

DECCAN Chronicle

THE LARGEST CIRCULATED ENGLISH DAILY IN SOUTH INDIA

COIMBATORE | WEDNESDAY 24 | FEBRUARY 2021

WEATHER



Max: 35°C
Min: 19°C
Rainfall: Nil

ASTROGUIDE

Sarvari: Maasi 12
Tithi: Dwadashi
Star: Punarpusam/ Pusam
Rahukalam:
12 noon to 1.30 pm
Yamagandam:
7.30 am to 9 am
PRAYERS
Fajar: 5.17 am
Zohar: 12.28 pm
Asar: 3.44 pm
Maghrib: 6.17 pm
Isha: 7.28 pm
SUNSET TODAY 6.17 PM
SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.28 AM
MOONRISE TODAY 3.35 PM
MOONSET TOMORROW 4.48 AM

CORONA COUNT

CASES	DEATHS
(+13,462)	(+100)
1,10,29,236	1,56,598

covid19india.org

STATE GOVERNMENT BULLETINS

(+442)
TN: 8,49,166 12,472

WORLD CONFIRMED CASES

11,24,57,379

DEATHS

24,90,406

COUNTRIES, AREAS WITH CASES
219

worldometers.info

TN transport employees to go on strike from tomorrow

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, FEB. 23

A strike call by the transport corporation employees from Thursday, which threatens to bring public transport in the state to a screeching halt, came as a big blow to the government that had been managing to keep the trade unions from not going for direct action for the past few years.

A meeting of the federation of nine trade unions met on Tuesday and decided to go on strike from February 25 as the government has not been addressing their grievances for the past few years and despite several promises.

A joint statement signed by leaders of the nine unions — LPF, CITU, AITUC, HMS, TTSTF, MLF, AALLF and TWU — affiliated to various political parties said that the workers of the eight government transport corporations had been providing the best services to the people.

While acknowledging the constraints under which the government was running the transport corporations, the unions pointed out that no funds were being allocated to them.

COUNTER

POINT



Mantriji? He is always touring poll-bound states!

Army to buy 118 more Arjun tanks

PAWAN BALI | DC
NEW DELHI, FEB. 23

The Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) headed by defence minister Rajnath Singh on Tuesday accorded acceptance of necessities (AoNs) to proposals worth ₹13,700 crore including indigenous main battle tank Arjun Mk-1A.

DAC accorded AoNs for 118 indigenous Arjun Mk-1A

● **This is the second biggest “Make-in-India” project cleared in 2021 after Cabinet Committee on Security last month approved procurement of 83 Tejas Mk-1A fighter jets for Indian Air Force in a deal worth around ₹48,000 crore**

tanks for Indian Army worth ₹8,379 crore.

This is the second biggest “Make-in-India” project cleared in 2021 after Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) last month approved procure-

ment of 83 Tejas Mk-1A fighter jets for Indian Air Force (IAF) in a deal worth around ₹48,000 crore.

The tank has been fully designed and developed by the DRDO in close coordina-

tion with the Indian Army.

Last week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had formally handed over to the Army the Arjun Mk-1A in Chennai. Indian Army will now issue Request for Proposal (RFP) to DRDO and after which a contract will be signed. The Arjun Mk-1A tanks would be joining the fleet of the first batch of 124 Arjun tanks which have already been inducted into the Army.

DC

CHENNAI, FEB. 23

An eerie silence descended on the political corridors of Puducherry the day after the democratically-elected government was made to quit as even the BJP was caught in the horns of a dilemma over forming a government of its own.

Though the ousted Congress chief minister V. Narayanasamy was planning to file a revision petition on

the Supreme Court order allowing the nomination of three MLAs by former lieutenant governor Kiran Bedi, which actually led to the fall of his government, the public mood was against the BJP's machinations.

The Secular Democratic Progressive Alliance in the Union Territory which is a rainbow coalition of different parties has started organising protests to take the issue to the people. ■ P3

Intl passengers arriving at Chennai to undergo virus test

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, FEB. 23

All International passengers arriving at Chennai airport must undergo a mandatory Covid-19 test starting from February 23.

According to the airport sources, with newer variants of Covid-19 emerging and finding occurrences in India, the Union and state governments have refreshed their guidelines for International arrival.

As per the new protocol that has come to force on Tuesday, passengers coming from the European countries, the middle east, UK, Sri Lanka will have to get an RT-PCR test done prior to their flight.

US reaches 5,00,000 Covid-19 deaths

Washington, Feb. 23: The United States on Monday crossed a grim “heartbreaking milestone” in its fight against Covid-19 as the death toll due to the disease crossed 500,000, a staggering figure that is more than the combined American casualties during World War I, World War II and the Vietnam War.

“As a nation, we can’t accept such a cruel fate. We’ve been fighting this pandemic for so long. We have to resist becoming numb to the sorrow. We have to resist viewing each life as a statistic or a blurb or on the news,” President Joe Biden said on Monday as he led the nation in mourning the dead. — PTI

Public mood turns in favour of ousted CM

G. BABU JAYAKUMAR | DC
CHENNAI, FEB. 23

An eerie silence descended on the political corridors of Puducherry the day after the democratically-elected government was made to quit as even the BJP was caught in the horns of a dilemma over forming a government of its own.

Though the ousted Congress chief minister V. Narayanasamy was planning to file a revision petition on

the Supreme Court order allowing the nomination of three MLAs by former lieutenant governor Kiran Bedi, which actually led to the fall of his government, the public mood was against the BJP's machinations.

The Secular Democratic Progressive Alliance in the Union Territory which is a rainbow coalition of different parties has started organising protests to take the issue to the people. ■ P3

STATE | 3

Industries minister launches DigiBoxx in TN



WORLD | 5

Putin hosts Belarusian Prez for talks

SPORT | 8

Spinners, pacers both in game: Virat



deccanchronicle.com, facebook.com/deccannews, twitter.com/deccanchronicle, google.com/+deccanchronicle

TN to launch insurance scheme for poor; focus on infra; projects 2.02% growth

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, FEB. 23

Deputy Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam presented the interim budget for the year 2021-22 in the state assembly on Tuesday even as the entire Opposition walked out of the House in protest against the Speaker not allowing DMK member Duraimurugan to speak.

Among the highlights of the budget was the launching of the Puratchi Thalaivi Amma Comprehensive Accident cum Life Insurance Scheme for 55.67 lakh families living Below the Poverty Line.

The scheme, entailing a compensation of ₹2 lakh in the event of the breadwinner's death due to natural causes, ₹4 lakh if it was an accidental death and ₹2 lakh in the case of permanent decapitation, will be funded by the government and implemented in association with the Life Insurance Corporation and United India Insurance Company.

“Computer science which so far is being taught as a separate subject only in Classes 11 and 12, will now be introduced for Classes 6 to 10 in all government high and higher secondary schools,” the interim budget said.



Deputy chief minister and finance minister O. Panneerselvam presents the interim budget in the assembly, in Chennai, on Tuesday. — DC

Pandemic fight ▶ Total expenditure ₹13,352.85
▶ Additional capital expenditure ₹10,000 crore
▶ State expected to register a positive growth rate of 2.02 per cent, which was against an All India negative growth rate of 7.7 per cent

level committee, chaired by former RBI governor Dr C. Rangarajan, of incurring a capital expenditure of at least ₹10,000 crore additionally in 2020-21.

Additional sanctions, over and above the provisions made in the budget estimates 2020-21, were granted for capital works — irrigation, construction of buildings, roads and highways, housing, water supply and sanitation — amounting to ₹20,013 crore and the state expect-

ed to register a positive growth rate of 2.02 per cent, which was against an All India negative growth rate of 7.7 per cent, he said. The annual budgetary allocation for the police department has been stepped up from ₹3,513.15 crore in 2011-12 to ₹9,567.93 crore in the interim budget estimates 2021-22 and a provision of ₹5,000 crore has been made in the interim budget for the crop loan waiver scheme. ■ P2

TN INTERIM BUDGET

20²¹
22

Amma Comprehensive Accident cum Life Insurance Scheme for 55.67 lakh families living Below the Poverty Line. Compensation of ₹2 lakh in the event of the breadwinner's death due to natural causes.

Computer science to be introduced for Classes 6 to 10 in all government high and higher secondary schools

DFR for establishing 44-km first of phase Coimbatore at a cost of ₹6,683 crore under examination

₹22,218.58 crore for rural development sector

Debt within limits, insists finance secy

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, FEB. 23

Tamil Nadu's debts were well within the limits prescribed by the Union government, finance secretary S. Krishnan said, expressing a hope over the future of the economy.

Speaking to reporters after the presentation of the interim budget by Deputy Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam on Tuesday, Mr Krishnan said the state expected a revenue of Rs 30,000 crore from liquor sales. Since the Tasmac shops were closed for a prolonged period due to the pandemic in 2020, the revenue dropped, besides the Covid-19 itself draining the coffers.

He made it clear that the reason behind the hike in prices of petrol and diesel was not the state governments' taxation. “It was because of the Centre's policies,” he said.

Answering a question on the States' Rs 5.70 lakh crore debts he said that the 14th Finance Commission had restricted the limit for borrowing to 25 per cent and the 15th Finance Commission had increased it to 28 to 29 per cent. Tamil Nadu's debt was very much within the limits, he pointed out.



Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi, K.C. Venugopal, Ramesh Chennithala and Oommen Chandy during the conclusion of the 'Aishwarya Kerala Yatra' in poll-bound Kerala, in Thiruvananthapuram, on Tuesday. — PTI

BJP sweeps polls to municipal corporations in Gujarat

Ahmedabad, Feb 23: The BJP on Tuesday swept elections to six municipal corporations in Gujarat by winning 483 out of 576 seats.

The ruling party retained power in all the six municipal corporations in the state — Ahmedabad, Surat, Vadodara, Rajkot, Jamnagar and Bhavnagar. The polls had been held on February 21. The main opposition Congress got a drubbing, as it won only 55 seats and failed even to open account in Surat. On the other hand, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) put up an impressive show by winning 27 seats, all in Surat, and emerged as the main opposition in the Surat Municipal Corporation. The AAP had for the first time fielded 470 candidates across all the six corporations.

The BJP won 159 out of 192 seats in Ahmedabad, 68 out of 72 seats in Rajkot, 50 out of 64 seats in Jamnagar, 44 out of 52 seats in Bhavnagar, 69 out of 76 seats in Vadodara and 93 out of 120 seats in Surat. — PTI

Disaster-resilient infra need of the hour, says PM Modi

Kharagpur (WB), Feb. 23: Warning against the dangers of climate change and natural disasters like the one in Uttarakhand recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi Tuesday asked the IITs to develop disaster resilient infrastructure that can withstand their effects.

Addressing the 66th convocation of IIT (Kharagpur), the oldest of Indian Institutes of Technology, he gave the students the mantra of ‘Self-3’ — “self-awareness, self-confidence and selflessness” — in order to become startups for bringing about a change in the lives of people. He also spoke of the need for making available safe, affordable and environment-friendly energy to people through initiatives like the International Solar Alliance.

“Climate change is a major challenge as natural disasters destroy infrastructure. India drew the attention of the world to the issue of disaster management. “You can see what hap-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses the 66th Convocation Ceremony of IIT Kharagpur through video conferencing, in New Delhi, on Tuesday. — PTI

pened recently in Uttarakhand. We should focus on developing disaster resilient infrastructure that can withstand natural disasters,” he said.

The prime minister referred to the global Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), which he announced at the UN Climate Action Summit in 2019.

The CDRI envisages partnership of national governments, UN agencies and programmes, multi-lateral development banks, financing mechanisms, private sector, and knowledge institutions to promote the resilience of new and existing infrastructure systems to climate and disaster risks to ensure sustainable development. — PTI

Court sends activist Deep Sidhu to 14-day judicial custody

BHASKAR HARI SHARMA | DC
with agency inputs
NEW DELHI, FEB. 23

A Delhi court on Tuesday made strong remarks in favour of freedom of speech and expression and the right to dissent in the country while noting that “any call for any kind of violence” was absent from the much maligned “toolkit” as it granted bail to Disha Ravi, the 22-year-old climate activist arrested from Bengaluru on February 13.

Commenting that the Delhi police's case against Ms Ravi was based on “scanty and sketchy” evidence, the court said that “the offence of sedition cannot be invoked to minister to the wounded vanity of governments”.

Ms Ravi is accused of creating and disseminating an online document that lists out how people in India and abroad can support the farmers' protest against the three new laws.

The Delhi police has claimed that the document was meant to revive a Khalistani group and was part of a global conspiracy to “spread disaffection against the Indian state”.

New Delhi, Feb. 23: A Delhi court Tuesday sent actor-activist Deep Sidhu to judicial custody for 14 days in connection with the Red Fort violence on Republic Day during farmers' tractor parade against the Centre's three new agri laws.

Sidhu was produced before Metropolitan Magistrate Samarjeet Kaur on expiry of his 7-day police custody. He was produced before the magistrate in Tihar Jail, where he is currently lodged. — PTI

The court rubbished that allegation in its order.

In Tuesday's brief hearing, Ms Ravi's counsel stressed that she had no links with the Khalistani movement and that a case of sedition could not be sustained.

The police, opposing grant of bail, said Ms Ravi could tamper the evidence if she were to be released. “The resistance to the bail plea,” additional sessions judge Dharmendra Rana said, ■ P4

Coming to Kerala was very refreshing, says Rahul

Thiruvananthapuram, Feb. 23: Senior Congress leader and Wayanad MP Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday said he was used to a “different type of politics” in north India and coming to Kerala was “very refreshing” as people are interested in ‘issues’.

Gandhi, while speaking at the concluding rally of the ‘Aishwarya Yatra’, led by Leader of Opposition in the Kerala Assembly Ramesh Chennithala, said he learnt a lot from Kerala and understood a bit about the “wisdom of the people” here. “For the first 15 years, I was a member of Parliament in the north. So I had got used to a different type of politics. And for me coming to Kerala was very refreshing,” Gandhi said. — PTI



The main opposition, DMK, on Tuesday boycotts the presentation of interim budget for 2021-22 in the Tamil Nadu Assembly and walks out of the House. —DC

TN budget on poll track with Covid imprint

■ Announcements like life insurance, crop loan waiver and metro rail for Kovai and enhanced allocations for various sectors form part of interim TN budget. *B. Vijayalakshmi and Auspin Baylis* compile them

NEW ANNOUNCEMENTS — INTERIM BUDGET ESTIMATES FOR 2021-22

- On the whole, the government has incurred a total expenditure of ₹13,352.85 crore on the Covid-19 pandemic response.
- Considerable expenditure on the Covid-19 relief measures has also been met from the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF). So far, a total amount of ₹11,943.85 crore has been spent from the SDRF in 2020-21.
- The government is formulating an 'Urban Wage Employment' programme and the detailed guidelines are being finalised through discussions with stakeholders.
- A sum of ₹5,141.60 crore has been provided for devolution to urban local bodies and ₹6,754.30 crore to rural local bodies.
- A total amount of ₹3,548 crore has been provided for the PMAY (Gramin) scheme.
- An amount of ₹22,218.58 crore has been provided for the rural development sector.
- A sum of ₹3,700 crore has been provided for the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana - Urban (PMAY-U).
- Provision for the Comprehensive road infrastructure development programme (CRIDP), has been enhanced to ₹6,023.11 crore.
- To fund losses incurred by TANGEDCO, as per the UDAY commitments, a provision of ₹7,217.40 crore has been made in the Interim Budget Estimates 2021-22.
- In addition to Harvard University and Houston University, the government will provide assistance for the establishment of a Tamil Chair at Toronto University in Canada.
- With the sanction and construction of 11 new government medical colleges at a total cost of ₹3,995 crore, an additional 1,650 MBBS seats are expected to be available in 2021-22 academic year.
- Government grants are being provided for pilgrimage to Manasarovar and Mukthinath.
- The government will infuse ₹1,000 crore as fresh additional capital to the Tamil Nadu Industrial Investment Corporation Ltd., (TIIC) to strengthen and expand its role as a term lending institution accepting the recommendations of the Dr. C. Rangarajan Committee. A provision of ₹300 crore has been made in the Interim Budget Estimates 2021-22 for this.

METRO RAIL FOR COIMBATORE

The DFR for establishing a 'Metro Rail' in Coimbatore with 44 km in the first phase at a cost of ₹6,683 crore has been prepared, and is under examination. Besides the provision of ₹22,218.58 crore for the rural development sector, a DPR for the extension of metro rail from airport to Kelambakkam bus terminus via Tambaram and a detailed feasibility report (DFR) for the line from Tambaram to Velachery are under preparation.

T. SUDHEESH | DC
CHENNAI, FEB. 23

In order to improve the terrestrial flora and faunal population along the Cooum river, the Chennai Rivers Restoration Trust (CRRT) has decided to bolster its green cover by planting 4.53 lakh saplings of 108 native species on the riverbed by spending Rs 36.61 crore. A CRRT official said that trees *Millettia Pinnata*,

A CRRT official said that trees *Millettia Pinnata*, *Terminalia Arjuna Ellupai*, *Mahua Longifolia*, shrubs *Neer Nochi*, *Kurivi Pazham*, *Aavaram* and herbs *Pambukala*, *Karpooravalli* will be planted in order to increase the diversity and density of coastal aquatic organisms, mangroves and mangrove associates.

Terminalia Arjuna Ellupai, *Mahua Longifolia*, shrubs *Neer Nochi*, *Kurivi Pazham*, *Aavaram* and herbs

Pambukala, *Karpooravalli* will be planted in order to increase the diversity and density of coastal aquatic

organisms, mangroves and mangrove associates. Currently, the Cooum river banks are degraded and deprived of flora and fauna diversity in the riverine ecosystem. The eco-restoration plan covers the stretch from Paruthipattu to the rivermouth in the Bay of Bengal at a length of 32 km. It includes interception and diversion of wastewater, solid waste management, river channel

improvement, rehabilitation and resettlement, biodiversity management and riverfront development. The implementation of restoration works including de-silting and construction of baby canal, laying of intercepter pipelines, fencing, removal of solid waste management and rehabilitation of project-affected families are nearing completion. So it is imperative to build a green cover to protect the

river banks and preserve the diversity along the banks of Cooum, the official said. Last month, the state government had accorded administrative sanction for Rs 604.77 crore to implement sub-projects under the Integrated Cooum River Eco-Restoration Project. This comes at a time when the National Green Tribunal (NGT), southern zone, Chennai has decided

to hear a case regarding the pollution and encroachment of rivers Cooum and Adyar and Buckingham Canal on Wednesday. The tribunal in its order on January 22 had asked the chief secretary and officials concerned to file their status report regarding the steps taken to protect these waterbodies from pollution and encroachment on or before February 24. It may be recalled that on

February 13, 2019, the NGT had directed a committee headed by the chief secretary to be constituted for protecting rivers Cooum, Adyar and Buckingham Canal and to convene the meeting fortnightly for a period of next three months and thereafter on a monthly basis to review the progress in the matter and submit a quarterly progress report to the tribunal. But they have not yet filed the report.

REVISED ESTIMATES

POLICE

The annual budgetary allocation for the police department has been stepped up from ₹3,513.15 crore in 2011-12 to ₹9,567.93 crore in the Interim Budget Estimates 2021-22.



COURTS

A total sum of ₹1,437.82 crore has been provided for Administration of Justice, which includes a sum of ₹289.78 crore for the construction of new court buildings.



FISHERIES

The capital outlay for fisheries has been enhanced to ₹580.97 crore in the Interim Budget Estimates, 2021-22.

FOOD SUBSIDY

The provision for food subsidy has been stepped up from ₹6,500 crore to ₹9,604.27 crore for 2020-21.

AMRUT/SMART CITY SCHEMES

Provision for 'Smart Cities mission' has been stepped up to ₹1,850 crore and for AMRUT ₹1,450 crore. ₹2,350 crore has been provided for Smart Cities Mission and ₹1,450 crore for AMRUT in the Interim Budget Estimates 2021-22.

AGRICULTURE, LOAN WAIVERS & SUBSIDIES

To provide further relief to farmers, Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palanisami has announced waiver of all crop loans owed to Primary Agricultural Cooperative Credit Societies. A total amount of ₹12,110.74 crore owed by 16,43,347 farmers has been waived. A provision of ₹5,000 crore has been made in the Interim Budget Estimates 2021-22 for the crop loan waiver scheme. The government has taken the additional burden of premium subsidy and adopted a new co-insurance model on a 80:20 proportionate sharing basis to ensure that farmers have adequate risk coverage in the current year. The provision for the scheme has been stepped up from ₹747.15 crore in Budget Estimates 2020-21 to ₹812.09 crore, in the Revised Estimates 2020-21 and further to ₹1,738.81 crore in the Interim Budget Estimates for 2021-22. To honour the services of renowned farmer leaders, the 'C. Narayanasamy Naidu Paddy Productivity Award' is given from this year onwards to farmers who achieve the highest productivity in paddy crops, adopting the SRI method of cultivation. The 'Nel Jayaraman Centre for Traditional Rice' varieties is being established at Needamangalam at a cost of ₹47.87 lakh.



LIVESTOCK & VETERINARY

Three new veterinary colleges at Theni, Thalaivasal and Udumalpet have been started in 2020-21. At Thalaivasal in Salem district, the advanced Institute for Integrated Research on Livestock and Animal Sciences is being established on 1,102 acres of land at a total estimated cost of ₹1,020 crore. In the Revised Estimates 2020-21, the provision for establishing the



Institute has been enhanced to ₹634.87 crore.

FISHING HARBOURS

Sanctions have been accorded for taking up 43 new fishing harbours, fish landing centres and associated infrastructure at a total cost of ₹1,374.64 crore.

PALLIKARANAI MARSHLAND PROJECT

The government is fully committed to protect the Pallikaranai marsh land, which is one of the recognized wet lands in Tamil Nadu and plays a major role in absorbing flood waters and for recharging ground water.

In the light of the recent flooding in the southern suburbs of Chennai city, an integrated project in collaboration with the public works department, highways department and the Greater Chennai corporation, to clear and train waterways feeding into and out of Pallikaranai marsh. Steps to restore the absorptive capacity of the marsh will be undertaken at a tentative cost of Rs. 816.80 crore.



WATER PROJECTS

In 2020-21, 40 lakh household connections will be provided at a total cost of ₹3,016.26 crore of which funding from 'Jal Jeevan Mission' will be ₹2,006.08 crore and ₹1,010.18 crore will be converged from other schemes.



URBAN DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

The World Bank assisted Tamil Nadu Sustainable Urban Development Project (TNSUDP) has been implemented at a total cost of ₹3,831 crore from 2015. The project is to be completed by March 31, 2022. Out of the savings of US\$ 32 million under this project, it is proposed to take up two addi-

AGRICULTURE, IRRIGATION

The total allocation for the agriculture sector in the Revised Estimates 2020-21 has been stepped up to ₹11,109.48 crore. In the Interim Budget Estimates for 2021-22, a provision of ₹11,982.71 crore has been made for agriculture.

The capital outlay on major irrigation, medium irrigation and minor irrigation has been stepped up from ₹4,882.45 crore in Budget Estimates 2020-21 to ₹6,389.22 crore in Revised Estimates 2020-21. An allocation of ₹6,453.17 crore has been provided in the Interim Budget Estimates 2021-22.



PADDY PRODUCTIVITY AWARD

To honour the services of renowned farmer leaders, the 'C. Narayanasamy Naidu Paddy Productivity Award' is given from this year onwards to farmers who achieve the highest productivity in paddy crops, adopting the SRI method of cultivation. The 'Nel Jayaraman Centre for Traditional Rice' varieties is being established at Needamangalam at a cost of ₹47.87 lakh.

allocation of ₹34,181.73 crore has been made for school education.

Computer Science which so far is being taught as a separate subject only in Classes 11 and 12, will now be introduced for Classes 6 to 10 in all government high and higher secondary schools.

HEALTH, FAMILY WELFARE

An allocation of ₹144 crore has been made for 'Amma Mini Clinics' in the Interim Budget Estimates 2021-22.

The provision for Health and Family Welfare department has been stepped up from ₹15,863.37 crore in Budget Estimates 2020-21 to ₹18,458.27 crore in the Revised Estimates 2020-21. The allocation has been further stepped up to ₹19,420.54 crore in the Interim Budget Estimates 2021-22.



JOBS/EMPLOYMENT

The Tamil Nadu Private Job Portal has been developed and launched which job seekers and private sector employers can access. As on date 1,12,194 job seekers and 3,360 employers have registered on this portal, and 18,147 job seekers have already secured placements

WORLD BANK FUNDS

The Chennai city partnership has been formulated as a unique model of development cooperation after detailed discussions with the World Bank.

The Government of India's approval has been secured for the programme and loan negotiations with the World Bank will be held shortly.

The programme will be implemented in three phases over seven years. In Phase-1, the programme will be implemented with an outlay of ₹3,140 crore of which the World Bank funding assistance will be US\$ 300 million.



CRRT to plant 4.53 lakh saplings on Cooum riverbed

IN BRIEF

Industries min launches DigiBoxx in TN

Chennai: M. C. Sampath, minister for industries, virtually launched DigiBoxx, India's first digital asset management platform, in Tamil Nadu. The platform is an Indian digital file storage, sharing, and management SaaS product that provides storage options for businesses as well as individual users. It provides an easy and secure way to store all the files in one centralized location. It is India's first indigenous tech startup to enter the digital asset management business with value-added services encouraging entrepreneurs to 'Make in India' and 'Store in India'. Available in monthly and yearly plans starting with as low as Rs.30 per month, DigiBoxx provides a free account with 2GB maximum file size, and unlimited external collaborations.

PM to address BJP's CBE election meeting

Coimbatore, Feb. 23: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will address an election meeting here on February 25 and at least 1.5 lakh people are expected to attend, BJP sources said on Tuesday.

Modi will arrive here by flight at 3.30 PM and attend a function at the Codissia complex where he will dedicate various projects to the nation at 3.55 pm. BJP's district party president Nandakumar told reporters. He will address the public meeting organised by BJP at the adjacent grounds at 5 PM and leave for Chennai by flight at 6 PM, he said. Tamil Nadu Governor Banwarilal Purohit, Chief Minister K Palaniswami and Deputy Chief minister O Panneerselvam will participate in the official function,



Nandakumar said.

Party workers and functionaries from 12 districts are expected to attend the meeting, in the presence of BJP national general secretary C T Ravi, Union minister of state for home G Kishan Reddy and State president L Murugan. Tight security cover has been thrown in and around the area from Monday and nearly 7,000 police personnel including those from nearby districts, will be deployed on the day, police sources said.

PM in Tamil Nadu, Pondy tomorrow to launch several projects

New Delhi, Feb 23: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit poll-bound Tamil Nadu and Puducherry on Thursday to inaugurate and lay the foundation stone of various development initiatives, including key power projects in Tamil Nadu.

While at around 11:30 am on Thursday, the PM minister will inaugurate and lay the foundation stone of various development initiatives in Puducherry, at around 4 PM, he will dedicate to the nation and lay the foundation stone of multiple infrastructure projects worth over Rs 12,400 crore in Coimbatore, a Prime Minister's Office statement said. In Tamil Nadu, the PM will dedicate to the nation the Neyveli New Thermal Power Project - a lignite based power plant designed for power generation capacity

of 1000 MW with two units of 500 MW capacity each. Built at a cost of about ₹8,000 crore, the pit head power plant will utilise lignite as fuel from the existing mines of Neyveli, which have sufficient lignite reserves for meeting the lifetime requirement of the project, the statement said. The plant has been designed for 100 per cent ash utilisation and the power generated would benefit Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Puducherry, with Tamil Nadu having the major share of about 65 per cent, it said.

The PM will also dedicate to the nation the 709 MW solar power project of NLCIL, established over an area of about 2,670 acres of land across the districts of Tirunelveli,

Tuticorin, Ramanathapuram and Virudhunagar. The project has been set up at a cost of over ₹3,000 crore. Modi will also lay the foundation stone of the extension, renovation and modernisation of Lower Bhavani Project System. He will also inaugurate the eight-laning of Korampallam Bridge and Rail Over Bridge (ROB) at V.O.Chidambaram Port - one of the major ports in India. During his Tamil Nadu leg of the visit, the PM will lay the foundation stone for design, supply, installation and commissioning of a 5MW grid connected ground based solar power plant at V.O.Chidambaram Port. The project, to be set up at an estimated cost of about ₹20 crore, will generate over 80 lakh units (KWH) per annum, meeting 56 per cent of the total energy

consumption of the Port, thereby helping reduce carbon footprint of port operation. He will also lay the foundation stone for development of Integrated Command and Control Centers (ICCC) in nine smart cities - Coimbatore, Madurai, Salem, Thanjavur, Vellore, Tiruchirappalli, Tiruppur, Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi.

These ICCCs would be developed at a cost of about ₹107 crore, and would act as a 24x7 support system, providing real time smart solutions for quicker services, with the aim of integrating essential government services and enabling data-based decision-making, the statement said. In Puducherry, the Prime Minister will lay the foundation stone for 4-laning of NH 45-A - 56 km S a t t a n a t h a p u r a m -

Nagapattinam package of Villupuram to Nagapattinam project covering Karaikal district. He will also lay the foundation stone of the Medical College Building at Karaikal New Campus - Phase I, Karaikal District (JIPMER). The estimated cost of the project is ₹491 crore. Modi will lay the foundation stone for development of Minor Port at Puducherry under Sagarmala scheme. Modi will also inaugurate the Blood Centre at Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education & Research (JIPMER), Puducherry, which will function as a research laboratory and a training centre for short-term and continuous blood bank personnel training in all aspects of transfusion. It has been set up at a cost of ₹28 crore. —PTI



Makkal Needhi Maiam (MNM) party president Kamal Haasan in a press release in Chennai on Tuesday, lauded party functionary, S.P. Jegadeesh, secretary, party's Chepaak-Triplicane unit, who fixed a replica of party symbol 'Torchlight' on his auto-rickshaw, in an effort to spread the party's poll preparedness message to the public. Delighted over the cadre's enthusiasm, Kamal Haasan himself took the auto for a short ride with Jagadeesh. All other party workers were also encouraged by the developments. —DC

PIL against appointment of Justice Baskaran as chairman of TNSHRC

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, FEB. 23

An advocate has approached the Madras high court to declare as arbitrary, unconstitutional and illegal, the appointment of Justice S.Baskaran, a retired judge of the Madras high court, to the post of chairperson of Tamil Nadu State Human Rights Commission and further direct the state government to invite all eligible and suitable persons to offer their candidature and consider their merit on a rational basis and appoint the most suitable person.

The first bench comprising Chief Justice Sanjib Banerjee and Justice Senthilkumar Ramamoorthy before whom the Public Interest Litigation filed by advocate Logeshwar came up for hearing on Tuesday, directed Government Pleader V.Jayaprakash Narayanan either to get instructions or to file counter and posted after

four weeks, further hearing of the case.

Senior counsel A.Sirajudeen from Supreme Court, appearing for the petitioner submitted that the post of chairman is a statutory post and a public employment within the meaning of Article 16 of the Constitution of India. It is an employment or office under the State. Further, by virtue of Article 14 of the Constitution of India, all the eligible persons are entitled to be considered and the top meritorious person has to be appointed to any office under the State. It requires giving opportunity to the eligible persons to apply for it and thereafter considered on merit, he added.

Sirajudeen said there were hundreds of retired judges of the high court and a number of retired Chief Justices who were eligible for being considered. Among them, the number of retired judges who had worked as judges for more than

10 years may exceed 100. The selection committee had not considered any of them. Justice Baskaran had just worked as a judge for 2 years. He took oath of office as additional judge in the Madras high court on October 5, 2016 and retired on superannuation on November 16, 2018. But, on some extraneous reason, the more experienced judges were not at all considered and Justice Baskaran was appointed. There was no public advertisement or invitation at all to the eligible persons to apply for it and that was the reason for M.K.Stalin to boycott the proceeding. Though the Rules of the year 2020 regarding appointment of members to the Tribunal do not refer to the Human Rights Commission, in view of the Roger Mathew judgment, the Chief Justice of the high court should have been consulted and the failure makes this appointment illegal and unconstitutional, he added.

Jungle temple festival concludes

DC CORRESPONDENT
OOTY, FEB. 23

The five-day annual jungle temple festival at the Sri Mariamman temple located in Bokokapuram limits in MTR buffer zone, concluded on Tuesday evening.

Popularly known as 'Bokkapuram festival', the temple car festival on the penultimate day, always used to be a crowd puller. Round-the-clock bus services even from neighbouring districts which used to be the usual practice for decades, was missing this year due to the pandemic restrictions. Stalls and other recreation activities associated with the festival also were not allowed this year.

Devotees made a bee line to the temple during the permitted hours and the usual 'karagam', 'kumbam' and other such rural arts, formed part of the celebrations. Devotees and villagers in and around MTR believe that a visit to this temple would bring them good tidings.

Officials here breathed a sigh of relief as they effectively managed the crowd and prevented accumulation of litter in the woods.

Plea to increase working days for Home Guards

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, FEB. 23

A retired IPS officer has approached the Madras high court to declare as unconstitutional, a Tamil Nadu government order, in so far as it restricted the number of call out duties (working days) to 10 per month for the Home Guards.

The first bench comprising Chief Justice Sanjib Banerjee and Justice Senthilkumar Ramamoorthy before whom the PIL filed by K.Annamalai of Coimbatore district, came up for hearing ordered notice to the State government and DGP and posted after 10 weeks, further hearing of the case.

Noon-meal workers court arrest

DC CORRESPONDENT
PUDUKOTTAI, FEB. 23

Hundreds of employees of the Pudukkottai district unit of the Tamil Nadu nutritious noon meal scheme staged a road roko in the central districts of Pudukkottai, Tiruchy, Karur, Perambalur, Ariyalur, Tiruvarur and Nagapattinam and courted arrest here on Tuesday.

Association's state secretary

A.Malarvizhi told the media that the agitation was organised as part of the statewide agitation demanding among other things regularisation of their services, time-bound scale, etc.

At Pudukkottai, 324 persons including 291 women were arrested. Police said all the arrested were released in the evening.

In Thanjavur, 230 noon meal workers were arrested

when they staged a rasta roko agitation.

T. Ravichandran, district secretary of Tamil Nadu noon meal workers union, and Ramamirtham, district joint secretary, led the agitation.

Women participated in large numbers wearing black sarees. They demanded making them permanent staff, implementation of pension and family pension schemes.

Traders observe fast against land acquisition

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUCHY, FEB. 23

Members of Salai Virivakka Panigalal Pathikkappaduvar Kootamaippu, affected by the road extension, under the guidance of A.M. Vikkiram Raja and Ve. Govindarajulu, president and general secretary respectively of the Tamil Nadu traders federation, observed a day's fast at Kattur on the Tiruchy-Thanjavur national highway on Tuesday. They urged the Tamil Nadu government to give up its move to acquire land on both sides for constructing a service road for 14 km from Old Palpannai to Thuvakkudi, on the Tiruchy-Thanjavur national highway, as it would severely affect the wayside traders and the residents.

In a press conference, Vikkirammaraja appealed to the state government to give up its move for a service road and to plan a bridge in between Old Palpannai and Thuvakkudi highway.

He added the government should think over the Asur-Tiruchendurai ring road project which is nearing completion and once this ring road is ready, the traffic congestion on the Tiruchy-Thanjavur national highway will be reduced to a larger extent.

Among others, federation's general secretary Ve. Govindarajulu, Kootamaippu president K.Marappan and secretary S.Raghunathan were present.



Noon-meal workers in Vellore district take part in the statewide agitation demanding regularisation of their services and time-bound pay scale. —K.Senthil Nathan

More people could be swayed against BJP

From P1

With more such agitations being held, more people could be swayed against the BJP. Even the allies of the BJP in the Union Territory, the NR Congress and the AIADMK, were apprehensive of forming a hotch-potch interim government that can't last for more than two months as elections are due by May.

But the BJP would like to have a government in place when the elections come, though it is not sure how the Centre would deal with the present situation, particularly with Prime Minister Narendra Modi scheduled to

visit Puducherry on Thursday.

Since the decision to impose President's rule has to be taken by the Union cabinet, no announcement has come on that with the lieutenant governor's office only making it clear that the resignation of Mr Narayanasamy has been accepted.

Imposition of President's rule might not be a good idea at the moment as it might impede the Prime Minister from announcing a slew of attractive schemes for the Union Territory, besides launching some projects, with a view to endearing himself to the

people of Puducherry.

But then the public is angry over the dismissal of the government and might not be enamoured by the Prime Minister announcing grandiose schemes.

The dismissal has in fact come to help Mr Narayanasamy in the popularity stakes as there is now a collective fear that all that he had portended during his confrontation with Ms Bedi might come true.

Mr Narayanasamy had been warning the people of a conspiracy to strip Puducherry of its Union Territory status and turn it into something without political power like Ladakh

or merge it was neighbouring Tamil Nadu giving scant respect for its quintessential culture and traditions.

People now fear that all that might come true and the BJP trying to take control of the Union Territory has something more than it meets the eye. The manner in which MLAs of other parties defected from the Congress had also given the people a sense of uncertainty in politics.

Since the people vehemently seek to protect their culture and practices, the local parties would definitely play on the sentiments and create more public aversion against the BJP.

SHORT TAKES

U'KHAND: 136 MISSING PEOPLE 'PRESUMED DEAD'

Dehradun, Feb. 23: The Uttarakhand government has issued a notification authorising 136 people still missing after the flash flood in Chamoli district over two weeks ago to be declared "presumed dead".

Sixty-eight bodies have so far been recovered after the February 7 disaster. There is a tunnel in which around 35 people are suspected to have been trapped, but rescuers have not been able to reach it till now due to the sludge. Authorities say clearing the debris from the tunnel could take months.

A glacial lake was formed upstream of Tapovan over Rishiganga following the devastating flash flood which had demolished a 13.2 MW hydel project along the river besides causing extensive damage to the NTPC's Tapovan-Vishnugad hydel project along Dhauliganga.

Uttarakhand health secretary Amit Singh Negi said on Tuesday that the presumption of death can be made by officials in the affected district only in case of missing people who in all likelihood have died in the disaster but their bodies have not been found.

Normally the missing are declared dead only when they are not traced for seven years after the incident responsible for their disappearance but in case of an extraordinary occurrence like the one witnessed in Uttarakhand special provisions can be made, he said.

The move to declare those who continue to be missing in the flash flood as presumed dead has been initiated to expedite the process of distribution of compensation among the affected families, he said.

SIX KILLED WHILE DISPOSING GELATIN STICKS IN K'TAKA

Bengaluru/Chikkaballapur, Feb. 23: Six people were killed when the gelatin sticks they were trying to dispose of clandestinely exploded accidentally at a stone quarry site in a village in Chikkaballapur early Tuesday, police said.

The government has ordered a CID probe into the blast. Police said preliminary investigation indicated use of petroleum gel and Ammonium Nitrate in the quarry that was operating clandestinely and was closed a few days ago following raids.

The incident comes close on the heels of a similar blast at a quarry site in Yediyurappa's hometown of Shivamogga on January 22, which left six dead. Karnataka health minister K. Sudhakar, who represents the Chikkaballapur constituency, visited the spot and said the bodies of the victims were badly mutilated and scattered all over the place. Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted his condolences to the families of the victims of the blast.

"Pained by the loss of lives due to a mishap at Chikkaballapur in Karnataka. Condolences to the bereaved families. Praying that the injured recover quickly," he said.

Expressing shock over the incident, Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa said he has ordered a thorough investigation into the case and directed the officials to take stringent action against the guilty.

"A high-level investigation into the incident is underway and stringent action will be taken against the guilty," he added. "Whoever is involved in illegal activities, we will take merciless action," he said.

Karnataka home minister Basavaraj Bommai ordered a CID inquiry into the blast after visiting the spot.



West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee along with the daughter of TMC MP Abhishek Banerjee Azania Banerjee, at his residence in Kolkata on Tuesday. — PTI

Didi visits kin to boost confidence before CBI grills nephew's wife

RAJIB CHOWDHURI | DC KOLKATA, FEB. 23

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Tuesday morning met her MP nephew Abhishek Banerjee and his family apparently to boost their confidence minutes before the Central Bureau of Investigation reached their palatial residence in South Kolkata and questioned Abhishek's wife Rujira Banerjee Narula for her suspected link to overseas financial transactions in the coal smuggling case.

At around 11.30 am, a worried Trinamul Congress supremo, on her way to the state secretariat at Nabanna in a convoy from her Harish Chatterjee Street residence in the vicinity, dropped at Shantiniketan on 188A Harish Mukherjee Road, which was already turned by the Kolkata Police personnel

● **A 10-MEMBER CBI team including two legal officers and a female officer among others reached the same address within five minutes.**

into a fortress, after learning that a CBI team would arrive at the same address anytime to quiz Narula.

Walking into the multi-storied apartment, Banerjee paid a surprise visit to Abhishek, his wife and others and also spoke to them. In less than ten minutes, she however walked out of the building with Abhishek's little daughter. Boarding her car, the CM left for Nabanna while her grand niece was taken inside.

A 10-member CBI team including two legal officers and a female officer among others from the anti corruption branch reached the same address within five minutes. They grilled Narula over the next one hour and a half

about her link to Anup Majhi alias Lala, the absconding kingpin of the coal smuggling case, who allegedly used to deposit around ₹36 lakh monthly to the Kasikorn Bank account at Bangkok in Thailand and another bank in London, according to sources.

The CBI also wanted to know from her about her job profile, foreign tours and it's purpose, details of her bank accounts, whether she holds more than one passport and it's purpose and if she is associated with any registered company, sources claimed. After recording Narula's statement, the CBI investigators left.

In the afternoon sources close to the CM nephew claimed, "all questions were replied. All sort of cooperation was extended. The questioning session completed smoothly."

Slamming the CM for her visit to her nephew's house ahead of CBI's

arrival, BJP spokesperson Shameek Bhattacharya claimed, "Common people understand it well that the CBI does not enter someone's residence to unleash political vendetta. In such a situation, the CM's presence is unexpected. It was an attempt to create a mental pressure on the CBI. Had she refrained from paying the visit, it would have been better for her as the CM."

TMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh, however, alleged that the BJP has been trying to politicise the issue. "Abhishek has been on the forefront boldly. First he himself tweeted the CBI notice to his wife. Now Rujira also cooperated with the CBI. However, there are many others with allegations of corruption against them who are in the BJP. Still no action is taken against them. Rather those who are out of BJP, are being targeted unnecessarily," he said.

ICMR: Strains not linked to surge in Covid cases

Punjab orders new restrictions on indoor, outdoor gatherings

FROM PAGE 1

Amid a spike in coronavirus cases, a meeting was held at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) on Tuesday to review the pandemic situation. On Monday, Union home minister Amit Shah held a meeting and directed multiple central agencies to monitor the situation on a daily basis in states where Covid-19 cases have started increasing again. India on Monday had 10,584 new cases and 78 deaths.

Dr Balram Bhargava, director-general of Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR), said these two virus strains have been detected in other countries, too, and are not specific to India. They were found earlier in some states in India.

The E484Q strain was detected in four sequences in Maharashtra as early as March and July 2020. The N440K mutation has been reported on 13 different occasions, between May and September 2020, in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Assam. "The current upsurge in Maharashtra cannot be attributed to the currently discussed point mutations," Dr Bhargava said.

The spike in coronavirus numbers in some states comes as 240 new strains of

Kerala CM writes to PM

GILVESTER ASSARY | DC THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, FEB. 23

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on Tuesday sought immediate intervention of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to lift the restrictions on movement of people and vehicles from Kerala to Karnataka.

In a letter to Modi, the Chief Minister said that the people and vehicles from Kerala were being blocked at the interstate check posts along areas bordering Karnataka in the name of Covid restrictions. Following the stringent restrictions, people seeking medical treatment in hospitals in Mangalore and Dakshina Kannada districts and students pursuing studies in various higher educa-

● **CM SAID that the people and vehicles from Kerala were being blocked at the interstate check posts along areas bordering Karnataka in the name of Covid restrictions. Even vehicles bringing in essential commodities were being blocked.**

tion institutions in Karnataka were facing a harrowing time. Even vehicles bringing in essential commodities were being blocked.

He said the Karnataka action was against the Centre's standing direction that there should be no restrictions in the interstate transportation. Hence the Prime Minister should intervene and ensure the matter is settled amicably at

the earliest, he added.

Meanwhile, the workers of CPM, CPI, Congress and Muslim League led organisations took out separate marches to the Karnataka border demanding the lifting of restrictions on interstate travel. The workers took out processions towards the Talapady interstate border and blocked vehicles coming from Karnataka. They demanded that the restrictions which warrant mandatory Covid negative test reports for entering Karnataka should be lifted completely.

Though the Karnataka government had put the restrictions on hold for two days, political parties in Kasargod are demanding a complete roll back. The ensuing Assembly elections has also aggravated the situation.

the virus have emerged across the country. Health ministry sources said that between 800 and 900 samples — from Maharashtra and Kerala — had been sent for genome sequencing in the

past month. Samples for genome sequencing — to understand the complete genetics of the virus — have also been sought from Punjab and Bengaluru, where, in the past few days

alone, two apartment complexes have been declared containment zones and sealed.

So far genome sequencing of nearly 6,000 samples has been done.

Court slams police, grants bail to Disha

From page 1

"seems to be more of ornamental in nature...Considering the scanty and sketchy evidence available on record, I do not find any palpable reasons to breach the general rule of bail against a 22-year-old young lady with absolutely blemish-free criminal antecedents and having firm roots in society, and send her to jail."

The judge also added in his bail order that there was not "even an iota of evidence brought to my notice connecting the perpetrators of the violence on 26.01.2021 with the said Poetic Justice Foundation or the applicant/accused."

"The perusal of the said 'Toolkit' reveals that any call for any kind of violence is conspicuously absent. In my considered opinion, citizens are conscience keepers of the government in any democratic nation. They cannot be put behind the bars simply because they choose to disagree with the state policies."

"In my considered opinion, the freedom of speech and expression includes the right to seek a global audience. There are no geographical barriers on communication. A citizen has the fundamental rights to use the best means of imparting and receiving communication, as long as the same is permissible under the four corners of law and as such have access to

audience abroad," he said. Ms Ravi was asked to submit two sureties of Rs 1 lakh each.

Shortly afterwards a second judge — Pankaj Sharma, the chief metropolitan magistrate of the Patiala House Court — disposed of a Delhi police application seeking extended custody. The police had sought further four days of custody.

Ms Ravi has already spent six days in police custody and two days in jail.

In last week's hearing, Judge Rana had picked holes in the argument that Ms Ravi and two others — activist Shantanu Muluk and lawyer Nikita Jacob — were in league with secessionists and conspiring to cause violence

during the farmers' Republic Day tractor rally.

The judge dubbed Delhi police's reasoning "conjecture". "What is the evidence collected by you to show the link between her and the January 26 violence? You have argued about her role in toolkit and (that) she (is) in touch with secessionists," he began.

When the police, represented by additional solicitor-general S.V. Raju, said, "Conspiracy can be seen only through circumstantial evidence," the judge shot back, "So you don't have any evidence to connect Disha with the January 26 violence?"

To underscore the point, he added, "How do you connect actual violators with Disha?"



Narendra Modi

GUJ CIVIC POLLS: MODI TERMS RESULTS 'SPECIAL'

New Delhi, Feb. 23:

With the BJP set to retain power in six Gujarat municipal corporations, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday termed the results "very special" and said that for a party serving a state for over two decades to record such a phenomenal win is noteworthy.

He said the results of municipal elections clearly show the unwavering faith people have in politics of development and good governance.

The BJP appeared on course to retain power in the six municipal corporations, winning 409 of the 474 seats where results were declared till evening.

"Thank you Gujarat! Results of municipal elections across the state clearly show the unwavering faith people have towards politics of development and good governance," Modi said in a series of tweets.

"Grateful to the people of the state for trusting BJP yet again. Always an honour to serve Gujarat," he said. Modi also hailed the efforts of Gujarat BJP workers who reached out to people with the party's vision for the state. — PTI

India nods for Pak PM flight plan

DC CORRESPONDENT with agency inputs NEW DELHI/COLOMBO, FEB. 23

India granted permission to overfly Indian airspace for the aircraft carrying Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan en route to Sri Lanka on Tuesday evening, news agencies reported.

Permission was reportedly granted despite the fact that Pakistan had refused permission in 2019 on three occasions for Indian VIP aircraft carrying President Ram Nath Kovind and Prime Minister Narendra Modi to overfly Pakistani airspace.

The Pakistan PM reached Colombo on Tuesday evening for an official visit to the island nation. The external affairs ministry in New Delhi did not issue any comment on the permission that was reportedly granted.

Sources confirmed that Pakistan had officially sent its flight plan to India in advance regarding the aircraft that was to carry the Pakistan PM on his way to Sri Lanka, after which New Delhi granted permission for the

same. The aircraft reached Colombo from Islamabad on Tuesday evening and flew over the waters of India's Exclusive Economic Zone or in its vicinity on the flight path parallel to the peninsular Indian coastline, sources said.

Khan, who will hold wide-ranging talks with top Sri Lankan leaders including President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and PM Mahinda Rajapaksa on issues like trade, defence and technology, is the first government head to visit Sri Lanka since the Covid-19 pandemic. It is his first visit to Sri Lanka after assuming office in 2018. His last visit to Sri Lanka was in 1986 when he was the captain of Pakistan's cricket team during the acrimonious Test series where he accused the local umpires of bias.

Ahead of his visit, the Sri Lankan government cancelled Khan's planned speech to Parliament, citing the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is said the Parliament speech, due on February 24, was included in Khan's itinerary at the Pakistan government's request.

Maha minister denies links to woman's death

BHAGWAN PARAB | DC MUMBAI, FEB. 23

Maharashtra forest minister Sanjay Rathod made his first public appearance on Tuesday after being linked with the death of a 22-year-old woman in Pune. Though the minister dismissed the allegations against him, he landed himself in another soup over his show of strength defying Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray's public appeal against large gatherings due to Coronavirus pandemic.

Rathod visited Pohradevi temple in Maharashtra's Washim district, where he sought blessings and took part in rituals. The temple is revered by the Banjara community, to which he belongs. The Shiv Sena leader was conspicuous by his absence in public eye after his name was connected to the death of Pooja Chavan (22). On February 8, the deceased, hailing from Beed district, allegedly

committed a suicide by jumping off a building in Pune. Her death had kicked off a political storm in the state, as several audio clips of her purported conversation have gone viral in the social media linking the incident to Rathod.

However, the minister claimed 'dirty politics' was being played in the name of the woman's 'unfortunate' death. "The death of Pooja Chavan, who belonged to our community, in Pune was unfortunate. The entire community is pained by the death. Me and our entire community is part of the Chavan family's grief," he said.

Rathod also said that Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray has ordered a probe into the matter and the truth will come out following a probe into the matter.

On the images of him and the woman doing rounds on social media, the minister said his community loves him and several people get themselves

photographed with him. "I have been working in the social sector for 30 years. Don't put me in the wrong box just because of one incident," he added.

However, his visit to Pohradevi proved controversial as the minister's supporters thronged the venue defying the Covid-19 guidelines issued by the state government.

Praveen Darekar, Leader of Opposition in the Maharashtra Vidhan Parishad, said, "The way Rathod organised a huge gathering at the temple in Washim is condemnable. We have asked a district administration to take strict action against him for violating the norms." State BJP chief Chandrakant Patil said that the state government has been shying away from taking action against the minister despite many evidences of him connecting to the death of a deceased woman coming out in open. The culprit should be punished, he added.

URGENT | NEED

Places orders for 10 million doses of vaccine with Serum Institute of India

Sri Lanka may go with only Covishield vaccine

Colombo, Feb. 23: Sri Lanka has ordered 13.5 million Oxford AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccines in addition to the 500,000 doses gifted by India, and the country may not use Chinese vaccines in the second phase of immunisation, a government spokesman said on Tuesday.

Ramesh Pathirana, who is also the minister of plantations, said Sri Lanka is likely to go only with the AstraZeneca vaccines for the second phase of vaccination as the Chinese and Russian vaccines are not ready yet. "The Chinese vaccine has not submitted the papers relating to phase three trials," he said.

● **RAMESH PATHIRANA**, who is also the minister of plantations, said Sri Lanka is likely to go only with the AstraZeneca vaccines for the second phase of vaccination as the Chinese and Russian vaccines are not ready yet. The Chinese vaccine has not submitted the papers relating to phase three trials, he said.

● **INDIA GIFTED 500,000 doses of the same vaccine which kicked off Sri Lanka's vaccine rollout in late January.**

● **SRI LANKA** has recorded more than 80,500 coronavirus cases so far with 450 deaths. In recent weeks, health experts have said that delaying the second dose by three months could increase the efficacy of the vaccine.

For the first round of vaccinations, the government has placed an order for 10 million doses of AstraZeneca vaccine from the Serum Institute of India at a cost of \$52.5 million

and a further 3.5 million doses directly from AstraZeneca Institute of UK under the Covax programme, the spokesman said.

India gifted 500,000 doses of

the same vaccine which kicked off Sri Lanka's vaccine rollout in late January.

Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa thanked India last month for its generosity after he received 500,000 doses of Covishield vaccine donated by the country under the "Neighbourhood First" policy.

The government will be directed by the best medical advice on when the second dose should be given, Pathirana said, adding that although initially it was believed that the booster jab should be given after four weeks.

In recent weeks, health

experts have said that delaying the second dose by three months could increase the efficacy of the vaccine.

Last month, India announced it will send Covid-19 vaccines under grant assistance to Sri Lanka and seven other countries - Bhutan, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar and Seychelles, Afghanistan and Mauritius.

India is one of the world's biggest drug-makers and an increasing number of countries have already approached it for procuring coronavirus vaccines.

Sri Lanka has recorded more than 80,500 coronavirus cases so far with 450 deaths. — PTI

SHORT TAKES

U.S. CURBS ON 2 MORE MYANMAR JUNTA LEADERS

Washington, Feb. 23: The United States on Monday announced sanctions against two more leaders of Myanmar's junta and warned of further action as hundreds of thousands defiantly rallied for the restoration of the nation's democracy.

The US said it was blocking any US property and suspending the entry into the country of two members of the newly ruling State Administrative Council — General Maung Maung Kyaw, who commands the air force, and Lieutenant General Moe Myint Tun.

"We will not waver in our support for the people of Burma," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, using Myanmar's former name.

ZUMA GRAFT TRIAL SET TO BEGIN IN MAY

Johannesburg, Feb. 23: Former South African president Jacob Zuma's corruption trial is set to begin in May, more than 16 years after he was first implicated in the graft allegations.

Zuma, South Africa's president from 2009 to 2018, is accused of receiving bribes from French arms manufacturer Thales. However, both Zuma and Thales have refuted the charges levelled against them, which include corruption, fraud, racketeering, and money laundering.

Zuma's trial and the order for him to appear before a judicial inquiry into corruption are seen as tests of President Cyril Ramaphosa's campaign against corruption.

NEPAL: HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES REINSTATED

Kathmandu, Feb. 23: Nepal's Supreme Court on Tuesday reinstated the dissolved House of Representatives, in a major setback to embattled Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli who was preparing for snap polls amidst a tussle for power with his rivals in the ruling communist party. In a landmark ruling, a five-member Constitutional bench led by Chief Justice Chandra Shumsher annulled the Oli government's "unconstitutional" decision to dissolve the 275-member lower house of Parliament.

The court also ordered the government to summon the House session within the next 13 days. Nepal plunged into a political crisis on December 20 after President Bidya Dev Bhandari dissolved the House.

PUTIN HOSTS BELARUSIAN PREZ FOR TALKS

Moscow, Feb. 23: Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted his Belarusian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko for talks on Monday, amid media reports suggesting that he was coming to Russia to secure another loan. The Kremlin extended both economical and political support to Lukashenko after his disputed re-election in August triggered the largest and the most sustained wave of mass protests in Belarus' history. In September, Putin said Moscow would provide a \$1.5 billion loan to its ex-Soviet neighbor. Earlier this month, the Kommersant newspaper cited government sources saying that another loan, this time of over \$3 billion, would be discussed during his visit to Russia.

AFGHAN PEACE TALKS RESUME IN QATAR

Islamabad, Feb. 23: After more than a month of delays, escalating violence and a flurry of diplomatic activity, peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government have resumed in the Middle Eastern State of Qatar. Taliban spokesman Dr. Mohammad Naeem tweeted on Monday night that talks had resumed.

There were no details other than the atmosphere was "cordial", a commitment that negotiations should continue and an announcement that the first item of business will be setting the agenda. When talks ended abruptly in January, both sides submitted their wish lists for agendas. The task now is for the two sides to sift through the respective wish lists, agree on items to negotiate and the order in which they will be tackled.

FB to restore news services in Oz

Firm to pay local media companies for content after deal on pending landmark legislation

Sydney, Feb. 23: Facebook said Tuesday it will lift a contentious ban on Australian news and pay local media companies for content, after a last-gasp deal on pending landmark legislation. Australia's Treasurer Josh Frydenberg announced a face-saving compromise that will see Google and Facebook plunge tens of millions of dollars into the struggling local news sector.

In return the US digital firms will, for now, avoid being subjected to mandatory payments that could cost them vastly more and create what they see as an alarming global precedent.

Just hours after the compromise was unveiled, Facebook announced its first proposed deal with an Australian media company, Seven West, and was said to be pursuing commercial deals with other

local news organisations.

The company is expected to use the content to launch a dedicated news product in Australia later this year. "As a result of these changes, we can now work to further our investment in public interest journalism, and restore news on Facebook for Australians in the coming days," said Will Easton, managing director of Facebook Australia. The social media firm sparked global outrage last week by blacking out news for its Australian users in protest at the proposed legislation, and inadvertently blocking a series of non-news Facebook pages linked to everything from cancer charities to emergency response services.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison had angrily accused Facebook of making a decision to "unfriend" Australia. Google has already brokered deals worth mil-

● **THE SOCIAL media firm sparked global outrage last week by blacking out news for its Australian users in protest at the proposed legislation, and inadvertently blocking a series of non-news Facebook pages linked to everything from cancer charities to emergency response services.**

ions of dollars with local media companies, including the two largest: Rupert Murdoch's News Corp and Nine Entertainment.

Commentators described the eleventh-hour amendments — which came as parliament looks set to pass the law this week — as "a reasonable compromise". "Everybody can walk away saying, well we

got what we wanted," University of New South Wales business professor Rob Nicholls said.

Both companies now have an additional two months to reach further agreements that would stave off binding arbitration.

The tech firms had fiercely opposed the legislation from the get-go, fearing it would threaten their business models.

In particular, the companies objected to rules that made negotiations with media companies mandatory and gave an independent Australian arbiter the right to impose a monetary settlement.

That process will now be avoided if companies are deemed to have made a "significant contribution" to the Australian news industry through unspecified "commercial agreements". "We now face the strange possibility that

the news media mandatory code could be passed by parliament and it applies to precisely no one," said Marcus Strom, head of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, a union.

"It will just sit in the Treasurer's (drawer) as a threat to misbehaving digital companies." Google was also keen to avoid creating a precedent that platforms should pay anyone for links, something that could make their flagship search engine unworkable.

Facebook — which is much less reliant on news content — had initially said being forced to pay for news was simply not worth it and shut down content. "There is no doubt that Australia has been a proxy battle for the world," said Frydenberg.

Critics of the law say it punishes innovative companies and amounts to a money grab by struggling

but politically connected traditional media.

Thousands of journalism jobs and scores of news outlets have been lost in Australia alone over the past decade as the sector watched advertising revenue flow to the digital players.

For every \$100 spent by Australian advertisers today, \$49 goes to Google and \$24 to Facebook, according to the country's competition watchdog.

Tech insiders see the legislation as driven, in particular, by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, which dominates the local media landscape and has close ties with Australia's conservative government.

A new provision in the law gives Facebook and Google more discretion over who they do deals with, and what the sums involved would be.

— PTI



Javad Zarif

IRAN IMPOSES CURBS ON UN N-INSPECTIONS

Tehran, Feb. 23: Iran officially has begun restricting international inspections of its nuclear facilities, state TV reported Tuesday, a bid to pressure European countries and US President Joe Biden's administration to lift crippling economic sanctions and restore the 2015 nuclear deal. The state TV report gave little detail beyond confirming that Iran had made good on its threat to reduce cooperation with International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors. Iran's move to limit international inspections underscores the daunting task facing Biden as he seeks to reverse Trump's policies and return to the deal, the most significant pact between Iran and major world powers since its 1979 Islamic revolution.

"The law has gone into effect from this morning," said Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, reiterating that Iran would no longer share surveillance footage of its nuclear facilities with the UN agency.

"We never gave them live video, but (recordings) were given daily and weekly," Zarif said of the IAEA's access to information recorded by camera monitors. "The tape recording of our (nuclear) programme will be kept in Iran."

— AP

DRUG KINGPIN EL CHAPO'S WIFE ARRESTED

Washington, Feb. 23: The wife of Mexican drug kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman was arrested Monday in the United States and accused of helping her husband run his multibillion-dollar cartel and plot his audacious escape from a Mexican prison in 2015.

Emma Coronel Aispuro, a 31-year-old former beauty queen, was arrested at Dulles International Airport in Virginia and is expected to appear in federal court in Washington on Tuesday. She is a dual citizen of the United States and Mexico. Her arrest is the latest twist in the bloody, multinational saga involving Guzman, the long-time head of the Sinaloa drug cartel.

Guzman, whose two dramatic prison escapes in Mexico fed into a legend that he and his family were all but untouchable, was extradited to the United States in 2017 and is serving life in prison. And now his wife, with whom he has two young daughters, has been charged with helping him run his criminal empire.

— AP

Volcano erupts in Italy



The moon is partially seen in the sky as lava flows from the Mt. Etna volcano, near Catania, Italy, early Tuesday. The explosion started before midnight on Monday, provoking a huge plume that rose for several kilometres from the top of Etna, as reported by The National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology, Etno Observatory. — AP/PTI

Ex-security officials to answer for Jan. 6 failures at Capitol

Washington, Feb. 23: Congress is set to hear from former US Capitol security officials for the first time about the massive law enforcement failures on Jan. 6, the day a violent mob laid siege to the building and interrupted the presidential electoral count.

Three of the four scheduled to testify Tuesday before two Senate committees resigned under pressure immediately after the deadly attack, including the former head of the Capitol Police. Much remains unknown about what happened before and during the assault, and lawmakers are expected to aggressively question the former officials about what went wrong.

How much did law enforcement agencies know about plans for violence that day, many of which were public?

— AP

China relation is one of strong competition: WH

Washington, Feb. 23: America's relationship with China is one of "strong competition" and the Biden administration will work in close coordination with partners and allies to make sure that it is coming from a position of strength, the White House said, a day after Beijing urged the US to stop interfering in its internal affairs and lift trade sanctions.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki made the comments on Monday while responding to a question on a statement made by Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the China-US ties. Wang said that the US

should stop "smearing" the ruling Communist Party of China and its one-party political system, lift sanctions on trade and halt Washington's backing of "separatist forces" in Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong and Xinjiang. He also said that the Biden administration should "adjust" the hardline policy pursued by former President Donald Trump towards Beijing to check its growing influence.

At the White House briefing, Psaki said, "there is, of course, a review of our tariffs and the tariffs that were put in place. I don't have any update on that at this point in time."

"We believe the relation-

ship with China is one of strong competition. We want to come to that relationship from a position of strength.

"That means working in close coordination with our partners and allies around the world: Europeans, other partners in the region, also with Democrats and Republicans in Congress. And it also means we want to do work at home, and focus on doing work at home, to make sure we are coming to that from a position of strength," Psaki said.

The relations between China and the US are at an all time low.

— PTI

3-MINUTE | TRAILER

Rover searching for signs of ancient microscopic life

Nasa releases video of Mars landing

Cape Canaveral (US), Feb 23: Nasa has released the first high-quality video of a spacecraft landing on Mars, a three-minute trailer showing the enormous orange and white parachute hurtling open and the red dust kicking up as rocket engines lowered the rover to the surface. The quality was so good — and the images so breathtaking — that members of the rover team said they felt like they were riding along.

"It gives me goosebumps every time I see it, just amazing," said Dave Gruel, head of the entry and descent camera team. The Perseverance rover landed last Thursday near an ancient river delta in Jezero Crater to search for

signs of ancient microscopic life. After spending the weekend binge-watching the descent and landing video, the team at Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, shared the video at a news conference on Monday.

"These videos and these images are the stuff of our dreams," said Al Chen, who was in charge of the landing team. Six off-the-shelf cameras were devoted to entry, descent and landing, looking up and down from different perspectives. All but one camera worked. The lone microphone turned on for landing failed, but Nasa got some snippets of sound after touchdown: The whirring of the rover's systems and wind

● **FLIGHT CONTROLLERS were thrilled with the thousands of images beamed back — and also with the remarkably good condition of the rover. It will spend the next two years exploring the dry river delta and drilling into rocks.**

gusts. Flight controllers were thrilled with the thousands of images beamed back — and also with the remarkably good condition of the rover. It will spend the next two years exploring the dry river delta and drilling into rocks that may hold evidence of life 3 billion to 4 billion years ago.

The core samples will be

set aside for return to Earth in a decade. Nasa added 25 cameras to the \$3 billion mission — the most ever sent to Mars.

The space agency's previous rover, 2012's Curiosity, managed only jerky, grainy stop-motion images, mostly of terrain. Curiosity is still working. So is Nasa's InSight lander, although it's hampered by dusty solar panels.

Deputy project manager Matt Wallace said he was inspired several years ago to film Perseverance's harrowing descent when his young gymnast daughter wore a camera while performing a backflip.

Watching the video "I think you will feel like you are getting a glimpse into what it would be like to

land successfully in Jezero Crater with Perseverance," he said.

Thomas Zurbuchen, Nasa's science mission chief, said the video and also the panoramic views following touchdown "are the closest you can get to landing on Mars without putting on a pressure suit." The images will help Nasa prepare for astronaut flights to Mars in the decades ahead, according to the engineers.

There's a more immediate benefit. "I know it's been a tough year for everybody," said imaging scientist Justin Maki, "and we're hoping that maybe these images will help brighten people's days."

— AP

DECCAN Chronicle

24 FEBRUARY 2021

Puducherry: Democracy on backfoot, hold polls on time

The V. Narayanasamy-led Congress government lost a trust vote in Puducherry paving the way for an alternative mode of governance till the elections in April-May. Those wishing to bring down an elected government have succeeded in their efforts at demolishing democratic functioning backed by the will of the people as reflected from free and fair polls. The southern Union Territory is just another regime which in being brought down fulfils the “Congress *mukt*” aims of the national ruling party. The indecent hurry shown in dismantling the regime even at the cost of sacrificing a faithful “lieutenant” in Kiran Bedi has been linked to the Prime Minister’s visit to Puducherry on February 25 to inaugurate a renovated landmark. The machinations were complete once the Speaker was convinced into falling line with a Supreme Court order investing three nominated MLAs with the vote on such matters as the Budget and trust vote.

The Puducherry imbroglio follows the classic pattern of destabilisation of regimes not owing allegiance to the ruling dispensation at the Centre. It began with Arunachal Pradesh and swept through Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh and is another milestone for the BJP as it sought more footholds in the south while denying the Congress any share in power in a vast region. An emaciated Congress had not been politically smart enough to nominate three MLAs to the UT in time and now suffers the fate of ruling only in Punjab, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, besides backing the Shiva Sena

and NCP government in Maharashtra. The laidback manner of political operations in the grand old party played into the hands of a manoeuvring BJP, so brazen in its use of the office of governors and lieutenant governors in throttling the functioning of governments.

The Puducherry question should help bring the focus back to whether nominated members of Parliament and legislatures can be allowed to vote. The Speaker’s decision to abide by a Supreme Court judgment may have helped avert an awkward confrontation with the higher judiciary. Whether this only places a crown on the supremacy of the judiciary in present-day India is moot and needs a lot more debating on the delineation of powers among three pillars in a democracy. The Puducherry Speaker’s action can be questioned as to due procedure not followed in the trust vote though the chief minister and his alliance MLAs walking out before the confidence motion may only have helped him arrive at his own conclusion within the sweeping ambit of a Speaker’s power in the House.

The hunger for power driving toppling games is as old as the hills in India and may have evolved from ancient palace intrigues. This does not absolve those who continue to bring down governments through the clever strategy of resignations when anti-defection laws are in place. This is not a good advertisement for a democracy that mandates honouring of popular verdicts in a modern setting. It remains to be seen if Puducherry is in for a spell of President’s Rule but the aim should be to give an immediate opportunity for the people to vote again and it is incumbent on the forces that be to support the case for elections to be held in Puducherry as slated.

Judiciary’s late intervention

The order of Bombay high court on Monday granting bail to poet Varavara Rao, an accused under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) in the Bhima-Koregaon violence case, is a welcome intervention by the judiciary to stop state agencies from using stringent special laws to keep citizens behind bars as undertrials forever. Given his age and health condition, “sending him back to Taloja central prison would amount to endangering his life, thereby violating his fundamental right under Article 21”, the court held, and said it could not be a “mute spectator” as Mr Rao’s health deteriorated in government facilities.

While granting him bail, the court also widened the scope of the writ jurisdiction of the high court under Article 226 of the Constitution to invoke Article 21 on the right to life and offer relief to people who face the stringent sections in special laws, which make it difficult even for the courts to grant relief.

In a similar case earlier this month, the Supreme Court held that statutory restrictions should not stop constitutional courts from granting bail on grounds of violation of Part III of the Constitution. It had also asked the constitutional courts to consider the inordinate delay in the start of the trial while considering bail petitions. “Such an approach would safeguard against the possibility of provisions like Section 43-D (5) of UAPA being used as the sole metric for denial of bail or for wholesale breach of constitutional right to speedy trial,” it said.

These two orders together send a message to the law enforcement and investigating agencies that they have to use their professional excellence to get people convicted of crimes and keep them in jail instead of using provisions in special laws to do so. The courts’ resolute interventions also offer a ray of hope to hundreds of undertrial prisoners languishing in our jails due to the delay in the legal system.

Subhani

LOOKS LIKE ALL YOUR EFFORTS ARE GOING IN VAIN, MAHARAJ VIKRAM

SECOND WAVE OF CORONA

Afghan challenges for India & Taliban factor



Anand K. Sahay

Far & Near

In the Afghanistan context, the present juncture can be characterised as the twilight hour embedding the deepest uncertainty. India cannot but be greatly concerned as it has indicated interest in being invested over the long term. It has unmistakable strategic interests in a geopolitical (and geo-economic) area that marks the junction of South Asia, West Asia and Central Asia. India’s interest has lately been underlined in spite of the unsettling political and military situation in Afghanistan, which may well permit the return of the Taliban to the seat of power in Kabul. Indeed, India’s commitment to the people of Afghanistan was restated when earlier this month it signed the \$300 million Shahtoot dam project that will provide clean drinking water to the once great city of Kabul, which has fallen on hard times in recent decades.

The Taliban, a strong politico-military outfit specialising in the terrorist method, are a special product of Pakistan, manufactured to permit Islamabad to have a long-term hold over Kabul. This is widely recognised. The Taliban leadership lives in Pakistan. Whether the Taliban will continue to be under Pakistan’s thumb over the long haul is a matter for the future.

Pakistan influences Afghanistan in deep, malignant ways as it has a long border with that country. Pakistan’s best friend China, now militarily and economically very powerful, also has a border with Afghanistan. India, on the other hand, does not, and is thus disadvantaged by geography.

And yet, it must remain engaged with Afghanistan. Whether the Taliban’s recapture

of Kabul comes to pass or not, staying engaged with Afghanistan is India’s foremost challenge in the region.

New tools need to be devised. A new diplomacy with the friendly countries of the region, in particular Iran and Russia, which enjoy contiguity with Afghanistan (Russia via Tajikistan, where Moscow’s influence is paramount), must be envisioned. Indeed, the process of better gauging the Taliban, and forging the terms on which a relationship with this group can be reached, is also a part of the challenge for India.

The uncertainty in the Afghan theatre has been precipitated on account of the agreement reached by America’s erstwhile Trump administration with the Taliban one year ago this month. Under the Doha accord, all US troops must leave Afghanistan by May 1 this year in return for the Taliban cutting links with Al Qaeda. Alongside, the Taliban are enjoined to engage in an intra-Afghan dialogue in which the Afghan government is included. This is with a view to the formation of a government that will enjoy wide acceptability in the country.

The Taliban have, however, scuttled meaningful negotiations. They have instead unleashed violence on an unheard-of scale, killing around 50 people daily over the past year, and engaging in targeted assassinations.

The prognosis is dire. If the American forces pull out wholesale as planned, it is widely thought that civil war will break out. Armed factions are likely to emerge to resist the Taliban as the latter attempt to take control in Kabul with the help of Pakistan (and possibly China), while some

groups may strike deals with the Taliban.

All eyes are on the new US administration of President Joe Biden. Will he stick to the timetable of withdrawal of American forces envisaged by his predecessor? Or will he, as many have urged, adopt a conditions-based approach whereby the US forces will persevere with a withdrawal scheme that will be guided by conditions on the ground and not by an artificial timetable.

The Afghans, and the regional powers, are naturally watching the situation closely. Iran and Russia, which carry considerable weight in Afghanistan, would want the Americans to withdraw soonest, but not in a rush. They fear that a hasty US pullout will inexorably pave the path for a quick Taliban or Pakistan takeover as other leading political and armed factions (over which Iran and Russia have natural leverage) will be disadvantaged if the Taliban cut through militarily, pre-empting a political process.

India — while it has commonalities with Tehran and Moscow on the Afghan issue — desires that the US ensure a smooth political process for the future governance of Afghanistan in which all participants, including the Taliban if they are interested, engage in political competition on the basis of an agreed Constitution, without resort to arms, in a sovereign, democratic, Afghanistan.

New Delhi has nursed such a goal for long but has done all too little to work in that direction. It practically found itself rooted to the ground for more than six months after the US and Taliban signed the Doha agreement in February 2020,

Zamir Kabulov, the Russian President’s special envoy for Afghanistan and a respected Kabul hand, is said to have noted wryly: ‘If India wants to come to the party, it must dance!’

uttering diplomatic pieties and doing little else.

India showed yet again that while it has influence in Afghanistan, especially with the people, it possesses little leverage. Lately, however, attempts are being made to change this state of affairs. To the satisfaction of the Ashraf Ghani government in Kabul, New Delhi actively engaged the United States and Nato to resist a precipitate military withdrawal and has shown other signs of engaging more deeply.

It may be appropriate to make mention in this context of the Afghan charge d’affaires in New Delhi, Tahir Qadiry, who worked with energy, and some foresight, in a most difficult moment to impress upon India to step up its act and be proactive to mobilise Afghan factions in the democratic direction even as the US-sanctioned Doha process (which may conceivably unravel) plays its music in a different register.

Kabul has not had an ambassador in New Delhi for more than two years and it fell to this young diplomat to fill a big gap. It is this spirit that saw in the recent period the arrival in New Delhi of senior Afghan personalities such as Abdul Rashid Dostum and Ata Mohammad Noor and others although the Covid-19 pandemic inhibited travel. The building of a viable consensus among the top political figures of Afghanistan is crucial in the context of a post-US Afghanistan.

India enjoys the goodwill to be a catalyst. But will it play that part? Zamir Kabulov, the Russian President’s special envoy for Afghanistan and a respected Kabul hand, is said to have noted wryly: “If India wants to come to the party, it must dance!” Perhaps preliminary steps have been taken in that direction. But it is still early days. What New Delhi must really prepare for is to remain on *terra firma* in the Afghan theatre even if the US troops pull out completely in the next two months.

LETTERS

HIKE IN COVID CASES

It is distressing to note that India has recorded its steepest single day hike since November-end due to high number of cases in five states. Complacency and disregard in following the pandemic protocols are the main reasons. The governments (central and state) should also share the responsibility for the rise as they have reduced the supervision in identifying and action on the violators. It is high time the government stepped up its vigil. The states going for polls (especially Tamil Nadu) are at a greater risk as the Covid-19 cases could rise in the coming days due to electioneering process and more than 75% of the public including leaders could be seen not wearing masks.

M.C. Vijay Shankar, Chennai

FALL OF CONG GOVT

THE FALL of Congress government led by V. Narayanasamy in Puducherry was a foregone conclusion the day Centre had given the temporary charge to former Tamil Nadu BJP chief and Governor of Telangana instead of the Governor of Tamil Nadu, which is very close to UT of Puducherry. What the previous governor Dr Kiran Bedi could not achieve to use 3 nominated BJP members to topple the fragile government over the last four years, the new Lt Governor achieved in four just days. Of course, the leadership from Delhi led by the home minister played an important role in what is called ‘Operation Kamalam’. Of course, for the Congress another state gone out of their hands clearly shows the party has no leader to take care of the state which has been destabilised by the ruling BJP.

N. Nagarajan, via e-mail

MILESTONE FOR ISHANT

TO CONGRATULATIONS Ishant Sharma, who will be playing his 100th Test match at the biggest stadium in the world on Wednesday. No doubt, for any player the team comes first and the milestones next. However, very rarely a pace bowler could achieve the milestone of playing his 100th Test, that too in his own country. We sincerely wish that, as in the case of Joe Root, who celebrated his 100th Test with a double ton, Ishant Sharma too comes up with a record haul of wickets at Motera and takes our team to the World Test Championship. Incidentally, the presence of thousands of spectators should boost his morale to excel at Motera. We wish him and the Team the best in the remaining two Tests.

N. Mahadevan, Chennai

KAUSHIK MITTER

Editor

K. SUDHAKAR

Printer & Publisher

R. MOHAN

Resident Editor

DECCAN CHRONICLE offices are located at:

Chennai: SP 5 Developed Plot, Industrial Estate, Guindy, Chennai 600032. Phones: (044) 22254747, 22254748

Coimbatore: 77 Vivekananda Road, Rammagar, Coimbatore 641009. Phone: (0422) 2231255, 2231256

Hyderabad: 36, Sarojini Devi Road, Secunderabad 500 003. Phone: (040) 27803930-4. Fax: (040) 27805256.

Bangalore: 5th Floor, BMTC Commercial Complex, 80 Ft. Road, Koramangala, Bangalore-560095. Ph: 08043460500; Fax: 080-22960551/52/55

Visakhapatnam: Survey No. 13A Beach Road, Near Kailasgiri Ropeway, Sector-9 MVP Colony, Visakhapatnam - 530 017. Phones: (0891) 2552333/2552334, Fax: (0891) 2755285

Vijayawada: No. C 3 & 4, Patamata, Industrial Estate, Auto Nagar, Vijayawada (A.P.). Phones: (0866) 2555284/ 2555287, Fax: (0866) 2555234

Rajahmundry: Vemagiri, Dhawleswaram Rd, Rajahmundry 533125. Phones: (0883) 2417208, 2417618

Anantapur: Thapovan Colony, Bangalore Bye-Pass Road, Anantapur 515004. Phones: (08554) 276903, Fax: 08554-276904

Nellore: Survey No. 527/2, Burranpur Village, Venkatchalam (M), Chemudugunta Panchayat, Nellore. Phone: (0861) 2248581/ 82, Telefax: (0861) 2348580

Karimnagar: Survey No. 1341, Vavilalappally Colony, Jagityala Road, Karimnagar 505 001. Phone: (0878) 2228908; Telefax: (0878) 2220433

Kochi: No. 3-B, 3rd Floor, DD TRADE TOWER, Kaloor-Kadavanthara Road, Ernakulam, Ph: 0484-4039408

Kozhikode: No 6/1002 E, First Floor City Mall, Opp. YMCA Kannur Road, Kozhikode - 673 001 Fax : 0495 4019018

Thiruvananthapuram: St Joseph Press Thycad post, Cotton Hills, Thiruvananthapuram-14, Ph: 0471-2735105/6/7, Fax: 0471-4016112 Gram: CHRONICLE Postal registration no. No HSD-348/2006-08ss

Dilip Cherian
Dilli Ka Babu



‘Takeover’ of Gymkhana Club strikes fear in Lutyens’ Delhi

The capital’s Gymkhana Club, the 107-year-old watering hole favoured by the high and mighty of currently beleaguered Lutyens’ Delhi, is back in the news. With its seemingly endless saga of mismanagement and irregularities, the Club has been in the limelight a lot, unfortunately.

The present crisis has emerged after the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) dissolved the Club’s governing council and appointed M.M. Juneja, director general of the ministry of corporate affairs, as “administrator” to oversee the club’s functioning even as the legal case continues. Among Mr Juneja’s first actions after his appointment sent a notice to all members to clear pending dues amounting to Rs 1.2 crores!

This is the first time in the Club’s history that an administrator has been appointed to run its affairs. Mr Juneja has been given the mandate to introduce “the best practices that can bring the club to the

21st-century norms”.

The current imbroglio dates back four years when the ministry of corporate affairs decided to open an inquiry into the Club’s management after the growing number of complaints and court cases against the Club. The petition was filed early last year at the NCLAT in which the ministry sought to take over the Club management. It seems to have got its way, for now. Other clubs in Lutyens’ Delhi are trembling now that serious action has begun. Any guesses about who’s next? DKB is listening to your chatter, so send it in...

ED ON AN EXPANSION SPREE

As it seeks to become nimbler as well as to strengthen its reach due to growing responsibilities, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) is on an expansion spree. This requires more officers for new zonal and sub-zonal offices.

The agency, a part of the revenue department of the Union finance ministry, is responsible for enforce-

ing economic laws and fighting economic crime. But with a wider jurisdiction now with new responsibilities under the FEMA, PMLA and FEO acts, it will need to expand its footprint.

According to sources, the expansion will involve a considerable restructuring of its cadre strength. At present, ED has a sanctioned strength of 2,064 posts including five special directors and 27 joint directors. Since there is a shortage of officers for even the sanctioned posts, there is a greater urgency for selecting more officers to fill existing vacancies as well as for the new offices. Apparently, there is a move to create new posts of additional/joint directors and deputy directors for the new zonal and sub-zonal offices.

Recently, ED promoted 10 assistant directors as deputy directors of enforcement. They include P. Radhakrishnan, P. Vinod Kumar, P. Nandini, Rajesh Kumar, M. Nair, Shubhendu Parthi, Diptesh Mondal, Benjamin S.N. Chattair, Pad-

ma, V.G. Thomas and Krishna Jain. The agency has also recently opened two new zonal offices in Bhopal and Gurugram and raised the status of sub-zonal offices in Raipur and Bhubaneswar to zonal offices. It has also opened several sub-zonal offices across the country.

BIHAR EX-DGP’S POLITICAL CAREER STILL AT START LINE

The political ambitions of the high-profile former DGP of Bihar Guptaeshwar Pandey have been thwarted, yet again.

Though Mr Pandey waited patiently for his hoped-for induction into the NDA government, chief minister Nitish Kumar has instead appointed another former IPS officer, Sunil Kumar, as a cabinet minister in the state with the excise and prohibition portfolio, barely a few months after his retirement.

Mr Pandey shot into the headline with his comments during the furore over actor Sushant Singh’s suicide. Even as the controversy

raged, Mr Pandey took voluntary retirement and joined the Janata Dal (United) Party hoping to get a party ticket. However, the ticket went to the BJP candidate under the seat-sharing agreement within the NDA.

This denied, many were certain that Mr Pandey would be inducted into the Nitish Cabinet sooner than later. But Sunil Kumar has pipped him to that. Neither has Mr Pandey been made an MLC either.

Curiously, this was Mr Pandey’s second attempt at a career in politics. In 2009, he had taken voluntary retirement in the hope of getting a BJP ticket, which he was denied. Luckily for him, Nitish Kumar allowed him to withdraw his resignation from the IPS and subsequently even elevated him as state police chief.

Will Mr Pandey’s patient wait fructify or has he run out of options? We’ll wait and see.

Share a babu experience! Follow dilipthecherian@Twitter.com.

quick
BITES

INDICATORS %

Sensex	49,751.41	0.01
Nifty 50	14,707.80	0.22
S&P 500*	3,841.84	-0.89
Dollar (₹)	72.44	0.08
Pound Sterling (₹)	101.73	-0.13
Euro (₹)	88.05	-0.31
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	46,372.337	0.72
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	65.24	0.00
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.172	0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.372	0.003

* As of 8:30 PM IST

NTPC inks pact
to buy Gail's 25%
in Ratnagiri Gas

NTPC said it has signed a share purchase agreement to buy Gail's 25.51 per cent stake in Ratnagiri Gas and Power Pvt Ltd (RGPL), commonly known as Dabhol project. Once the transaction is complete, NTPC will have 86.49 per cent stake in RGPL. Earlier in January, NTPC had announced acquiring 35.47 per cent stake in RGPL from its lenders. Initially, NTPC and Gail had 25.51 per cent stake each in the Dabhol project.

■ Separation could help revive stake sale to Aramco
RIL to spinoff O2C unit
with \$25 billion loanDEBJIT CHAKRABORTY &
ARCHANA CHAUDHARY
FEB. 23

Reliance Industries Ltd has started carving out its new oil-to-chemicals (O2C) operation into an independent unit with a \$25 billion loan from the parent, as billionaire Mukesh Ambani steps up efforts to unlock the value of his businesses.

The wholly owned unit's assets will be funded by the interest-bearing loan, which will be an "efficient mechanism to upstream cash, including any potential capital receipts," in the unit, according to a presentation filed with the stock exchanges.

Oil-to-chemicals contributed more than 60 per cent in the last financial year to the group's revenue that's been lately pivoting toward consumer businesses such as technology and retail. Splitting the business will make it easier for Ambani to bring in investors and help expedite a proposed stake sale to Saudi Arabian Oil Co.

Creating the unit "facilitates participation by strategic and financial investors," Reliance said. It expects the separation to be completed by September. Approvals have been received from the markets regulator and stock exchanges, and the company will seek a nod from shareholders and creditors in the first quarter of FY22.

Ambani amassed more than \$27 billion last year from global investors,

SLICING AND DICING VALUE

► RIL to house only upstream oil and gas E&P biz, including KG-D6 block, financial services, group treasury and legacy textile businesses

► Even though the O2C assets will move into a new arm, its debt will continue with RIL

► O2C unit houses Singapore and UK-based oil trading subsidiaries and Reliance Industries Uruguay Petroquimica SA.

► It also houses Reliance Ethane Pipeline Ltd that operates a pipeline between Dahej and Nagothane as well as a 74.9% stake RIL holds in the JV with Sibur

including Facebook Inc and Google through stake sales in his retail and digital ventures, turning Reliance net-debt-free.

Reliance has floated separate units twice earlier for funding two refineries on the west coast. The entities were merged with the parent on the completion of the plants, which can together now process 1.4 million barrels of crude daily, making it the world's biggest refining complex.

Once the spin-off is completed, Reliance Industries will house only the upstream oil and gas exploration and production business, including the KG-D6 block, financial services, group treasury and the legacy textile businesses, and act as a holding company of the group.

The retail business is held in Reliance Retail Ventures and telecom and digital ventures are nested in Jio Platforms.

RIL holds 85.1 per cent of Reliance Retail and 67.3 per

cent of Jio Platforms. The rest it had sold to global investors for over Rs 2 lakh crore.

RIL will provide the \$25 billion loan to the O2C subsidiary at floating interest rate for 10 years. The subsidiary has about \$42 billion of assets (28 per cent of consolidated assets).

In August 2019, RIL had agreed to upstream Rs 1.08 lakh crore of Jio's debt to make its telecom venture debt-free, ahead of inducting strategic and financial investors like Facebook, Google and KKR.

As of December 2020, RIL's gross debt stood at Rs 2.57 lakh crore.

Even though the O2C assets will move into a new arm, its debt will continue to sit inside RIL.

The O2C unit also houses the firm's Singapore and the UK-based oil trading subsidiaries and marketing subsidiary, Reliance Industries Uruguay Petroquimica SA.

It also houses Reliance

Ethane Pipeline Limited that operates a pipeline between Dahej in Gujarat and Nagothane in Maharashtra as well as a 74.9 per cent stake that Reliance holds in the joint venture with Sibur.

It's very large ethane carriers, gas pipelines such as one that transports coal-bed methane from its coal bed methane (CBM) blocks, overseas oil and gas asset holding company Reliance Industries (Middle East) DMCC, and domestic exploration and production assets would not form part of the O2C unit.

Also, RIL's textiles business as operated out of the Naroda site, Baroda township and land, including cricket stadium, Jamnagar power assets, and Sikka Ports and Terminals Limited would also not be part of the O2C unit.

RIL owns and operates twin oil refineries at Jamnagar in Gujarat, with a combined capacity of 68.2 million tonnes per annum. It is also the country's largest petrochemical manufacturer with units at Jamnagar, Dahej, Hazira, Nagothane, Vadodara, Patalganga, Silvassa, Barabanki, and Hoshiarpur.

The company holds a 66.6 per cent stake in the KG-D6 block where it is investing about \$5 billion in developing a second set of gas discoveries along with BP.

It also has a similar stake in the NEC-25 block in the Bay of Bengal and operates two CBM blocks in MP. These upstream assets are not part of the O2C unit.

— Bloomberg/PTI

INDIA INC MAY
OFFER 7.7%
SALARY HIKESANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, FEB. 23

Indian Inc is likely to offer an average salary hike of 7.7 per cent in 2021 after the decade's lowest hike of 6.1 per cent in 2020. The year will also see a reversal from the 10-year declining trend in salary hike. However, this may not increase higher cash-in-hand for employees if organisations make higher provident fund contributions as per the new labour codes.

According to a survey by global professional services firm Aon, almost 88 per cent of surveyed companies reported they intend to increase salaries in 2021, up from 75 per cent in 2020.

Over 34 per cent companies said that they would offer salary hike between 8 and 10 per cent, while 30.6 per cent would offer 5 to 8 per cent. Only 12.2 per cent companies said they would not give any hike and this is lower than 25.4 per cent in 2020.

Hirings are, meanwhile, picking up in India Inc. Job site Scieky Market Network, which has analysed data from over 15,000 job postings, said the IT sector is experiencing a sequential growth in hiring since the lockdown. Job postings were up 39 per cent in January compared to December.

The IT sector was followed by BPO (10 per cent growth) and banking (6 per cent).

Job postings have seen a jump in several metro cities, including Hyderabad and Pune.

China returns as top
trade partner amid
border standoffKARTHIKEYAN
SUNDARAM &
ARCHANA CHAUDHARY
FEB. 23

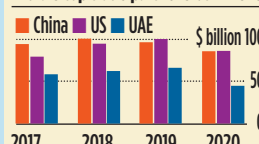
China regained its position as India's top trade partner in 2020, as New Delhi's reliance on imported machines outweighed its efforts to curb commerce with Beijing after a border conflict.

Two-way trade between the economic and strategic rivals stood at \$77.7 billion last year, shows provisional data from India's commerce ministry. Although that was lower than the previous year's \$85.5 billion, it was enough to make China the largest commercial partner displacing the US-bilateral trade with which came in at \$75.9 billion amid muted demand for goods in the middle of a pandemic.

While Prime Minister Narendra Modi banned hundreds of Chinese apps, slowed approvals for investments from the neighbour and called for self-reliance after a deadly clash along their disputed Himalayan border, India continues to rely heavily on Chinese-made heavy machinery, telecom equipment and home appliances. As a result, the bilateral trade gap with China was at almost \$40 billion in 2020, making it India's largest.

Total imports from China at \$58.7 billion were more than India's combined purchases from the US and the UAE, which are its second- and third-largest trade part-

Dragon returns

China displaces the US to regain
India's top trade partner slot in 2020Source: Ministry of Commerce
Note: Data for 2020 is provisional

ners, respectively.

That said, India did manage to lower imports from its neighbour amid demand disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic. India also managed to increase its exports to China by about 11 per cent from a year ago to \$19 billion last year.

The tense relations are already weighing on India's ambitions to bolster its manufacturing capabilities. New Delhi has been slow to issue visas to Chinese engineers needed to help Taiwanese companies set up factories under a so-called production-linked incentive programme, or PLI, to promote local manufacturing.

"Still a very long way to go" is how Amitendu Palit, an economist specialising in international trade and investment at the National University of Singapore, described New Delhi's efforts to wean itself away from Beijing.

"The PLI schemes will take at least four-five years to create fresh capacities in specific sectors. Till then reliance on China would continue."

— Bloomberg

COFFEE-BREAK

Your day today By Dr C.V.B. Subrahmanyam



Aries: Be open to well meaning advice. Your partner could get upset. Your initiatives will carry more weight if you garner the support of influential colleagues and seniors.



Taurus: Discussions could be time consuming and intense but you will make steady progress towards resolving certain issues. Your efforts at work will be productive.



Gemini: Objectively discuss issues that are on your mind instead of sweeping them under a rug and ignoring them. Close associates will be valuable allies.



Cancer: Don't give away all your ideas and suggestions at once, wait for the right moment to bring things up and you will have people coming to you for more.



Leo: You may want to venture out of your safe haven. Seniors will notice your initiative. Avoid dealing with land and property matters. You will connect with a new friend.



Virgo: Move carefully as there are chances of minor accident. Relations with your higher ups may deteriorate. Don't get upset quickly. Take decision after much scrutiny. Avoid meeting with strangers.

You share your b'day with

Sanjay Leela Bhansali is an Indian film director and producer. He directed films like Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam, Guzaarish, Saawariya, Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela amongst others.



Libra: You would remain cheerful and feel contented. However, you would feel tired and drawn up by the evening. Avoid keeping love to yourself.



Scorpio: An exciting development in love life is possible. Breathtaking beautiful site scenes are your lover's desire. Avoid excessive caffeine intake.



Sagittarius: Finances are settling down but avoid short-cut schemes. Participation in the group activities is also highlighted today. Worrying would not help you.



Capricorn: Matters of real estates attract problems. A new position may ruffle many feathers. Investments can give good returns. Auspicious functions can make your home buzz with activity.

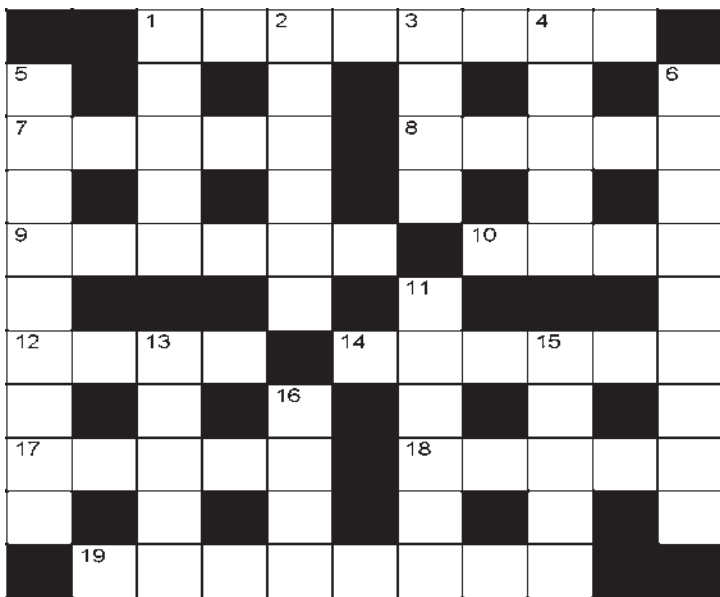


Aquarius: Politicians face reduced opposition. Disputes over properties can arise. You will progress at work, though transfers cannot be avoided. Real estate deals take a back seat.



Pisces: Heavy expenditure makes things tight. An unexpected discord with a relation may leave you wondering. You'll have the chance to be a supportive friend.

QUICK CROSSWORD



Across

1. Move (8)
7. Animal jail (5)
8. Glossy fabric (5)
9. Fall off (6)
10. Accurate (4)
12. Slip (4)
14. Ceremonious (6)
17. Tend to (5)
18. Imperturbable selfcontrolled person (5)
19. Source of wealth (4,4)

Down

1. Defeats decisively (5)
2. Account book (6)
3. Suit for trial (4)
4. Private instructor (5)
5. Job seeker (9)
6. Weave (9)
11. Miniaturised tree (6)
13. Abstain from (5)
15. Elk (5)
16. Go first (4)

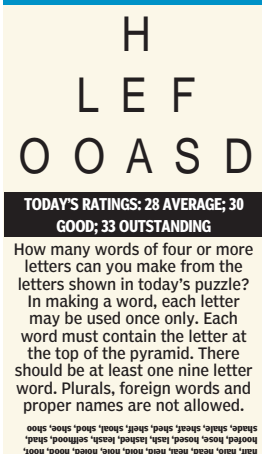
YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

Across: 1. Shrunk, 6. Odds, 7. Tattoo, 9. Final, 11. Brand, 12. Alarm, 13. Plain, 16. Employ, 18. Stun, 19. Construe.

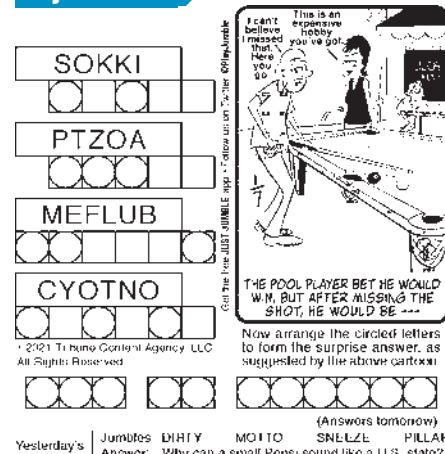
Down:

1. Snowflake, 2. Rodin, 3. Kite, 4. Natural, 5. Goo, 8. Ordinance, 10. Acrylic, 14. After, 15. Hymn, 17. Met.

Word Mine



jumble

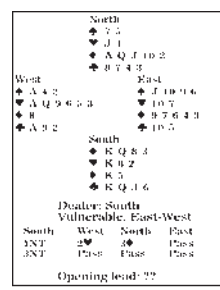
bridge
PHILLIP
ALDERLEAD
DECLARER
INTO THE
VALLEY OF
DEATH

Thomas Gray, an 18th-century English poet, wrote, "The paths of glory lead but to the grave." Rather depressing, but in bridge, when you are on opening lead, you are hoping that that grave will be dug for the contract. To that end, sometimes you need an unusually shaped shovel.

Look at West's hand in today's diagram. What would you lead against three no-trump?

After South opened one no-

trump, and West overcalled two hearts, North responded three diamonds. Should this be treated as forcing, game-invitational or to play (a signoff)? That is a very good question! You and your partner should come to an agreement. Unless you use the Lebensohl convention (which employs an artificial two-no-trump response to increase the possibilities), you cannot do more than select one interpretation. If forced to choose, I would opt for invita-



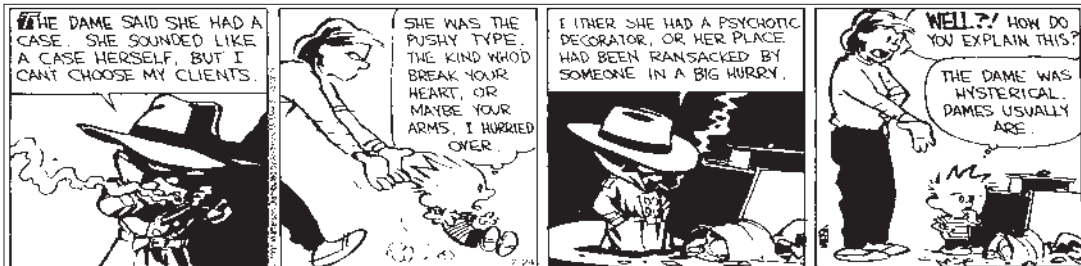
tional. With a game-force, you just have to jump to three no-trump, or cue-bid and hope it all works out well. With a weak hand and a long suit, pass or overbid!

On lead against three no-trump, it is normal to start with the fourth-highest from your longest and strongest. At the table, that is exactly what West did. However, declarer called for dummy's heart jack and, when it held the trick, played on clubs. The defense was

dead. Holding three aces, West should lead the heart ace. If the dummy has, say, three hearts, West continues with a low heart, playing for declarer to hold king-doubleton. Here, though, West leads the queen at trick two, pinning dummy's jack and hoping declarer doesn't have the 10. As you can see, this attack kills the contract.

Copyright United Feature Syndicate (Asia Features)

CALVIN AND HOBBS|Bill Watterson



THE WIZARD OF ID|Parker and Hartsd



ARCHIE|Bill Henry Scarpelli & craig boldman



BLONDIE|Dean Young and John Marshall



ANDY CAPP |Reg Smythe



TARZAN|Edgar Rice Burroughs



SHORT TAKES

Bedi undergoes bypass surgery

New Delhi: Legendary spinner Bishan Singh Bedi has undergone a bypass surgery at a city hospital a few days back after he complained of heart problems and he is recovering well. The 74-year-old Bedi underwent the procedure 2-3 days back and he is expected to be discharged from the hospital soon, according to a close confidant of the former India captain. "As far as I know, he was having some heart issues and he underwent a bypass surgery 2-3 days back on the advice of the doctors," he said. "He is currently doing fine and recovering from the surgery and is expected to be discharged from the hospital soon," he added. Bedi, a premier left-arm orthodox spinner in his playing days, represented India in 67 Tests and 10 ODIs between 1967 and 1979, scalping 266 and seven wickets respectively. — *PTI*

Deepak in last 8 of Strandja meet

New Delhi: Asian silver-medalist Deepak Kumar (52kg) advanced to the quarterfinals with a facile win as Indian boxers got off to a mixed start at the 72nd Strandja Memorial Tournament in Sofia, Bulgaria. Deepak, also a 2019 India Open gold-medallist, defeated Kazakhstan's Olzhas Bainiyazov 5-0 in his opening bout to make the last-eight stage. Other winners on Monday included Naveen Kumar (91kg) among men and Jyoti (51kg) in the women's draw. While Naveen defeated American Darius Fulghum in a close fight that ended 3-2 in his favour, Jyoti got the better of Ukraine's Tetiana Kob 4-1. India has sent a 12-member team for the prestigious event — seven men and five women.

Shooters look to shine in Cairo WC

Cairo: A 13-member Indian squad will seek medals in the Shotgun World Cup starting here on Wednesday as the International Shooting Sport Federation's marquee events return after a break of almost a year due to pandemic. The eight-day competition is the year's first Shotgun World Cup stage, beginning with men's and women's skeet competitions on the opening day. There will be 10 events in the competition. As many as 191 athletes from 33 countries have entered the fray and for the first time, the men's and women's team competitions will be held based on the new team event formats declared last year by the ISSF. The Cairo event assumes additional significance given that this will be the final chance for the shooters to qualify for the Tokyo Olympics on the basis of world ranking points. — *PTI*

Jazz hammer Hornets in NBA

Los Angeles: Donovan Mitchell had 23 points and eight assists as the NBA-leading Utah Jazz gained a franchise-record 28 three-pointers in a 132-110 rout of the Charlotte Hornets on Monday. Joe Ingles and Georges Niang scored 21 points apiece as the Jazz won for the 21st time in their last 23 games.

Live on TV

CRICKET

India vs England: Third Test, Day 1 from 2.30 pm on Star Sports 1, HD
South Africa T20 Challenge: Titans vs Warriors from 1.30 pm; Lions vs Dolphins from 5.55 pm on Star Sports Select 2, HD

FOOTBALL

Indian Super League: Odisha vs Mumbai City from 7.20 pm on Star Sports 2, 3

Europa League: Tottenham Hotspur vs Wolfsburg from 10.30 pm; Atalanta vs Real Madrid from 1.30 am (Thursday) on Sony Ten 2; Monchengladbach vs Manchester City from 1.30 am (Thursday) on Sony Ten 1

WWE

NXT: Bouts from 6.30 am (Thursday) on Sony Ten 1, HD

Regd. No.
TNENG/2010/35692

Printed & Published by
K. Sudhakar on behalf of
Deccan Chronicle Holdings
Limited and Printed at
Deccan Chronicle Press situated at
No 2/22, Sengalipalayam Road,
N.G.G.O Colony Post,
Kurudampalayam Village,
Coimbatore - 641 022. RNI
Registration No.: TNENG/2010/35692
Ph No.: 2231252, 253, 255, 257 & 358
Editor: **KAUSHIK MITTER**

MOTERAW

India, England look to exploit 'unexplored' strip in pink ball conundrum

Ahmedabad, Feb. 23: A virgin Motera strip has become the big talking point as India captain Virat Kohli prepares the right pink ball questionaire to trouble a spoilt-for-choice England in the day-night third Test starting here on Wednesday. Ahmedabad as a cricketing venue has been witness to a lot of cricketing feats in Indian cricket — from Sunil Gavaskar's famous late cut to complete 10,000 runs in Tests to Kapil Dev's best bowling figures of 9 for 83 and also him eclipsing Richard Hadlee's then world record of highest wickets. On Wednesday, Ishant Sharma joining Kapil as the second Indian pacer to play 100 Tests would add to the momentous occasion and Kohli scoring a hundred is just what the 55,000 odd spectators, who would be allowed in, might crave for.

The refurbished Sardar Patel Stadium looks colossal under lights but the first Test match in many years would mean that even the home team wouldn't expect a lot of advantage. It would prefer a square turner to go 2-1 up in a high-stakes game but whether it actually gets one remains to be seen. As senior opener Rohit Sharma was clear in team's choice of surface — a turner that helps Ravichandran Ashwin and Axar Patel just like Joe Root would have opted for a green top at the Headingley or the Old Trafford.

There are a few more questions that would demand answers. How would the twilight period be for the batsmen as James Anderson feels that the ball swings more in that phase?

Will the extra lacquer on the 'SG Test Pink' make it difficult for the Ashwin-Axar combo which wreaked havoc on the Chepauk snake pit? And with a 2:30 pm start, how much will the dew have a bearing during the final session? The ball would be difficult to grip at that point for slow bowlers and the pitch, despite grass being shaved off, might ease out with ball skidding off the surface. His opposite number James Anderson however has no doubts whatsoever that by the time clock ticks 2:30 pm on Wednesday, the track will bear a bald look, similar to Chepauk.

Umesh Yadav passing the fitness test was good news for the Indian camp as Kuldeep Yadav is likely to be dropped from the playing XI. — *PTI*

India crushed England by 317 runs on a turner in Chennai to level the four-match series 1-1. All eyes are now on the refurbished Motera pitch which will make its debut with the pink ball Test. "We're going to take our time with the limited information we have on this ground and pink ball cricket. You know, we are going to make sure, we give ourselves as much (time) as possible heading into the game before we make a decision," Root said on the eve of the match.

The England think tank has a selection headache both in bowling and batting departments. In bowling they have Jofra Archer fit and available along with veteran pace spearhead James Anderson, who is back in fray after workload management kept him out of the second Test. Stuart Broad is also in contention for a spot.

England's lead spinner Jack Leach says he is ready for a new role as the day/night pink ball Test against India looks set to bring the seamers back into the forefront after the 'tweakers' domination in the first two matches. Leach is aware that with the pink ball, which tends to move around a lot more than the traditional red cherry, his role could change over the next few days. "We want to be adaptable, we feel like we've got all bases covered in our squad so I think it's going to be a fascinating Test match if the ball is moving around, and if so, it might be a slightly different role for me," Leach said.

"I've definitely thought about that — it'll be a different challenge and I'll be ready." Both sides are wary of how the pink ball would behave under lights on a newly laid strip. Batting in the twilight phase has been one of the talking points going into the game. On England's preparations, Leach said, "We had a good session under lights that started in that twilight period and while I don't have much experience of playing in these day-night games, I've heard that during twilight can be a tough time to bat." — *PTI*



Rishabh Pant practices during a net session at Motera in Ahmedabad on Tuesday. — *BCCI*

Spinners, pacers both in game: Virat

Ahmedabad, Feb. 23: A rank turner is being anticipated at Motera but India captain Virat Kohli expects pacers to have as big a role as spinners in the day-night third Test against England, a side riddled with "many weaknesses" according to him. Both teams have won a game each in the four-match series and ahead of third Test here starting Wednesday, the talk has been incessantly focussed on the nature of the virgin track at the refurbished stadium.

Asked if the ball is unlikely to swing much in the third Test, Kohli said he expects the pacers to be in the game till the ball is "nice and shiny". "I don't think that is an accurate assessment (that the bowl will not swing). The pink ball does tend to

swing a lot more than the red ball. We experienced that when we played for the first time in 2019 (against Bangladesh)," Kohli said. Kohli also rejected the assessment that England would have an edge if the pitch favours pacers. "...Not really bothered about what the strengths and weaknesses of the English team are. We



Virat Kohli trains at Motera on Tuesday. — *BCCI*

have beaten them in their home as well, where the ball does way more and hold them out every time so we're not really bothered with that. It's just about playing well as a team," he said. "And yeah, there are many, many weaknesses in the opposition side as well, if you are keen to exploit them. If it's a seamer friendly track for

them it's for us as well. "And we probably have, you know, among other teams, the best bowling attack in the world so we're not really bothered by what the ball might bring differently to the table. We're ready for anything that comes our way," he asserted. Senior batsman Rohit Sharma has already said that it will be another turning pitch. Kohli said facing the pink ball is more challenging than the red ball irrespective of the nature of the surface. "It is much more challenging to play with pink ball regardless of the pitch you play on. Especially in the evening, if as a batting team, you are starting your innings under lights then that one and a half hour is very challenging." — *PTI*

LEACH READY FOR NEW ROLE IN THIRD TEST

Ahmedabad, Feb. 23: England's lead spinner Jack Leach says he is ready for a new role as the day/night pink ball Test against India looks set to bring the seamers back into the forefront after the 'tweakers' domination in the first two matches. Leach is aware that with the pink ball, which tends to move around a lot more than the traditional red cherry, his role could change over the next few days. "We want to be adaptable, we feel like we've got all bases covered in our squad so I think it's going to be a fascinating Test match if the ball is moving around, and if so, it might be a slightly different role for me," Leach said.

"I've definitely thought about that — it'll be a different challenge and I'll be ready." Both sides are wary of how the pink ball would behave under lights on a newly laid strip. Batting in the twilight phase has been one of the talking points going into the game. On England's preparations, Leach said, "We had a good session under lights that started in that twilight period and while I don't have much experience of playing in these day-night games, I've heard that during twilight can be a tough time to bat." — *PTI*

England's lead spinner Jack Leach says he is ready for a new role as the day/night pink ball Test against India looks set to bring the seamers back into the forefront after the 'tweakers' domination in the first two matches. Leach is aware that with the pink ball, which tends to move around a lot more than the traditional red cherry, his role could change over the next few days. "We want to be adaptable, we feel like we've got all bases covered in our squad so I think it's going to be a fascinating Test match if the ball is moving around, and if so, it might be a slightly different role for me," Leach said.

"I've definitely thought about that — it'll be a different challenge and I'll be ready." Both sides are wary of how the pink ball would behave under lights on a newly laid strip. Batting in the twilight phase has been one of the talking points going into the game. On England's preparations, Leach said, "We had a good session under lights that started in that twilight period and while I don't have much experience of playing in these day-night games, I've heard that during twilight can be a tough time to bat." — *PTI*

England's lead spinner Jack Leach says he is ready for a new role as the day/night pink ball Test against India looks set to bring the seamers back into the forefront after the 'tweakers' domination in the first two matches. Leach is aware that with the pink ball, which tends to move around a lot more than the traditional red cherry, his role could change over the next few days. "We want to be adaptable, we feel like we've got all bases covered in our squad so I think it's going to be a fascinating Test match if the ball is moving around, and if so, it might be a slightly different role for me," Leach said.

"I've definitely thought about that — it'll be a different challenge and I'll be ready." Both sides are wary of how the pink ball would behave under lights on a newly laid strip. Batting in the twilight phase has been one of the talking points going into the game. On England's preparations, Leach said, "We had a good session under lights that started in that twilight period and while I don't have much experience of playing in these day-night games, I've heard that during twilight can be a tough time to bat." — *PTI*

England's lead spinner Jack Leach says he is ready for a new role as the day/night pink ball Test against India looks set to bring the seamers back into the forefront after the 'tweakers' domination in the first two matches. Leach is aware that with the pink ball, which tends to move around a lot more than the traditional red cherry, his role could change over the next few days. "We want to be adaptable, we feel like we've got all bases covered in our squad so I think it's going to be a fascinating Test match if the ball is moving around, and if so, it might be a slightly different role for me," Leach said.

ENGLAND SKIPPER WARY OF 'TRICKY' NEMESIS ASHWIN

Ahmedabad, Feb. 23: Ravichandran Ashwin has proved to be England's nemesis in the first two Tests and, well aware of his abilities now, visiting skipper Joe Root on Tuesday described the India off-spinner as a "world-class performer" in all conditions. Ashwin has already taken 17 wickets in the series so far and is expected to add some more to his kitty in the third Test beginning here on Wednesday.

"Yeah, he (Ashwin) is a world-class performer. I think it's been quite tricky for everyone but as you mentioned, in particular, the left-handers is against him... Because you know how skilful he is, how good his record is against left-handers in world cricket," Root said. The 34-year-old Ashwin has been Virat Kohli's go-to man in this series. Besides his nine wickets in the first Test and eight in second, Ashwin has also scored a century on a Chepuak track.

"So, he is a fine performer at home and guys just have to keep working hard to try and figure out how they're going to score every run." — *PTI*

Iyer hits century in Mumbai win

Jaipur, Feb. 23: Mumbai rode on skipper Shreyas Iyer's unbeaten 103 to beat Maharashtra by six wickets in their Elite Group D game of the Vijay Hazare Trophy here on Tuesday. This was Mumbai's second successive win after they had beaten Delhi in the lung-opener. Opting to bat first, Maharashtra posted 279/9, with centuries from Yash Nahar (119) and Azim Kazi (104) despite experienced Mumbai pacer Dhawal Kulkarni (5/44) running through their top-order. But it was Iyer, who anchored the Mumbai chase and saw them home in 47.2 overs. Chasing 280, Mumbai openers Yashasvi Jaiswal (40) and Prithvi Shaw (34) conjured 67 for the first wicket. Iyer, who walked in at three, was in his elements and hammered nine boundaries and one six, in his uneaten knock and after Jaiswal perished, he found able partners in Suryakumar Yadav (29), Shivam Dube (47) as they played their roles to perfection. Dube took the game away from Maharashtra, with his hitting, smashing five fours and a six, and

took Mumbai on the cusp of a win. **CHANDIGARH CLIMB TO TOP OF TABLE** Chandigarh continued their giant-killing run in their Elite debut, stunning hosts Bengal by five wickets in a Group E clash at the Eden Gardens. Fresh from their win over neighbours Haryana, Chandigarh who were playing their second domestic season chased down Bengal's 253/9 with seven balls to spare to climb up to the top of the group table, ahead of Saurashtra on net-run rate. **BIHAR PLAYER TESTS POSITIVE FOR COVID-19** The event has seen its first case of Covid-19 with a Bihar player returning positive for the virus, following which all the other cricketers are being tested. "It is confirmed and the concerned player has been isolated from other players. He is currently in Bangalore as he cannot travel," a senior official of the state's cricket body said. A Bihar Cricket Association official believed that the game would go on as scheduled. — *PTI*

Chasing 280, Mumbai openers Yashasvi Jaiswal (40) and Prithvi Shaw (34) conjured 67 for the first wicket. Iyer, who walked in at three, was in his elements and hammered nine boundaries and one six, in his uneaten knock and after Jaiswal perished, he found able partners in Suryakumar Yadav (29), Shivam Dube (47) as they played their roles to perfection. Dube took the game away from Maharashtra, with his hitting, smashing five fours and a six, and

BRIEF SCORES

■ Maharashtra 279/9 in 50 overs (Yash Nahar 119, Azim Kazi 104; Dhawal Kulkarni 5/44) lost to Mumbai 280/4 in 47.2 overs (Shreyas Iyer 103 not out, Shivam Dube 47; Satyajeet Bachhav 3/59) by six wickets.
■ Delhi 354/4 in 50 overs (Nitish Rana 137, Dhruv Shorey 132; Sagor Trivedi 2/66) beat Pondicherry 175 in 39.3 overs (S. Suresh Kumar 42; Kulwant Khejroliya 4/32, Pradeep Sangwan 2/27) by 179 runs.
■ Rajasthan 199 in 47.5 overs (Mahipal Lomror 67, Arjit Gupta 45; Rishi Dhawan 6/27) lost to Himachal Pradesh 201/6 in 33.3 overs (Rishi Dhawan 73 not out; A Singh 2/46, Ravi Bishnoi 2/60) by four wickets.
■ Bengal 253/9 in 50 overs (Shabaz Ahmed 59) lost to Chandigarh 257/5 in 48.5 overs (Arslan Khan 88, Shivam Bhambrri 71 not out, Manan Vohra 45) by five wickets.
■ Services 274/7 in 50 overs (Ravi Chauhan 118, Pulkit Narang 48 not out, Divesh Pathania 42 not out) lost to Jammu & Kashmir 276/7 in 48 overs (Shubham Khajuria 84, Abdul Samad 63) by three wickets.
■ Haryana 264 in 50 overs (Chaitanya Bishnoi 84; Chetan Sakariya 3/63) lost to Saurashtra 265/9 in 49.1 overs (Snell Patel 79, Arpit Vasavada 46) by one wicket.
■ Manipur 148/9 in 50 overs (Jayanta Sagatapam 32, Mayank Mishra 2/18) lost to Uttarakhand 152/3 in 23.1 overs (Jay Bista 71, Kamal Singh 41) by seven wickets.
■ Meghalaya 319/7 in 50 overs (Punit Bist 116, R. Sanjay Yadav 73 not out) beat Sikkim 231/9 in 50 overs (Ashish Thapa 79, Robin Bist 59, Dippu Sangma 2/33) by 88 runs.
■ Arunachal Pradesh 222/7 in 50 overs (Rahul Dalal 123 not out) lost to Assam 226/5 in 38.4 overs (Sibsankar Roy 60 not out, Denish Das 59, Saahil Jain 48, Rakesh Kumar 4/58) by five wickets.
■ Nagaland 347/9 in 50 overs (Stuart Binny 80, R. Jonathan 62, Varte Kima 5/66) beat Mizoram 318/6 in 50 overs (Pratik Desai 141, Taruwar Kohli 108, KB Pawan 40, Nagah 2/30) by 29 runs.



Cristiano Ronaldo (centre) of Juventus scores against Crotone in their Italian league match at the Juventus stadium in Turin on Sunday. The hosts won 3-0. — *AFP*

Ronaldo brace floors Crotone

Turin (Italy), Feb. 23: Cristiano Ronaldo scored twice as Juventus got back to winning ways by beating bottom club Crotone 3-0 in Serie A. Ronaldo could even have had a hat trick in the first half. Weston Mckennie sealed the result after the break. Juventus moved up to third on the table, eight points behind Serie A leaders Inter Milan, having played a match less.

It was Crotone's fifth successive defeat and left them eight points from safety. Ronaldo hadn't scored for Juventus since the start of the month. He came close on a couple of occasions before breaking the deadlock in the 38th minute when he headed in an Alex Sandro cross. Ronaldo doubled his tally in first-half stoppage time with another impressive header, this time from an Aaron Ramsey cross.

SEVILLA MOVE TO 3RD PLACE IN LA LIGA

Sevilla comfortably defeated Osasuna 2-0 to extend their winning streak in the Spanish league to six matches and move into the top three in the standings

for the first time this season. Defender Diego Carlos and striker Luuk de Jong scored in different halves to help Sevilla move a point in front of fourth-placed Barcelona on Monday. Sevilla trails second-placed Real Madrid by four points and are seven points behind league leaders Atlético Madrid.

PALACE STUN BRIGHTON Crystal Palace manager Roy Hodgson defended his side's style after snatching a 2-1 derby win at Brighton in the EPL thanks to Christian Benteke's stunning 95th-minute volley. The Eagles had just two touches in the Brighton box, but scored with both whereas the Seagulls saw 25 shots and nearly 75 per cent possession count for little. "We get so hung up on statistics these days. The game is decided by goals. Goals are a question of how well you take your chances and defend theirs," said Hodgson. Victory takes Palace 10 points clear of the relegation zone, while Brighton remain just four clear of Fulham. — *Agencies*