The drying conditions in the Late Triassic, led to many softer plant groups becoming less common, and dry-adapted conifers spreading worldwide. These changes also drove patterns of extinction. The hardy herbivores thrived, as other herbivores died out.

Mike Benton, from the University of Bristol, who co-led the study explained in a release that this sheds real light on key processes at an ecological level and helps explain why some groups died out and were replaced by others such as the first dinosaurs.

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



**Slinky find:** Named *Subdoluseps nilgiriensis*, the reptile has a slender body of just about 7 cm and is sandy brown in colour. ▀

"The new species was found in a dry deciduous area, showing that even the dry zones of our country are home to unrealised skink diversity. There is an urgent

need to change the notion that high biodiversity can be found only in the wet and evergreen forests," adds Aniruddha Datta Roy, corresponding author of the paper recently published in *Zoology*.

He adds that most of the studies in Tamil Nadu are carried out only in the protected areas and focus only on megafauna such as tigers, elephants and other such.

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A health worker with a COVID-19 patient at the Guru Teg Bahadur Hospital in New Delhi. ■ FILE PHOTO

## Mucormycosis in COVID-19 patients

What causes the invasive infection in some people after recovery and can it be prevented?

**RAMYA KANNAN**

**The story so far:** Hospitals across the country have started to report a number of cases of mucormycosis, an invasive fungal infection affecting patients who have recently recovered from COVID-19. In common parlance, it also goes by the name 'black fungus', a direct reference to the blackening that is characteristic of the disease.

### What is mucormycosis?

Mucormycosis is an aggressive and invasive fungal infection caused by a group of molds called mucormycetes. It can affect various organs but is currently manifesting as an invasive rhino-orbito-cerebral disease, crawling through the sinus and working its way to the brain, affecting the ear, nose, throat, and mouth. While it is not contagious, it can cause a lot of damage internally and can be fatal if not detected early.

While mucormycosis is an old disease, what is perhaps new and concerning is the sudden increase in the invasive form of the sinus variant, which involves the orbit, and at times the brain, leading to blindness, stroke or death, according to Dr. Mohan Kameswaran, Chief Surgeon and Director at the Madras ENT Research Foundation, Chennai.

**While diabetes mellitus is the most common underlying cause, mucormycosis is also being triggered in patients who have recovered from COVID-19, due to 'indiscriminate use of a high dose of steroids'**

Arunalo Chakrabarti et al., in a journal, estimated a prevalence of 0.14 cases per 1000 individuals in India.

While the infection is being reported from many States, Maharashtra Health Minister, Rajesh Tope, told mediapersons recently that there could be over 2,000 such cases in the State as of now, and predicted that the figure may go up as the number of COVID-19 cases escalates. Dr. Ram Gopalakrishnan, senior consultant, Infectious Diseases, Apollo Hospitals, added that while no studies exist on the current prevalence, the infection remained a possibility for one in 10,000 persons who recovered from COVID-19.

### What causes the disease?

Diabetes mellitus is the most common underlying cause, followed by haematological malignancies and solid-organ transplants, according to a comparative study of several papers on the incidence of mucormycosis in India, published in a recent issue of *Microorganisms*. Diabetes mellitus was reported in 54% to 76% of cases, according to a report.

What seems to be triggering mucormycosis in patients post COVID-19 is, Dr. Kameswaran said, "an indiscriminate use of a high dose of steroids in COVID-19 patients, sometimes even in minimally symptomatic patients". This leads to spikes in the sugar level among diabetics, which, in turn, renders them vulnerable. Dr. V. Mohan, senior diabetologist, Dr. Mohan's Diabetes Specialities Centre, said steroids in some COVID-19 patients might be a life-saver, and therefore, they become a double-edged sword. Rational use of steroids is necessary, and constant monitoring of sugar levels and resorting to insulin use to control these levels if required, is essential, he added.

Dr. Kameswaran said the use of monoclonal agents like Tocilizumab may be a factor, too. He added that while the fungi are present in the environment, the use of nasal prongs and other devices for oxygen delivery and possible breach of sterile conditions can possibly lead to cross-infection and hospital-acquired infection. "The question of COVID-19 infection itself predisposing to invasive fungal disease would need further studies but cannot be ruled out at this stage," he added.

**Does the disease cause any distinct symptoms?** Dr. Nisar Sonam Poonam, associate consultant at the Department of Orbit and Oculoplasty at Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai, said the signs to watch out for are a stuffy nose, bloody, blackish, or brown discharge from the nose, blackish discolouration of the skin, swelling or numbness around the cheek, one-sided facial pain, toothache or jaw pain, drooping of the eyelids or eyelid swelling, double vision, redness of eyes, and sudden decrease in vision. The main line of treatment is an anti-fungal drug called amphotericin B, which is given over an extended period of time under the strict observation of a physician. Surgery to remove the fungus growth might also be warranted.

### How can mucormycosis be prevented?

Following appropriate treatment protocols as recommended by the World Health Organization for COVID-19, including rational use of steroids and monoclonal antibodies only when they can help a patient, is important, said Dr. Kameswaran.

It is important to keep blood sugar levels under control and ensure that appropriate calibration of oral drugs or insulin is done from time to time, stressed Dr. Mohan. Further, recognising the symptoms and seeking treatment early if there are two or three symptoms at a time is key. Like most illnesses, if detected early, mucormycosis can be cured.

# Vaccinating a population of 940 million

How many doses will India need to fight COVID-19 and what are the States doing to procure them?

**G. ANANTHAKRISHNAN**

**The story so far:** Many States have announced their intention to import COVID-19 vaccines through a global bidding process, and several tenders inviting Expression of Interest have been issued, including by Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Uttarakhand, and also by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation for Mumbai.

### Is the onus on States to procure vaccines?

The Centre is currently pursuing a 'Liberalised Pricing and Accelerated National Covid-19 Vaccination Strategy', under which it has left vaccination of people in the 18-44 years age group to the States from May 1. State governments have to call for vaccine bids in an open market in the case of international imports and buy a limited domestic supply at prices fixed by the manufacturer.

Vaccine makers in the country are required to provide 50% of their production to the Centre to meet the needs of the 45-plus priority age group, besides 25% to the States, and leave the rest open for purchase by the private sector. The strategy was submitted in the Supreme Court by the Centre in the *suo motu* case as a step taken in an effort to incentivise and grow vaccine manufacturing. Earlier, the Drugs Controller General of India issued guidance on April 15 stipulating the conditions for the import of vaccines for restricted use in emergency situations.

### What is the state of vaccine availability?

For the 18-plus age group, India has a population of about 940 million, and Census-based projections put the 18-44 age group at over 591 million. This makes up a total requirement of about 1.9 billion (or 190 crore) vaccine doses, at two doses each.

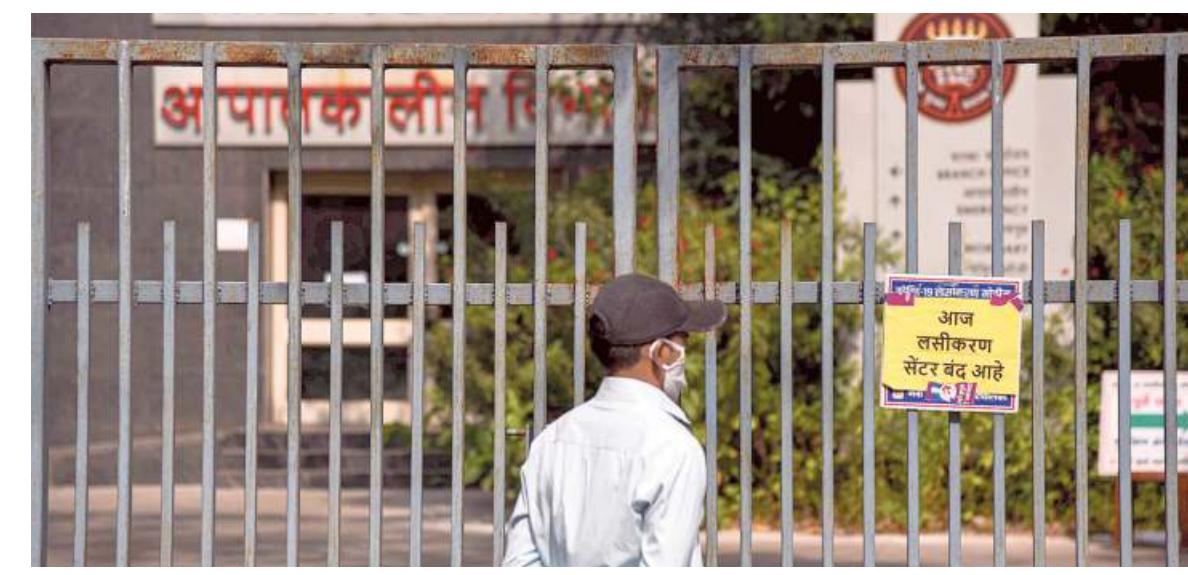
Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said on May 12 that India's domestic vaccine production in May is likely to be 8 crore doses and about 9 crore doses in June. Considering that over 18 crore doses have been administered as of May 15, of which around 14 crore are only the first dose, there is a requirement of 172 crore doses more to cover the target population.

NITI Aayog member V.K. Paul has said that overall, 216 crore doses of vaccines could be available in India between August and December 2021. But this optimistic estimate includes 130 crore doses of Covishield (75 crore) and Covaxin (55 crore), and 15.6 crore doses of Sputnik V, while the rest – Bio E sub-unit, Zydus Cadila DNA, SII-Novavax, BB Nasal and Gennova mRNA – represent vaccine candidates in trials. In addition, Dr. Paul said Indian authorities were actively encouraging Moderna, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson to apply for emergency use authorisation (EUA) for their vaccines. Pfizer had applied for EUA in India but withdrew it in February this year as the regulatory authority sought additional information on its vaccine.

For those not eligible for free immunisation and others who go to a private provider, prices range from ₹600 to ₹1,200 a dose for the two available vaccines, besides any hospital charges. Dr. Reddy's Laboratories has announced a price of ₹995.40 per dose for the new entrant, the imported Sputnik V vaccine. The rule for private hospitals receiving vaccines from the government, which capped the price at ₹250 a dose, has been discontinued.

### Why do States need to import?

While the States will continue to get vaccines under the Central quota for those above 45 years, they must prepare for beneficiaries in the 18-44 years age group using their own resources; private hospitals will sell to the better-off sections, mainly in urban areas, using imports. States are allowed to order only an approved



A closed vaccination centre in Navi Mumbai on Friday amid a massive shortage being faced by States. ■ PTI

NITI Aayog member V.K. Paul has said that 216 crore doses of vaccines could be available in India between August and December 2021. But this estimate includes several vaccine candidates in trials

number of domestically manufactured doses for the 18-44 years group, on a pro-rata basis fixed by the Central government based on a population estimate. Imports, therefore, come into play to meet the demand early.

Pressure for vaccines continues to mount on governments amid the wildfire spread of the infection, with the country seeing around 400,000

cases and almost 4,000 deaths a day. This has led to several decisions that the Centre claims will improve availability. These include direct import of vaccines by States and private entities for immediate use, promoting wider domestic manufacture of Covaxin, and, if intellectual property restrictions are relaxed, domestic manufacture of foreign vaccines, which experts say will take time.

At the same time, there is a demand for a free, central vaccine procurement programme to cover every citizen. Leaders from 12 political parties, including four Chief Ministers, asked the Centre to procure vaccines, domestic and international, for universal immunisation. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had recently appealed to the Prime Minister for speedy import of approved vaccines and help to set up franchised production units in India, for which her State would provide land and all support.

### How do vaccine imports work?

In the Centre's scheme, an "incentivised" market will increase the number of manufacturers, and thus, the availability of vaccines, although the counter view is that the decentralised, unregulated procurement system will push up costs due to weak bargaining power, and with global shortages, only pave the way for profiteering.

Imports have to meet the norms stipulated by the Centre. As per the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) guidance of April 15, which is based on the recommendations of the National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration for COVID-19 (NEGVC), foreign-produced vaccines granted emergency approval for restricted use by specified regulators such as the United States's Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the European Medicines Agency (EMA) in Europe, United Kingdom's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices Agency (PMDA) in Japan, or which are listed in the World Health Organization's (WHO) Emergency Use Listing, may be granted emergency approval in India. After approval, these vaccines must be subjected to a bridging clinical trial in place of a local

clinical trial, as per the New Drugs and Clinical Trials Rules, 2019.

Also, the first 100 beneficiaries must be assessed for safety outcomes for seven days, before a vaccine is rolled out as part of the vaccination programme. To speed up the availability of more vaccines, the CDSCO will process applications for restricted use in three days and registration and import formalities will be completed in three days thereafter. Every batch of a vaccine would have to be tested and released at the Central Drugs Laboratory (CDL), Kasauli, says the order.

### Have States issued tenders under the new plan?

A number of States have constituted committees to finalise import modalities and many official tenders have been published. Uttarakhand said it would import 2 million doses of Sputnik V over two months.

The Uttar Pradesh tender for 40 million doses, which closes on May 21, specifies that the "goods supplied must be as per the guidelines of the ICMR". The State seeks six to eight million doses every month, starting seven days from the issue of the purchase order, and requires the bidder to have an import licence and import registration certificate as well as the necessary transport cold chain infrastructure. U.P. Medical Supplies Corporation, the importer, has specified a vaccine storage temperature of 2°C to 8°C in nine warehouses.

Tamil Nadu has issued a tender for 50 million doses of vaccines to be delivered progressively in 90 days from the date of order, with the bid closing on June 5. Odisha has invited bids for 38 million doses, with online bids closing on May 28. Karnataka has announced that it will procure 20 million doses, while Andhra Pradesh has identified 20.4 million people for coverage in the 18-44 years group.

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) in Mumbai has floated a tender for 10 million doses from COVID-19 vaccine manufacturers, their Indian partners, wholesalers of manufacturers or authorised distributors of manufacturers, but barred applicants from "countries sharing borders with India". This condition, in effect, rules out China's two-dose Sinopharm vaccine that was approved by the WHO earlier this month. Moreover, the responsibility to maintain the cold chain and supply the vaccine at the main storage facility, any hospital or vaccination centre, is that of the applicant. In addition, taking into account the very low storage temperatures required for some vaccines such as Pfizer (-80°C and -60°C up to expiration date but refrigerated at 2°C to 8°C up to 120 hours), the tender says the responsibility to maintain such infrastructure up to the vaccination point would be that of the bidder. The Mumbai civic body currently has 20 hospitals and 240 vaccination centres.

Given the complexities, States feel it is the Centre that should negotiate prices, set terms and get vaccines delivered to them from international and domestic companies, to meet the challenge of universal coverage and get the country back on its feet.

## The hurdles in accessing foreign COVID-19 aid

Why is the flow of supplies to India facing problems and is the Central government taking steps to ease it?

**VIKAS DHOOT**

**The story so far:** As India ran out of critical supplies for managing the severe second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic – from medical oxygen to medicines, hospital beds and even vaccines – the Centre unveiled gradual measures over the past month to ease the imports of some items. Import duties and taxes were cut in some cases, while a new system was introduced for allowing foreign donors to route emergency relief to the pandemic's frontline victims. However, there are some serious hiccups.

### What steps have been taken to facilitate imports of relief supplies?

On April 24, the Finance Ministry announced it was dropping the basic customs duty on import of COVID-19 vaccines, and the basic customs duty as well as health cess on imports of medical grade oxygen and other equipment related to providing oxygen to patients, till July 31. Prior to this, the customs duty on the much-prescribed drug for India's COVID-19 patients, Remdesivir, and its active pharmaceutical ingredients had been waived. On April 30, the government dropped the import duties on diagnostic kits till October 31 to help ramp up testing efforts and allowed individuals to import oxygen concentrators for personal use through courier from e-commerce portals or global vendors. The customs department was told to clear them as 'gifts' till July 31.

### Have all critical COVID-19 imports been made temporarily tax-free?

No. Though customs duties have been slashed, such imports still attract the Goods and Services Tax (GST), specifically termed the Integrated GST (IGST). For hospitals, corporates or domestic entities that import such goods, 12% GST is payable on oxygen concentrators and related equipment, the same rate that is payable on domestic purchases. Vaccines attract a 5% GST.

Imports of oxygen concentrators for personal use were taxed at 28%, but the government reduced this rate to 12% on May 1. So, even as special protocols have been put in place by the Shipping Ministry to ensure that vessels with COVID-19 relief material are unloaded on a priority basis and paperwork and cargo clearances are processed expeditiously by Customs and the Directorate General of Foreign Trade, GST payments are mandatory for the



A patient breathing with the help of oxygen provided by a gurdwara in New Delhi. ■ AFP

material to be released. Several shipments sent by foreign donors, including groups of NRIs, or procured online by resident Indians from abroad, were held up due to a lack of awareness of this.

G. Bansal, who, with his IIT alumni friends in London, sourced 40-odd oxygen concentrators locally and couriered them to Delhi when the city was facing daily shortages of medical oxygen, said they had to raise more funds subsequently to facilitate the GST payments to get them released. "The money wasn't the issue, but this ended up delaying the use of those concentrators by at least three days," he said, adding that for subsequent relief efforts, he and his friends were factoring in the GST costs as well, which would dent the quantities of relief material they send.

The same tax implications arise for all Indian entities trying to import such material, be it a domestic corporate or an NGO that raises funds to import such goods.

### Has something been done to reduce the GST burden?

Yes, but there are problems. On May 3, the Finance Ministry granted a conditional 'ad-hoc' GST exemption for imports of all COVID-19 relief material, including vaccines, medical oxygen and Remdesivir vials, etc, till June 30. This was in response to representations from charitable organisations, corporates and entities outside India seeking exemption from paying IGST on the import of COVID-19 relief material, said the Ministry.

To avail of this IGST exemption, the material has to be "received free of cost for free distribution anywhere in India for COVID relief". But domestic companies or charities importing these items by purchasing them, even

if for free distribution in the country, cannot avail of this tax break. Moreover, entities that wish to import relief material for free distribution need a prior certification from State governments. So, global donors and their intended recipients for the donations would need to register with individual States where they wish to route relief material.

### Can any entity use this system to tie up with a global donor?

No entity in India is allowed to receive foreign aid or cash donations unless they have an approval to do so under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA). No exemption from the FCRA has been granted in the system laid out by the Finance Ministry. Moreover, FCRA-approved entities and NGOs need to have the same stated objective as the intended use of funds being donated. New rules introduced last September required such NGOs to open a bank account for receiving foreign funds at the State Bank of India's Parliament Street branch by April 1. Many have struggled to do this, with a petition in the Delhi High Court stating that only 16% of NGOs have managed to open an account.

But there is an even bigger challenge – an NGO receiving foreign funds or material can no longer transfer foreign aid to any other person, which would make it difficult to pass on the relief material to patients or smaller NGOs or groups working on the ground.

### What next?

Nasscom has urged the Prime Minister to temporarily relax the FCRA norms, stressing that many countries and global firms are keen to help India. "However, the amended provisions of the FCRA 2020 are proving to be a deterrent. Given the humanitarian crisis, we would request the government to grant a temporary waiver to the FCRA Act and the 2020 amendments," said Nasscom.

Separate petitions concerning the restrictive FCRA provisions are being heard in the High Courts, and a Bench of the Delhi High Court has also asked the Finance Ministry to consider dropping GST levies on all oxygen concentrator imports as they can be linked to the Right to Life under Article 21 of the Constitution amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

State governments are also expected to raise the issue of GST levies on COVID-19 supplies, including vaccines, at the GST meeting on May 28.

**HAMAS**

# Islamists, militants and nationalists – all in one

A creation of the first intifada, Hamas has risen from a charity in Gaza to a key, controversial force of the Palestinians' fight against occupation

STANLY JOHNY

**W**hen Israeli troops stormed Al-Aqsa Mosque on May 10, the day Israel observed as Jerusalem Day this year, commemorating the capture of the eastern part of the city in 1967, Hamas, the Islamist militant group that runs Gaza Strip, immediately issued an ultimatum. Hamas asked Israel to pull back all troops from the Al-Aqsa compound, and stop all actions to evict Palestinian families from East Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah by the evening. Israel ignored it. In the evening, Hamas launched dozens of rockets from Gaza. Israel responded with hellfire on Gaza, launching its biggest operation against Hamas since the 2014 attack on the strip.

This is an ongoing story. Ever since Hamas took over Gaza in 2007, there were at least three major conflicts between Israel and Hamas. It's an irony that Hamas, whose founding members were encouraged by Israel in the 1970s and 80s against Yasser Arafat's secular national movement, has turned out to be Israel's biggest rival in the Palestinian territories.

**The roots**  
The roots of Hamas go back to the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood, established by Egyptian Islamist Hasan al-Banna in 1928, made a presence in the British-ruled Palestine in the 1930s. Its focus had been on reorienting Muslim society, while the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), founded in 1964, championed the Palestinian nationalist sentiments. After Israel captured the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and Gaza Strip from Egypt in 1967, the PLO, vowing to liberate the whole of

ciation. This allowed Yassin to raise funds, build mosques and set up educational institutions, including the Islamic University of Gaza. But the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran would change the landscape of Islamist politics across West Asia. Islamist organisations, having witnessed the political success of the Mullahs in Iran, started becoming politically more ambitious and active.

**The rise**  
Hamas was established after the first intifada broke out in 1987. The occupied territories were swept by a mass uprising. The PLO called on its supporters to join the intifada. The Brotherhood also found it an opportunity to enter the struggle against the occupation. On December 14, the Brotherhood, under the leadership of Yassin, issued leaflet, asking Palestinians to stand up to the Israeli occupation. In January, they issued another leaflet under the name Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah (the Islamic Resistance Movement) – in short, Hamas, which means "zeal" in Arabic. In 1989, Hamas launched its first attack, abducting and killing two Israeli soldiers. Israel cracked down on the group, arresting Yassin and jailing him for life.

Unlike the PLO, which was modelled around the leftist guerrilla national movements in the third world, Hamas had a completely different vision. The charter it issued on August 19, 1988 was studded with anti-Semitic remarks.

According to the charter, Palestine is "an Islamic Waqf land consecrated for Moslem generations until Judgement Day"; "there is no solution to the Palestine problem except jihad" and all peace initiatives are a "waste of time and acts of absurdity". When the PLO moved to join peace efforts seeking a solution to the Palestinian issue, Hamas hardened its position. It opposed the Oslo agreement, which allowed the formation of the Palestinian Authority with limited powers within the occupied territories.

When the PLO recognised Israel, Hamas rejected the two-state solution and vowed to liberate the whole of Palestine "from the (Jordan) River to the (Mediterranean) Sea". It has built a organisation with several branches – the social wing is involved in Islamic education and charity

works, while Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing, is in charge of military planning and weapons acquisitions. It also has a political bureau. In October 1994, a year after the Oslo Accord was signed, Hamas carried out its first suicide attack, killing 22 in Tel Aviv.

**The evolution**

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Hamas conducted several suicide attacks, targeting Israelis. In 2000, when the second intifada broke out, Hamas was in the driving seat. Hamas supporters fought pitched street battles with Israeli troops, who used brute force to crush the protests. Israel had also taken a policy of targeted assassinations. Hamas continued to remain defiant, targeting Israeli troops and settlers. In 2005, faced with Hamas's violent resistance, Israel unilaterally decided to pull out of Gaza.

Hamas's violent tactics and Israel's collective pun-

ishment of Palestinians in return seemed to have helped the Islamists gain popularity. In the 2006 legislative elections in the Palestinian territory, Hamas won 74 out of the 132 seats, while the Fatah party, the PLO's backbone, got only 45 seats. Hamas formed the government, but faced opposition from Israel and most international powers. Like Israel, the U.S. and several European countries have designated Hamas as a terrorist organisation. As tensions rose between Fatah and Hamas in the West Bank, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas dissolved the Hamas government and declared a state of emergency. This led to violent clashes between Fatah and Hamas. Fatah ousted Hamas from the West Bank and Hamas ousted the former from Gaza in 2007. Since then, Hamas is the government in Gaza. Following Hamas's capture of Gaza, Israel has imposed a blockade on the strip, which practically turned the terri-

tory of 2 million people into an open prison.

While Hamas never gave up its right to armed resistance, the organisation's outlook has evolved over the years, like the PLO's did in the pre-Oslo years. It still refuses to recognise Israel but has offered *hudna* (a lasting ceasefire) if Israel returned to the 1967 border. In 2017, it adopted a new charter from which the anti-Semitic remarks of the original charter were expunged. The new document stated Hamas is not seeking war with the Jewish people – only with Zionism that drives the occupation of Palestine. "Hamas advocates the liberation of all of Palestine but is ready to support the state on 1967 borders without recognising Israel or ceding any rights," it said back then.

Ideally, this should have opened a new beginning. But Israel continues to maintain the position that it won't hold talks with a "terrorist entity" that doesn't recog-

nise it, while at the same time deepening the occupation. Hamas's view is that unless Israel withdraws to the 1967 border, there won't be peace. It's a stalemate.

Hamas may not have the capability to push Israel back to the 1967 border or the deterrence to stop Israel from pounding Gaza. But it does two things with its resistance to the superior Israeli Army – one, it has emerged as a key force in Palestine's political landscape, which in the past had largely been driven by secular nationalism. A solution to the Israel-Palestine problem cannot be reached without taking Hamas into consideration. Two, it survives. Over the years, Hamas has lost most of its founding leaders, it is categorised as a terrorist outfit by the U.S. and others and it faces disproportionate Israeli attacks frequently. Every time it bombs Gaza, Israel vows to destroy Hamas's militant infrastructure. But Hamas survives, to fight another day.

**In Focus**

■ Hamas was established after the first intifada broke out in 1987. Muslim Brotherhood leaders in the occupied Palestine formed Hamas as an Islamist alternative to the secular PLO in the fight against occupation

■ In its original 1988 charter, Hamas rejected recognising Israel and called peace efforts a "waste of time and acts of absurdity"

■ But in the renewed 2017 charter, Hamas says it is not fighting Jews but the occupation of Palestine by Zionists, and has offered a lasting truce with Israel if it withdraws to the 1967 border

**HIMANTA BISWA SARMA**

# From student leader to CM

From regional identity politics to BJP, Sarma's career has evolved over the years

SANDEEP PHUKAN

**A** student leader, Congress Minister-turned-rebel and now the much-feted Chief Minister of BJP-ruled Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma, 52, has covered almost the entire spectrum of politics in Assam with reassuring ease.

The position of Chief Minister was the culmination of a political journey that started as a teenager; one in which he successfully moved from the politics of cultural and regional identity to the BJP's overarching idea of "one nation, one culture".

Known for his oratory from his early days, Mr. Sarma, like many from that generation, plunged into student politics by becoming a member of the powerful All Assam Students' Union (AASU), the student body that had catapulted student leaders like Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and the late Bhrigu Kumar Phukan as the State's Chief Minister and Home Minister.

The Assam Agitation from 1979 to 1985, also known as the anti-foreigners' movement, to detect and deport undocumented immigrants from Bangladesh not only saw the emergence of Assamese sub-nationalism but also a breed of student leaders whose politics was tied to the question of cultural identity and regional aspirations. Post the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, the AASU became the training ground of many



a regional leader, including Mr. Sarma and his predecessor as Chief Minister, Sarbananda Sonowal.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when student leaders dominated Assam's political landscape – under the shadows of Mr. Mahanta and Mr. Phukan, who had founded the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) – Mr. Sarma, or HBS as he is known in political circles, went on to head the students' union of the prestigious Cotton College (now upgraded as a university).

**Quick rise**  
His quick rise as the general secretary of the All Guwahati Students' Union, his organisational skills and the ability to mobilise youth attracted the attention of then Congress leader Hiteshwar Saikia. Mr. Saikia, who had become the Chief Minister in the middle of 1991, was looking for a young leader who could bring the youth – an influential voting segment that had been driven

away by the anti-Congressism of the Assam Agitation – back into the Congress fold.

While the Congress found a promising youth leader in HBS, his former mentors to the AASU were forced to sever ties with him. The bitter parting prompted the Congress to field him against Mr. Phukan from the Jalukbari constituency in the 1996 Assembly elections, a contest that he lost but it set the stage for his future politics. In 2001, as the Congress regained the State from the AGP, Mr. Sarma scored his first electoral victory from the Jalukbari constituency, a seat that has now given him five terms including his latest win. He not only endeared himself to Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi but soon became the main troubleshooter and a crisis manager for the Gogoi government.

Their relationship soured with the entry of Mr. Gogoi's son, Gaurav, into the political arena. As Gogoi senior

made it clear that his son would be his political heir, an ambitious HBS got impatient. His claim to the Chief Minister's post met with resistance from former Congress chief Rahul Gandhi. After unsuccessfully leading a rebellion to dislodge Mr. Gogoi, Mr. Sarma, along with supporters, joined the BJP in August 2015.

Mr. Sarma not only successfully weathered the storm but soon became the BJP's chief crisis manager, the force behind the Sonowal government and the master strategist who ensured that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was in power in all the north-eastern States.

If his work as the State's Health Minister in the previous government to contain the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic got noticed, his strident Hindutva position with regard to the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and strong support for the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that went against the Assam Accord endeared him to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

Much like the theories of disruptive innovation taught in business schools, Mr. Sarma's rise in politics too has been through disruptions in his political career of more than three decades. But his skills will be tested now as his government negotiates controversial laws such as the CAA that had met with massive protests on the ground.

**MOHAMED NASHEED**

# A man of many comebacks

Undeterred by an attempt on his life, former President vows to return stronger

MEERA SRINIVASAN

**I**t was past 11 p.m., on September 23, 2018. The banquet hall of the three-star hotel in central Colombo was buzzing with young men and women. They were restlessly following updates on a big screen showing live news from another island, not far away.

The chatter in Dhivehi was hard to follow, but the outcome they desired was clear. They wanted to see the common oppositional candidate from the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) win the crucial presidential election. Watching the developments intently, but calmly, was former President and exiled leader Mohamed Nasheed. He had played a critical role in that poll. His party colleague Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's decisive victory against incumbent Abdulla Yameen, widely regarded as an authoritarian leader, gave the Maldives another chance with democratising the Sunni Muslim nation that is home to over 500,000 people.

"Destiny has a habit of always choosing the right and the good. When history is on the march, you can't stop it. President Yameen has to go," he told *The Hindu* that night. In the international arena, Mr. Nasheed is best known as the Indian Ocean archipelago's first democratically elected (2008-2012) President, who was controversially ousted and convicted on terrorism charges that the Maldivian Supreme Court later deemed wrongfully quashed. He shot to global fame as a climate hero in 2009, when his government held the world's first underwater Cabinet meeting. In the realm of domestic politics, Mr. Nasheed, 53, is arguably the country's most charismatic politician, consistently speaking out against religious extremism and corruption.

A week after the MDP alliance's big election win in 2018, Mr. Nasheed landed in Male, ending three years of exile, as huge crowds thronged the streets to welcome him back. Barely three years since – during which time the ruling alliance won the parliamentary elections, and Mr. Nasheed was appointed Speaker – he was targeted in a deadly explosion in the capital 10 days ago. Mr. Nasheed survived, although with serious injuries, and is currently receiving treatment in Germany. The police arrested three suspects allegedly in

volved in the "terror attack" that they have linked to religious extremists. While observers have flagged religious extremists, corrupt individuals, and political rivals as forces hostile to the ex-President, the motivations or actors behind the May 6 attack remain unknown, with no one claiming it as yet.



**Challenging time**  
The assassination bid targeting Mr. Nasheed not only exposed security threats within the country, but also came at a politically challenging time for Mr. Solih who is confronted with mounting criticism and a relentless pandemic imperilling its economy. The local council election in April was a reality check – despite beating the opposition in total, the party lost its traditionally held mayoral seat in the capital. However, the party's problems did not stop Mr. Nasheed from constantly pressuring the go-

vernment to act on corruption allegations. The Speaker openly accused senior Cabinet Ministers of corruption, in an act that his critics saw as a deliberate effort to embarrass and discredit President Solih. Some party insiders sensed a deepening rift within the MDP.

The ex-President's political ambitions are no secret, as his pet demand for the Maldives to transition to a parliamentary system of governance shows. Soon after the local council election last month, Mr. Nasheed confronted President Solih on the subject, reportedly conveying his desire to lead the country as Prime Minister. President Solih, seen as a leader more amenable to the MDP's diverse alliance partners, maintains that the system of governance could be changed only by the citizens' will.

Meanwhile, the recent attack has put political debates on hold, and national security under the spotlight. Mr. Nasheed himself was shocked, according to his family. "We don't know who did this, but what we know is Nasheed is not safe here. Those who wanted to eliminate him will see this as a job unfinished," Ibrahim Nasheed, brother of the former President, told *The Hindu* from Male. But that is unlikely to deter Mr. Nasheed, who has vowed to return stronger. Ahead of his departure to Berlin, he told nurses treating him: "I have already planned my comeback speech".

A ND-NDE

# GST Council to convene on May 28

Centre, States likely to discuss inclusion of petroleum products, levies on critical COVID supplies

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI

The Goods and Services Tax Council will meet for the first time in more than seven-and-a-half months, on May 28, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced on Saturday, setting the stage for the Centre and States to take up several pending as well as pressing issues relating to the indirect tax amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from the possible inclusion of petroleum products under the GST regime to ease the tax burden that has pushed retail fuel prices to record levels, the Council is also expected to take up States' concerns on GST levies on critical COVID-19 supplies, including the 5% GST on vaccines.



**Déjà vu:** States might seek a discussion on the plans to meet compensation shortfalls that may arise this year. ■ K. PICHUMANI

The Council, which is expected to meet every quarter, had last met in early October. While States had been urging a meeting of the

Council over the past couple of months, the Centre had said it would be better to wait for the Assembly elections, including in large

**Compensation shortfalls**

States are also expected to seek a discussion on the plans for meeting the GST

compensation shortfalls that may arise this year too, as second-wave lockdowns dent economic activity afresh, as well as the estimated ₹63,000 crore due to them for last year's compensation.

After a fractious debate, the Centre had last year met ₹1.1 lakh crore of the compensation shortfall through special market borrowings that it lent to the States.

While GST collections for 2021-22 began with a record ₹1.41 lakh crore in April, most economists anticipate a moderation in revenue as more States impose curbs. "Fresh lockdowns have disrupted businesses again and this may result in lower tax collections in the coming months," Brickwork Ratings said in a note last week.

## Special GST refund drive till May 31

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI

The Revenue Department on Saturday announced a fortnight-long special drive to clear pending GST refund claims, citing the possible adverse impact on economic activity due to the restrictions in several States to curb the COVID-19 pandemic's second wave.

"It is urged that in these difficult times, all central tax officers should endeavour to make their best efforts and contribution in the fight against COVID-19, by liquidating the pending GST refund claims by 31.05.2021," GST Commissioner Sanjay Mangal wrote in a special communiqué to the department's field formations.

## Power usage rose 19% in first fortnight of May

Consumption rose to 51.7 billion units



mand, and with onset of summer and the productive pre-monsoon cycle of the Indian economy, an uptick is always expected," said Davinder Sandhu, Advisor Primum Partners.

"Both energy demand and supply have risen by 25-40% over March-May 2021, with thermal PLFs (plant load factor or capacity utilisation) rising to 75% and more, after many quarters. This is aided by the opening of the economy in Q1 (January-March 2021), with rising economic output as well as sharp uptick in exports," added Mr. Sandhu, who is also a former Advisor at the World Bank.

**'Second wave impact'**  
The second wave of lockdowns will certainly impact economic activity, and in turn, energy demand. The larger than usual increase in part is attributed to lower base, and as well as to the pent up demand being executed now, he added.

The power consumption in April grew almost 40% to 118.08 BU. Power consumption in April 2020 had dropped to 84.55 BU from 110.11 BU a year earlier, after most economic activity was halted following the imposition of the national COVID-19 lockdown in the last week of March 2020.

The power consumption had also declined in May 2020 to 102.08 BU, from 120.02 BU in May 2019.

Similarly, peak power demand met or the highest power supply in a day also slumped to 132.73 GW in April 2020 from 176.81 GW in the same month in 2019, reflecting the impact of the lockdown on activities.

The fewer economic activities also resulted in a fall of peak power demand in May 2020 to 166.22 GW from 182.53 GW in May 2019.

"Energy is derived de-

## Maharashtra waives RT-PCR for truckers entering State

Truck drivers will be screened for temperature, symptoms

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

MUMBAI

In a relief to road transporters, the Maharashtra government has done away with the mandatory RT-PCR test requirement for truck drivers in the State, industry body AIMTC said on Saturday.

The All India Motor Transport Congress, which is the top body of the transporters in the country, had called on the State government to waive such a condition.

The State government, in its revised guidelines issued on Saturday, said that the truck drivers "may be allowed to enter in the State



only after checking the temperature and any other symptoms as well as status of each person on Aarogya Setu".

"With persistent follow-ups at the highest level we are successful in getting revised guidelines regarding

**With persistent follow-ups we are successful in getting revised guidelines**

BAL MALKIT SINGH,  
AIMTC

## Chola Fin Holdings Q4 net ₹31.97 cr.

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

CHENNAI

Cholamandalam Financial Holdings Ltd. has reported a standalone profit of ₹31.97 crore for the quarter ended March 31.

The company had posted a profit of ₹25.36 crore in the year-earlier quarter.

For the year ended March 31, profit was ₹21.71 crore, against ₹83.33 crore.

Total income for the quarter grew to ₹50.74 crore, from ₹28.66 crore in the same quarter last fiscal.

Full-year profit was lower on account of lower dividend income and interest cost recognised on borrowing made for equity investment in a subsidiary, the firm said in a statement.

## Orpat Group to invest ₹125 cr. on expansion

Appliances maker sees rising demand

LALATENDU MISHRA

MUMBAI

Orpat Group is investing ₹125 crore to raise manufacturing capacity at its plant in Gujarat to meet growing demand for kitchen and home appliances both in the domestic and export markets.

The group, which operates under the Ajanta brand for wall clocks and Orpat for other products, plans to strengthen its sales network in Tier-3 and Tier-4 cities from where it draws 90% of its customers.

"In the last year we aggressively expanded our distributors' network and added 80 new distributors to the already existing 450 distributors," said Nevil Patel,



director, Orpat Group. "We are also looking at aggressively ramping up production to cater to the demand for the existing and new products," he added.

Mr. Patel said despite the setback from the second wave, demand would pick up in the second half. "We expect 25% growth in top line this year," he added.

## IN BRIEF



Hyundai extends free service, warranty period

NEW DELHI

Hyundai Motor India on Saturday said it has extended warranty and free service timelines by two months for its customers who are unable to avail services due to lockdowns. The initiative is in line with the automaker's support to customers across the country during these challenging times, the company said. PTI

Penna Cement files DRHP for ₹1,550-cr. IPO

NEW DELHI

Penna Cement has filed preliminary papers with SEBI to raise ₹1,550 crore through an initial share sale. The initial public offer (IPO) comprises fresh issue of equity shares worth ₹1,300 crore and an offer-for-sale of up to ₹250 crore by the promoter, according to the draft red herring prospectus. Proceeds from fresh issue will be used to pay debts of ₹550 crore. PTI

Jet Airways to hold AGM on June 8

NEW DELHI

The annual general meeting of Jet Airways, which suspended operations more than 2 years ago, will be held on June 8, according to a regulatory filing. The AGM will adopt the company's audited standalone financial statements for the financial year ended March 31, 2020, together with the reports of auditors. Appointment of statutory auditors will also be discussed. PTI

Punjab National Bank raises ₹1,800 cr. via QIP

NEW DELHI

State-owned Punjab National Bank on Saturday said it had raised ₹1,800 crore by selling 53 crore shares on a private placement basis to investors including LIC and Societe Generale. Eligible qualified institutional buyers (QIBs) were given the shares at an issue price of ₹33.75 per unit aggregating to ₹1,799.99 crore, the public sector lender said in a regulatory filing. PTI

## INTERVIEW | SANJAY JALONA

### 'Great Restructuring' is the new turning point: L&T Infotech

'Customers increasingly looking at digital interventions'

MINI TEJASWI

**Having bagged large deals in the last few quarters, L&T Infotech CEO & MD Sanjay Jalona says the nature of the deal pipeline is changing as customers are increasingly looking at digital interventions in a pandemic-hit marketplace that requires them to embrace 'restructuring'.**

**What is the current market reality?**

■ In the last 100 years, the world has witnessed three major economic turning points. The first one was the Great Depression of 1929, then came the Great Recession of 2007, and we believe what we are going through right now is the 'Great Restructuring'.

We call it the 'Great Restructuring' because every aspect of our life and work is going through a change. The way we interact, collaborate, learn, deliver and expect value is changed forever. It is going to have a profound impact on the future of work, workplace, and workforce. The 'Great Restructuring' is comprehensive, because no industry, no company, and no country is isolated. Everyone must adapt or cede their position.

**How are you positioned to explore this opportunity?**

■ Looking at the convergence of market trends and capabilities, we feel cloud and data products are two key areas that present huge opportunities for industry players.

Accordingly, we have created two separate units to cater to these opportunities and these units will be the critical growth engines for us in the next 3 to 5 years. Additionally, we see four themes emerging as top priorities of customers:



**Do you expect any systemic change around outsourcing under the Biden administration?**

■ Early indications are positive, and we believe the administration will take the necessary steps to ensure that American enterprises remain competitive. We will continue to work with governments in the U.S. and India and support measures that ensure healthy relations between the two nations.

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## TV PICKS

**Premier League:** SS Select 1 (SD & HD), 4.30 p.m., 6.30 p.m., 9 p.m. & 11.30 p.m.  
**FIH Pro League:** SS Select 2 (SD & HD), 9 p.m.  
**Serie A:** Sony Ten 2 (SD & HD), 4 p.m., 6 p.m., 9.30 p.m. & 12.15 a.m. (Monday)

## IN BRIEF



Ibrahimovic to miss Euro 2020 due to knee injury

STOCKHOLM Sweden's talismanic forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic will miss Euro 2020 due to a knee injury, the Swedish Football Association said on Saturday. "I have spoken to Zlatan Ibrahimovic who unfortunately has told me that his injury will stop his participation in the European Championship this summer," Sweden team coach Janne Andersson said in a statement. AFP

## Shubhankar lies tied 53rd

WISHAW (UK) Indian golfer Shubhankar Sharma was lying tied 53rd after an action-packed closing with birdies on 15th and 18th besides two bogeys in between in the third round of the Betfred British Masters here. The only Indian to make the cut among four participants, Sharma carded 1-under 71 in the third round of the tournament. England's Eddie Pepperell's bid to win the British Masters for a second time got a boost as he carried a one-stroke lead into the final round. PTI

## US triple jumper banned from Olympics

GENEVA American triple jumper Omar Craddock was banned for 20 months over missed doping tests and will miss the Tokyo Olympics and the 2022 world championships in Oregon. Track and field's Athletics Integrity Unit alleged the 2019 Pan American Games champion broke anti-doping rules with three violations of the whereabouts rule in a 12-month period. AP

## Divij-Sander duo loses in semifinals

HEILBRONN (GERMANY) Divij Sharan and Sander Arends were beaten 6-3, 6-3 by third seeds Nathaniel Lammons and Jackson Withrow in the semifinals of the €88,520 Challenger tennis tournament here. Divij and his Dutch partner collected 35 ATP points and €1840.

## Lifters to leave for Tashkent on May 18

## Y.B. SARANGI

Promising lifter Jeremy Lalrinnunga was relieved that the suspense surrounding international flight tickets was over and he could now take part in the World junior championships to be held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, from May 21 to 31.

After days of uncertainty, the Indian Weightlifting Federation (IWF) managed to get visas and flight tickets for two lifters – Jeremy (67kg) and Achinta Sheuli (73kg) – on Saturday.

The two will board the flight to Tashkent on May 18 morning, informed IWF secretary Sahdev Yadav.

Jeremy was delighted. "Finally the uncertainty is over and good to know that we are going," Jeremy told The Hindu.

Jeremy, who could not give his best in the Asian championships at the same venue last month due to knee pain, was eager to do better. "This is an important event prior to the Olympics. The knee pain is still there, I have to perform well while dealing with it," said Jeremy.

Coaches Pramod Sharma and Vijai Rohilla will accompany the lifters in the absence of chief coach Vijay Sharma, who is in the USA along with Mirabai Chanu.

## Nadal cruises into the final

Karolina Pliskova to take on Iga Swiatek for honours in the women's section

## ITALIAN OPEN

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
ROME

Nine-time champion Rafael Nadal advanced to the Italian Open final for the 12th time on Saturday with a 6-4, 6-4 win over American Reilly Opelka.

Playing his 500th clay-court match, Nadal staved off break points in the fourth game of the first set and did not look back as he made his 52nd Masters final.

"It's important for my confidence to be back in a final," said Nadal, who exited early in Monte Carlo and Madrid. "I did what I had to do today, it was not an easy or beautiful match to play. The work is done."

**Djokovic comes through**  
Earlier in the day, World No.1 Novak Djokovic survived a three-set battle with Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas over two days in their rain-delayed quarterfinals.

The defending champion, and five-time winner, won



On course: Karolina Pliskova is one match away from regaining the crown that she last won in 2019. ■ REUTERS

4-6, 7-5, 7-5 after 3hr 16min on court in the clash which had been suspended on Friday with the Serb trailing 6-4, 2-1. The 33-year-old next meets Italian Lorenzo Sonego who shocked Russian seventh seed Andrey Rublev 3-6, 6-4, 6-3.

Czech ninth seed and former World No. 1 Karolina

Pliskova beat Petra Martic 6-1, 3-6, 6-2 in the semifinal as she bids to reclaim the title she won in 2019 but lost last year after retiring injured while trailing Simona Halep in the final.

Pliskova will meet reigning French Open champion Iga Swiatek, who took out American teenager Coco Gauff 7-6(3), 6-3.

Gauff 7-6(3), 6-3.

**The results: Men: Semifinal:** Rafael Nadal bt Reilly Opelka 6-4, 6-4. **Quarterfinals:** Novak Djokovic bt Stefanos Tsitsipas 4-6, 7-5, 7-5; Lorenzo Sonego bt Andrey Rublev 3-6, 6-4, 6-3.

**Women: Semifinals:** Karolina Pliskova bt Petra Martic 6-1, 3-6, 6-2; Iga Swiatek bt Coco Gauff 7-6(3), 6-3.

## Athletes need a decision on Tokyo'

Federer says he is in two minds over competing due to lack of clarity

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
GENEVA

Roger Federer said on Friday that athletes need a firm decision on whether the Tokyo Olympics are going ahead, with the tennis star saying he was in two minds over the Games.

An Olympics singles gold medal is the only major honour missing from the Swiss great's collection – but the 39-year-old said he would understand if the Games were called off.

The pandemic-postponed 2020 Olympics are due to open on July 23.

"It's difficult," Federer told Switzerland's *Leman Bleu* television.

"We're not hearing much. That makes me think the Games will happen, even if I've heard that lots of people in Tokyo are against the Games."

"Honestly I don't know what to think," said Federer.

"I would love to play in the Olympics, win a medal for Switzerland, that would make me so proud.

"But if that doesn't happen due to the situation, I would be the first to understand. But I think what the athletes need is a decision: is it happening or isn't it?

"At the moment, we have the impression that it will. We know it's a fluid situation. And also you can also decide as an athlete if you want to go. If you feel there's a lot of resistance, maybe it's better not to go. I don't know."

**Federer vaccinated**  
Federer is playing in the Geneva Open tournament next week, his second event since coming back from more than a year off with knee

problems.

Rafael Nadal admitted on Tuesday that he had not yet decided whether he would participate in Tokyo, giving himself more time to decide according to "circumstances".

On Monday, Serena Wil-

liams said she was undecided about going to the Olympics, while Japanese stars Naomi Osaka and Kei Nishikori have both raised concerns.

Federer said he has been immunised with the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine.

"Only those who clear the COVID screening process

will travel. For that the Qatari authorities have agreed to issue visa on arrival in case the players are unable to get the necessary clearance before their departure," said a senior AIFT official.

The team will travel to

## Qatar waives off quarantine period

India gets time to prepare for qualifier

## FOOTBALL

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
KOLKATA

The Qatar government has waived off the quarantine period for the Indian football team, thereby giving it a period of roughly two weeks to train ahead of the World Cup / Asian Cup qualifying match scheduled on June 3 in Doha.

After receiving the necessary clearance from the host nation, the All India Football Federation (AIFT) has asked the squad selected by national coach Igor Stimac to assemble in Delhi and undergo a process of COVID-19 testing and screening before taking the flight to Doha by May 20.

"Only those who clear the COVID screening process

will travel. For that the Qatari authorities have agreed to issue visa on arrival in case the players are unable to get the necessary clearance before their departure," said a senior AIFT official.

The team will travel to

Qatar by a special flight from Delhi before restarting their qualification campaign after almost 18 months. India is scheduled to play its remaining three matches against Qatar (June 3), Bangladesh (June 7) and Afghanistan (June 19).

Karnataka's Krii Ajay Tyagi has been named in the squad for the boys' event to be held from June 7 to 12.

## Indian tennis teams for Asia-Oceania jr. meet

SPORTS BUREAU

The selection committee of the All India Tennis Association (AITA) has chosen Samiksha Dabas, Riya Sachdeva and Raja Sarvagnya Kilaru to represent the country in the Asia-Oceania World junior under-14 girls' tennis championship to be played at Nur Sultan, Kazakhstan, from June 14 to 19.

Karnataka's Krii Ajay Tyagi has been named in the squad for the boys' event to be held from June 7 to 12.

**The team:**

**Boys:** Krii Ajay Tyagi, R.S. Rethin Pranav and Manas Manoj Dhame. Reserve: Tejas Ahuja. **Captain:** Sajid Lodi.

**Girls:** Samiksha Dabas, Riya Sachdeva, Raja Sarvagnya Kilaru. **Reserve:** Thaniya Saran Gogulamanda. **Captain:** Shalini Thakur Chawla.

## Competitions are a must: Vimal

## BADMINTON

STAN RAYAN  
KOCHI



U. Vimal Kumar. ■ FILE PHOTO

Despite the long lockdown and many restrictions, young badminton star Pavithra Naveen managed to train the whole of last year, putting in nearly three sessions every day. She was entering a new age-group and her coach Antony K. Jacob convinced her to work harder.

"But I didn't play a single tournament for a whole year. It was my first under-17 year and I was really fit, so it was very disappointing," said the 16-year-old, the Kerala women's singles champion, in a chat with *The Hindu*.

**Small goals**  
"During tournaments, we can focus more since we have a target. Nowadays, we are practising without goals as there are no tournaments. It was a bit hard for me be-

cause I kept setting small goals for myself frequently."

Pavithra is perhaps luckier than many others in the country as many children could not even train and had only online sessions during the lockdown.

That could be really shattering for the juniors, feels former international U. Vilma Kumar.

**Youngsters suffering**  
The youngsters are suffering. Just like education, sport has been completely destroyed in the last one-

and-a-half years because of COVID-19," the former national coach said from Bengaluru.

"Definitely, more than the established people, this has been a very hard time for youngsters. COVID-19 has destroyed them, basically it destroys your soul."

So, competitions are a must, feels Vimal.

"They have to compete, whatever one may say, sportspersons need competitions. The earlier they start, at whatever level, it's good for them," said the former national champion.

"I'm talking about the smaller level, conduct a small event at the district level, whether it is badminton or tennis, it's not for ranking or anything, it is just to keep the activities on."

"That's why some of the other top nations always have their domestic activities. Unfortunately, we are not able to do that in our country."

"CA open to reinvestigating Sandpaper Gate'

## CA open to reinvestigating Sandpaper Gate'

ANI  
MELBOURNE

Cricket Australia (CA), on Saturday, said it is open to reinvestigating the Sandpaper Gate if there is anyone who has more knowledge about the matter.

This announcement came after opening batsman Cameron Bancroft hinted that there had to be wider knowledge about ball-tampering during the 'Sandpaper Gate' incident in 2018 in the Cape Town Test between Australia and South Africa than just the trio of Steve Smith, David Warner and the opener himself.

"CA has maintained all along that if anyone is in possession of new information in regards to the Cape Town Test of 2018, they should come forward and present it. The investigation conducted at the time was detailed and comprehensive. Since then, no one has

presented new information to CA that casts doubt on the investigation's findings," ESPNcricinfo quoted CA spokesperson as saying.

## Caught on camera

In March 2018, Bancroft was caught on camera trying to change the condition of the ball using sandpaper in a Test match against South Africa in Cape Town. The incident later went on to be labelled as the 'Sandpaper Gate'.

"Whilst not selecting Veda for the upcoming series may be justified from their point of view, what angers me the most is that as a contracted player she has not received any communication from BCCI, just to even check how she is coping," the ICC Hall of Famer said in a note on her Twitter handle.

"A true association should deeply care about the players that play the game... not focus solely on just the game at any cost. So disappointed."

Stalekar also felt the time has come for a player's

## Sthalekar 'disappointed' with BCCI on Veda

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
NEW DELHI

Former Australian women's team captain Lisa Stalekar is 'disappointed' the BCCI neither checked on Veda Krishnamurthy after the twin tragedies in her family nor communicated to the bereaved India cricketer its decision to not consider her for the upcoming tour of England.

"Whilst not selecting Veda for the upcoming series may be justified from their point of view, what angers me the most is that as a contracted player she has not received any communication from BCCI, just to even check how she is coping," the ICC Hall of Famer said in a note on her Twitter handle.

"A true association should deeply care about the players that play the game... not focus solely on just the game at any cost. So disappointed."

Stalekar also felt the time has come for a player's

association for the Indian women's team.

"As a past player the ACA (Australian Cricketers' Association) have reached out daily to see how we are and provided all kinds of services. If there was a need for a player association in India surely it is now." The 41-year-old Stalekar, now a commentator, said being looked after has become more important at the moment.

England's IPL players unsure for Kiwi Tests'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
LONDON

England is unlikely to rush its Indian Premier League players straight from quarantine to the Test squad against New Zealand as they would be lacking red-ball practice, according to reports.

This will mean that the likes of Jos Buttler, Jonny Bairstow, Chris Woakes, Sam Curran and Moeen Ali, who are serving a mandatory 10-day quarantine after return-

ing from the currently-suspended IPL, are likely to miss the two Tests against the Kiwis, starting on June 2.

Their isolation period expires at the weekend, leaving little more than two weeks before the first Test at Lord's.

"The timeline is considered too tight for the (IPL) returning players, meaning calls up are expected for the likes of Ollie Robinson,