

OTHER STORIES

TONSURED HAIR
SOLD ON E-AUCTION
PLATFORM

From Page 1

According to temple officials, all its stock of tonsured hair was being sold on the e-auction platform to international bidders every three months.

The TTD hands over the stock after deducting prescribed GST. Thereafter TTD does not intervene in issues like whether the bidder possesses international export permits or where they dispose of their stock, temple officials said adding that they will blacklist the companies if they are found guilty after due process.

THUNDERSTORM
LIKELY IN NORTH
AP, YANAMDC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, MARCH 30

A cyclonic circulation is lying over southeast Bay of Bengal and adjoining South Andaman Sea, extending up to 4.5 km above mean sea level. Under its influence, a low pressure area is likely to form over these areas during the next 24 hours.

It is likely to become more marked over North Andaman Sea and neighbourhood during subsequent 24 hours, a report from Indian Meteorological Department (IMD), Amaravati, said on Tuesday.

Under its influence, thunderstorms, along with lightning, are likely to occur at isolated places over north coastal Andhra Pradesh and Yanam on April 2 and April 3.

GUV RELEASES
MAGAZINE
'SAGARIKA'DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 30

Andhra Pradesh Governor Biswabhusan Harichandan released the first official Hindi magazine 'Sagarika' brought out by the Regional Passport Office, Visakhapatnam at Raj Bhavan on Tuesday.

Visakhapatnam regional passport officer DSS Srinivasa Rao informed the Governor that they were receiving nearly 3,000 passport applications per day at their offices located in Visakhapatnam, Vijayawada, Tirupati and at major post offices with passport services. He said that soon after receiving the application for issue of a passport, they would process it and issue the passport within four days subject to police verification.

The Governor also released the catalogue brought out by the Andhra Pradesh Photography Akademi to commemorate the centenary year of the nation's tri color designed by the Pingali Venkaiah.

Earlier, the Governor facilitated junk artist P. Srinivas as he won appreciation from Prime Minister Narendra Modi during one his 'Mann Ki Baat' programmes.

LOKESH AGAINST
G.O. OVER
SARPANCHESDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 30

Telugu Desam national general secretary and MLC Nara Lokesh on Tuesday strongly objected to G.O. No. 2 issued by Jagan Mohan Reddy government saying it usurps powers of elected sarpanches and reduces them to mere figureheads in local self-government.

"The G.O. is antithetical and inconsistent with 73rd Amendment of Constitution that vests sarpanches with special rights and responsibilities. Jagan Reddy dictatorial action has consigned Mahatma Gandhi's noble dream of Gram Swaraj to dustbin," Lokesh remarked.

He asked how YSRC government could stop sarpanches from controlling grama secretariats. This could become a hurdle in path of sarpanches to provide good governance and welfare within local bodies. He claimed that such an act of the government is also against Article 243G of the Constitution.

Lokesh accused ruling YSRC leaders of trying to rule panchayats by appointing party activists as grama volunteers and grama secretariat staff.

He alleged that ever since he became Chief Minister, Jagan Mohan Reddy has been making non-stop assaults on all democratic and constitutional institutions from village to state level.

New start



Newly elected State Election Commissioner Nilam Sawhney meets Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy at the camp office near Tadepalli on Tuesday.

Naidu ruined AP, says
minister Peddireddy

He alleges TD chief wasted money on unproductive works

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, MARCH 30

Panchayat raj minister Peddireddy Ramachandra Reddy alleged that Telugu Desam chief Nara Chandrababu Naidu had ruined the state by spending huge amounts of money on unproductive works by borrowing from financial institutions.

The minister along with TTD Chairman Y.V. Subba Reddy, Deputy Chief Minister Narayana Swamy, minister Kanna Babu, MLAs Biyyapu Madhusudhan Reddy, Dwarakanath Reddy and party's Tirupati MP candidate Dr Gurumoorthy campaigned at Srikalahasti on Tuesday. Addressing the public gathering, the minister claimed that it was the YSRC government which changed the spending pattern and utilising the funds on productive works like developing the infrastructure in schools, colleges, hospitals and other public sectors.

He said that the state government under the leadership of Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has been redeveloping all schools and hospitals in the state and also building as many as 16 government medical colleges – happening for the first time in the history.

Maintaining that the YSRC have made a clean sweep in the panchayat raj and municipal elections, the minister said that the AP people have supported the YSRC's welfare agenda and elected their candidates as the Jagan Mohan Reddy-led state government had fulfilled over 95 per cent of its poll promises. He exuded confidence that party candidate Dr Gurumoorthy will win the byelection with over 4 lakh votes of majority.

"The winning mantra is Jagan Mohan Reddy's welfare programmes, which will help us retain the Tirupati LS seat with a thumping majority. In fact, we did not find any competitor in this bypoll. We have to work hard to take the welfare programmes into public and win their hearts.

CPI trying to save TD, says
BJP leader NarasimhaDC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, MARCH 30

Taking a jibe at Dr M. Gurumoorthy, the YSRC candidate contesting the Tirupati Lok Sabha byelection, BJP MP G.V.L. Narasimha Rao said that the doctor-turned-politician was rewarded with the ticket for his services to AP Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy.

"There are many nominated posts to give those who did personal service. The MP ticket was given to a person who has personally served CM Jagan. Now, the competition in Tirupati is between 'Jagan Seva and Janam Seva,' he said while appealing to the public to think about which to choose.

'WINNING MARGIN
SHOULD BE A
LESSON TO OPPN'DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, MARCH 30

Minister for water resources Dr P. Anil Kumar Yadav has called upon his partymen to put all their efforts to secure highest majority to YSR Congress nominee for Tirupati Lok Sabha bypoll for Dr Gurumoorthy.

Addressing the party cadre in Gudur on Tuesday, he said that the winning margin should be a lesson to the opposition parties while underlining the need for an intensive campaign to achieve the target.

Dr Anil Kumar discussed strategies and plan of action with party leaders for an effective campaign to deal with the opposition.

Gudur legislator Dr V. Varaprasad Rao, Raptadu MLA T. Prakash Reddy, Kovur MLA N. Prasanna Kumar Reddy, party senior leaders N. Ramkumar Reddy and others were present.

● He said the TD is on the verge of political extinction which is why CPI secretary Narayana had been trying to save Naidu and his party.

Addressing a press conference here on Tuesday, the BJP MP also alleged that there was a secret alliance between the Telugu Desam and the CPI.

He said the TD is on the verge of political extinction which is why CPI secretary Narayana had been trying to save Naidu and his party.

Narasimha Rao asked how the YSRC and the TD could say that the BJP hadn't done anything for the state despite giving it first priority and pushing all developmental pro-

grammes to the state.

"The BJP-led Centre has sanctioned many higher education institutions to Tirupati, including the IIT and IISER. AP is the only state to get five industrial nodes - three are in Tirupati parliamentary segment," he said while adding a point about the redevelopment of Tirupati and Nellore railway stations into smart stations.

He also promised that the Tirupati parliamentary region would get more Central funds under the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation and Smart Cities (AMRUT). He appealed to the public to choose the BJP candidate as their MP for the development of this region.

Lakshmi seeks votes
on her past worksDC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, MARCH 30

Panabaka Lakshmi, Telugu Desam (TD) nominee, said that the Tirupati Lok Sabha seat by-election was a battle against the Modi government and not a contest between the YSRC and the Telugu Desam.

While addressing the public during the election campaign in different parts of Venkatagiri constituency on Tuesday, she called upon the people to remember her good work in the past and back her. She underlined the need to fight against the spiralling prices of every commodity, for which the Centre was responsible.

The former Union minister said she would be the voice of the people in the Lok Sabha if she was elected. Lakshmi interacted with some farmers during her campaign when she noticed them loading rice bags into a vehicle on the road between Venkatagiri and Kaluvoy.

The farmers told Lakshmi that they were not getting a minimum support price (MSP) for their produce and urged her to look into their problems.

Speaking on the occasion, former irrigation minister and TD senior leader Devineni Umamaheswar Rao took a dig at the state government and the Centre for lack of development in Andhra Pradesh.

He highlighted the shortcomings of the YSR Congress government. Parchuru MLA Eluru Sambasiva Rao, Venkatagiri TD incharge Kurugondla Ramakrishna, Udayagiri former legislator Kambam Vijayarami Reddy were present.

An elaborate temple structure in Suryapet built during the Kakatiya period and renovated during the Vijayanagara period is in utter neglect. Based on information received from the local community in Suryapet, Dr E. Sivanagireddy, archaeologist and CEO, The Cultural Centre, visited the temple on Monday and examined it thoroughly.

Covid crisis reason for
rise in AP's debts: YSRCDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 30

The ruling YSR Congress has said the Covid-19 crisis was the main reason for the sharp rise in the debts of Andhra Pradesh.

Refuting the allegations from Telugu Desam that the YSRC government has created a new record in the state's debts climb, the ruling party leaders said that under the TD government's rule from 2014 to 2019, the debts rose by a whopping 132.31 per cent, which was the highest-ever record.

During the period, the central government was forced to borrow ₹18,48,655 crore in 2020-21, the highest ever. The state and central exchequers were burdened beyond all projections due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

"Economic growth in the country was dismal even before the pandemic. GDP growth at fixed prices was limited to 4.18 per cent in 2019-20, while the gross tax revenue collections contracted by 3.39 per cent," the YSRC leaders noted.

As a consequence, the real GDP during the first quarter of this financial year contracted by 23.9 per cent. In addition to the aforementioned issues, Andhra Pradesh had to deal with a few exclusive woes arising out of the "unjust" manner in which the state bifurcation took place in 2014, and due to the subsequent failure at top levels to implement all the clauses listed in the AP reorganisation act, they claimed.

Minister for civil supplies Kodali

Venkateswara Rao alias Nani and other YSRC leaders said Chandrababu Naidu had borrowed Rs 3.6 lakh crore during his tenure as first CM of new AP, incurred wasteful expenditure and "looted the exchequer the most."

Chief minister Jagan Mohan Reddy, they said, has borrowed ₹90,000 crore and put this to proper use. The funds were used for the needy weaker sections in times of pandemic and the state did not withhold any welfare activity. Such activities were carried out in a transparent manner.

Minister Nani said that during Naidu's rule from 2014 to 2019, the central government's debt ratio increased by 49.92 per cent, while AP's rose phenomenally by 132.31 per cent.

KAKANI SLAMS
ATCHANNAIDU
FOR TARGETING
VOLUNTEERSDC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, MARCH 30

Assembly Privileges Committee Chairman and Sarveyapalli legislator Kakani Govardhan Reddy came down heavily against TD State president Atchannaidu for trying to project village volunteers as culprits.

During a press conference in Nellore on Tuesday, he pointed to Atchannaidu's announcement that they would offer ₹10,000 to those giving information on irregularities being committed by the volunteers.

He said that they are focusing on bagging a huge majority for their nominee Dr Gurumoorthy in the by-poll to Tirupati Lok Sabha seat while TDP is struggling to protect its identity.

Govardhan Reddy said that people are vexed with the Chandrababu Naidu who opted for the Special Package instead of a Special Status to Andhra Pradesh.

YSRC refutes TD
charges on SCSDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 30

The YSRC claimed that it was continuing its efforts to get Special Category Status (SCS) in all possible ways, refuting allegations of the Telugu Desam and other Opposition parties that the ruling party was flinching.

YSRC MLA Ambati Rambabu, the party's spokesperson, said that TD president Chandrababu Naidu had deceived the people of AP by hypothecating SCS for political adjustments when he was in power, and hence he had no right to talk about special status. He claimed that the Telugu Desam would disappear.

Addressing a press meet here on Tuesday, Rambabu said that Naidu also did not have the right to talk about special status as he had "betrayed and deceived" Andhraites by agreeing to a special package instead of special status. He said that Naidu turned the

Amaravati capital city project and the the Polavaram project construction into sources of personal income and had looted lakhs of crores of rupees.

Rambabu claimed that the public had the utmost faith in Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, which is why they had had voted for the YSRC in the recent local body elections. He said that YSRC would win the Tirupati bypoll with a mammoth majority. There would be no candidates for the TD in the coming elections, as the cadre had lost faith in Naidu.

Rambabu said Naidu has turned the TD formation day into a party closure day, destroying the work of party founder N.T. Rama Rao.

He said that Naidu had joined the TD after facing a defeat while in the Congress, backstabbed his own father-in-law, taken over the party and led it to its defeat. He said that there is no future for the TD under his leadership.

Ancient Buddhist artefacts
found in Guntur districtDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 30

Buddhist remains belonging to 1st Century BC have surfaced while digging the foundation for Bhavagni Asram at Vaikunthapuram in Tulluru mandal of Guntur district.

Seeing the artefacts, asram people contacted Dr E. Sivanagi Reddy, Buddhist archaeologist and CEO, Cultural Centre of Vijayawada and Amaravati, who has examined the finds.

Since then, Sivanagi Reddy has found a conical cup of polished ware inserted into a redware stand of Iron Age (1000 BC), pit shreds of redware, terracotta tiles that once covered roofs of Buddhist viharas, a well polished black granite muller, and a broken chatra (parasol) that enshrined a stupa of Satavahana period.

The Buddhists archaeologist says a surprise discovery is a Brahmi inscription, which men-



Items discovered at Vaikunthapuram in Tulluru mandal of Guntur district.

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Muniratnam Reddy, Director, Epigraphy Branch, Archaeological Survey of India, has confirmed that the script in Prakrit language belongs to 1st Century BC.

Dr Sivanagi Reddy said Bhavagni Asram authorities have told him that the Buddhist finds will be displayed by them in their proposed museum at Vyasabagavan Temple now under construction. He stated that Buddhist remains in Vaikunthapuram had originally been reported by then British archaeologists 125 years ago.

UTTER | NEGLECT

Govt urged to restore lost glory of the ancient monument

650-year-old temple in shambles

D. SIVA RAMI REDDI | DC
MAHABUBNAGAR, MARCH 30

An elaborate temple structure in Suryapet built during the Kakatiya period and renovated during the Vijayanagara period is in utter neglect.

Based on information received from the local community in Suryapet, Dr E. Sivanagireddy, archaeologist and CEO, The Cultural Centre, visited the temple on Monday and examined it thoroughly.

ly. He said that the temple consists of Garbhagriha, arthamandapa, mahamandapa and a rangamandapa supported by 48 pillars and have a pillared cloister alariund (pradakshinapatha) and representing the Kakatiya and post Kakatiya temple architecture. It measures 50x100 ft in width and length whose superstructure on the sanctum sanctorum is missing.

He added that the entablature (eve slabs) all around, a span of the pil-

lared mandap on the north-west corner and the wall on the rear side are seen fallen due to lack of maintenance. Even the inside and the surroundings of the heritage structure is littered with debris and spooling the aesthetics. Dr Sivanagireddy appealed to the Department of Heritage, Telangana, and the district administration to look into the matter and restore the lost glory of the monument and to preserve it for posterity.



It represented the Kakatiya and post Kakatiya style of temple architecture.

SHORT TAKES

TTD REDUCES
DARSHAN QUOTA
DUE TO COVID-19DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, MARCH 30

With Covid-19 cases rising across the country, the TTD has reduced the number of Sarva Darshan tokens, being issued at Tirupati, from 22,000 to 15,000.

TTD additional EO A.V. Dharma Reddy, speaking to the media at Annamayya Bhavan in Tirumala on Tuesday, said that the board was mulling to reduce the number of online special darshan tickets (₹300) depending on the Covid-19 situation. He said that the TTD is reviewing its earlier decision to revive the Arjitha Sevams from April 14 in view of the spike in Covid-19 cases.

He said, the TTD will allow only two persons to stay in one room at Tirumala and devotees will be allowed at Alipiri check point only by 1 pm, on the day before their darshan slot. Those who are trekking Alipiri and Srivari Mettu will be allowed only at 9 am. He said the devotees will be allowed to enter the Vaikuntam queue complex only half an hour before their allotted darshan timing.

He appealed to the devotees coming for darshan to follow the guidelines and cooperate with the TTD. He asked devotees to wear masks compulsorily at Vaikuntam queue complex, Srivari temple, Anna Prasad Bhavan, Kalyanakatta and at all crowded spots. He told devotees to bring their own masks and sanitisers and observe physical distancing. All vehicles will be subject to sanitisation at the Alipiri toll gate and the devotees have to undergo thermal scanning. He also advised the devotees who are suffering with fever, cold and cough not to visit Tirumala.

2 GIRLS RESCUED
FROM BEING
MADE JOGINISDC CORRESPONDENT
ANANTAPUR, MARCH 30

In a major breakthrough, officials of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), along with police, rescued two minor girls from being made joginis in Rayadurgam area of Anantapur district on Tuesday. Of the two, one girl is studying in class VIII and the other is aged just six years.

Jogini or basavini is a medieval custom of offering young girls to serve in temples of local gods. These girls are later forced into becoming prostitutes of the village. This custom has managed to survive in certain parts of Rayadurgam and Kalyanadurgam areas of Anantapur district along the Karnataka border.

ICDS officials received information from villagers of Kalahal in Bommanhal mandal that a mother, herself a jogini, was trying to turn her daughter, studying in Class VIII, a jogini like her by following traditional customs at the local temple premises. Following this, the officials and police rushed to the village and rescued the girl. The mother, however, resisted saying she was only abiding by local religious customs of submitting her daughter to the village god as a jogini.

Post rescue, the girl wished to continue her studies and requested authorities to help her study in a hostel.

Likewise, another mother tried to convert her six-year-old daughter as jogini at Somulapuram village in D. Hirehal mandal. She too was rescued.

Thieves from TN are
behind temple heist

Officials hiding actual loss, not revealing stock: Devotees

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, MARCH 30

Professional thieves from Tamil Nadu are behind the theft in Polamamba temple of Visakhapatnam. The stolen gold and silver jewels of the Goddess have been melted into blocks and sold, police sources disclosed.

The gang of four that committed the theft includes a man in his 50s, his two sons and a friend. Police have taken them to Vijayawada for recovery of valuables and the process may take another two days. The ornaments have, however, been melted, sources confirmed.

CID sleuths are expected to interrogate the gang members once they are brought back to Vizag. They want to find their possible link with decapitation of Lord Ram idol in Ramaswamy temple of Vizianagaram district.

Meanwhile, members of Peda Waltair Grama

5 temple thieves arrested

DC CORRESPONDENT
KURNOOL, MARCH 30

Kurnool police arrested five persons who were involved in six temple thefts at various police stations limits in the district and recovered stolen cash ₹1,01,248 and other material from them.

All the accused were produced before the media in the presence of district SP K.

Seva Sangham, which organises the annual festival of the Goddess, have accused temple officials of hiding the actual loss of gold, silver and cash.

Sangham member and a senior leader of Telugu Desam Pothana Reddy told *Deccan Chronicle* on Tuesday that one hundi, which thieves could not open, had ₹4.5 lakh in cash. Officials are saying only ₹20,000 had been

fakeerappa on Tuesday. According to the SP, Veldurthi police took custody of three persons including Yerukali Subbarayudu, Duvvuru village in YSR Kadapa district, Nagalur Adinarayana and Nagalur Janayya, both were native of Madhavaram village in Vontimitta mandal of YSR Kadapa district. The three along with other three persons stole ₹4,000

of Hundi amount after breaking the locks in three temples in Veldurthi town on March 1.

The police booked cases in this issue as per complaints given by the temple priest and solved the case based on footages of CC cameras. The Veldurthi police recovered the stolen amount ₹4,000 along with one hunting knife from them.

taken from other hundi that thieves could open. Being a famous temple, cash collections would have been in lakhs, Pothana maintained.

Similarly, he said officials say 35 tolas of gold ornaments including Goddess crown, are missing. But these could be much more.

“Officials are not showing us the stock register, which lists the cash collected on a monthly basis

as well as total quantity of gold and silver ornaments. We presume they are hiding the actual loss. The recovery from thieves might reveal actual loss of gold and cash,” Pothana Reddy remarked.

The TD leader says the temple is also known for corruption. Three staff members, who had been booked by ACB, are still continuing to work in the temple, he added.

TWO DIE AS VEHICLE PLUNGES
INTO WELL IN SRIKAKULAMDC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, MARCH 30

The driver and the cleaner of a van died when it plunged into a road-side well near Pakivalasa village under Kotabommali mandal in Srikakulam district on Tuesday.

The police said that the driver of the vehicle lost control due to over-speeding and drowsiness, resulting in the vehicle hitting the road-divider and plunging into the well. The empty vehicle was coming from Odisha

AP RECORDS 993
COVID-19 CASES,
3 DEATHSDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 30

Andhra Pradesh registered 993 fresh Covid-19 cases and three deaths in the last 24 hours.

The state health authorities reported on Tuesday that out of 30,851 samples tested, 993 persons were infected with Covid-19. Out of a total number of 1,50,52,215 samples tested so far in the state, 9,00,805 persons were infected with the virus and of them, 8,86,978 were recovered while 6,614 are still active with the virus.

Among the daily cases, Guntur district reported the highest at 198, followed by 179 in Chittoor, 176 in Krishna, 169 in Visakhapatnam, 49 in Anantapur, 45 in Srikakulam, 37 in Kurnool, 35 in Nellore, 30 in Prakasam, 29 in East Godavari, 18 in Kadapa, 16 in Vizianagaram and 12 in West Godavari.

Among the daily Covid-19 deaths, three were reported, with one each at Guntur, Krishna and Visakhapatnam districts. Chittoor topped the state for having the highest number of cumulative active cases.

Grandeur marks
chariot festival at
Ranganatha shrineDC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, MARCH 30

Grandeur and devotional fervour marked the Chariot festival held as part of Brahmotsavams at the ancient Sri Ranganatha Swamy temple in Nellore on Tuesday.

Thousands of devotees participated in the holy event which was flagged off by water resources minister Dr Anil Kumar Yadav.

Chanting “Ranga Ranga Sri Ranga Ranga”, the huge gathering came together to pull the colourfully decorated chariot with the idols of the Lord Sri Ranganatha Swamy and his consorts Sri Devi and Bhudevi mounted on it.

Speaking on the occasion Dr Anil Kumar said he presented silk clothes to the presiding deity after performing puja.

He said that he appealed to the Lord to keep the people and the Chief Minister happy. He urged the people



Anil Kumar Yadav

to follow safety precautions pertaining to Covid-19 and wear masks without fail.

Former Deputy Mayor Mukkula Dwarakanath, Chairman of Vijaya Dairy Kondreddi Ranga Reddy, YSR Congress leaders P. Roopkumar Yadav, Konidala Sudheer and Nune Mallikarjun Yadav were present among others.

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I, KARNATI VENKATA SUBBAMMA, W/o. MALLELA GURUVI REDDY, House No. 25-2-1290, Near Seetharama Temple, Police Colony, AK Nagar, NELLORE CITY - 524 004 POST & MANDAL, SPNR NELLORE District, Andhra Pradesh State, India.

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Vaccination is way to
prevent Covid: CMDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 30

Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has advised officials to concentrate on Covid-19 vaccination to contain the pandemic's spread and stressed that vaccination is the best method to cope with the present situation.

The Chief Minister conducted reviews on various issues with district collectors and SPs on Tuesday.

Reddy stressed on the need for completion of village clinic constructions on a war footing. These clinics would play a crucial role in facing up to the pandemic's threat. Only six days are left for completion of the MPTC/ZPTC election process, after which officials should fully concentrate on the vaccination drive.

The CM discussed with collectors and SPs on a wide ranging of issues during the Spandana video conference.

Matters like village secretariats, RBKS, YSR

health clinics, house site pattas in 90 days, Nadu-Nedu, Cheyutha Spandana, house site pattas for middle class people at affordable prices, the MGNREGA works and the schemes to be implemented in April and May were discussed.

He said focus will be laid on vaccination in urban areas from April 1. Village and ward secretariats should be considered as a single unit for vaccination.

The CM announced the welfare activities to be implemented in April and May. Volunteers would be felicitated on April 13 and Jagananna Vidya Deevena will be held on April 16. The interest-free YSR loans scheme for farmers would be implemented from April 20 and the interest-free YSR loans scheme for DWACRA women would be implemented from April 23.

The Jagananna Vasati Devena would be implemented on April 28 and the money will be credited to accounts.

Complete pending 6%
house site pattas: JaganDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 30

Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has said 94 per cent of distribution of house site pattas has been completed and the remaining 1,69,588 pattas should be distributed soon.

“Complete the distribution of around 47,000 pattas under TIDCO,” he told officials at a meeting he held on the housing scheme on Tuesday.

During reviews on various departments with the district collectors and SPs, the chief minister said every eligible beneficiary should receive house site and officials must take steps for complete verification of the pending applications.

The CM advised officials to complete land acquisition for providing house sites to new applicants. Reason should be mentioned as and when an application for house site is rejected, he told officials, and

stressed that the rejected applicants can reapply with valid proof. Those applications should be re-verified.

Reddy said the state government is building 15.6 lakh houses in 8,682 colonies in the first phase of the Navarathalu- Pedalandariki Illu scheme.

For drinking water, borewells should be set up in such colonies and electricity should be made available in the layouts for construction of houses.

The CM said the construction works would start on April 15 and preparatory works like mapping, geo-tagging, registration of beneficiaries in the AP Housing Corporation and issuing of job cards under MGN-REGA should be completed by April 10.

He said district and division level officers should be appointed as nodal officers to every municipality and mandal for monitoring the progress of the housing

scheme. A model house should be built in every layout.

Jagan Mohan Reddy said the model house will give an idea on the problems in construction and expenditure. The construction of model houses should be completed by April 15. The CM said the services of engineering assistants, digital assistants and welfare assistants can be used for the housing scheme. “Be prepared to provide cement, steel, sand, metal and bricks as per the option chosen by the beneficiaries,” he told officials.

He advised officials to acquire 100 to 150 acres of land to provide house sites to the middle-class segment of the population at affordable prices with clean titles on a non-profit basis. “Ensure there are CC roads, footpaths, underground drainage, parks, open-air gym, walking tracks, electricity lines, greenery, smart bus stops in the layouts.”

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SHORT TAKES

MANIPUR GOVT RETRACTS ORDER ON REFUGEES

MANOJ ANAND | DC
GUWAHATI, MARCH 30

In what has led to serious embarrassment for the Manipur government, it has been compelled to withdraw an administrative order barring district administrations and civil society organisations from opening shelters or providing food to refugees from Myanmar who may have crossed the border following the ongoing military action against the agitating civil society protesters against the coup.

The state home department, in an order signed by Gyan Prakash on March 26, had stated that only medical attention could be provided in case of “grievous injuries” on “humanitarian considerations”. The notice was addressed to the deputy commissioners of the border districts — Chandel, Tengnoupal, Kamjong, Ukhrul and Churachandpur — adjoining the international border with Myanmar.

NANDED: 18 ARRESTED FOR ATTACK ON COPS

BHAGWAN PARAB | DC
MUMBAI, MARCH 30

The police have arrested 18 people for the violence and an attack on policemen at Nanded. They have also registered a case against 410 people for attempting to take out a Holi Mohalla procession outside Sachkhand Gurudwara without permission.

According to police, an FIR has been registered under IPC sections for attempt to murder, causing grievous hurt and rioting. The situation around the gurudwara in Nanded is tense but under control at present.

On Monday, several hundred Sikhs gathered at the Gurdwara for Holi Mohalla despite being denied permission by the police. When the police tried to disperse the crowd in a bid to maintain social distancing, the crowd became violent and attacked them.

NIA SEIZES LUXURY CAR REGISTERED IN WASE'S NAME

SHAHAB ANSARI | DC
MUMBAI, MARCH 30

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Tuesday seized a high-end car apparently registered in the name of arrested Mumbai Police officer Sachin Waze from Navi Mumbai. The probe team had been looking for this Mitsubishi Outlander SUV for the last several days.

According to sources, the car was parked in Kamothe area of Navi Mumbai around 15 days ago. It was discovered after locals informed the police about the abandoned car.

Meanwhile, a special court in the city on Tuesday extended NIA custody of convicted police constable Vinayak Shinde and a bookie Naresh Gaur till April 7. Both the persons have been arrested in connection with Mansukh Hiren's murder case. Hiren was the caretaker of the car, which was found stuffed with explosives near industrialist Mukesh Ambani's residence 'Antilia' in South Mumbai. His body was found in the Mumbra creek in Thane on March 5.

Seeking 10 days additional custody, NIA prosecutor had argued that Waze and former policeman Shinde were present at the meeting where Hiren's murder was planned.



Union home minister Amit Shah during a road show in support of BJP candidate Suvendu Adhikari from Nandigram Constituency for the Assembly elections, in Nandigram on Tuesday.

Mamata tries to woo Nandigram voters

Says N'gram people are not to be blamed for her injury

RAJIB
CHOWDHURI | DC
KOLKATA, MARCH 30

Swinging into damage control mode in Nandigram, from where she is standing in the Assembly election, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee clarified Tuesday that the people of the area were not to blame for her leg injuries on March 10 evening.

The Trinamul Congress supremo, who broke her silence on the leak of her conversation with BJP leader Proloy Pal recently, also stood on her feet as the national anthem was being played, mustering courage for the first time in public in the last 20 days since the leg injuries put her into a wheelchair.

Before the campaign for the second phase polls ended, Banerjee said at Tenua in Nandigram, “After suffering injuries at Birulia, I found my feet swollen badly and blood dripping. The heel was badly injured. But the people of Nandigram are not to be blamed for my injury. I still believe some goons from outside this place planned the attack on me. Nandigram wants me. That is why I am fighting here.”

Her latest version on the March 10 incident assumes significance as she held the locals responsible for her injuries in the past few days of the campaign. The injured CM, helped by some TMC leaders, was later seen rising from her wheelchair briefly to show her respect for the national anthem at the dais of her party rally.

Seeing their firebrand leader back on her feet, the TMC workers erupted in jubilation. Soon after Banerjee's campaign ended, TMC workers clashed with some BJP cadres in the area.

On the leak of the audio clip, which recorded her plea to Pal to work for her victory, the TMC chief angrily said, “I had some information that the person concerned wanted to talk to me. I have every right to have that conversation as a candidate.



West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee at a rally on the last day of the campaign for the 2nd phase of Assembly polls, in Nandigram on Tuesday.

FORMER CM ASKS PEOPLE TO VOTE CONG-LEFT-ISF ALLIANCE IN BENGAL

RAJIB CHOWDHURI | DC
KOLKATA, MARCH 30

Former West Bengal chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee has called for votes to Sangjukta Morcha against the ruling Trinamul Congress and BJP in an audio clip released by the CPI(M) on Tuesday to galvanise its rank and file on the eve of the second phase of Assembly election in the state.

“Dear citizens of Bengal, the Assembly polls have been underway. All of us understand this is a juncture in the politics of this state. In the

previous polls we set our slogan: Agriculture is our base, Industry is our future. We progressed on that thought. Like success came in agriculture, industry saw expansion,” Bhattacharjee said in his plea.

He added, “But the TMC has created a dangerous situation after the ouster of the Left Front from power in the state. In the last 10 years no mention worthy industry came up. The silence of the graveyard has engulfed Nandigram and Singur. While anarchy prevails in education, the health system has collapsed.”

What he did was a criminal offence. I am not at fault. I will not forgive those who backstabbed us here in Nandigram. I will continue to have such conversations whenever I feel like.”

On a day when Union home minister Amit Shah

led roadshows for her nemesis Suvendu Adhikari in Nandigram and predicted his victory, Banerjee, to drive a wedge within the BJP, argued “Mukul Roy is a better element than Suvendu, not as harmful. At least that is what I feel.”

NOT NECESSARY THAT ONLY SITTING MLA WILL BECOME CM: DILIP

New Delhi, March 30: Claiming that a “strong undercurrent” for the BJP has now come to the surface in West Bengal, its state unit chief Dilip Ghosh on Tuesday exuded confidence that the party will form the next government in the state and said it is not necessary that only a sitting MLA will become the chief minister.

Ghosh, a sitting MP from Medinipur, asserted that the momentum “in favour” of the BJP will continue till the last phase. “After the first phase of polling only the BJP is confident of its victory, whereas the TMC and its leaders are frustrated. As the election will progress, the trend set by the BJP in the first phase will gain momentum and with every phase of polling TMC workers will themselves realise their defeat,” Ghosh said.

To a query on whether a sitting MLA will become the chief minister if the BJP wins, Ghosh, who himself is seen as a strong contender, said, “It is for the party to decide but it is not necessary a sitting MLA will become the chief minister. When Mamata ji became chief minister she was not an MLA.”

Referring to the party's top leader and Union home minister Amit Shah's claim of BJP winning 26 seats out of 30 seats that went to polls in the first phase on March 27, Ghosh said people of the state are now “not afraid” of casting their vote freely. Therefore the “strong undercurrent for BJP has now become an overcurrent” and it will reflect in the result, he said. He said the BJP has worked on areas such as Kolkata and its adjoining districts where it was relatively less strong and the result of its hard work would be visible now.

Former MP's remarks on Rahul starts row in Kerala

DC CORRESPONDENT
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM,
MARCH 30

The offensive remarks made by former LDF MP Joice George against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi in connection with the latter's frequent interaction with college girls, evoked widespread condemnation and sharp reaction from the Congress.

With the issue snowballing into a major controversy, Joice George was forced to apologise and withdraw the offensive remarks. At an election meeting in support of power minister and senior CPM leader M.M. Mani who is contesting from Udumbanchola constituency in Idukki district, the former MP said, “Rahul Gandhi only visits women's colleges therefore girls should be cautious while dealing with the Congress leader. Rahul Gandhi is a bachelor and is a troublemaker. So the girls should be wary of him.”

He was indirectly referring to an event held in St Theresas College in Kochi recently in which the Congress MP gave a

CPI(ML) leader says its not fun

New Delhi, March 30: CPI(ML) general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya on Tuesday hit out at CPI(M)-backed former MP Joice George over his controversial remarks against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, saying the Left movement needs to come out of the “abyss of everyday sexism and misogyny”.

The Left needs to be progressive on every front, Bhattacharya said.

Taking to Twitter, Bhattacharya said, “It's not fun! The Left movement in India needs to come out of this abyss of

everyday sexism and misogyny! Comrades across the Left spectrum need to take a call and reject this discourse. The Left needs to be progressive on every score, on every front.”

The CPI(M) has distanced itself from George's remarks, while the former MP has expressed regret.

“I hereby unconditionally withdraw the inappropriate remarks made by me while addressing an election rally in Irattayar on Monday. I also express regret over that,” George said on Tuesday.

— PTI

demonstration of the principle of resistance and empowerment in Aikido, a martial art form. He also made the students do the exercise on the stage.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan distanced himself from the comments made

by Joice George. He said the LDF would oppose him politically and not at the personal level.

With the CM disapproving of his remarks and the issue snowballing into a major controversy, Joice George tendered an unconditional apology.

Priyanka launches attack on LDF

DC CORRESPONDENT
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM,
MARCH 30

Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi on Tuesday hit out at the CPM led-LDF government for failing to meet the aspirations of the people of the state during its five year rule.

Gandhi who began her campaign in the state on Tuesday addressed a series of meetings in Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam and Alappuzha districts in support of UDF candidates. She said the LDF government had failed to provide 20 lakh jobs that it had promised to give to the youth after coming to power in 2016.

She said the LDF had sold off the fishermen interests and their means of livelihood for ₹5,000 crore to a US company while referring to the MoU signed by the government for deep sea trawling and ship building. The government was later forced to scrap the MoU following widespread protests.

But the deal has exposed the government's real intentions.

● SHE SAID LDF had sold off the fishermen interests and their means of livelihood for ₹5,000 cr to a US company while referring to the MoU signed by the government for deep sea trawling and ship building.

Gandhi said the CPM-led government had failed to implement a reasonable support price for paddy, coconut and rubber. The cashew and coir sectors were in dire straits. She said the UDF would revive the state's economy and provide support price to the cash crops and paddy.

The Congress leader lashed out at the government for spending crores of rupees on advertisement to refurbish its image. “If you ask me where the government's money is going? I would say it is going for publicity, propaganda and advertisement,” she said amid applause from people at Karunagapally.

The Congress general secretary addressed rallies in Kollam district and took part in road show at Kayamkulam.



Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi arrives in poll-bound Kerala, at Kayamkulam in Alappuzha district.

PEACEFUL TIES MUST: PAK PM TO MODI

SRIDHAR
KUMARASWAMI | DC
NEW DELHI, MARCH 30

Pakistan is “convinced that durable peace and stability in South Asia is contingent upon resolving all outstanding issues between India and Pakistan”, in particular the Kashmir issue, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan has told Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a letter.

He further said Pakistan desires “peaceful, cooperative relations with all neighbours including India”. The “creation of an enabling environment is imperative for a constructive and result-oriented dialogue”, the Pakistan PM added.

The letter dated March 29 was a reply to PM Modi's letter a week ago to wish his counterpart on the occasion of Pakistan National Day on March 23, in which he had India wanted cordial relations with its neighbour but that for this, an environment of trust devoid of terror and hostility was imperative.

INDIA STRESSES ON AFGHAN DOUBLE PEACE

SRIDHAR
KUMARASWAMI | DC
NEW DELHI, MARCH 30

External affairs minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar on Tuesday said that “for durable peace in Afghanistan, what we need is a genuine ‘double peace’, that is, peace within Afghanistan and peace around Afghanistan” that “requires harmonising the interests of all, both within and around that country”. He was speaking at the ninth Ministerial Conference of the Heart of Asia — Istanbul Process (HoA-IP) on Afghanistan at Dushanbe, Tajikistan. The HoA-IP was launched in 2011 to encourage security, political and economic cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbours and assist the war-ravaged nation. Afghanistan is geographically considered the “Heart of Asia”.

In a blunt assessment of the reality, the EAM said, “The situation in Afghanistan continues to give cause for grave concern. Violence and bloodshed are daily realities and the conflict itself has shown little sign of abatement, whatever may be the promises. The last few months have also witnessed an escalation in targeted killings of civil society.”

BJP candidate files papers for MP bypoll

RABINDRA NATH
CHOUDHURY | DC
BHOPAL, MARCH 30

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Tuesday launched a scathing attack on his predecessor and senior Congress leader Kamal Nath, saying that the latter had turned state secretariat a den of racketeers when he headed the government in MP.

Launching campaign for BJP candidate for Damoh Assembly constituency by-election, scheduled to be held on April 17, Chouhan alleged that his predecessor was running a corrupt government ignoring interest of the state. “Nath had no time even to meet MLAs of his party when he was chief minister. He used

to tell them ‘You can go now’. The MLAs had later given a befitting reply to him by dislodging him from power”, Chouhan said.

He was referring to resignation of 22 Congress MLAs from Assembly as well as the party in March last year to pull down the 15-month-old Kamal Nath government. They were loyalists of Jyotiradity Scindia who also quit Congress and joined BJP then.

State BJP president V.D. Sharma called Nath as ex-accidental chief minister and said the latter even did not know names of many MLAs and leaders of Congress. “Nath had become chief minister by default. He did not even know names of some of his party MLAs,” he said.

ASSEMBLY | POLLS

TMC had alleged that central forces were trying help BJP

Forces not influencing voters: Probe

DC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 30

An internal probe conducted by para-military forces like CRPF, BSF and SSB which are deployed for Bengal elections, has revealed that “there was no concrete evidence to suggest that central forces tried to influence or pressurised public to vote for a particular political party or candidate.”

Sources said a close watch is being kept on the conduct of central forces deployed in Bengal to ensure they remain impartial during the poll process.

Trinamul Congress has alleged that central forces

were trying help BJP and its candidates.

During the first phase of polling Trinamul had alleged that at a number of polling centres the central para-military forces were asking people to vote for the BJP.

Trinamul also claimed that para-military forces from BJP ruled states like Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh were being deliberately sent to Bengal to help BJP.

Following this central forces including BSF, CRPF and SSB which have been deployed in large number in Bengal Assembly polls initiated an internal probe and even discussed the issue

● SOURCES SAID a close watch is being kept on the conduct of central forces deployed in Bengal to ensure they remain impartial during the poll process.

● Trinamul also claimed that para-military forces from BJP ruled states like Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh were being deliberately sent to Bengal to help BJP.

● BOTH EC and home ministry have specifically directed the central forces to ensure that their conduct during elections ‘remains above board and totally clean.’

with the Election Commission.

“We are committed to the an impartial election under overall supervision of the Election Commission. So we conducted a detailed an internal inquiry but did not find any evidence to substantiate allegations levelled by different political

vote for BJP,” a senior CRPF official added.

Both Election Commission and home ministry have specifically directed the central forces to ensure that their conduct during elections “remains above board and totally clean.”

This time central forces have been deputed inside the polling stations also and are assisting the local administration in checking the voter I-cards or other identity proofs to ensure that fake votes can be checked. Trinamul had objected to this also saying only local police and administration should be allowed inside the polling booth.



SHORT TAKES

SOUTH DAKOTA FIRES: 400 HOMES VACATED

South Dakota, March 30: Three separate wildfires in the Black Hills of South Dakota have forced evacuations of more than 400 homes northwest of Rapid City and shut down Mount Rushmore.

A fire that started near Schroeder Road in the Nemo area, about 24 kilometres northwest of Rapid City, had burned as much as 11/2 square miles and was "still moving" on Monday afternoon, according to the Pennington County Sheriff's Office. Several out-buildings and possibly two homes have been destroyed.

PIO NOMINATED DC DISTRICT COURT JUDGE

Washington, March 30: US President Joe Biden on Tuesday announced his intent to nominate Indian-American Rupa Ranga Puttagunta as a federal judge, among 10 other diverse picks for top judicial positions which include African-American and Muslim American candidates.

Among the presidential nominations, 10 are for Federal Circuit and District Court judge posts, and one is for Superior Court Judge for the District of Columbia. These highly-qualified candidates reflect the president's deeply-held conviction that the federal bench should reflect the full diversity of the American people — both in background and in professional experience, the White House said. If confirmed by the US Senate, Judge Puttagunta would be the first Asian American and Pacific Islander (API) woman to serve on the US District Court for the District of DC, the White House said.

Judge Puttagunta currently serves as an Administrative Judge for the D.C. Rental Housing Commission. Prior to joining the Commission in 2019, Judge Puttagunta was a solo practitioner from 2013 to 2019, representing indigent criminal defendants in trial and on appeal. Before opening her own practice, Judge Puttagunta practised family and appellate law at Delaney McKinney, LLP from 2012 to 2013.

Judge Puttagunta also provided hundreds of hours of pro bono legal services by volunteering at D.C. Superior Court's Family Court Self-Help Center and Attorney Negotiator Programme and representing victims of domestic violence in D.C. Superior Court. She began her legal career as a law clerk for Judge William M. Jackson of the D.C. Superior Court from 2008 to 2010, as well as the Senior Judges of the D.C. Court of Appeals from 2010 to 2011.

I WITNESSED A MURDER: FLOYD CASE WITNESS

Minneapolis, March 30: A man who was among the onlookers shouting at a Minneapolis police officer to get off George Floyd last May testified Tuesday that he called 911 after paramedics took Floyd away, "because I believed I witnessed a murder."

Donald Williams, a former wrestler who said he was trained in mixed martial arts, including chokeholds, returned to the witness stand a day after describing seeing Floyd struggle for air and his eyes roll back into his head. He said he watched Floyd "slowly fade away ... like a fish in a bag."

Prosecutor Matthew Frank played back Williams' 911 call, on which he is heard identifying officer Derek Chauvin by his badge number and telling the dispatcher that Chauvin had been keeping his knee on Floyd's neck despite warnings that Floyd's life was in danger. She offers to switch him to a sergeant. As he is being switched, Williams can be heard yelling at the officers, "Y'all is murderers, bro!"

On Monday, Williams said he thought Chauvin used a shimming motion several times to increase the pressure on Floyd. He said he yelled to the officer that he was cutting off Floyd's blood supply. Williams recalled that Floyd's voice grew thicker as his breathing became more laboured, and he eventually stopped moving.

Williams was among the first prosecution witnesses as Chauvin, 45, went on trial on charges of murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death.

The death of the PoC man after he was held down by the white officer touched off sometimes-violent protests around the world and a reckoning over racism and police brutality. Prosecutors led off their case by playing part of the harrowing bystander video of Floyd's arrest.

90% US adults to be eligible for vaccine by April 19: Biden

Urges state authorities to make mask-wearing obligatory in public places

Washington, March 30: President Joe Biden has announced that 90 per cent of the adults in the US would be eligible for Covid-19 vaccination by April 19 and the rest 10 per cent no later than May 1. Biden also urged state authorities to once again to make mask-wearing obligatory in public places to combat the disease as the "war is far from won".

Biden's announcement on the vaccination schedule came on a day when the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Dr Rochelle Walensky warned that the US faces "impending doom" as Coronavirus cases and hospital admissions rise across America, the worst-hit by the pandemic.

The US has recorded around 60,000 new cases daily for the past week, a rise of around 7 per cent. The US has reported more than 30,331,000 confirmed cases and over 550,000 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University Covid-19 tracker.

The vaccination drive under the Biden administration has been going in at an unprecedented pace. As many as 100 million shots have been administered in less than 60 days of his administration and they are now moving on to the next 100 million shots in just 40 days.

"I'm pleased to announce that at least 90 per cent of all adults in this country will be eligible to be vaccinated by April the 19th, just three weeks from now, because we have the vaccines," Biden told reporters at the White House on Monday. "For the vast, vast majority of adults, you won't have to wait until May 1. You'll be eligible for your shot on April 19th. Finally, the final 10 per cent will be eligible no later than May 1," he said.

"Due to the steps we're taking today, 90 per cent of Americans will be within five miles of a location where they can get a shot as of April the 19th."

"The progress we're making is a significant testament to what we can do when we work together as Americans. But as I've always said, we still need everyone to do their part. We still are in a war with this deadly virus. And we're bolstering our defenses, but this war is far from won," Biden said.

According to Biden, the progress on vaccination is a stunning example that there is nothing this country cannot do if "we put their minds to it".

Biden said just 10 weeks after he became the president, nearly 75 per cent of Americans over the age of 65 had received at least one vaccination shot.

"When I took office on January 20th, that number was 8 per cent. It's going to 75 per cent," he said.

— PTI



A Spanish police officer checks PCR Coronavirus test results of motorists willing to enter Spain at the border between France and Spain in Le Perthus, on Tuesday, amid the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic.

— AFP

CDC warns of virus rebound

Washington, March 30: President Joe Biden and a top health official warned that too many Americans are declaring virus victory too quickly, appealing for mask requirements and other restrictions to be maintained or restored to stave off a fourth surge of Covid-19. The head of the CDC said she had a feeling of impending doom if people keep easing off.

The double dose of warnings on Monday came even

as Biden laid out hopeful new steps to expand Coronavirus vaccinations, with all adults to become eligible over the next five weeks. Biden announced plans to expand the number of retail pharmacies that are administering vaccines, and investments to help Americans get to vaccination sites. But the optimism was tempered by stark warnings about the potential for another wave of cases.

This is deadly serious,

Biden said, urging governors to reinstate mask mandates and other restrictions that some states have been easing.

Hours earlier, during a virtual White House health briefing, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, grew emotional as she reflected on her experience treating Covid-19 patients who are alone at the end of their lives. "We have so much to look forward to, so much

promise and potential of where we are and so much reason for hope," she said. "But right now, I'm scared. I'm going to lose the script, and I'm going to reflect on the recurring feeling I have of impending doom."

Cases of the virus are up about 10% over the past week from the previous week, to about 60,000 cases per day, with both hospitalisations and deaths ticking up as well, Walensky said.

— AP

VIETNAM FLIGHT ATTENDANT GETS 2 YRS FOR SLIP

Hanoi, March 30: A Vietnamese court on Tuesday sentenced a flight attendant to two years probation for violating Covid-19 quarantine rules and spreading the virus to others, becoming the first person in the country to stand trial for such offences, state media said.

Duong Tan Hau, 29, was found guilty of the charges for leaving his home during a mandatory home quarantine routine after he returned from a trip to Japan while working for the national carrier Vietnam Airlines, *Vietnam News Agency* reported.

The newspaper said Hau frequently met a friend, who is a teacher, went to a cafe and attended an exam at an English centre in Ho Chi Minh city before he tested positive for the virus toward the end of his scheduled quarantine period last November.

— AP

Leaders call for pandemic treaty

London, March 30: More than 20 heads of government and global agencies on Tuesday called for an international treaty for pandemic preparedness that they say will protect future generations.

But there are few details to explain how such an agreement might actually force countries to act more cooperatively. World Health Organisation Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and leaders, including Boris Johnson of Britain, Mario Draghi of Italy and Paul Kagame of Rwanda, called for a renewed collective commitment to reinforce the world's pandemic preparedness and response systems, that would be rooted in the UN health agency's constitution. "We are convinced that it is our responsibility, as leaders of nations and international institu-

tions, to ensure that the world learns the lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic," the authors wrote in a commentary that was published Tuesday. Although they called for solidarity, and greater societal commitment, there was no indication any country would soon change its own approach to responding to the pandemic.

Last week, Tedros pleaded with rich countries to immediately donate 10 million Covid-19 vaccines so that immunisation campaigns could start in all countries within the first 100 days of the year. Not a single country has yet publicly offered to share its vaccines immediately. Of the more than 459 million vaccines administered globally, the majority have been in just 10 countries and 28 per cent in just one.

— AP

PAK MIN JUMPS QUEUE, GETS KIN VACCINATED

Islamabad, March 30: A federal minister in Pakistan found himself in hot waters on Tuesday after video clips showing his family getting shots of Coronavirus vaccine surfaced online, creating a stir as netizens accused him of "jumping the queue" and demanded an apology from him.

The clips showed a nurse giving vaccine jabs to family members of Minister for Housing Tariq Bashir Cheema, which seems to be a clear violation of government policy regarding Covid-19 vaccination. Cheema belongs to the Pakistan Muslim League Quaid (PML-Q), which is an ally of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI). Pakistan's vaccination drive began on Feb. 2 starting with frontline workers followed by health workers and people over 60 years.

— PTI

Crackdown in Myanmar: Death toll passes 500

Yangon, March 30: The death toll in the Myanmar military's crackdown on protesters has passed 500, as armed rebel groups on Tuesday threatened the junta with retaliation if the bloodshed does not stop. World powers have ramped up their condemnation of the military's campaign against the anti-coup movement that is demanding the restoration of the elected government and the release of civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Washington suspended a trade pact with Myanmar and UN chief Antonio Guterres called for a united global front to pressure the junta after more than 100 protesters were killed in a bloody weekend. Adding to that pressure campaign, a trio of ethnic rebel groups on Tuesday condemned the crackdown and threatened to fight alongside protesters unless the military reined in its violence.

Daily rallies across Myanmar by unarmed demonstrators have been met with tear gas, rubber bullets and live rounds.

The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) said it had confirmed a total of 510 civilian deaths but warned the true toll was probably significantly higher.

On Tuesday, protesters in Yangon emptied rubbish bags in the streets as part of the latest action, while in the town of Muse in Shan state a 35-year-old protester was shot dead.

VILLAGERS NOT SENT BACK, SAYS THAILAND

Mae Sam Laep (Thailand), March 30: Thailand's prime minister denied Tuesday that his country's security forces have sent villagers back to Myanmar who fled from military airstrikes and said his government is ready to shelter anyone who is escaping fighting.

His comments came a day after humanitarian groups said the Thai military had begun sending back some of the people who have fled airstrikes by Myanmar's military. "There is no influx of refugees yet. We asked those who crossed to Thailand and if they have any problem in their area. When they say no problem, we just asked them to return to their land first. We asked, we did not use any force," PM Prayuth Chan-ocha said.

— AP

There was also another fatality at Myitkyina, Kachin state, rescue workers confirmed. Three of the country's myriad armed ethnic insurgent groups — the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Myanmar Nationalities Democratic Alliance Army and the Arakan Army (AA) — issued a joint statement threatening retaliation.

— AFP

China reduces elected seats in HK legislature

Hong Kong, March 30: China has sharply reduced the number of directly elected seats in Hong Kong's legislature in a setback for the territory's already beleaguered democracy movement. The changes were announced Tuesday after a two-day meeting of China's top legislature. The legislature will be expanded to 90 seats, and only 20 will be elected by the public.

Currently, half of the 70-seat legislature — 35 seats — is directly elected. The move is part of a two-phase effort to rein in political protest and opposition in Hong Kong, which is part of China but has had a more liberal political system as a former British colony. China imposed a national security law on Hong Kong last year and is following up this year with a revamp of the electoral process. The crackdown comes in the wake of months of pro-democracy protests in 2019 that brought hundreds of thousands to the streets and turned violent as the government resisted the movement's demands.

"It's a very sad day for Hong Kong. The election system is completely dismantled," said former lawmaker and Democratic Party member Emily Lau. "They are going to get rid of opposition voices because under this new system, which is so oppressive and restrictive, I don't think any self-respecting individual will want to take part," Lau said.

— AP

China's top legislature, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, amended Hong Kong's constitution to pave the way for the changes. The Hong Kong government is now tasked with revising its electoral laws and holding an election.

— AP

Probe into Suez Canal blockage begins

Suez (Egypt), March 30: Experts on Tuesday boarded the massive container ship that had blocked Egypt's vital Suez Canal and disrupted global trade for nearly a week, seeking answers to a single question that could mean billions of dollars in legal implications: What went wrong? As convoys of ships again began travelling in this artery linking East and West

through the Mediterranean and Red Seas, hundreds more idled waiting for their turn in process that will take days.

Egyptian government officials, insurers, shippers and others similarly waited for more details about what caused the skyscraper-sized Ever Given to become wedged across the canal's southern single-lane on March 23.

When blame gets assigned, it could turn into years of litigation over the costs of repairing the ship, fixing the canal and reimbursing those who saw their cargo shipments disrupted. And with the vessel being owned by a Japanese firm, operated by a Taiwanese shipper, flagged in Panama and now stuck in Egypt, matters become an international morass.

"This ship is a multinational conglomerate," said Capt. John Konrad, the founder and CEO of the shipping news website gcaptain.com. Experts boarded the Ever Given as it idled Tuesday in Egypt's Great Bitter Lake, just north of the site where it previously blocked the canal.

A senior canal pilot, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was

not authorised to talk to journalists, told *The Associated Press* that experts were looking for signs of damage and trying to determine the cause of the vessel's grounding.

Damage to the vessel could be structural, Konrad warned. Stuck for days across the canal, the ship's middle rose and fell with the tide, bending up and down.

— AP

GOVT | NOTIFICATION

In May last year, the central govt had allowed certain OCI card holders to come to India

India trip: OCI card holders won't need old passports

Washington/New York, March 30: People of Indian origin and the Indian diaspora having Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) cards are now not required to carry their old, expired passports for travel to India, as required earlier, according to a government notification that has been welcomed by members of the community.

The Overseas Citizens of India or OCI card is issued to people of Indian origin globally which gives them almost all the privileges of

an Indian national except for the right to vote, government service and buying agricultural land. The OCI card gives them a visa free travel to India.

In a March 26 press release, the Indian missions in the US said that in order to ease the travel of OCI card holders, it has been decided that the time line for re-issuance of OCI cards in r/o OCI card holders, who may be required to get their OCI card reissued has been extended until 31 December, 2021.

Further requirement of carrying old and new passports along with the OCI card has been done away. Henceforth, the OCI card holders travelling on the strength of their existing OCI card bearing old passport number are not required to carry their old passport. However, carrying a new passport is mandatory. New York-based social activist Prem Bhandari, who has been taking up the cause of OCI card holders for the past several years, welcomed the anno-

uncement. He expressed gratitude to the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of External Affairs and the Government of India for not only extending the renewal up to December 31 this year but also for relaxing the guidelines and not requiring OCI card holders to carry their old, expired foreign passports.

The OCI card holders can heave a sigh of relief worldwide, with these new guidelines, he said. He expressed thanks to Home Secretary Ajay Kumar Bhalla

for the new guidelines. Bhandari said that he had seen first-hand the inconvenience caused to members of the Indian diaspora due to certain OCI card rules as they undertook travel to India during the pandemic.

He said some of the passengers were not allowed to board flights to India and were sent back from airports as they were not carrying their old foreign passports, which was required as per government rules. The OCI card, am-

ong other benefits, allows multiple entry, multi-purpose life long visa to an Indian-origin foreign national to visit India. Under the provisions of the OCI card, which gives the cardholder lifelong visa to India, those below 20 years and above 50 years need to renew their OCI card every time they have their passport renewed.

The Indian government has relaxed the provisions since last year due to the Coronavirus. The timeline has been extended multi-

ple times so far. However, this is for the first time that the guidelines have been relaxed for carrying old passports and the new passports along with the OCI cards for overseas Indians. In May last year, the central government had allowed certain categories of OCI card holders, who were stranded abroad, to come to the country. Earlier, visas of foreign nationals and OCI cards were suspended as part of the new international travel restrictions.

— PTI

DECCAN Chronicle

31 MARCH 2021

Let not Covid 2nd wave destroy economy again

The spike in the daily numbers of new Covid-19 infections across the country is truly alarming and it reminds us of the period when the pandemic had peaked last year. The country has seen a steady surge in new cases for the past couple of weeks and the active cases at present are 5,40,720, which is little over half of the September 18 peak of 1,017,754. When Tuesday's new infections of 56,211 are added, India's total Covid-19 caseload has risen to 1,20,95,855. The death toll has reached 1,62,114, or 1.34 per cent of total confirmed infections.

While the infection killed lakhs across the globe, it paralysed the economy and threw many millions out of their jobs and into abject penury. Governments had to announce several special economic packages to bring them back to life; and India was no exception. And the worst affected were the people at the lowest strata of the economic pyramid. The fate of lakhs of guest workers who had to walk back home hundreds of miles away was an experience no one would like to see repeated. From economic to social and psychological breakdown, the micro-organism has sowed seeds of disquiet in societies and families.

The sad part is that we as a people are still at the mercy of the virus despite an expansion of our knowledge base to fight it and the discovery of vaccines. There are treatment protocols that help save lives. There have been research findings that elaborate on the virus activity in the human body once it enters it. We are much better equipped to fight the infection and we now know the consequences which we had not known last year. But still, there is no stopping the virus and its effects.

The Union government has, on its part, speeded up the vaccination programme, and has rectified the technical glitches in the software; at present, one crore people can register for the jab in one day. There are still logistical issues to be addressed and coupled with vaccine hesitancy, they drag down the vaccination programme which aims at inoculating 30 crore people by June this year. The number now stands at 6.5 crore after two-and-a-half months.

The worsening of the pandemic situation could force another national lockdown which the economy, and the nation, can ill-afford. The government and the people must realise it and return to the strict adherence of Covid-appropriate protocols and behaviour.

Some of the developed countries have added "meetings outdoors" to the standard prescription of social distancing, mask wearing and washing of hands. This means group functions will no longer be allowed in closed environs. This measure could help avoid gatherings turning into super spreader events.

The government must consider introducing this idea here too. It must also relaunch the awareness campaign on the Covid-19 protocols and direct the state governments to enforce them. The people have been lax in following them, and the governments have been equally lax in enforcing them. This combined neglect will land the nation in deeper trouble. There will be no justification for that, should it happen.

Suez lesson proves costly

Proof of Murphy's Law could not have come in a worse scenario than in the Suez Canal being blocked by the skyscraper-sized, 2,24,000-tonne container ship *Ever Given*, which is as long as the Empire State Building is tall. As \$9 billion of daily trade was blocked for a week in terms of goods in transit, from crude oil to cattle, nature's helping hand came to the rescue as an unusually high tide followed a full moon. How helpless man was for days as tugs, sand dredgers and various other salvage equipment battled on to refloat a symbol of man's ambition in making things bigger and bigger in order to benefit from economies of scale, which, in this case, includes environmental benefits too in terms of carbon footprint.

The all-Indian crew of the Japan-owned, Panama-flagged giant ship will be among those eagerly awaiting the result of a blame game that will probably be resolved at the end of a thorough probe of what went wrong, how and why. Human error is not ruled out either as the ship was gathering speed to 13 knots on an uneven course in the channel. The explanation that the stacked-up containers could have acted as a huge sail to gusts from dust storms not uncommon to the area may seem logical enough. For all the high fees in hundreds of thousands of dollars, including costs of pilots, to use the canal to save 5,000 km on Europe-Asia journeys Suez Canal pilots, the responsibility of steering is solely that of the ship's captain.

The Suez Canal, completed in 1869, has saved uncountable time and money in cutting global shipping costs and today 13 per cent of maritime trade moves through the crucial waterway. An occasional tanker getting grounded used to be solved with the simple principle of tugging it out but a catastrophe of this size had never been envisaged. This serves up the elementary lesson that bigger is not necessarily better as man is still vulnerable to nature's random acts as much as his vehicles are subject to the laws of locomotion.

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Subhani



Weak Britain reluctant to confront aggressive China


Sunanda K.
Datta-Ray

Reflections

British history books claim that before the First Opium War against Manchu China in 1839, the Chinese hoped there would be a lot of "talkee-talkee before fightee-fightee". This time around, it is the British who seek discussions and negotiations before the war of words over China's alleged human rights abuses spills over into action.

The United States also drew back when similar arguments erupted with China. One reason was that China held \$3,399.9 billion of the American Treasury's foreign exchange reserves. Another factor was the calculation that the American cost of living would shoot up without access to cheap Chinese footwear, clothing, electricals and household goods.

No wonder British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy skirted around the subject of China. The 100-page review even hinted that Russia was Britain's most serious threat and the reason for acquiring high-tech drones and the expensive paraphernalia of cyber warfare and satellites to control space while increasing the stockpile of nuclear warheads by 40 per cent.

No wonder Britain's response was limited to grieving rhetoric when Beijing imposed sanctions on five ruling Conservative Party MPs, two peers, a barrister and an academic. They can no longer travel to China, and any assets they there will be frozen. "Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike/ Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike", as in Alexander Pope's poem, Mr Johnson "noted that China has chosen to sanction individuals and entities that are

while improving our ability to respond to the systemic challenge that it poses," the review says.

A showdown seemed imminent when British foreign secretary Dominic Raab told the House of Commons that British businesses should not profit from what he called the "industrial scale" forced labour of Uighurs. However, Mr Raab tactfully refrained from mentioning sanctions on Chinese Communist Party officials allegedly involved in human rights abuses. The omission confused listeners because the government had earlier indicated sanctions under a law modelled on the US Global Magnitsky Act.

Mr Raab's explanation that the possibility of sanctions was being kept "in reserve" did not satisfy Sir Iain Duncan Smith, a former Conservative Party leader who supports sanctions. He asked in Parliament who in the government might be blocking Mr Raab from following through with the planned measures.

Whoever was responsible, the reversal exposed the inconsistency of official British thinking about China. The UK government's last white paper on China was published in 2009, before the CCP became aggressively authoritarian after Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012. The softer tone of Mr Raab's speech also reflected Mr Johnson's desire to keep his options open as the UK assumes the G-7's annually rotating presidency and prepares to host the next climate change conference in Glasgow later this year, reaches out to the Indo-Pacific destiny that the review eulogises, and

Boris Johnson cannot be anxious to provoke a China that has recently imposed punishing tariffs on Australian imports of everything from wine to timber and coal, in retaliation for Canberra's calls for an investigation into the origins of Covid.

seeks economic and strategic alternatives to EU membership.

He cannot be anxious to provoke a China that has recently imposed punishing tariffs on Australian imports of everything from wine to timber and coal, in retaliation for Canberra's calls for an investigation into the origins of Covid-19. Chinese investments in Britain, assessed at £8.63 billion, represent a 12.5 per cent year on year increase. Chinese investment in London real estate rose from £2.69 billion in 2016 to £3.69 billion in 2017. Bilateral trade totalled £80 billion (roughly \$110 billion) in 2019.

Chinese companies play a vital role in British infrastructure. The state-owned China General Nuclear Power Group holds a one-third stake in the Hinkley Point C nuclear power station, a £20-billion project being built in south-western England. Last year, Chinese steelmaker Jingye Group paid about £50 million to acquire British Steel. Other Chinese firms have large stakes in British offshore oil fields, as well as transport networks and utilities.

Ramping up criticism of Beijing not only risks deterring future Chinese investment but could undermine British businesses in China. Hence the review's diplomatic claim: "We will pursue deeper engagement in the Indo-Pacific in support of shared prosperity and regional stability, with stronger diplomatic and trading ties ... This approach recognises the importance of powers in the region such as China, India and Japan and also extends to others including South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines."

With their acute sense of history, the Chinese know that they have little to fear. European writers and politicians have spoken down the centuries of "La Perfidie Albion", or Perfidious Albion.

The writer is a senior journalist, columnist and author

LETTERS

MYANMAR

That hundreds of agitating civilians are being shot down by the military Junta in Myanmar is appalling. Though world has been voicing concern over the human rights violations there, the voice is very feeble with no impact. India should take initiative to help improving the situation there to normalcy.

Dr D.V.G. Sankararao
Vizianagaram

ENCROACHMENTS

River bank dwellings are always subject to inundation, as such Krishna Lanka and other adjacent areas in Vijayawada city are no exception. The successive governments and the local bodies have consistently failed in protecting the natural environment and brazenly allowed encroachments all along the river bank. The authorities must pay attention to this aspect because there are over 5,000 not 3,000 families living on the river bank in Vijayawada city.

Govardhana Myneedu
Vijayawada

FOODGRAINS

This has reference to 'Jana Sena men skip BJP event' (*DC, March 30*). The spree of mudslinging by the leaders of various political parties has begun for the Tirupati Lok Sabha byelection even at the stage of fielding the nominations. The absence of Jana Sena leaders and cadres during the event was obtrusive. Failed promises of the bifurcation, VSP Privatisation, denial of ticket to Jana Sena's candidate, snubbing at graduate MLC elections of TS by the ruling dispensation at the Centre could be some of the reasons for the rumblings and discontent of JSP. At the same time, the election is crucial and throws down the gauntlet to all the parties.

Dr C. Ghanshyam
Visakhapatnam

West Pak troops retreating

AGARTALA, March. 30 West Pakistani troops were retreating everywhere today as Sheikh Mujibur Rehman's liberation forces won control of most of east Pakistan, including the capital city of Dacca, Free Bangladesh radio claimed.

The head of the Pro-visional Government of Bangla Desh, Major Jia Khan himself went on the air to invite the world at large to come and see the success of his forces for themselves.

A.G. Noorani



India in Nato? Is New Delhi ready for such a major shift?

WHILE it is not fair to impute motives to a writer, one cannot help wondering if he is flying a kite, especially given his background. A. Wess Mitchell was US assistant secretary of state for Europe and Eurasia from 2007-2019 and co-chair of the Nato 2020 Reflection Process. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, headquartered in Brussels, has long been in a reflective mood regarding its own fatuous irrelevance.

That did not inhibit him from writing recently in an Indian publication: "When the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) leaders meet later this spring, they will debate the recommendations from a group of experts [which Mr Mitchell co-chaired] that advocates, among other things, extending a formal offer of partnership to India. Such an idea has been discussed before but has always foundered on India's aversion to entanglement in rival geopolitical blocs. It's time to overcome this obstacle.

"China's meteoric rise has dramatically heightened India's need

for closer security relationships with politically reliable, like-minded states. ... Beijing is increasingly willing to depart from its hide-and-bide strategy to directly challenge even the largest of its neighbours."

China's military spending is three times that of India. India's policy of equidistance, with tilts towards Russia and China, is not viable enough to meet the juggernaut of China's power. Hence its moves for ties with the United States, Japan and Australia in the "Quad". Now for the moth-eaten carnet: "While Nato partnerships do not carry the Article 5 guarantee of collective defence against armed attack, they nevertheless come with regular defence dialogues, military-to-military planning and joint exercises that improve readiness, interoperability and predictability. In the event of a conflict, India would benefit from having prior planning and arrangements in place for cooperating with Nato and its Mediterranean partners...."

Nato has spread a web of partners, namely Egypt, Israel, Sweden, Austria, Switzerland and Finland.

Now comes the crunch. "However, the obstacles to partnership are not only on the Indian side; in the past, some Nato allies have effectively blocked discussion of the matter insisting that any offer of partnership to India be accompanied by similar invitations to Pakistan. This may have seemed attractive to some in the era when Nato militaries were mainly focused on conducting operations in Afghanistan. But with the winding down of operations there, Nato has little in common with a Pakistan that is increasingly radicalised at home and aligned with, and beholden to, China.

"... The Nato leadership should extend to India an offer of opening partnership talks. Doing so would signal that it is seriously evaluating all of its tools, including partnerships, according to how well they equip its members for dealing with a new era of great-power competition...."

"In this emerging competition, India is a vital player in its own right and should be treated as such. But Indians should be under no illu-

sions that a truly nonaligned path remains a viable option."

Nonalignment is a worn-out misnomer. India's non-alignment did not prevent its first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru from seeking covertly — behind the back of India's ambassador Asaf Ali — a written alliance with the United States in 1948.

Note that the Nato partnership is shorn of guarantee of help in Article 5 of the Nato Treaty of 1949, which reads: "The parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all; and consequently, they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the party or parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force...."

This is a worthless guarantee as its prime architect, US secretary of

state Dean Acheson, had said. He told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: "This naturally does not mean that the United States would automatically be at war if one of the other signatory nations were the victim of an armed attack. Under the treaty we would be bound to make an honest judgment as to what action was necessary to attain that end and consequently to take such action. That action might or might not include the use of armed force."

As Charles De Gaulle remarked, treaties, like roses and pretty girls, last only as long as they last. How did Pakistan's pacts with the United States help, in its moments of crisis in the 1965 and 1971 wars?

Treaties are concluded in the national interest purely. Help is extended in the same spirit. In 1962, it took the US long to support India's case on the border and even that was confined to the McMahon Line; not the Aksai Chin in Ladakh.

India has unwisely let skirmishes on an undefined border ratchet its dialogue and diplomacy.

By arrangement with Dawn

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	50136.58	2.30
Nifty 50	14845.10	2.33
S&P 500*	3,952.54	-0.47
Dollar (₹)	73.38	-1.19
Pound Sterling (₹)	100.99	-0.47
Euro (₹)	86.14	-0.68
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	44,113▼138	0.31
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	64.00	-1.51
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.143	0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.753	0.032

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Govt may extend current foreign trade policy

The government is expected to further extend the existing foreign trade policy (FTP), which is scheduled to lapse from April 1, for a few more months, an official said. On March 31, 2020, the government had extended the Foreign Trade Policy 2015-20 for one year till March 31, 2021, amid the coronavirus outbreak and the lockdown. The official said that stakeholder consultation is going on for the new policy.

Torrent Gas signs pact to take over Sanwariya Gas



Torrent Gas said it has signed an agreement to take over Sanwariya Gas, which has a licence to retail CNG to automobiles and piped gas to households in Mathura. The acquisition adds to the Torrent group's gas distribution network that is now spread over 33 districts in seven states and one union territory. The firm did not provide the value of the deal. Torrent Gas plans to invest Rs 8,000 crore in CGD over five years.

UltraTech Cement prepays ₹5,000-cr loan

UltraTech Cement said it has prepaid its long-term loans of Rs 5,000 crore. The loan repayment has been done through free cash flows that the company has generated over the last few quarters despite the pandemic, the Aditya Birla Group firm said. But it did not share the deadline by which the long-term loans were to be prepaid. It said the prepayment is in line with the company's policy.

Tamilnadu Petroproducts to invest ₹435 crore

Chennai-based Tamilnadu Petroproducts Ltd, a member of the petrochemicals arm of AM International Group, is investing Rs 435 crore to expand its production facilities. As part of the investment plans, the liner alkaline benzene capacity would be increased from 120,000 tonne per annum to 145,000 tpa at a cost of about Rs 240 crore. The project would be commissioned in about 24 months.

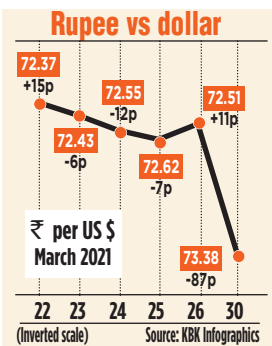


Global investors court dollar as bond yields spike
Dollar rally trips rupee

FALAKNAAZ SYED
MUMBAI, MARCH 30

The rupee on Tuesday depreciated by 87 paise against the US dollar as the accelerating pace of Covid-19 vaccinations and massive fiscal stimulus package in the US stoked inflation concerns, causing a spike in US treasury yields. Global investors are moving towards safe-haven dollar, which dampened the appetite for Asian currencies, including the rupee. According to currency experts, the rupee is likely to further weaken and could touch 74 soon. At the interbank forex market, the local unit

opened at 72.85 against the greenback. It weakened to an intraday low of 73.43, its lowest level since March 9, before finally closing at 73.38. On Friday, the rupee had settled at 72.51 against the dollar. Oil prices rose as investors expect delays at the Suez Canal to persist despite the large container vessel was freed. Sriram Iyer, senior research analyst at Reliance Securities, said, "The US economy is on track because of the large fiscal stimulus of the government, which is supporting the dollar and hardening the yields, which in turn weighed on the rupee.



Secondly, the month-end importer demand and reduced fiscal year-end exporter dollar selling also weighed on the local currency. "Additionally, worries

over second wave of coronavirus infections in India have also waned risk appetite and kept investors away from the markets." Technically, the USD-INR spot pair has given a strong breakout above a pivotal level at 73.00, indicating a strong upside momentum in the counter. Resistance is at 73.50-73.80 levels. INR spot could trade in a range of 73.20-73.70 levels in coming session. Close to the end of financial year, currency traders may refrain from placing large bets on the rupee, given the lack of clear trajectory on the Indian currency in the truncated trading week.

FY21 sees record mop-up of ₹1.89 L cr equity capital

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, MARCH 30

Despite the entire financial year 2020-21 being overshadowed by the pandemic, Indian corporates managed to raise an all-time high amount of Rs 1,88,900 crore from public equity markets. This was more than double the amount of Rs 91,670 crore raised in 2019-20, according to data base provider Prime Database. The previous highest amount raised in a financial year was Rs 1,75,680 crore in 2017-18. "Strong retail participation in IPOs, huge listing gains and highest-ever amount raised through QIPs and InvITs/ReITs were the key highlights of the year," Pranav Haldea, managing director, Prime Database Group, said.



Thirty main-board IPOs came to the market during the pandemic-ruined year, raising Rs 31,268 crore. This marked an increase of 54 per cent from the Rs 20,350 crore raised through 13 IPOs in 2019-20. The largest IPO in FY21 was from Gland Pharma, for Rs. 6,480 crore. The overall response from the public to the mainboard IPOs of the year was very good; 18 IPOs received a mega response of more than 10

times while four IPOs were oversubscribed by more than three times and the balance eight IPOs were oversubscribed between 1 to 3 times. The IPOs also received tremendous response from retail investors. The highest number of applications was received by Indigo Paints (25.88 lakh) followed by MTAR Technologies (25.87 lakh) and Mazagon Dock (23.56 lakh). IPOs also saw strong list-

ing performance, led by Burger King (return of 131 per cent) Happiest Minds Technologies (123 per cent) and Indigo Paints (109 per cent). The IPO pipeline remains strong with 18 companies holding Sebi approval, proposing to raise nearly Rs 18,000 crore and another 14 companies are awaiting the regulator's nod to raise nearly Rs 23,000 crore. SME IPO activity declined in FY21 compared with FY20; there were only 28 SME IPOs, which collected a total of Rs 243 crore compared with 45 IPOs in FY20, collecting Rs 436 crore. At the same time 31 companies mobilised Rs 78,731 crore through qualified institutional placement or QIPs, highest ever in a financial year.

ByteDance India bank a/cs frozen in tax case

ADITYA KALRA & ABHIRUP ROY
NEW DELHI, MARCH 30

Indian authorities have blocked bank accounts of ByteDance in the country for alleged tax evasion and the company has asked a court to quash the directive which it fears will hit its operations hard, two sources with direct knowledge said. ByteDance in January cut its India workforce after New Delhi decided to retain a ban on its popular video app TikTok, first prohibited last year following a border clash between India and China. ByteDance still has around 1,300 employees in India, most of whom service its overseas operations. In mid-March, two of ByteDance India's bank accounts in Citibank and HSBC were ordered blocked by authorities for alleged evasion of certain taxes in online advertising dealings between the ByteDance unit in India and its parent entity in Singapore, TikTok Pte Ltd, the two sources said. Other than the two accounts, the authorities also directed Citibank and

HSBC to not allow ByteDance India to withdraw funds from any other bank accounts linked to its tax identification number, the first source said. In a court filing which is due to be heard soon at the Mumbai High Court, ByteDance India has argued that while it had only about \$10 million in its accounts, the blocking decision was an abuse of the legal process and will make it hard for it to pay salaries and taxes, the source added. Both the sources declined to be identified as the details of the bank freeze or company's court challenge were not public. ByteDance India, as well as HSBC, Citibank and India's finance ministry, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The directive to freeze ByteDance India's bank accounts came after tax authorities last year inspected documents at the company's office, scrutinised documents and questioned some executives in relation to the advertising and other transactions with its parent entity, the first source said. —Reuters

Sensex soars on earnings optimism

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, MARCH 30

In a big swing of market mood, from last week's extreme pessimism to gushing optimism, the Sensex rallied 1128 points, or 2.30 per cent, to close above the 50,000 mark again, at 50,136.58. The Nifty-50 gained 337.80 points, or 2.33 per cent, to close at 14,845.10. Investors' notional wealth rose by Rs 3.5 lakh crore as BSE's market cap-

italisation stood at Rs 204.77 lakh crore. Upcoming earnings season, new \$3 trillion infrastructure plan to be unveiled on Wednesday by President Joe Biden, lower Covid infections reported in India on Monday at 56,211 less than the previous day and rising Asian and European markets led to buying in select sectors and stocks. "The global markets traded with a positive bias which had a positive

impact on our markets at the opening post the extended weekend. A lot of sector and stock specific movement was seen today wherein the IT, Pharma, Metals and FMCG pack saw good buying interest along with the heavyweights HDFC twins-HDFC (3.05 per cent) and HDFC Bank (3.86 per cent)," said Ruchit Jain, technical and derivatives analyst, Angel Broking. The Nifty IT index

gained 2.90 per cent ahead of the fourth quarter earnings starting early next month, Pharma's 2.79 per cent and Metal's 2.72 per cent gains were also on better earnings prospects. The FMCG Index also gained 2.25 per cent ahead of the annual earnings show. Domestic institutions were net buyers of equities worth Rs 2,181 crore while foreign portfolio investors were net buyers by Rs 769.47 crore.

EV EFFECT: VW TO REBRAND USA UNIT AS 'VOLTSWAGEN'

DAVID SHEPARDSON
WASHINGTON, MARCH 30

German automaker Volkswagen AG's US unit confirmed Tuesday it will rename its US operations as "Voltswagen of America" as it shifts its focus to electric vehicles. The revised name takes effect in May and the announcement came after several outlets on Monday reported on a draft release mistakenly posted on the automaker's US website. "We might be changing out our K for a T, but what we aren't changing is this brand's commitment to making best-in-class vehicles for drivers and people everywhere," said Scott Keogh, president and CEO of Voltswagen of America. The German automaker has committed to sell one million EVs worldwide by 2025. The VW Dark Blue colour logo will remain for gas-powered vehicles and it will use a new light blue logo for electric vehicles. The company will use "Voltswagen" as an exterior badge on all EV models. —Reuters

TAP DIASPORA BONDS: UN BODY

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, MARCH 30

A UN body has advocated the issue of diaspora bonds by high remittance recipients, including India, to tide over the Covid-19 induced financial crunch. Diaspora bonds tap savings held by emigrants and could offer several benefits. For countries with limited access to foreign capital, these bonds offer a fixed-rate source of income, while enabling citizens to contribute to the development of their origin economies, finds United Nations Economic

and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan, the Philippines and Vietnam are among the world's top 10 remittance recipients. "The most predominant example is India, which issued five-year diaspora bonds in 1991, 1998 and 2000, generating \$32 billion in total," UNESCAP said. In general, diaspora bonds' interest rates can be lower than those of sovereign bonds because diasporas often have a lower country risk perception than other international investors.

Auto pay rules changed

New Delhi, March 30: Come April there will be no automatic recurring payment for many services, including recharge and utility bill as the RBI has made Additional Factor of Authentication (AFA) mandatory after March 31. On December 4, RBI had directed all banks including RRBs, NBFCs, and payment gateways that the processing of recurring transactions using cards or prepaid payment instruments (PPIs) or UPI under arrangements/ practices not compliant with AFA would not be continued beyond March 31, 2021.

Non-readiness of some of the players could impact recurring payment such as of utility bills, recharge of phone, DTH and OTT from Thursday. Under the new norms, banks will be required to inform customers in advance about recurring payment due and transaction would be carried following nod from the customer. So the transaction would not be automatic but would be done after authentication from the customer. For recurring payments above Rs 5,000, banks are required to send OTP to customers. —PTI

NAZARA DEBUT TURNS VOLATILE AFTER 80% GAIN

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, MARCH 30

The first gaming platform to be listed in India, Nazara Technologies, made a highly volatile debut on the bourses, with shares issued at Rs 1,101 listed at Rs 1,990 on the NSE, a premium of 80.4 per cent and at Rs 1,971 on the BSE. But later heavy profit taking led to shares hitting the 20 per cent lower circuit and closing at Rs 1,576.80 on the BSE and Rs 1,592 on NSE. Still Nazara shares closed 43.22 per cent higher compared to the public issue price of Rs 1,101 on the BSE and 44.59 per cent up on the NSE.

\$10-BN-A-DAY | CLOSURE Legal issues arising from the mishap are enormous
Suez Canal crisis: Time to add up damages

AARON CLARK, CINDY WANG & ANN KOH
MARCH 30

The immediate crisis of the Suez Canal blockage may have ended, but the battle over damages from the waterway's longest closure in almost half a century is just beginning. The long-term cost of the canal's estimated \$10-billion-a-day closure will likely be small, given that global merchandise trade amounts to \$18 trillion a year. Yet with cargoes delayed for weeks, if not months, the blockage could unleash a flood of claims by everyone affected, from the shipping lines

to manufacturers and oil producers. "The legal issues are so enormous," said Alexis Cahalan, a partner at Norton White in Sydney, which specialises in transport law. "If you can imagine the variety of cargoes that are there—everything from oil, grain, consumer goods like refrigerators to perishable goods—that is where the enormity of the claims may not be known for a time." The Ever Given was successfully pried from the sand on Monday, and traffic has resumed through the canal. But the blockage, which began last Tuesday, was the canal's



longest closure since it was shut for eight years following the 1967 Six-Day War. Egyptian authorities were desperate to get traffic flowing again through the waterway that's a conduit for about 12 per cent of

world trade and around 1 million barrels of oil a day. It may take as long as four days to return the canal to normal, Suez Canal Authority chairman Osama Rabie said at a Monday evening press conference. That assessment may be optimistic, and it could take weeks for the situation to be fully resolved, according to Arthur Richier, senior freight analyst at energy market intelligence firm Vortexa. The canal's blockage will reduce global reinsurers' earnings, which have already been hit by winter storms in the US and flooding in Australia, as

well as the pandemic, according to Fitch Ratings. Prices for marine reinsurance will rise further as a consequence, it said. Fitch estimates losses may amount to hundreds of millions of euros. In a potential merry-go-round of legal action, owners of the goods on board the Ever Given and other ships could seek compensation for delays from their insurers, if they have one. Those insurers for cargo on board can in turn file claims against Ever Given's owners, who will then look to their insurers for protection. —Bloomberg

HONDA RIDES IN CBR650R, CB650R SPORTS BIKES

MICHAEL GONSALVES
PUNE, MARCH 30

Honda Motorcycle & Scooter, India's second largest two-wheeler maker, on Tuesday introduced the 2021 CBR650R and the CB650R sports bikes priced at Rs 8.88 lakh and Rs 8.67 lakh, respectively. The bookings have opened at the firm's premium BigWing Topline dealerships. Both the models have taken the CKD (completely knocked down) route to enter India. The new Honda CBR650R and the Honda CB650R are powered by a 649cc, DOHC, 16-valve, in-line 4-cylinder engine that develops 86hp of maximum power.

