

DECCAN Chronicle

THE LARGEST CIRCULATED ENGLISH DAILY IN SOUTH INDIA

KARIMNAGAR | WEDNESDAY | 24 FEBRUARY 2021

WEATHER

Max: 33°C
Min: 18.4°C
RH: 71%
Rainfall: Nil

Forecast: Cloudy sky.
Mist or haze likely.
Max/Min temp. 32/18 °C

NATION | 4

Arjun main tank's purchase cleared

WORLD | 5

US calls China just a 'strong competitor'

SPORTS | 8

India take on England in day-night Test from today



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COVID-19 COUNT

CASES (+10,705)
DEATHS (+77)

1,10,15,776 1,56,495

STATE GOVERNMENT BULLETINS

NA* NA*
TS: 2,97,712 1,625
(+70) (+1)
AP: 8,89,409 7,168

CASES AROUND THE WORLD

11,24,33,431
DEATHS 24,89,661
COUNTRIES, AREAS WITH CASES 219

worldometers.info/coronavirus

* TS stopped daily updates

ASTROGUIDE

Sarvari: Uttarayana
Tithi: Magha Shuddha Dwadasi till 5.59 pm
Star: Punarvasu till 1.11 pm
Varjyam: 9.11 pm to 10.47 pm
Durmuhurtam: 12.06 pm to 12.52 pm
Rahukalam: 12 noon to 1.30 pm
HIJRI CALENDAR
Rajab 11,1442 AH
PRAYERS
Fajar: 5.39 am
Zohar: 12.40 pm
Asar: 4.43 pm
Maghrib: 6.27 pm
Isha: 7.35 pm
SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.37 AM
SUNSET TODAY 6.20 PM
MOONSET 3.18 AM
MOONRISE 2.36 PM

COUNTER POINT



Mantriji? He is always touring poll-bound states!

SHORT TAKES

Jawan killed in accidental fire

Jammu: An Army jawan was killed in an accidental firing during training here on Tuesday, a defence spokesman said. "Gunner Sayan Ghosh of Artillery Regiment suffered fatal injury due to a firing accident while carrying out live firing training at the field firing range (in Akhnor sector)," the spokesman said. The incident occurred around 10.30 am. The spokesman said further details are being ascertained.

HASTY STEP

State to release data of Covid cases weekly, experts criticise move

TS stops daily Covid case updates

DC CORRESPONDENT HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

The Telangana government will no longer release daily Covid-19 caseload data and information on district-wise new cases as also the number of people dying from Covid-19 in the state.

"Henceforth, instead, a weekly bulletin will be released," the state director of public health Dr G Srinivasa Rao announced here on Tuesday.

As on Sunday, Telangana has a total of 1,27,712 Covid-19 cases and there were alto-

gether 1,625 deaths due to the disease. The GHMC area including Hyderabad city had the highest daily cases in the state, 24, out of the 114 new cases recorded on Sunday.

There are no major changes in Covid-19 behaviour or cases in Telangana, the official said, justifying the stoppage of daily Covid bulletin. "We have realised that instead of dedicating exclusive human resources and many man hours into generating the Covid-19 data on a daily basis, this manpower can be used in the

ongoing vaccination drive," Dr Rao said.

"In case of any significant development," the media will be informed," he said.

The decision to do away with the daily Covid-19 bulletins has left public health policy experts confused.

"Data collection is a daily process of disease surveillance. Even if the government believes that it has gotten rid of Covid-19 in the state, the data should be made public to help people make appropriate choices," an infection diseases control expert said.

PMO CONDUCTS REVIEW MEETING ON SUDDEN SPIKE IN CORONAVIRUS CASES

DC CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 23

Amid a spike in coronavirus cases in the country, a meeting was held at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) on Tuesday to review the pandemic situation.

Union health ministry officials, meanwhile, have said that two mutated variant of SARS-CoV-2 — N440K

and E484Q — have been detected in Maharashtra and Kerala but there is no direct relation between the recent surge in Covid-19 cases in these states and some others with the mutant virus strains. Maharashtra and Kerala account for 75 per cent of total active Covid-19 cases in the country.

Full report on Page 4

TS Assembly building's elevation portion falls

Debris falls in garden; no one is injured; officials worried

DC CORRESPONDENT HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

A portion of the elevation of the Telangana Assembly building collapsed on Tuesday afternoon and fell into the premises. The 115-year old Assembly building is a heritage structure. Fortunately, no one was injured as the debris fell into the empty garden area in the vicinity of the Assembly.

According to security personnel who were on duty at the Assembly premises, the elevation on the east side of the Assembly building collapsed, with a loud noise. The side portion of the elevation of the office of the Government Chief Whip Rega Kanta Rao was also damaged.

Security personnel, who heard the noise, rushed to the spot to check if anyone was in the vicinity. However, they found no one was injured in the incident.

Though officials are taking up periodic repair and



A portion of the Assembly building's parapet wall collapsed on Tuesday, peeling off stucco from a portion of the roof.

— P. SURENDRA

renovation works, the incidents of building developing cracks and some portions of the building collapsing are being witnessed frequently,

sending shockwaves among Assembly and security staff working in the premises.

Legislature secretary V. Narasimha Charyulu,

said, "the main building structure is strong and there is no need to worry. Since the building is over 100 years old, incidents like these are common. The engineering wing of the Assembly takes up periodic inspections of the entire building premises and takes up repair works on a priority basis."

However, Tuesday's incident has left Assembly officials worried as the Budget session of the Telangana Assembly is expected to commence in the second week of March. During the session, the premises will be filled with ministers, MLAs, MLCs, bureaucrats, media personnel, and other visitors.

The Telangana Assembly was built using public funds by the citizens of Hyderabad, who raised money to build it, to mark the 40th birthday of Nizam Mahboob Ali Khan.

Page 2: KCR wanted new building for Assembly

Classes 6 to 8 will begin from today

DC CORRESPONDENT HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

Chief Secretary Somesh Kumar on Tuesday held a teleconference with all district collectors, district education officers and district welfare officers of the BC, SC and ST, and minority departments to discuss measures to be taken for reopening of schools for students from classes VI to VIII from Wednesday.

The Chief Secretary told officials that Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao has directed that schools be reopened from February 24 and asked officials to ensure that all schools comply with the

directive before March 1. Somesh Kumar said that classes should start from Wednesday as far as possible and all schools must open by March 1.

About 17.2 lakh students, in addition to existing students of higher classes already at school, are likely to attend school from classes VI to VIII.

He directed that an education monitoring committee, chaired by district collectors, should meet and take up the issue of reopening of classes. He said all precautions should be taken for the safety of students and teachers.

Classes from IX to XII have already started functioning in the state.

Parents worried over kids' health

HARLEEN MINOCHA | DC HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

On a day when the Telangana government announced reopening of schools for Classes six to eight, involving 17.24 lakh students, some parents expressed concern over the safety of their children in the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic conditions.

The decision to reopen schools for upper middle classes ended a period of abrupt closure since March last. Education minister Sabitha Indra Reddy who chaired a meeting of education officials said if classroom space is not enough to accommodate students in

conformity with safety protocols, schools are free to start a shift system.

The decision was welcomed by the teaching community. The Telangana state United Teachers Federation thanked the government and said this would ensure academic year is not wasted.

Some parents *Deccan Chronicle* spoke to felt there was risk to sending their wards to schools as the pandemic refused to go away. Venkat Sainath, parent of a Class 6 student, said he will not allow his wards to attend regular classes.

Page 2: Parents question state's about-turn in policy

Another TS, AP water row erupts

L. VENKAT RAM REDDY | DC HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

Yet another water row has erupted between Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

The Telangana state government took a serious view of the AP government launching works to construct a canal at Rajolibanda village in Kurnool district, in parallel to the existing Rajolibanda Diversion Scheme (RDS) to draw additional water without obtaining any approvals from various government agencies. This will deny Telangana its right-

PUBLIC REPRESENTATIVES and farmers of Gadwal and Mahabubnagar districts complained to Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao that the Andhra Pradesh government had started making markings to dig a canal on the right side of the RDS.

Official sources said Rao discussed the issue with officials and directed them to lodge a complaint with the Krishna River Management Board, the Central Water Commission and the Apex Council of the Jal Shakti against the AP government.

ful share and adversely affect the erstwhile Mahabubnagar district.

Public representatives and farmers of Gadwal and Mahabubnagar districts complained to Chief Mini-

ster K. Chandrashekar Rao that the AP government had started making markings to dig a canal on the right side of the RDS.

Official sources in the irrigation department said

that Rao discussed the issue with officials on Tuesday and directed them to lodge a complaint with the Krishna River Management Board, the Central Water Commission and the Apex Council of the Union ministry of Jal Shakti against the AP government and ensure that Andhra Pradesh suspends these works.

Though TS is supposed to get 16 tmc ft of water through the RDS, it is getting less than five tmc currently due to leakages.

Page 2: Farmers worry about AP's parallel project

Protest drums



Bharatiya Kisan Union chief Naresh Tikait wearing a turban plays dhol during an agitation against the new farm laws and observe Pagdi Sambhal Jatta day in the memory of Sardar Ajit Singh on his birth anniversary, at Ghazipur in New Delhi on Tuesday. — PTI

Toolkit case: Court grants bail to Disha, calls evidence scanty

BHASKAR HARI SHARMA 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 activist arrested from Bengaluru on February 13.

Commenting that the 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 the governments".

Ms Ravi is accused of creating and disseminating an online document that lists out how people can support the farmers' protest against the three new laws. 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". 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 resistance to the bail plea," additional sessions judge Dharmendra Rana said, "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 blemish free criminal antecedents."

In Kerala, Rahul slams BJP, CPM

DC CORRESPONDENT THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, FEB. 23

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday launched a scathing attack on the Narendra Modi led government at the Centre and the CPM led dispensation in Kerala as he formally launched the opposition UDF's election campaign in Thiruvananthapuram.

Addressing a rally to mark the culmination of UDF's Aishwarya Klearla yatra at the Shangmugham beach here, Rahul Gandhi said both the central and the state governments had broken the backbone of the common man. The policies of the two governments were destroying the farmers, SMEs and shopkeepers.

Attacking the LDF government over the controversial agreement signed with a US company for deep sea fishing, he said instead of protecting the livelihood of fishermen

GANDHI SAID both the central and the state governments had broken the backbone of the common man. He said the two governments were destroying the farmers, SMEs and shopkeepers.

they were destroying their lives.

Rahul hinted at the alleged nexus between the BJP and CPM in Kerala. "I fight the ideology of RSS every single day. Every step I take, the BJP attacks me. Right now they are watching this speech and thinking what is it that they can attack me on. But I don't understand why cases against the Left government are progressing at a snail's pace. Why is the CBI, ED not attacking the left front. I know that when you attack the BJP, they attack you 24/7. There is only one reason why the BJP is going slow on these cases. You can figure out the reason," he said.

IMRAN KHAN ALLOWED TO USE INDIAN AIRSPACE

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 VVIP aircraft carrying President Ram Nath Kovind and Prime Minister Narendra Modi to overfly Pakistani airspace.

The Pakistan Prime Minister 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.

Full report on Page 4

Illegal quarry explosives set off accidentally, kill 6 in Karnataka

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.

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 minis-

ter 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.

Full report on Page 4

SHORT TAKES

FOUNDATION FOR SECRETARIAT MOSQUE PUT OFF

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

State government has postponed laying of the foundation stone for re-constructing the mosque in premises of old secretariat complex. The stone was scheduled to be laid on Friday, but has been put off owing to Model Code of Conduct in place because of MLC polls.

Home minister Mahmood Ali, however, reiterated that the state government will established the new masjid at the same place it stood when the entire secretariat complex was demolished to establish a new one. A new date for laying the foundation will be announced after MLC elections in consultation with religious scholars.

The minister said a Hindu temple and a church will also be constructed within the secretariat complex for convenience of employees as well as visitors coming to the secretariat. "Our Chief Minister K. Chandrababhan Rao respects all religions," he added.

HC SEEKS COUNTER AFFIDAVITS IN KAMALAKAR'S CASE

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

The Telangana High Court on Tuesday directed the respondents including Chief Secretary Somesh Kumar and State Wakf Board to file counter-affidavits in a case filed by Gangula Kamalakara, minister for civil supplies and KC welfare. Justice P. Naveen Rao heard the writ petition filed the Minister seeking a direction to the District Collector, Karimnagar, to remove his 15 acres from the prohibitory list and to the Wakf Board to notify his land from its gazette.

During the course of hearing Minister's counsel Jandhyala Ravishankar drew the attention of the court to a pending case filed by the Minister in 2014 on the same issue. Justice Rao directed the Registry to tag the old writ with the new one and adjourned the case to March 23.

BJYM PROTESTS AGAINST KERALA GOVT

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

The Telangana unit of Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) on Tuesday protested against the brutal lathicharge, teargas and water cannons against BJYM activists outside the Kerala secretariat. Led by BJYM state vice-president P.M. Sai, BJYM and ABVP activists lending support to their Kerala counterparts held a protest at the CPM office at RTC crossroads.

Addressing the media, the BJYM leader said that along with ABVP activists, they were protesting against the Pinarayi Vijayan government, which has refused to extend tenure of rank list of candidates selected by the Kerala State Public Service Commission.

He said that rank list holders have been on a protest for the last two weeks to draw the attention of the LDF government in Kerala, which has refused to accede to their demands.

He alleged that the CPM was illegally regularising hundreds of party cadres, working as temporary employees in many government departments and State PSUs.

Mr Sai said that BJYM will not allow a backdoor entry for CPM cadre when meritorious candidates are waiting for jobs. He warned the CPM not to test the patience of the youth.

Dejected Congress leaders stream into 'buoyant' BJP

BJP to speed up its recruitment drive of leaders from other parties

IREDDY SRINIVAS REDDY
IDC
HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

While more Congress leaders are increasingly given to insecurity over their future, the Bharatiya Janata Party is having a field day in its recruitment drive, given the growing perception that the saffron party can alone challenge and defeat the TRS in the state. Several congress senior leaders, including former ministers and MPs, are already in a queue to join the BJP, whose fortunes are on a clear ascendency since the Dabbak bypoll.

In the last one week, two important leaders of Congress joined the BJP. Medchal district president and former MLA Kuna Srisaillam Goud and Adilabad district leader, who contested from

Kagaznagar Palvai Harish Kumar the joined BJP in presence of Telangana BJP party affairs in-charge Tarun Chugh.

The BJP welcomed these leaders from the Congress as it has been since Dabbaka and GHMC elections.

With the graduate MLC election process ongoing, the BJP has decided to catalyse this attrition and speed up its recruitment drive of leaders from other parties. The BJP is currently focused on Congress, its principal opponent at the national level. If BJP succeeds in demoralising the Congress in the state, it anyway becomes the de facto challenger for the TRS for the next assembly election.

With several former ministers and MPs having already joined BJP, and more in queue, the BJP

● IF BJP succeeds in demoralising the Congress in the state, it anyway becomes the de facto challenger for the TRS for the next assembly election.

can now afford to get selective and is focusing on leaders with a good public image.

BJP national vice-president DK Aruna has invited several leaders, including a former deputy chief minister, a former minister and a spokesperson of Congress to quit and join the saffron party.

The former deputy chief minister reportedly wants a guarantee of the Zaheerabad Lok Sabha ticket while the former minister is seeking a surety for his past assembly segment.

BJP senior leaders shared that former MLA of

Medchal Kichennagari Laxma Reddy and former Member of Parliament Konda Vishveswar Reddy also are in touch with the BJP party but both leaders are asking for the Chevella Lok Sabha seat.

The discussion is going on inside the party on how to handle such contenders with similar claims. The BJP is likely to give importance for Dalit leaders, a community which has got neglected in the Congress and is angry with the TRS for not fulfilling various promises.

Rumours are abound in Congress that its Hyderabad MP candidate and Nampally in-charge Feroz Khan is likely to join the BJP. Sources say that party president Bandi Sanjay Kumar interacted with Feroz Khan twice and asked him to join the BJP.

From the districts,

Adilabad former MP Ramesh Rathod and Nirmal former MLA Yeleti Maheswar Reddy are likely to join BJP in a few days. Both leaders are from Congress and had contested in the last elections.

Congress party Mahila wing president Nerella Sharada is also likely to leave the Congress due to group rivalries. Mruthynjayam, a former Congress leader who recently joined the BJP, is reportedly in touch with Nerella Sharada and is trying to woo her into the BJP.

A former TRS MP from erstwhile Nalgonda district is also seeking to join the BJP due to the party not giving any importance to him, after he lost the Lok Sabha elections. If he leaves, the constituency-level and second-level leaders are likely to go along with him into the BJP.

110 NOMINATIONS ON THE LAST DAY; 179 IN FRAY

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

As many as 110 aspirants entered the fray on the last day of nominations for the biennial elections to the Telangana legislative council from the Mahbubnagar-Rangareddy-Hyderabad graduates' constituency. With this, 179 candidates are in fray for the MLC polls. TDP Telangana unit president L. Ramana was among those who filed the nominations. City mayor Gadwal R. Vijaylaxmi filed a second set of nominations on behalf of S. Vani Devi from the TRS.

The nominations will be verified on Wednesday and the last date for withdrawal is Friday. The voter enrollment over, around 5,17,883 people are eligible to vote in Mahbubnagar-Rangareddy-Hyderabad graduates' constituency.

The number of voters has doubled compared to the last election when the voter strength was of 2.3 lakh persons. The highest number of voters is from Rangareddy district with a tally of 88,358 followed by Medchal-Malkajgiri and Hyderabad with 77,349 and 64,224 voters respectively.

The election will be held in nine districts -- Mahbubnagar, Nagarkurnool, Wanaparthy, Jogulamba Gadwal, Narayanpet, Rangareddy, Vikarabad, Medchal Malkajgiri and Hyderabad under Mahbubnagar-Rangareddy-Hyderabad constituency.

Former minister G. Chinnareddy from the Congress, sitting MLC N Ramchander Rao from the BJP, S. Vani Devi from the TRS and former MLC professor K Nageshwar Rao are among those in the field for the Hyderabad, Rangareddy and Mahbubnagar graduates constituency.

KCR wanted new Assembly building

From Page 1

The construction began during the reign of the sixth Nizam Mahabooob Ali Khan in 1905 and was completed in December 1913. A new building was built in 1980 in order to accommodate the legislative offices of ministers and political parties.

As the building was becoming older and posing an existential threat, Chief Minister K. Chandrababhan Rao decided to construct a new Assembly at Errum Manzil, at a cost of ₹100 crore. He even laid the foundation stone for its construction in June 2019, along with a new

Secretariat complex.

However, several petitions were filed in the High Court against the demolition of the 150-year-old Errum Manzil to pave the way for constructing a new assembly building.

Heritage lovers also went to court against the demolition of the secretariat. While the High Court cleared the demolition of the secretariat, it issued stay orders on the demolition of Errum Manzil in September 2019, which are still in force. Due to this, the government could not start construction works for a new assembly building so far.

Parents question state's U-turn

From Page 1

"There is no point in starting classes when this academic year is about to end. Two days ago, the education minister said junior-level schools will remain shut. So, what has changed," he asked.

Another parent Madhushekhara raised concern over rising cases in some states and felt this is not the right time to reopen schools. "Students till Class 8 will be promoted as per the law. Online classes at this point are safer. Why should we risk our kids with the virus," he asked.

Zubair Razzack, a parent from Glendale Academy said, "The vaccines that are now being used are not for kids under the age of 16. Parents would prefer online classes until the pandemic is controlled. Most parents I know of are against sending their children to school."

The education department said that in the first 10 days of reopening of schools from Class 9 and above from February 1, the attendance saw a steady rise.

More than 60 per cent of the students are attending schools and junior colleges in the rural districts as well.

Farmers worry about AP's parallel project

From Page 1

Farmers complained that if AP builds a parallel canal, it would deprive Telangana of even the minimum five tmc of water.

Irrigation project RDS is located on Tungabhadra river and spread in Gadwal district of Telangana, Kurnool district of AP and Raichur district of Karnataka. It is an interstate barrage on Tungabhadra river, which supplies water to the three states.

The RDS is crucial for Telangana, as it irrigates about 87,000 acres in the state and 4,000 acres in AP. Telangana has been allocated 15.9 tmc from the RDS but gets an average of only five tmc.

The RDS has only one canal, which emanates from the left side of RDS anicut on Tungabhadra river. The anicut is located at the border of Andhra Pradesh (Kurnool) and Karnataka (Raichur). The canal passes through Karnataka for 43 kms and flows into Telangana for the remaining 100 km. It is intended to serve an ayacut of 5,900 acres, util-

● IRRIGATION PROJECT RDS is located on Tungabhadra river and spread in Gadwal district of Telangana, Kurnool district of AP and Raichur district of Karnataka.

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ising 1.2 tmc in Karnataka and 87,500 acres with 15.9 tmc in Telangana. The tailend reaches in Telangana have not been getting water for decades due to leakages.

RDS was one of the main issues during the Telangana statehood agitation. However, it was not addressed in the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014. Due to this, farmers under the RDS canal in Gadwal district are still awaiting their rightful share of water to reach their fields even more than six years after Telangana state was formed.



MP and PCC president N. Uttam Kumar Reddy addresses two-day Youth Congress training camp in TRR medical college complex in Patancheru on Tuesday.

— BY ARRANGEMENT

Take fight against communal BJP, corrupt TRS, says Uttam

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

Telangana Congress chief N. Uttam Kumar Reddy exhorted members of the Youth Congress to take up agitations against the communal BJP government at the Centre and the corrupt TRS government in the state.

Addressing a two-day training camp of Youth Congress leaders and cadre in Patancheru on Tuesday, Reddy said that Youth Congress has already served as a backbone for the Congress.

Citing different instances, the Nalgonda MP said that the Congress party had always won elections and retained power only when Youth Congress was strong. He said a majority of successful politicians across the country began their careers from Youth Congress. He said that members of Youth Congress should work in a disciplined and committed manner.

The TPCC chief said that

the responsibility of Youth Congress has increased due to the special circumstances prevailing in the country, especially in Telangana.

He said that neither the BJP government at the Centre nor the TRS in Telangana were doing anything for the youth. In fact, youth are being discouraged from taking up higher education by scrapping or downsizing scholarships and other relevant schemes.

He said the previous Congress Government had implemented a fee reimbursement scheme, along with scholarships, to encourage youth to pursue higher education without hurdles. In contrast, the TRS government has ruined the careers of lakhs of youths by not implementing fee reimbursement schemes. He said lakhs of students were being deprived of scholarship for the last many years.

Similarly, he said that the Central government has drastically cut down

● THE TPCC chief said that the responsibility of Youth Congress has increased due to the special circumstances prevailing in the country, especially in Telangana.

budgetary allocations for education. He said that even after seven years of formation of Telangana, universities in Telangana have no permanent Vice-Chancellor and most of them do not even have 50 per cent of staff.

Uttam Kumar Reddy said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014 elections on the promise of creating two crores jobs every year. Instead of creating 14 crore new jobs by now, nearly 30 crore people have lost their livelihoods due to faulty policies.

He said nearly 30 lakh educated youth were unemployed in Telangana. They include nearly 19 lakh youth, who got themselves enrolled with the Telangana State Public Service Commission

(TSPSC). He said that unemployment in Telangana was so bad, where 11-member TSPSC has nine vacancies.

Reddy asked Youth Congress activists to organise interactive programmes with youth to identify their problems and take up the fight against unemployment in Telangana on a big scale. He also asked Youth Congress members to play an active role in MLC election campaign to ensure victory of Congress candidates Ramulu Naik and G. Chinna Reddy.

He said he was confident that under the youthful leadership of Shiv Sena Reddy, Youth Congress would lead successful agitations against "communal BJP" and "corrupt TRS".

The meeting was addressed by MLA Seethakka, TPCC working president Ponnamb Prabhakar, former MP Konda Vishveswar Reddy, former MLA Ram Mohan and other leaders.

unemployment, inequality, racial injustice and poverty that need to be tackled immediately.

He appealed to the graduates of the state to vote for the Congress for its socialist, democratic

and progressive values in the MLC elections in graduates constituencies being held on March 14.

The Congress has fielded Dr G. Chinna Reddy from the Hyderabad-

Ranga Mahbubnagar graduates' constituency while Ramulu Naik is contesting from Nalgonda-Warangal-Khammam graduates constituency.

Vote for Cong in MLC polls: Sanjeeva

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

Intuc president Dr G. Sanjeeva Reddy on Tuesday said that Telangana state faces like

SURPRISE | WIN

Owaisi says party will emerge as new political force

MIM wins 7 seats in Guj civic polls

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

The AIMIM has surprised political circles with a set of significant wins in the Gujarat municipal elections. The Hyderabad-based party secured seven seats — 4 wards in Jamalpur and three in Maktampur, the results declared on Tuesday showed.

The All India Majlis Ittehad ul Muslimin has entered the election fray in Gujarat in alliance with the Bharatiya Tribal Party of

Chhotubhai Vasava. The BJP swept the polls while the AAP came second, edging out the Congress.

AIMIM president Asaduddin Owaisi was enthused at the success of his party in the civic polls. He was quick to claim that the AIMIM will emerge as a new political force in Gujarat by drawing in the "deprived communities".

Addressing an election meeting in Modasa in Gujarat, Owaisi said that during the last 65 years, Muslims

were made political slaves and forced to bear the burden of upholding secularism. At the same time, he said, they were refrained from having their due share in power. Though Muslims were asked to promote secularism, fact remained that not a single Muslim was elected from Gujarat for the Lok Sabha during the last 35 years, he said.

Added Owaisi: "It is a reality of Indian politics that your problems would not be solved and nobody

would be ready to even discuss your problems unless your elected representatives occupy the seats in Parliament or the assemblies.

Developmental initiatives ignored habitations where Muslims and other deprived communities lived. Our children have been deprived of qualitative education facilities because they are poor."

Owaisi alleged that the Congress party has all along exploited the Musl-

ims. The situation is such that it fears to give tickets to Muslims. "The Congress is worried that if it gave tickets to Muslims, it will lose the support of the majority community. The AIMIM is striving to help the community win its political rights. We will not allow anyone to create hurdles in the way of progress and deprive us of the fruits of development. The last time a Muslim was made the Mayor of Ahmedabad was in 1990."

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

Vice-president M. Venkaiah Naidu on Tuesday Naidu called for ending low representation to women in Parliament and legislatures and called upon all political parties to reach a consensus on providing reservation to them.

Speaking after releasing a commemorative postage stamp on former MLA, educationist, and social reformer J. Eashwari Bai at a special ceremony here, Naidu said though the 17th Lok Sabha has the highest number of 78 women members, they account only for 14 per



● Naidu said though the 17th Lok Sabha has the highest number of 78 women members, they account only for 14 per cent of the total number.

Naidu, recalling

Eashwari Bai's services, said she was the voice of the people as an opposition leader.

She constantly advocated the cause of children, NGOs, teachers, agricultural labourers, and the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.

OTHER STORIES

ONE DIES, TWO INJURED AS CAR OVERTURNS

DC CORRESPONDENT
KOTHAGUDEM, FEB. 23

A ten year old boy killed and another two kids sustained injuries on Tuesday when a car overturned at Suraram in Julurpad mandal while overtaking a vehicle coming opposite side.

Gugulothu Siva, ten years died on the spot and two other kids Sasi and Rishit injured in the mishap. The injured were shifted to hospital in Kothagudem. The Gugulothu Rambabu, resident of Nacharam in Enkoor mandal came to Surram to involve in a religious function and the accident took place while he was going to their village.

TWO MAOSIT LEADERS CARRYING EXPLOSIVES HELD

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHARLA (BHADRADRI), FEB. 23

Two CPI-Maoist leaders carrying explosives were nabbed at the Charla Bus Stand on Tuesday. Fifty electric detonators, 50 gelatin sticks and three notes of revolutionary literature were recovered from them. The two persons were identified as Paddam Munni aka Tellam Munni aka Nirmala, resident of Savanar village in Bijapur district and Jarputa Bansi, son of late Rayasu of Avupalli village in Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh.

Both persons were moving suspiciously at the bus stand, and the Charla police and CRPF personnel took them into custody for interrogation. They agreed that they were working for the CPI-Maoist party.

Munni is working as a member of the Indravathi Area Committee, and Bansi is the LGS commander of the Maddedu Area.

Munni is an expert in motivating the people in the villages of the Indravathi area and Bansi used to provide groceries and explosives to the Maoists.

A case under Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) was registered against the two and were sent to Judicial custody.

EIGHT HELD IN FAKE PASSPORTS CASE IN BODHAN

DC CORRESPONDENT
NIZAMABAD, FEB. 23

Eight people, including two police officers, were arrested in the bogus passports case in Bodhan. Reportedly, 72 Bangladesh nationals acquired Indian Passports from Bodhan by submitting fake details. Shockingly, of 72 Passports, 32 were issued on the same address in Bodhan, which building is owned by a police officer. Cyberabad police have been investigating the sensational case since the first week of February. One Parimal of West Bengal arrived in Bodhan town posing as an Ayurvedic doctor and played a key role in getting passports by Bangladesh nationals from Bodhan. In this case, two Special Branch head constables are facing corruption charges.

It is difficult for Bangladesh nationals to visit any country with their Passports. Due to restrictions, few Bangladeshis planned to get Indian Passport for safe passage to the Gulf countries, especially Dubai. Allegedly, Bangladesh nationals got Aadhar cards in West Bengal and later transferred them to Bodhan town in Telangana. With Mee Seva centres' cooperation, a few Special Branch and Postal department employees, they procured local Aadhar cards and passports. Of the 72 Bangladesh nationals, only four were caught at the Rajiv Gandhi International Airport while flying to Dubai.

The whereabouts of the remaining persons are not known. Special Branch head constables Mallesh (presently SD), Anil (presently ASI) submitted fake information to their higher officials for clearance to the Passports for Bangladesh nationals, a senior police officer opined. He said that the Union Ministry of Home Affairs, External Affairs and state police are seriously monitoring the fake passports case.

● IT IS difficult for Bangladesh nationals to visit any country with their Passports. Due to restrictions, few Bangladeshis planned to get Indian Passport for safe passage to the Gulf countries, especially Dubai.

New plan to be designed for SUDA covering KMC

More than 20 divisions were affected with the old plan

A. RAVINDRA SESHU
KHAMMAM, FEB. 23

The master plan of Khammam designed in 2009 turned out to be a curse to the 10,000 households directly or indirectly under Khammam Municipal Corporation's limits.

Though the state government decided to go for another master plan under the Central government's Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) scheme, it may take another 10 months to implement the new plan. The government has given the contract of designing the new master plan to the R.V. Associates. The master plan of 2009 is so unscientific, and it was designed by sitting in the office rooms. No field survey is taken up in it. Roads,

● KMC'S ASSISTANT city planner Ramachandra Rao said that the new plan would soon come up and the permission for house construction will be given accordingly.

including 180 feet outer ring road, 60 and 80 feet inner roads, went through the existing houses and vacant plots. More than 20 divisions were affected by the old plan.

Sankar, a retired government employee, is so anxious and tense with the rejection of his house site's permission to construct a house. "I was told that my plot is amidst the ORR of the 2009 master plan and there is no scope to give permission till a new master plan comes", he said.

Nearly 4000 such persons,

● LICENSED TOWN planner Swaran Singh said, "We are not giving any permission to the owners whose plots on the master plan roads. The house owners should not fall into the trap of middlemen".

who were told on the issue, are expressing concerns over the existing master plan. Another 6000, who had vacant plots and houses on these roads, are not aware that their houses were on the master plan of 2009. The map of the plan is seen on the website of the Director of Town and Country Planning (DTCP). The DTCP officials noticed the flaws in it and wrote to the government on it. It is decided to repeal the old plan. It will be in existence until the new master plan is approved and updated on

the website of DTCP.

KMC's assistant city planner Ramachandra Rao said that the new plan would soon come up and the permission for house construction will be given accordingly. "We expected changes in the proposed new master plan, which is being designed as SUDA (Stambadri Urban Development Authority) master plan covering Khammam Municipal Corporation area", he said.

These middlemen promised them that they would solve the problem and demand money from them. Licensed town planner Swaran Singh said, "We are not giving any permission to the owners whose plots on the master plan roads. The house owners should not fall into the trap of middlemen".

SCCL HAS BECOME FINANCIAL SOURCE TO TRS, ALLEGES BANDI

DC CORRESPONDENT
MANCHERIAL, FEB. 23

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) state president Bandi Sanjay alleged that SCCL (Singareni Collieries Company Limited) has become a financial source for the TRS and its CMD Sridhar has become a puppet in the hands of TRS and indulging in huge corruption.

Bandi Sanjay said Sridhar is not behaving like an IAS officer and became an 'adda' for the corruption and irregularities in the SCCL and held him responsible for irregularities in SCCL. He said the irregularities and corruption have resulted in losses to SCCL. Bandi Sanjay was addressing the gathering of Singareni workers who gave him rousing welcome at Srirampur in Mancherial district on the way to Kagaznagar to address a public meeting on Tuesday. He said the state government should not forget that Central government has a 49 per cent share in the SCCL and added that BJP will protect the interests of the Singareni workers.

BJP state incharge Tharun Chug said the TRS is exploiting the workers of SCCL and BJP will not tolerate anybody whosoever indulged in corruption and added they will take the SCCL issues to the notice of the Central government.

POSTMAN DIES IN ROAD MISHAP

Khammam: Vemula Krishna, 45, a postman working in Ari-kayalapadu in Enkoor mandal, died in a

Bandi asks Centre to speed up NH-563 works

PULI SHARATH KUMAR,
KARIMNAGAR, FEB. 23

Travel between Karimnagar and Warangal, the major second city in the state, is a nightmare. National highway 563 remains badly damaged and plying of vehicles is a hard task.

Hundreds of vehicles including heavy duty trucks pass through this road every day. The road was under control of the state government's road and buildings department till March 2015.

Then came the NHAI announcement that the Jagtial-Karimnagar-Warangal stretch of the road was made a national highway in view of the heavy traffic. The Centre included this stretch under the Bharatmala Pariyojana Scheme for upgradation and development. Since then, no maintenance work was done on this road. The journey on around 72km from Karimnagar is taking more than three hours now, against the around 90-minutes in the past. Potholes are one too

many and parts of the road were washed away due to rain and flooding, mainly from Manakonur to Elkathurthy. Not just from Karimnagar, several heavy duty vehicles from neighbouring districts of Nizamabad and Adilabad and other regions like Nanded, Nagpur and other parts of Maharashtra too pass through NH 563 to reach the Kazipet railway junction. They generally carry goods meant for business.

Several surveys had been conducted in the past, but neither the state nor the central government took any step for repair or maintenance. As a result, accidents are many. Several people were injured and some lost their lives. Recently, two RTC buses coming from opposite directions collided while one of them was trying to skip a pothole between Elkathurthy and Kothulanadamu villages.

Around 11 occupants were injured, including both RTC drivers. Hundreds of government and private employees working in

Karimnagar are travelling via Husnabad, an alternative route, and this costs them additional fuel expenses.

Jakkani Sanjay, state coordinator of BC Vidyarthi Sangam, told *Deccan Chronicle*, "Ruling party MLAs, MPs and ministers made tall claims about the good that will come out of the NH status for the road. They travel by this highway but are not taking any steps to improve its condition."

"Those like pregnant women are facing the worst. They have problem of safe travel to reach hospitals for their regular check-up", he said. At the initiative of Karimnagar MP, Bandi Sanjay Kumar, the central government has sanctioned ₹40.91 crore to take up the repair and widening works on NH-563. The works have not started yet.

Sanjay Kumar met Union transport and highways minister Nitin Gadkari in New Delhi on February 12 and urged him to speed up the repair works and convert the road from double lane to four-lane.

Won't take action on CP: Bar assn

DC CORRESPONDENT
PEDDAPALLI, FEB. 23

In response to the explanation given by the Ramagundam Police Commissioner, V. Satyanarayana about the comments he made against the Manthani advocates, the members of Mathani BAR association withdrew their decision of issuing of legal notices and further activities against the top cop.

It is to be notified here that Manthani BAR association members held a general body meeting on Monday and condemned the comments made by Police Commissioner V. Satyanarayana against the advocates of the Manthani that 'Legal factionism is going on Manthani'.

They even passed a resolution to take action against the Police commissioner for the comments he made and appealed the High Court to take immediate action against him as per law for insulting the advocates. However, the top cop

Satyanarayana explained in a statement released on the same day in which context he made such comments and said that has a lot of respect towards advocates who are rendering legal services unbiased under Ramagundam police commissionerate limits. He explained that under the Manthani police station limits some people having personal grudge upon one another and to prove supremacy in politics are filing petitions against each other and are continuing legal battle for years along with bringing bad name to police department. Keeping in view of such incidents, the comments were made but not to disrespect the advocates and members of the BAR association, he added. Satisfied with the explanation given by the top cop V. Satyanarayana, the members of the Manthani BAR association said that they are going to withdraw all the activities which they decided to take against the PC.

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The general public is hereby informed that my client Mr. Podisheetty Ramudu S/o Venkateshwarlu, is the sole and absolute owner and possessor along with his brother Mr. Podisheetty Lakshmanudu S/o Venkateshwarlu of "all that house with open place bearing Municipal H.No. 5-10-134 (5/938-3-1 Old) constructed in Plot No.12 in Sy. Nos 324 & 325 admeasuring to an extent of 355.55 Sq.Yds situated at Kishanpura, Hanamkonda, Warangal Urban Dist.," by virtue of registered sale deed No. 4281/1980 Dt. 20.8.1980. My client n while travelling from Hanamkonda to Kazipet on 02-02-2021, lost the cover containing the original documents of the above referred property i.e., original Reg. Sale Deed Doc. No. 4281/1980 Dt. 20.8.1980, Registered in SRO, Warangal, and its link Document No. 1492/1979, Original Plan and Permission pertaining to the above referred property and other relevant property tax receipts. With reference to the above, the general public are hereby called upon with a request to return if fund and informed that if anybody is having any rights, claims, interest on the above property, may approach the undersigned within 7 days from the date of publication of this notice, otherwise claims or objections received after this period will not bind my client.

Sd/- Rakesh Mudutanapelli Advocate.
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BJP state president Bandi Sanjay addresses the gathering at Chatrapati Shivaji Sankalp Sabha in Kagaznagar in Komaram Bheem Asifabad district on Tuesday.

—BY ARRANGEMENT

Bandi: 'Rama Rajyam' will come after '23 polls

DC CORRESPONDENT
KOMARAM BHEEM ASIFABAD, FEB. 23

The BJP state president Bandi Sanjay on Tuesday said 'Rama Rajya' will be established after elections in 2023 in Telangana by smashing TRS and alleged that Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao is diverting the central govt funds for other purposes and not giving publicity for Centre in the welfare schemes being implemented in the state. Bandi Sanjay alleged that local TRS MLA Koneru Konappa came to Kagaznagar with just two buffalo for lively hood from Andhra and now amassed a wealth of ₹200 crores. Bandi Sanjay was addressing Chatrapati Shivaji Sankalp Sabha in which local Congress leader Palvai Harish Babu joined the party in the Kagaznagar town.

He said the BJP's party wave that is going on in the Telangana state is not a 'Thoo fan' but is a Sunami and the TRS and KCR will vanish in the Sunami. He demanded the KCR to release a white paper on funds released to the state and challenged the KCR and KTR to contest in elections for two MLC seats if they have the guts and confidence to win the two MLC seats.

Bandi Sanjay alleged that KCR was fielding former Prime Minister late PV Narasimha Rao's daughter Vani in the defeating seat.

Bandi Sanjay said they have fought against the TRS and its ruling government from Adilabad which has the history of the Komaram Bheem fought against the then Nizam and Asafzahi for Adivasis rights on Jal, Jangal and Jameen.

He said BJP named the meeting place after B.R Ambedkar and meeting after Chatrapati Shivaji and this was possible only for BJP and they respect their leaders unlike other political parties which name after Akbar and Babar. BJP party Telangana in charge Tarun Chug reeled out the various welfare schemes being implemented for the benefit of the poor and described the KCR's cabinet as groups exploiters and they are not 'Rakshak but Bhakshak'.

Tarun Chug said people of the erstwhile Adilabad met injustice with the Kalleshwaram irrigation project and it would have been good if the Pranahitha-Chevella project constructed. He said KCR is taking water to the farmhouse but not giving it to the poor of Adilabad from the Kalleshwaram project.

JUNGLE | TOUR

Tipeswar Tiger Reserve is a habitat for tigers, leopards

Tiger safari attracts T'wood actors

PILLAMARRI SRINIVAS
TIPESHWAR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY
(MAHARASHTRA), FEB. 23

The Tipeswar Wildlife Sanctuary which is popularly known as Tiger Reserve that is located on the state borders in Maharashtra has got Tollywood celebrities' attraction these days.

Tipeswar Tiger Reserve was just 13 km from the Telangana state borders and 30 km from Adilabad town. The Tiger reserve falls in the Yavathmal district of Maharashtra.

Many Tollywood celebrities visiting the Tipeswar Tiger reserve just after it was reopened for visitors after a lockdown following the covid epidemic.

Tipeswar Tiger Reserve is a habitat for a considerable number of tigers, Leopards, Nilgai, spotted deer, Longoors, peacocks, and many other forest animals.

All these celebrities and



Tipeswar Wildlife Sanctuary's main gate at Sunna village in Yavathmal district in Maharashtra.

—BY ARRANGEMENT

families coming from Telangana are taking entry into tiger reserve from Sunna gate which is 2 km inside from Sunna village beside NH-44.

In addition, many families including IT professionals and nature lovers from Hyderabad are coming to Tipeswar Tiger Reserve.

The forest staff who are looking after the Tiger Safari there say those top Telugu actors including Allu

Nagachaitanya, Navdeep, George Reddy cine hero Sandeep Madhav and Big Boss show winner Abhijeet and many other top actors had recently visited and spent time with nature and enjoyed the Tiger Safari in the Tipeswar Tiger Reserve. One of the guides at Tipeswar Tiger Reserve said there was news that Telugu top hero Prabhas is likely to visit the Tipeswar Tiger Reserve soon.

A guide Sohail Sheik at Tipeswar Tiger Reserve said that some of the celebrities even sighted tigers during their tiger safari and some celebrities referring to their visit to tiger reserve had expressed that 'Acha... hi Dekhneke Layak...' next time Ayeenge'.

The officials of the Tipeswar Tiger reserve have opened a new and third gate to enter into the reserve from Kodduri village side near Pimpalkuti village located on the other side of the river Penganga on the state borders.

The interested tourists and visitors can book the Tiger Safari online through their website and forest officials arrange Safaris from 6 am onwards and tiger safari will be ended by 6 pm.

There was a private Foxtail Restaurant for accommodation in addition to the cottages to stay there along with the families.

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-storeyed 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

DC CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 23

Union health ministry officials have said that two mutated variant of SARS-CoV-2 — N440K and E484Q — have been detected in Maharashtra and Kerala but there is no direct relation between the recent surge in Covid-19 cases in these states and some others with the mutant virus strains.

Maharashtra and Kerala account for 75 per cent of total active Covid-19 cases in the country.

Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka and Gujarat are some other states that are also witnessing a surge in the cases.

Besides, people have also been detected with the South African and Brazilian strains of SARS-CoV-2 in India apart from the mutated UK variant.

Director General of ICMR, Dr Balram Bhargava, said that these two virus strains — N440K and E484Q — have been detected in other countries too and are not specific to India.

Moreover, they have been found earlier in some states in India.

The E484Q strain was earlier 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 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

Kerala CM writes to PM over virus curbs

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 education 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

● 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.

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.

With the BJP having a sizeable presence in areas in Kasargod bordering Karnataka, parties like the CPM, Congress and Muslim League have turned the issue into a political fight. These parties are accusing the BJP led government in Karnataka of causing innumerable problems for the people of Kerala.

It is learnt that the Kasargod district BJP president has conveyed to the Karnataka officials that if the restrictions continued it would adversely affect the party's electoral prospects in the coming polls.

Commissioners to impose night curfew in Covid-19 hotspots in their districts, if needed.

The move comes amid a growing concern over an upswing in the number of Coronavirus cases in the state.

Chairing a virtual meeting to review the Coronavirus situation, Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh ordered restrictions on gathering of people from March 1, with 100 people allowed indoors and 200 people allowed to gather outdoors, according to a government statement.

He also directed that wearing of face masks and social distancing norms be strictly enforced, with testing to be ramped to 30,000 a day, it said.

Health officials said presently 200 people were allowed to gather indoors and 500 people outdoors, while 20,000 to 22,000 tests are conducted every day.

Chief secretary Vinni Mahajan ruled out closure of government schools again and said the department is taking all steps to ensure the safety of students.

Amarinder Singh authorised deputy commissioners to impose night curfew in hotspots in their districts, if needed, with a micro-containment strategy to be adopted.

He also directed the police force to ensure strict enforcement of wearing masks.

There will be monitoring of adherence to Covid-19 norms at all restaurants and marriage palaces and the Department of Excise and Taxation will be the nodal agency for it.

The Chief Minister said a decision on reducing occupancy in cinema halls will be taken after March 1.

Private offices and restaurants shall be encouraged to display the last tests done for all employees, he added.

Punjab is among the five states that have been asked by the Centre to refocus on strict surveillance, containment and RT-PCR testing to check the growing number of cases. The other four states are Maharashtra, Kerala, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh.

containment zones and sealed. So far genome sequencing of nearly 6,000 samples have been completed.

Amid a spike in Coronavirus cases, a meeting was held at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) on Tuesday to review the pandemic situation.

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 fresh cases and 78 deaths.

Meanwhile, the Punjab government on Tuesday ordered curbs on indoor and outdoor gatherings from March 1 Deputy



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

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 conservation 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.

DEFENCE | PROPOSALS

Prime Minister had formally handed over the Arjun Mk-1A to Army

DAC clears 118 main battle tanks for ₹ 8,379 cr

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.

The DAC accorded AoNs for 118 indigenous Arjun Mk-1A tanks for Indian army worth ₹8,379 crore.

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

● THIS IS the second biggest 'Make-in-India' project cleared in 2021 after the Cabinet Committee on Security last month approved procurement of 83 Tejas Mk-1A fighter jets for the Indian Air Force.

● 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 and are deployed in the western desert along the Pakistan front.

approved procurement of 83 Tejas Mk-1A fighter jets for the 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 coordination with the Indian Army.

Last week Prime Minister Narendra Modi had formally

handed over to the Army the Arjun Mk-1A in Chennai.

The 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 and are deployed in the western desert along the Pakistan front.

Arjun Mk-1A has 72 improvements over the existing version, of which 14 are major upgrades.

The 118 Arjun tanks would also form two regiments in the Armoured Corps of the Indian Army like the first 124 tanks. Arjun Mark 1-A is equipped with a 120mm main gun and weighs 68 tonnes.

The Arjun has been designed by the DRDO's Combat Vehicles Research and Development Establishment (CVRDE) based out of Chennai.

"To meet the Atmanirbhar Bharat goals of the government on time-bound defence procurement process and faster decision making and to systematically work towards reducing the time taken for capital acquisition, the DAC also approved that all capital acquisition contracts (delegated and non-delegated) other than design and development (D&D) cases shall be concluded in two years," said defence ministry in a release.

It said that the ministry, in consultation with the services and all stakeholders, will come up with detailed plan of action for achieving the same.

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 mill-

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 longtime 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, Etneo Observatory. — AP/PTI

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

China relation is one of strong competition: WH

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

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 *mukh*” 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.

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Subhani



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 Qadiri, 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

OIL FROM IRAN

With a thaw in the US-Iran relations in the foreseeable future, India should grab the opportunity to buy crude oil from Iran which comes at a cheaper price than from Saudi Arabia. This move could bring down the ever-increasing petrol/diesel prices in the country. It could also explore possibilities of buying oil from Venezuela as the Biden’s government may lift sanctions imposed on them too.

R.J. Janardhana Rao
Hyderabad

LAUGHTER RIOT

‘Running on laughter’ has given me a good laugh (*DC, Feb. 23*). After seeing how people are reacting due to increase in petrol price that has pinched every section of the people, a ground reality, I also prefer that cycling is the best in many ways.

D. Manoj Kumar
Secunderabad

CHECK DOG MENACE

There are several stray dogs wandering around the piled-up garbage in the lanes and bylanes of Nimboliadda, Kacheguda Station and Barkatpura. Despite complaints no action has been taken so far to clean garbage and to catch the stray dogs. I request Mayor Gadwal Vijayalaxmi and Dy Mayor Sriatha Reddy to take action immediately.

Om Vishal Raj
Hyderabad

50 YEARS AGO IN DECCAN Chronicle

Separation will be suicidal for Telangana: CM

HYDERABAD, February. 23

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister K. Brahmananda Reddy today warned that if the demand for separate Telangana was conceded, it might end up in violence and bloodshed as in West Bengal because of frustration among the people.

Addressing separately the meetings of Congress (R) Advocates’ Forum and National Union of Students, he said the avenues and opportunities for employment would be far less in a small State than in a bigger one and consequently there would be greater frustration leading to unpleasant situations. The division of the State might lead to the demands for further division of the region. This course would not solve the problem, he added.

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 enforcing

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. Chattari, Pad-

ma, V.G. Thomas and Krishna Jani. 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 [dillipthecherian@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

Punjab & Sind Bk to allot ₹5,500 cr shares to govt

Punjab & Sind Bank will allot preferential shares to the government next month in lieu of Rs 5,500 crore capital infusion. An EGM of the shareholders is scheduled on March 25 in this respect, the bank said. In September, the government had approved a Rs 20,000 crore fund through Parliamentary for capital infusion into public sector banks. Of this, Rs 5,500 crore was approved to be infused into P&SB.

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 (RGPP), commonly known as Dabhol project. Once the transaction is complete, NTPC will have 86.49 per cent stake in RGPP. Earlier in January, NTPC had announced acquiring 35.47 per cent stake in RGPP from its lenders. Initially, NTPC and Gail had 25.51 per cent stake each in the Dabhol project.

Sebi: Pre-expiry margins to curb -ve prices soon

The Sebi will put in place pre-expiry margins on cash settled contracts wherein the underlying commodities are deemed to be susceptible to possible near zero or negative prices— like that happened in crude oil futures last year. The decision, to be effective from April 1, is aimed at encouraging reduction of open interest as the contract approaches the expiry date. The margin will be applicable on some commodities under ARME.

Bajaj launches new Pulsar 180 priced at ₹1.08 L

Bajaj Auto has launched the new version of Pulsar 180 bike priced at Rs 1,07,904, ex-show-room Delhi. The 178.6 cc model gets sporty split seats, black alloy wheels, LED tail lamp, five-speed transmission gear box with telescopic anti-friction bush in the front suspension and a five-way adjustable nitrox shock absorber at the rear. Currently, 20 per cent of the sports biking segment is in the 180-200cc motorcycles.



Separation could help revive stake sale to Aramco RIL to spinoff O2C unit with \$25 billion loan

DEBJIT 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, Vadodra, Patanganga, 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 HIKE

SANGEETHA 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 Sciley 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 standoff

KARTHIKEYAN SUNDARAM & ARCHANA CHAUDHAR
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-



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

Broking income set to hit ₹27,500 cr

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, FEB. 23

Due to high turnover in the first nine months of current fiscal, the brokerage industry is estimated to clock a record broking income of Rs 27,500-28,500 crore in FY21, up 30-35 per cent growth compared to Rs 21,000 crore in FY20, says rating agency Icra.

The equity market reported an aggregate turnover of Rs 4,222 lakh crore in the first nine months of FY21, registering year-on-year (YoY) growth of 66 per cent. The average daily turnover (ADTO) rose to Rs 22.46 lakh crore till December

in FY21 compared to Rs 13.89 lakh crore in the comparable period last year and Rs 14.39 lakh crore in FY20.

"The industry growth rate, however, is expected to moderate in the fiscal 2021-22 with gradual moderation in transaction volumes," Icra said.

The rating agency expects industry aggregate broking income of Rs 29,500-30,500 crore (YoY growth of 7-8 per cent), in FY22. Growing retail share along with increasing interest and other fee income is expected to support profitability of brokerages.

Large established enti-

ties with strong presence in online broking have increased their market share in the current environment. As per NSE data, the top 20 brokerage houses together accounted for about 84 per cent of overall active client accounts as of December 2020, up from 75 per cent as of March 2020 and 57 per cent as of March 2019.

Discount brokerage houses have been able to garner a predominant share of the new accounts supported by their technology-driven business model. But many traditional brokerage companies had a slow start to the year in terms of client additions.

Airtel partners with Qualcomm to drive 5G services

Bengaluru, Feb. 23: Bharti Airtel Ltd said on Tuesday it will work with US chipmaker Qualcomm for 5G services in India, as telecom firms in the world's second-largest wireless market gear up to usher in the latest generation of wireless networks.

Airtel, placed second to Reliance Industries-owned Jio by subscribers, said in a statement to stock

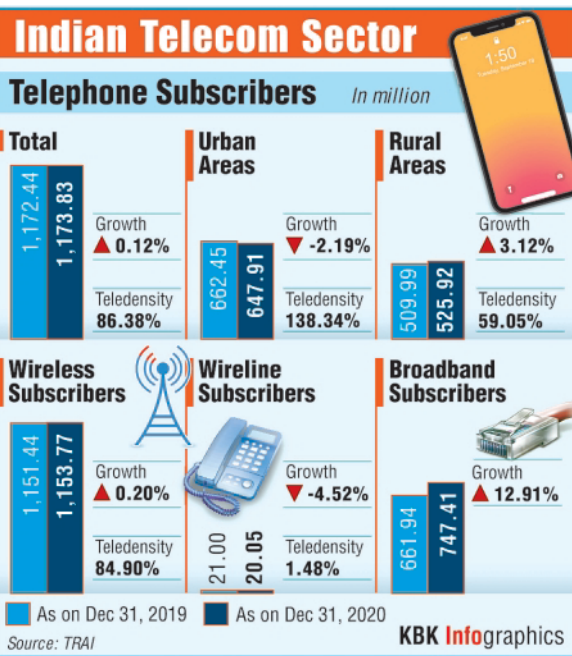
exchanges that it will use Qualcomm's Radio Access Network platforms, which runs services on the cloud, to roll out 5G networks in the country.

"This collaboration ... aims to allow a faster roll-out of broadband services ... across India for 'last mile' connectivity challenges that are becoming increasingly important in today's remote, mobile-

first society," Airtel said.

Although the need for high-speed internet has been highlighted in the pandemic-led work-from-home year, India's 5G ambitions have been buffeted by delays in auction of airwaves that support the technology.

Concerns have also been raised by telecoms around the relatively high pricing of spectrum in India.



PIAGGIO ENTERS CARGO ELECTRIC 3-WHEELER SPACE

MICHAEL GONSALVES
PUNE, FEB. 23

Piaggio Vehicles, the Italian manufacturer of small commercial vehicles, on Tuesday entered the cargo electric three-wheeler segment with the launch of Ape' E-Xtra FX priced at Rs 3.12 lakh. This is the second product in the EV space by the company with the first being the passenger electric three-wheeler Ape' E-City which was launched in late 2019 and came with swappable battery technology.

These small commercial vehicles are powered by the FX (fixed) range of battery solutions. The Ape' E-City is priced at Rs 2.83 lakh. Both prices are introductory.

The Ape' E-Xtra FX gives 9.5 kW power output and has a payload capacity of 506kg.

The top-speed of both E-Xtra FX and E-City FX is 45km/hour. The drive range of the cargo variant is 90km and the passenger variant, 110km.

The charging time for both the vehicles is three hours and 45 minutes.

— Bloomberg

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 (51kg) 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 rained 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 got a superb offensive performance from their bench to win for the 21st time in their last 23 games and improve to 25-6 overall.

Jordan Clarkson (five threes), Mike Conley (four threes), Mitchell (three threes) and Royce O'Neale (two threes) contributed to the Jazz's domination from beyond the arc. Conley also had 15 points.

Gordon Hayward scored 21 points but had to leave the game in the fourth quarter with a hand injury as the Hornets' six-game road trip got off to a rocky start. — *AFP*

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

FOOTBALL

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

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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 questionnaire 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*



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 bowl will not swing). The pink ball does tend to



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

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

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*

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 Chepauk 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*

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; Satyajit Bachhav 3/59) by six wickets.
■ Delhi 354/4 in 50 overs (Nitish Rana 137, Dhruv Shorey 132; Sagar Trivedi 2/66) beat Pondicherry 175 in 39.3 overs (S. Suresh Kumar 42; Kulwant Khepriya 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 Bhambrani 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 Sagatpam 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, Dipu Sangma 2/33) by 88 runs.
■ Arunachal Pradesh 222/7 in 50 overs (Rahul Dalal 123 not out) lost to Assam 226/5 in 36.4 overs (Sibsankar Roy 60 not out, Denish Das 59, Sashil Jain 48, Rakesh Kumar 4/59) 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, Nagaho 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 MOVES 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

— *Agencies*