

SHORT TAKES

Delhi fire dept gearing up for summer

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

From restricting leave for its staff to ensure maximum personnel are on standby, overhauling all vehicles and equipment to making special arrangements to respond quickly to fires in agricultural fields, the Delhi Fire Service is gearing up for a busy summer as the rise in mercury often means an increase in the number of fire-related incidents. The fire department will also conduct various public awareness and sensitisation programmes to educate people about steps to prevent fires, officials said on Sunday. With summer approaching, there is a rise in temperature. This also leads to a rise in fire-related incidents, Atul Garg, director of Delhi Fire Services, said. Until February, the department received a maximum of 35 to 40 calls about fire-related incidents per day. In March, the number of calls has doubled. Now, the fire department attends to around 90 calls per day and this is likely to further increase by April, he said. "The fire department would need extra manpower. So, a preparedness plan has been chalked out to tackle a busy summer and it will be reviewed from time to time," he added.

According to the plan, in order to ensure that maximum firefighters are on standby, leave for all staff have been restricted. Leave will be sanctioned by the head of department at headquarters level and divisional officers at division level, the officials said. The fire department said all vehicles and equipment have been overhauled and kept ready for deployment. Further, this is the first time that the maintenance contract has been given to authorised agencies so that the down time of vehicles can be reduced, they said. During summer, fire-related incidents are also reported from agricultural fields in rural areas of the city. The fire department is planning to station smaller units in these areas so that in case a fire breaks out, firefighters can reach the spot quickly and prevent any major damage to crops, Garg said. "As per requests received from the local authorities in such areas, we plan to make special arrangements by setting up smaller units there. Outpost fire stations such as Narela and Khera Dabur will be strengthened to deal with crop fires," he said. Each fire station will also conduct various public awareness and sensitisation programmes to educate the public about steps to prevent fires.

Delhi's air quality in 'poor' category

New Delhi: The national capital recorded a minimum temperature of 14 degrees Celsius on Sunday morning, a notch below the season's average, the Met office said. The weatherman has forecast mainly clear skies for the day. The maximum temperature is expected to settle around 32 degrees Celsius, the Met office said. The relative humidity at 8.30 am was 73 per cent, it said. The air quality in Delhi was recorded in the 'poor' category. The air quality index (AQI) was 218 at 11.05 AM, according to real-time data of the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). An AQI between 201 and 300 is considered 'poor', 301-400 'very poor' and 401-500 'severe', while an AQI above 500 falls in the 'severe plus' category. The air quality was recorded in the 'moderate' category across Ghaziabad, Noida, Greater Noida, Gurgaon and Faridabad, according to data issued by a government agency on Sunday. Pollutants PM 2.5 and PM 10 remained high in the air of the five immediate neighbours of Delhi, according to the air quality index (AQI) maintained by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). According to the index, an AQI between zero and 50 is considered 'good', 51 and 100 'satisfactory', 101 and 200 'moderate', 201 and 300 'poor', 301 and 400 'very poor', and 401 and 500 'severe'. The average 24-hour AQI at 4 pm on Sunday was 195 in Ghaziabad, 182 in Greater Noida, 174 in Noida, 180 in Faridabad and 195 in Gurgaon, according to CPCB's Sameer app. — PTI



People violate social distancing norms amid the coronavirus pandemic at crowded Sarojini Nagar market in New Delhi on Sunday.

— PTI

Delhi records 407 Covid-19 cases, positivity rate 0.60%

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

Delhi recorded 407 new Covid-19 cases on Sunday, crossing the 400-mark for the fourth consecutive day, while the positivity rate stood at 0.60 per cent, according to data shared by the health department.

The death toll climbed to 10,941 with two more fatalities, as per the latest bulletin issued by the Delhi health department.

The city had recorded 419 fresh Covid-19 cases on Saturday, while 431 cases were recorded on Friday, the highest single-day spike in over two months. The count on Thursday was 409.

Delhi had registered 370 new cases on Wednesday and 320 on Tuesday. The city had reported three Covid-19 deaths on Wednesday and four on Tuesday. A total of 585 cases were reported on January 1 and 424 on January 3. The daily count had dropped to 306 on January 11 and risen again to 386 on January 12, according to official figures.

The numbers had started

HEALTH EXPERTS and doctors have attributed the 'sudden rise' of Covid-19 cases to people turning complacent, not following Covid-19 appropriate behaviour and 'assuming that all is well now'

ed to come down in February. On February 26, the month's highest daily count of 256 new cases was recorded. The new coronavirus cases recorded on Sunday took the infection tally to 6,43,696, the bulletin said. The number of active cases in the city rose to 2,262 on Sunday from 2,207 on Saturday.

Health experts and doctors have attributed this "sudden rise" of Covid-19 cases to people turning complacent, not following Covid-19 appropriate behaviour and "assuming that all is well now".

Delhi health minister Satyendar Jain had on Friday said the figures of over 400 per day suddenly were "not alarming", and had asserted that the positivity rate was still below one per cent.

The total number of tests conducted on Saturday stood at 68,223, including 41,195 RT-PCR tests and 27,028 rapid antigen tests, the bulletin said. The number of people under home isolation on Sunday rose to 1,270 from 1,204 on Saturday, it said, adding that over 6.30 lakh people have recovered from the infection till date.

Noida recorded three new cases of Covid-19 on Sunday that pushed Gautam Buddh Nagar district's infection tally to 25,667, official data showed. The active cases in the district remained at 84, same as the previous day, according to the data released by the state's health department for a 24-hour period.

Another three patients got discharged during the period with the overall recoveries reaching 25,492, the fifth highest in the state, it showed.

Gautam Buddh Nagar has a death toll of 91 with a mortality rate of 0.35 per cent. The recovery rate of patients remained at 99.31 per cent, the statistics showed.

3 firing incidents in N-E Delhi in 2 days: 1 killed, 2 injured

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

A 47-year-old man was shot dead and two others got injured in three separate firing incidents in northeast Delhi in the last two days, police said on Sunday.

In the first incident on Friday, Suhail and Gazi fired four rounds at a bike mechanic Al Tasleem over some repairing issue in Jafrabad area, a senior police officer said.

The second incident took place on Saturday at Khajuri Khas where one Shorab Ansari (47), a shopkeeper, was shot dead by unknown persons while he was at his clothes shop, the officer said.

Police received information around 8.40 pm about the incident, they said, adding that Ansari was rushed to Jag Pravesh Chand Hospital where he was declared dead.

Police found that Ansari was shot dead over some family dispute or some personal rivalry, the officer said, adding that police are trying to nab the accused persons.

On the same day, one Manoj Sharma, 42, was shot at his cheek in Jafrabad. Sharma runs a Mother Dairy booth in the area and was admitted at GTB Hospital, police said, adding that they suspected that Sharma was shot over some monetary issue.

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— PTI

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2 fake DSIIDC officials held for cheating

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

Two men have been arrested for allegedly cheating people wanting to buy industrial plots by posing as officials of the Delhi State Industrial and Infrastructure Development Corporation (DSIIDC), the police said on Sunday.

The accused have been identified as Vikram Saxena, a resident of Dehradun in Uttarakhand, and Mithun Bhatnagar, a resident of Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh, it said.

The police received complaints from a man named Naresh Jindal and 14 others who alleged that they had been cheated by the

duo, officials said.

In his complaint, Mr Jindal said he had applied for an industrial plot of DSIIDC in 1998 in a reallocation scheme but his application form was rejected, the police said.

In 2018, Vikram and his brother Ajay met Mr Jindal and introduced themselves as DSIIDC employees. They showed him their identity cards and his original application form, which had been rejected earlier by DSIIDC, a senior police officer said.

They lured him to take the plot, which was rejected earlier, by paying more money. They also told Mr Jindal to tell other people known to him that they could also get plots, which

had been rejected earlier, by paying more money, the police said. Thereafter, Mr Jindal and six other people known to him got ready to pay extra money to get the plots, the police said.

"Vikram and Ajay asked them to deposit money for filing and other charges. Jindal paid ₹7,00,000 to both the accused but did not get the plot," DCP (Economic Offences Wing) Mohammad Ali said.

The accused were arrested on Saturday. Their interrogation revealed that Vikram used to work as a DSIIDC agent and helped people complete their file work, the police said.

He came to know that in 1996 the DSIIDC had launched a scheme for

First job will be to clean city, says party in-charge of MCDs Durgesh Pathak

AAP: Will make Delhi world class if win next MCD polls

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

The Aam Aadmi Party will focus on making Delhi clean and a world-class city if it comes to power in the municipal polls due next year, party leader Durgesh Pathak said.

Having won the municipal corporation bypolls, the Arvind Kejriwal led party is now focusing on consolidating its position in the civic bodies.

Pathak, who is the party's in-charge of municipal corporations, said there is a feeling on the ground that the Arvind Kejriwal government must be given an opportunity in municipal corporations. The municipal corporation polls of Delhi are due in 2022.

On the party's vision for municipal corporation, Pathak said the first thing they will do is to clean Delhi if they win the polls.

"The main work of the municipal corporation is to keep Delhi clean but the national capital is so dirty under the BJP. So the first thing we will do is to clean Delhi. Local bodies play a very important role in implementing policies so if the AAP government comes we will succeed in making Delhi a world-class city," he said.



Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal during the foundation laying ceremony of sewage projects at Kirari in Delhi on Sunday.

— PTI

He said the party will reduce corruption in municipal corporations. Talking about the bypoll results, Pathak said the AAP won the bypolls in the strongholds of the BJP and in other seats too, the AAP's margin has increased.

"So the feeling we are getting on the ground is that Arvind Kejriwal must be given an opportunity in municipal corporations too," Pathak told PTI in an interview.

The AAP swept the bypolls, winning four out of the five wards where elections were held on February 28.

Speaking about the factors that worked for the AAP, Pathak said there is anti-incumbency and at the same time people are impressed by the AAP's work.

"Looking at the work done by the AAP government in various sectors like health and education, people believe that if the

AAP government comes in municipal corporations then Delhi's development will happen," he said.

Speaking on the AAP's loss on one seat of Chauhan Bangar in the bypolls which used to be its stronghold, Pathak said in by-elections, local factors also play an important role.

Congress leader Chaudhary Mateen, whose son fought from Chauhan Bangar ward, has an influence in the area.

Moreover, Mateen had lost many polls earlier which might have led people to sympathise with his son Chaudhary Zubair Ahmad.

"Congress lost its deposit on the rest of the seats. I am very confident that next time AAP will win from Chauhan Bangar also," he said.

The Congress wrested the Chauhan Bangar ward from the AAP by a huge margin of over 10,000 votes.

Pathak said people trust the AAP's governance model and they will oust the BJP government in the upcoming polls.

The BJP has been ruling the municipal corporations since 2007. In the 2017 MCD polls, the party won 184 of the total 272 wards in three municipal corporations.

Delhi Master Plan: STF receives 77K complaints till Feb.

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

A special task force (STF) set up to comprehensively oversee effective and proper enforcement of the provisions of the Delhi Master Plan and bye-laws received over 77,000 complaints till February 28, officials said on Sunday.

Action taken on the complaints were reviewed during the 64th meeting of the STF on Saturday, they said, adding that officers from all local bodies and other agencies took part in it.

"In total, 77,186 complaints have been received by the STF till February 28, and action has been initiated on 71,531," a senior Delhi Development Authority (DDA) official said.

Since the constitution of the STF in 2018, over 3,320 unauthorised constructions have been demolished and more than 2,250 properties sealed, he said.

Other kinds of action have also been taken in coordination with agencies such as the Delhi Jal Board, the electricity and the revenue departments. In addition, more than 8,000 active actions have been taken up by urban local bodies on unauthorised constructions, the official further said.

Reviewing the progress of the action taken on the complaints, STF chairman and DDA vice-chairman Anurag Jain directed the ULBs to take the matter seriously and expedite the pending cases. He directed the government agencies to continue their work and take action as needed to remove encroachments.



Young artists take part in Street Art for Climates at Connaught Place in New Delhi on Sunday.

— G.N. Jha

Over 300 protests held in Delhi from Mar. 22 to Dec. 31 last year

New Delhi, March 14: A total of 303 protests were organised by various groups and organisations in Lutyens' Delhi between March 22 and December 31 last year, police said on Sunday.

According to a senior police officer, 255 demonstrations, 32 dharnas, 13 marches and three strikes took place last year after the government started easing lockdown restrictions.

Police said the data, which is from March 22, 2020 till December 31, 2020, has around 284 days and according to it, approximately over one protest

was held everyday.

According to the police, some of the demonstrations which took place last year include, a protest in August, when members of Central Trade Unions had gathered for a demonstration at Jantar Mantar here in violation of Unlocked-3 guidelines after the Delhi Police had registered a case against ASHA workers.

In September, members of the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC) gathered near the Pakistan High Commission to protest the alleged abduction of a Sikh girl in the neighbouring country.

The protest was held after a 22-year-old Sikh girl went missing in Pakistan's Punjab province.

On October 2, civil society activists, students, women and members of various political outfits had gathered at Jantar Mantar here to demand justice for the Hathras gangrape and murder victim.

Bollywood celebrity and political party leaders had also attended the protest. The body of the 19-year-old Dalit woman, who died in Delhi's Safdarjung Hospital, after she was gang-raped, was cremated in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh.

— PTI

SHORT TAKES

KERALA MAHILA CONGRESS CHIEF RESIGNS

Thiruvananthapuram: 14: In an embarrassment to the Congress in Kerala, party's women's wing president Lathika Subhash on Sunday resigned from the post hurt over the denial of Ettumanoor seat to her, shortly after the candidates list for the April 6 Assembly polls was released in New Delhi. The 56-year-old senior leader also shaved her head sitting in front of the Congress office here as a mark of protest. Subhash, who met reporters at the party headquarters Indira Bhavan here, soon after the KPCC chief Mullappally Ramachandran announced the party list at New Delhi, said it was short of women candidates. Of the list of 86 candidates released today by the Congress, only nine are women. It may be for the first time that any leader in any political party in Kerala has taken such a drastic step in protest against the party leadership for denial of poll ticket. A known woman face among party leaders and activists, Lathika Subhash had taken over as the head of Mahila Congress in 2018 from Bindhu Krishna, now a party candidate in Kollam. A weeping Subhash said she tounded her head as a symbol of protest for all the women in the party, who have been toiling hard for the success of other candidates, but have been sidelined and ignored by the leadership for years. She also said she does not want to continue in a position which could not earn her even a deserved election ticket.

YOGENDRA YADAV SAYS GOAL IS TO DEFEAT BJP

Guwahati: Activist Yogendra Yadav met jailed Rajgor Dal president Akhil Gogoi on Sunday and appealed to the people to defeat the ruling BJP in Assam. Yadav and Kisan Sangharsh Samiti leader Sunilam met Gogoi at the Gauhati Medical College Hospital. "Gogoi has put up 19 candidates in the 86 seats in the first two phases. His goal is to ensure that the BJP is defeated," Yadav said. "We have come with one message that the BJP should be ousted for the way it has treated farmers and taken decisions against their interests and welfare," the Samyukt Kisan Morcha leader said. Yadav said that he had met Gogoi in jail in February last year and his health condition has deteriorated considerably since then. "He has been subjected to considerable mental torture and his medical condition has deteriorated but still the ideological clarity, mental resolve and the courage shown by him is a model," he said. Yadav alleged that Mr Gogoi has been put in jail to ensure that he cannot interact with the people during the elections. "This is not a criminal trial but a political trial," he alleged. Yadav said that he had not gone to discuss politics but Gogoi was very interested to know how the farmers' agitation was progressing.

SHOULDN'T FORGET PROTEST, OUTRAGE AGAINST CAA: ACF

MANOJ ANAND
GUWAHATI, MARCH 14

The Assam Christian Forum (ACF)—an ecumenical body of churches in Assam—has made an appeal to the community that they should not forget the protest and outrage against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act that had rocked the state and claimed the life of a teenager in police action. Reminding the death of Sam Stafford, the 17-year-old who died in police action during the anti-CAA protest, the Christian body, that usually comes to focus during the elections only, said that no Christian has come to Assam from Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Afghanistan because of religious persecution and thus the act has no meaning for the community. Christianity is the third largest religious group in Assam with the population of Christians being 1,165,867, making it 3.74 per cent of the total population of the state recorded in the 2011 census. In an obvious attempt to mobilise the Christian voters against the saffron party, the forum said, "Laws should be framed to protect the land, livelihood, and income of tribal people."



Defence minister Rajnath Singh felicitated by party workers during an election campaign rally ahead of the Assam Assembly polls in Biswanath district on Sunday. — PTI

Denied ticket, ex-Kolkata mayor quits BJP amid Amit Shah's visit

Sovan Chatterjee, along with his close friend joined BJP on August 16 in 2019

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, MARCH 14

Dealing a massive jolt to the BJP on the eve of the West Bengal Assembly Election, sitting Behala East MLA and a Trinamul Congress turncoat: Sovan Chatterjee, along with his close friend Baishakhi Banerjee, quit the saffron party alleging "humiliation" soon after it announced young Tollywood actor Payel Sarkar's name from New Delhi on Sunday as its candidate against his estranged wife: Ratna Chatterjee of the TMC in his Assembly constituency. They had joined the BJP on August 16 in 2019.

Their move also coincided with Union home minister Amit Shah's arrival to the state on a two-day visit, his roadshow for BJP candidate Hiran Chatterjee in Kharagpur and a party meeting of grassroots level functionaries in the evening for the first phase of polls on March 27. Mr Chatterjee was the BJP Kolkata district convenor while Baishakhi was a co-convenor under him in the same wing. Both were seen campaigning in South 24 Parganas recently.

According to sources, Mr Chatterjee, who was a heavyweight minister of chief minister Mamata Banerjee's cabinet when he was in the TMC, wanted a ticket either for him or Baishakhi at the Behala East seat from where he won in the last two consecutive terms. He also made his wish clear to his new party which however offered him the Behala West seat but he refused, sources revealed. In the afternoon, the former Kolkata Mayor however found on TV the name of

CPI earmarked Thattanchavady seat; accord inked with Congress

Puducherry, March 14: The Communist Party of India (CPI), a constituent of the Congress-led Secular Democratic Alliance, was earmarked the Thattanchavady segment here to field its candidate in the April 6 Assembly poll.

An agreement was inked in this regard between the Puducherry PCC president A.V. Subramanian and the secretary of the Puducherry unit of the Communist Party of India A.M. Saleem at the PCC office here on Sunday, a press release

from the PCC president said. The Congress and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam have already been earmarked 15 and 13 seats respectively to field their candidates through an accord reached on Saturday. The Union Territory has totally 30 seats and the CPI has now been allotted Thattanchavady seat. A decision in respect of the remaining one seat is yet to be taken. — PTI

India A.M. Saleem at the PCC office here on Sunday, a press release

Didi Nandigram 'attack': 2 IPS officers suspended

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, MAR. 14

Cracking a whip on the dereliction of duty, the Election Commission of India (ECI), on Sunday, suspended two IPS officers, Vivek Sahay and Praween Prakash, and transferred an IAS officer, Bibhu Goyal, from the East Midnapore district magistrate's post in the incident that left West Bengal chief minister and Trinamul Congress supreme Mamata Banerjee, who is also a Z-plus category protectee, injured in Nandigram on March 10 evening.

The ECI took the decision based on state chief secretary Alapan Bandyopadhyay's report and a joint report by special general observer Ajay Nayak and special police observer Vivek Dubey. While Mr Sahay, an additional director general, was the director (security) who was also in charge of the CM's security being the chief of the unit, Mr

Prakash was the district's superintendent of police.

On Mr Sahay, the ECI stated, "The charges must be framed against him within a week for grossly failing in the discharge of his primary duty as the director of security to protect the Z-plus protectee." It directed Mr Bandyopadhyay, in consultation with DGP Niraj Nayan Pandey, to appoint Mr Sahay's successor and inform the Central poll panel by 1.00 pm on Monday. It also instructed the state government to "identify within the next three days the other proximate security personnel below the director of security, who failed in their duties to prevent the incident and protect the Z-plus protectee VVIP, and take suitable action for their failure."

Appointing Sunil Yadav as the SP (East Midnapore), the ECI, on Mr Prakash, added: "Charges shall be framed against him for major failure of bandobast."

BJP WILL BRING BACK 'SONAR BANGLA': SHAH

Kharagpur (WB), March 14: Union home minister Amit Shah on Sunday promised that after coming to power, the BJP will be successful in ushering in "true change in West Bengal and turn the state into 'Sonar Bangla' (Golden Bengal) again."

The senior BJP leader held a colourful roadshow at Kharagpur town in Paschim Medinipur district in support of BJP candidates contesting the West Bengal Assembly election.

Shah claimed that the huge turnout in the roadshow underscored that people want change in the state under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"I promise that the BJP government will be successful in bringing 'asli parivartan' (true change) and 'Sonar Bangla' will be created again," Shah said in a brief speech at the end of the roadshow.

The roadshow, held between the local BJP office 'Premhari Bhavan' and Malancha petrol pump, took over an hour to cover the less than one kilometre stretch, as the huge gathering made it almost impossible for the motorcade to move ahead.

Mr Shah was accompanied by BJP national general secretary in-charge of West Bengal Kailash Vijayvargiya and the party's state president Dilip Ghosh.

Thousands of people took part in the roadshow, which began after sundown, while people also gathered on rooftops and balconies in buildings on both sides of the road to watch it. Shah waved at the spectators and threw rose petals at the participants of the roadshow. — PTI

AIADMK promises washing machines for all in manifesto

To waive off educational loans

AGE CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, MARCH 14

Among the many promises that the AIADMK has made in its poll manifesto is not only a scheme of affordable housing for all poor people but also a washing machine. This addition to the "Ammu Housing Scheme" would have pleased the late chief minister J. Jayalalithaa no end, as she believed that the way to a woman's heart lay in reducing her household work.

Travel concessions to women, doorstep delivery of all ration items besides six free gas cylinders in a year already announced during chief minister Edappadi Palaniswami's poll campaign and a solar-powered kitchen and free Arasu cable for television connections too would be very much to the liking of women voters. On the political front, there is also a promise to release all seven convicts in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case besides pushing for dual citizenship of Sri Lankan refugees.

The long list of sops includes a promise of 150 days' work under MGN-REGA (up from 100 days), free data for college students round the year, waiver of education

to women, doorstep delivery of all ration items besides six free gas cylinders in a year already announced during chief minister Edappadi Palaniswami's poll campaign and a solar-powered kitchen and free Arasu cable for television connections too would be very much to the liking of women voters

loans, reduction in rising fuel prices, increase in maternity leave to one year, hike in pension for the differently-abled, increase in old age pension to ₹2,000, and government-run training facilities for aspirants taking competitive exams like UPSC, NEET, IIT-JEE and TNPSC.

The chief minister Palaniswami, Dy CM O Panneriselvam and other party bigwigs were at the function to release the poll manifesto that took place at party headquarters in Chennai on Sunday evening. Many promises made during the campaign earlier like ₹1,500 for housewives every month and half fare for travel on buses for women and subsidy for green auto-rickshaws were also included in the long list of the manifesto.



Tamil Nadu chief minister K. Palaniswami and deputy CM O. Panneerselvam with AIADMK party leaders during the release of party's manifesto ahead of Tamil Nadu assembly polls in Chennai on Sunday. — PTI

'Metro Man' in fray from Palakkad

AGE CORRESPONDENT
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, MARCH 14

Battlelines have been drawn for the forthcoming Assembly elections in Kerala with the Congress and BJP announcing their candidates for majority of the 140 seats on Sunday.

The BJP on Sunday announced candidates for 115 seats. 'Metro Man' E. Sreedharan will contest from Palakkad, former Mizoram governor K. Kummanam Rajasekhara will fight from Nemon, the only seat held by BJP in 140 member Kerala Assembly.

In a surprise move BJP state president K. Surendran has been fielded from two seats; Manjeshwaram in Kasargod district and Konni in Pathanamthitta district.

Meanwhile, KPCC president Mullappally Ramachandran announced the list of candidates at a press conference in Thiruvananthapuram.

Former chief minister Oommen Chandy will contest from his traditional seat Puthupally in Kottayam district. Opposition leader Ramesh Chennithala will seek re-election from Haripad constituency.

In a significant move the Congress decided to field sitting MP and former chief minister late K. Karunakaran's son K. Muralaitharan from Nemon, the only constituency represented by BJP in the state. The Congress decided to field Muralaitharan from Nemon to send out a message to the electorate that it is serious about fighting the BJP.

BACK | HOME

Ex-union minister had quit JD(U) in 2013 and formed RLSP

Kushwaha merges RLSP with JD(U)

NAYEAR AZAD
PATNA, MARCH 14

Putting an end to speculations, former union minister and Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RLSP) chief Upendra Kushwaha on Sunday announced his party's merger with JD(U).

While making an announcement he said, "I firmly believe that all like-minded forces should come on one platform in the interest of the nation. So we have decided to merge RLSP with JD(U) and will work under the leadership of Nitish Kumar. It is also the demand of the current political situation".

Replying to a query about his role after the



Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar felicitates RLSP president Upendra Kushwaha after the party merged with JD(U) in Patna on Sunday. — PTI

merger he said that he has left it on Chief Minister Nitish Kumar to take a

decision but hinted that he would continue to work for the improvement of educa-

tion in the state.

Political analysts are of the view that after JD(U)'s tally dropped to the third position in the 2020 Assembly elections, Nitish Kumar started working on a strategy to strengthen the party's organisational structure by trying to consolidate the OBC voter base especially among Kurmi — Koeri popularly termed as 'Luv-Kush' in Bihar politics.

Upendra Kushwaha is considered a powerful Koeri leader in Bihar. The community forms about 10 per cent of voters in the state and is the largest OBC caste group after the Yadavs in Bihar.

"After the Assembly elections, it was felt that there

was a need for both RLSP and JD(U) to come together. We feel that after the Assembly elections the mandate was for the merger of both the parties", Upendra Kushwaha said.

The merger announcement comes barely two days after RLSP suffered a jolt as more than two dozen office bearers of the party including the state president joined RJD.

Upendra Kushwaha had quit the JD(U) in 2013 and formed his political party RLSP. The party won all three Lok Sabha seats it contested as an NDA ally in the 2014 general elections. He was made union minister of state for the human resource department.

IN BRIEF

C'GARH NAXAL
KILLED WHILE
PLANTING IED

Bhopal: A Maoist was killed when the improvised explosive device (IED) he was planting underground on a road in Chhattisgarh's south Bastar district of Bijapur went off, police said on Sunday. According to a senior police officer posted in Bastar, the incident took place when the rebels were planting IEDs underground Bethpal-Hureli road under Mirtur police station in the district on Saturday evening. A Maoist, identified as Sunil Pada, was assigned with the task of planting an IED near Gaythapara village by a local militia commander of outlawed CPI (Maoist). He was killed when the IED exploded while being planted, police said.

Sukhbir to contest
Assembly bypolls

Chandigarh: Seeking to galvanise support for his party ahead of the next year's Assembly polls in Punjab, Shiromani Akali Dal chief Sukhbir Singh Badal on Sunday said he will contest the elections from Jalalabad. The Jalalabad Assembly segment in Fazilka was earlier represented by Sukhbir Badal but after his election to the Lok Sabha from Ferozepur in 2019, he quit the seat which was wrested by the ruling Congress in the bypolls later that year. Addressing a rally, Punjab Mangda Jawab (Punjab seeks answers), in Jalalabad, Badal hit out at the Congress. — PTI

BJP names 63
for Bengal poll,
112 for Kerala

■ **Continued from Page 1**
fielded C. Sadanandan Master from Kuthuparambba. In Tamil Nadu, BJP has fielded actor-politician Khushbu Sundar from Thousand Lights Assembly seat and the party's national women's wing chief Vanathi Srinivasan from Coimbatore South, from where actor Kamal Haasan is also contesting. Former IPS officer K. Annamalai has been fielded from Aravakurichi. In Assam, the party has fielded Hasinara Khatun from Baghbar and Suman Haripriya from Hajo Assembly constituency.

Amit Shah targets
Cong over its pacts
with 'minorities'

■ **Continued from Page 1**
two options before you. One is the Modi and Sonowal-led combine of BJP-AGP (Assam Gana Parishad). The other is the Rahul Gandhi-led Congress-Ajmal combine. Tell me who can do well for Assam. This election will determine Assam's future," Mr Shah said, while addressing the crowd. He went on to say that the Congress would go to the people, talk about communities and make them fight, which is its policy. But the BJP, he claimed, believes in "sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas". "The people of Assam can decide who is more concerned about their welfare - Prime Minister Modi or Badruddin Ajmal," he added.

The BJP, during the past five years, has successfully ousted infiltrators who had encroached land at Kaziranga National Park and occupied plots owned by religious bodies, the home minister said. "Five years ago, I, as BJP president, had promised to make Assam 'Andolan Mukh' (agitation-free) and 'Aatankbad Mukh' (militancy-free). We have fulfilled our pledge, and there is no longer any agitation or militancy in the state," Mr Shah said.

"Assam is experiencing peace and development. Give us another five years and we will also be able to solve the problem of infiltration," Mr Shah asserted.

In a jibe at Congress leaders, who has promised doles to tea garden workers if elected to power, he said the party remembers these labourers only during elections.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi has already taken several initiatives to improve the lives and working condition of the tea garden workers," he added.

Mr Shah also reiterated the commitment that the BJP will make Assam flood-free if it retains power: He said the entire state has been already surveyed through satellite imageries and a design prepared to divert the floodwater to canals, reservoirs, etc.

Vaze remanded to 10-day NIA custody

Prosecution told court that they want to investigate the role of accused in plantation of explosives

SHAHAB ANSARI and
SONU SHRIVASTAVA
MUMBAI, MARCH 14

An NIA special court in Mumbai on Sunday remanded API Sachin Vaze to NIA custody till March 25, in connection to the explosives found in a car outside Mukesh Ambani's house. The NIA arrested him at midnight after 12 hours of questioning. Former chief minister Devendra Fadnis said that the arrest of Vaze is just the beginning. Shiv Sena spokesperson Sanjay Raut alleged that the Centre is trying to demoralise the state police.

The central agency questioned Vaze for more than 12 hours on Saturday and formally arrested him at around 11.50 pm. He was produced before the Mumbai NIA court on



Sachin Vaze

Sunday afternoon.

Vaze has been arrested under IPC sections 120 (B) for criminal conspiracy, 286 for negligent conduct with respect to explosive substance; 465 for forgery, 473 for making or possessing counterfeit seal and 506(2) for criminal intimidation. In addition to this, he was also charged under section 4(a)(b)(i) of the Explosive Substances Act.

While seeking Mr Vaze's

NIA recovers 2nd car involved in Ambani security scare case

BHAGWAN PARAB
MUMBAI, MARCH 14

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Sunday seized a white Innova car, which was the second car used in the case of a vehicle laden with explosives found near industrialist Mukesh Ambani's residence. The vehicle was

used by the Mumbai police crime branch only, said sources.

NIA sources claimed that the Innova car was seized early on Sunday, at around 3.30 am, merely hours after the arrest of police officer Sachin Vaze. The car was seized from the Mumbai Police Commissionerate office. The NIA suspects that

the unidentified accused had used the Innova car to flee from the spot after abandoning the explosive-laden Scorpio near Mukesh Ambani's residence, Antilia, on February 25.

The Innova was seen tailing the explosive-laden Scorpio which was found parked near Antilia on the day of the incident.

transfer of this case to them it was with two other probe agencies hence they need to interrogate him thoroughly. It may be recalled that before NIA the Mumbai Crime Branch and Anti Terrorism Squad (ATS) conducted probe into this matter.

When arguments for Vaze's remand was going

on his lawyer demanded the copy of the remand application for perusal, which the prosecution refused saying privilege and confidentiality.

Mr Vaze's lawyer Sudeep Pasbala objected to it and claimed that the agency has no evidence to implicate his client. He claimed that the accused has right to

have access to the remand application. However, the court has posted hearing arguments on Vaze's lawyer on Monday for access to the copy of the remand application. It may be recalled that Mr Vaze's name cropped up in this matter after Mansukh Hiren's wife claimed Mr Vaze's hand in her husband's alleged murder.

Hiren is the person who was possessing the car that was found with explosives stuffed in it was found near Mukesh Ambani's house.

Hiren's wife, in her statement to local police, said that her husband was dealing in spare parts of vehicles and the explosives laden car originally belonged to a doctor who was her husband's customer and had given his car to them for personal use.

Farmers' stir may
continue till Dec:
Rakesh Tikait

Allahabad, March 14: The Bhartiya Kisan Union-led farmer agitation against the three central farm laws may continue till December this year, the outfit's national spokesperson Rakesh Tikait said here on Sunday.

Mr Tikait made the statement while talking to reporters here after his recent visit to the poll-bound West Bengal.

This agitation possibly will stretch up to November or December this year, he said.

Talking about his West Bengal visit, Tikait said during poll campaigning there, the central government people have been asking farmers to give them one feastful of rice.

I have advised Bengal farmers to ask grain seekers to fix an MSP of ₹1,850 per quintal for paddy before giving them a single grain of rice, Mr Tikait told reporters here.

He said after Bengal, he was planning to visit other parts of the country to press for the enactment of a law guaranteeing an MSP for various crops.

In Bihar, the paddy is currently being bought by traders at an abysmally low rate of ₹750 to ₹800 per quintal. I want a law guaranteeing the minimum support price for various crops, said Mr Tikait.

He said he was not going to sit in Delhi alone but was planning to visit all over the country, including Madhya Pradesh on March 14 and 15, Ganga Nagar in Rajasthan on March 17, Ghazipur's UP Gate border in Delhi on March 18, Odisha on March 19 and Karnataka on March 21 and 22.

During his visit here, Tikait also garlanded a statue of his late father and farmer leader Mahendra Singh Tikait at Tikait Park in Jhalwa near here.

The BKU spokesperson claimed the three central laws will lead to the closure of all small-time neighbourhood shops, leaving only big commercial malls to survive.

These farm laws will ruin traders and lead to the closure of small business utilities and the col-

lapse of small industries. These laws will bring in big multinational firms like Walmart," claimed Mr Tikait.

Had this government belonged to a political party, it would have talked to farmers and resolved the matter, Tikait said.

But this government is being run by big business houses. It is bent upon selling the entire country, he alleged. —PTI

BUSINESSMEN
RUNNING UNION
GOVT, SAYS TIKAIT

Rewa (MP), March 14: Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader Rakesh Singh Tikait on Sunday said the Union government was being run by businessmen who were cashing in on hunger by snatching away land.

He was addressing a farmers' rally in Rewa against the Centre's three agri marketing laws.

"A new business to cash in on hunger has started. Humans get hungry two times a day, 700 times a year. When the food grains will be in their control, they will start the hunger business," Mr Tikait said.

He said in places in Rajasthan and Haryana, land was being bought by businessmen for poultry sums, and massive godowns, with storage capacities of 14 lakh metric tons, had come up, after which the Centre's new farm laws came in.

"This means this government at the Centre is not run by a party, but by businessmen. It is not only farmers who are in trouble, the railways are being sold, but the opposition is weak, and young people who should have opposed such moves are sleeping," Mr Tikait claimed.

He asked people to come out and protest at the district level to get the new laws repealed, adding that farmers must sit at the collectorate and ensure their wheat is sold at ₹1,975 per quintal. —PTI

lapse of small industries. These laws will bring in big multinational firms like Walmart," claimed Mr Tikait.

Had this government belonged to a political party, it would have talked to farmers and resolved the matter, Tikait said.

But this government is being run by big business houses. It is bent upon selling the entire country, he alleged. —PTI



BJP workers prepare small cut-outs of Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the election campaign ahead of the state Assembly polls in Nadia district, West Bengal, on Sunday. — PTI

MEGHALAYA GOV
LEND'S SUPPORT
TO FARMERS

Baghat (UP), March 14: Siding with farmers protesting the Centre's new agriculture laws, Meghalaya governor Satya Pal Malik here on Sunday urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi and home minister Amit Shah not to offend them.

Speaking at an event in his home district, Malik said if the Centre gives legal guarantee of the minimum support price (MSP) for crops, farmers will relent.

The Meghalaya Governor also claimed to have prevented the arrest of farmer leader Rakesh Tikait when he heard rumours about it.

"None of the laws are in favour of farmers. Wherever one goes, there is a lathicharge, Malik said, adding that no one can save the country where farmers and soldiers are not satisfied.

Describing the condition of farmers as bad in the country, Malik said, "They are getting poorer day by day while the salary of government officials and staff increases after every three years." —PTI

New Delhi, March 14: The civil aviation ministry has invited bids for around 392 routes under the regional air connectivity scheme as part of continuing efforts to improve domestic connectivity as well as make flying more affordable.

Under the Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik (UDAN), which will complete four years this year, as many as 325 routes and 56 airports have been operationalised till now. These include five heliports and two water aerodromes.

On the commencement of the Union government's 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav (India@75)', around 392 routes have been proposed under UDAN 4.1 bidding process, the ministry said in a release on Sunday.

"The UDAN 4.1 round is focused on connecting smaller airports, along with special helicopter and seaplane routes. In addition to these, some new routes have been proposed under the

ministry, said the special UDAN 4.1 bidding round invites bids for priority routes which have not been covered under UDAN so far.

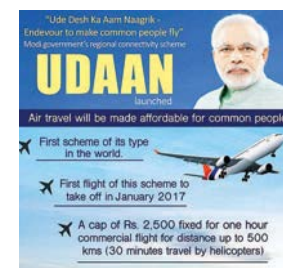
"This bidding round also includes routes specially requested by the state governments/ UT administrations and earlier cancelled/ terminated routes. We have observed great demand on many Tier-2 & Tier-3 UDAN routes..." she said.

Till date, 325 routes and 56 airports including 5 heliports and 2 water aerodromes have been operationalised under the scheme.

The regional connectivity scheme UDAN is a flagship scheme of the civil aviation ministry envisaged to make air travel affordable and widespread in the country. The scheme intends to boost inclusive national economic growth, employment opportunities, and air transport infrastructure development across the nation. —PTI

India has so far vaccinated 2,97,38,409 people — the 56th day of the vaccination drive — recorded the highest number of vaccinations administered in a single day.

India's Covid-19 tally crossed the 20-lakh mark



Sagaramala Seaplane Services in consultation with the ministry of ports, shipping, and waterways," the release said.

The latest bidding process is expected to be completed in six weeks.

According to the ministry, some operational flexibilities will be extended to airlines under the UDAN 4.1 to ensure suitable operation models to connect smaller cities/ airstrips.

Also, operations under NSOP (Non-Scheduled Operator's Permit) will be allowed for seaplanes, fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters under the latest round.

Usha Padhee, a joint secretary at the civil avi-

India's biggest 1-day Covid...

■ **Continued from Page 1**
cent of new instances of the disease reported in a day.

Maharashtra registered the highest daily new cases at 15,602, followed by Kerala with 2,035 and Punjab with 1,510 new cases. The situation in Maharashtra, which has consistently been reporting the highest number of cases in India in the past year, has been under scrutiny for some time, with several districts imposing partial lockdowns and night curfews.

Even Delhi's daily Covid-19 cases remained over 400 for the fourth day. With 407 fresh cases, the coronavirus cases' tally in the national capital reached

over 6.43 lakhs. Two new fatalities have mounted the death toll in the city to 10,941.

India last saw a single-day surge of 26,624 infections on December 20 last year. The count of daily fresh cases has been on a steady rise since the last week of February and has been touching record highs for the last three days. With the addition of the new cases, the cumulative caseload in India has reached 1,13,59,048.

The Covid-19 tally crossed the 2-lakh mark on Saturday after 53 days. The number was 2,02,022 on Saturday, 1,97,237 on Friday and 1,89,226 on Thursday.

India's Covid-19 tally crossed the 20-lakh mark

on August 7 last year; 30 lakhs on August 23, 40 lakhs on September 5 and 50 lakhs on September 16. It went past 60 lakhs on September 28, 70 lakhs on October 11, and crossed 80 lakhs on October 29, 90 lakhs on November 20 and crossed the one-crore mark on December 19.

Indian Council of Medical Research data shows a total of 22,67,03,641 samples were tested across the country. Of these, 8,64,368 samples were tested on Saturday.

India has so far vaccinated 2,97,38,409 people — the 56th day of the vaccination drive — recorded the highest number of vaccinations administered in a single day.

CENTRE TO SOON
APPOINT FULLTIME
CBI DIRECTOR

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

The central government is all set to appoint a regular CBI Director by March 20. The process to select a full-fledged CBI director has already been initiated by the ministry concerned, sources said.

The government on February 3 appointed Praveen Sinha, a 1988-batch Gujarat cadre IPS officer, as the acting chief of the CBI. Sinha is currently posted as additional director in the CBI. While several names are doing the rounds, Gujarat cadre IPS Officer and currently Director General (DG) of the Border Security Force (BSF), Rakesh Asthana, is the front-runner for the post of the next CBI chief.

According to sources, several other senior IPS officers of the 1984, 1985 and 1986 batch are also in the running for the top post, including Y.C. Modi, who is currently heading the National Investigation Agency (NIA). Arun Kumar, Director General (DG) of the Railway Protection Force and Rakesh Asthana (DG, BSF). Besides, names of Kerala cadre IPS officer Loknath Behra and H C Awasthi, DG (Uttar Pradesh), are also doing the rounds, sources said.

The CBI director is chosen by a high-powered committee of the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition and Chief Justice of India.

I'M IN PAIN,
WON'T BOW,
SAYS MAMATA

■ **Continued from Page 1**
its candidate against his estranged wife Ratna Chatterjee of the TMC in his Assembly seat. Mr Chatterjee, who was BJP (Kolkata zone) observer, wanted a ticket either for himself or Baishakhi, co-convenor in his wing, for the seat.

Earlier, the CM told the crowd: "We have a big responsibility to protect democracy from the autocrats and bring it back to the common people. Evil power should be defeated and destroyed. Good power must arise. The conspiracy and ploy encircling Bengal shall cease to exist. May the people of Bengal conquer all. Live peacefully and take care. Have restraint. Have faith in me. I will tour entire Bengal in a wheelchair with a broken leg. Khela Hobe (Game On)! Remember, a wounded tiger is more dangerous than a dead one. I offer my respects to the people of Nandigram where the incident of injuring me took place."

She elaborated: "I have overcome many attacks, retaliation and battles in my life. But I never bow down my head. Already five-six days got wasted. You know how valuable every minute, hour and day is during the polls! Now when someone asks me about my pain, I say my pain will continue for some time. Doctors prescribed me bed rest of 15 days. But if I take bed rest, who will reach out to the people of Bengal? In that case, those who hatch a conspiracy will be successful. I have to go out. I have got that mental strength from you. I express my gratitude personally, socially and politically to each of 'Maa Mati Manush' the way they felt worried about me."

Ms Banerjee said: "It is true I have pain. But pain in the heart, you know, is much bigger than physical pain. So is the pain of democracy if it is trampled. I am someone who can walk 20-25 kms regularly. When my legs walk, my heart and brain also walk. It is not only my legs which are injured. My body was hurt with black marks all over it. I did not care about these. I thank the doctors for treating me and doing the plaster. They will check my condition after seven days. I also took their permission. Besides, a team will accompany me." The CM later flew in a helicopter to Durgapur for her poll campaign in Purulia on Monday.

THE ASIAN AGE

15 MARCH 2021

Quad still regional body, but headed towards ‘near-Nato’

It is a testimony of sorts to the probable durability of the Quad — the loose, informal, association of the US, Japan, India and Australia which began life in 2007 with political criticism in India for New Delhi entering into an “alliance” with the US and its Cold War allies — that Prime Minister Narendra Modi, US President Joe Biden, Australia’s PM Scott Morrison, and the Japan PM Yoshihide Suga should pen a joint article in the *Washington Post* on Sunday — just days after their virtual summit last Friday — in which they played the Quad as a conglomerate of democracies to ensure “freedom of coercion” in the Indo-Pacific, the stretch from the Indian Ocean region to Japan.

This area has borne the brunt of the all-too-visible rise of China as an economic and military power that aims to challenge the supremacy of the US on the world stage, much like the former Soviet Union had done for four decades after the Second World War.

If that was a fight against Communism and encompassed the world, with the Nato — a military alliance of the US and its West European allies — in the lead role, the Quad is projected as a “regional” institution which purports to oppose “autocracy” from the standpoint of “democracy”.

The China focus is hard to miss as none of the summiters had ‘any illusion about China’. If it weren’t for this, Mr Sullivan is unlikely to have presented the Quad summit as ‘a great day for American diplomacy’.

This is the formulation US national security advisor Jake Sullivan offered to the media in Washington after the virtual summit last Friday. He specifically rejected the “propaganda” that the Quad was the “new Nato” by noting — rightly — that the Nato was a military alliance while the Quad would work on “fundamental issues” of the economy, technology, climate and security — in particular “maritime security”.

Come to think of it, such a remit does not differ so greatly from the avatar into which Nato has evolved in the post- Cold War era, except that the Quad is posited for the present as a regional entity.

If North Korea and the military takeover in Burma are autocracy-democracy contestations in the American readout of the Sullivan press conference, there can be little question that Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang, the Senkaku Islands where China militarily rubs up against Japan, and the Chinese military intrusion into eastern Ladakh, relate squarely to China.

The China focus is hard to miss as none of the summiters had “any illusion about China”, Mr Sullivan reported. If it weren’t for this, Mr Sullivan is unlikely to have presented the Quad summit as “a great day for American diplomacy”. The US sees itself pitted against China in competition in which it intends “to prevail”. The US NSA noted that the highest-level meet of the Quad was President Biden’s first summit since he was elected fifty days ago, underlining the unusual significance of the meet. The Quad was also extolled as an “emergent institution” that was a “critical” part of the “architecture” of the Indo-Pacific region, and the leaders agreed to adopt coordinated positions on China.

The focus of the summit was not China, however. That may have made the summit uni-dimensionally adversarial. It was the common fight against Covid-19 in which American technology, Indian manufacturing, Japanese and American finance, and Australia’s “logistics” support are to contribute one billion doses of vaccines by 2022 for the Indo-Pacific area and beyond.

After the near “coup” in America this January, and the derisive calling of India an “elected autocracy” by a Swedish institution, the autocracy-democracy trope could well be under debate.

Enforcing mask rules is vital

With the fears of a second wave of the pandemic lurking around, the government seems to have decided to crack down on violators of Covid-appropriate behaviour. While the director-general of civil aviation has directed airline companies to deplane passengers who refuse to wear masks properly and even put them on a no-fly list for a certain period of time, the Maharashtra government has hired Covid marshals to impose the practice on public places, including public transport.

The sudden spurt in the number of cases being reported every day has made India once again the country with the second largest number of people infected by coronavirus, surpassing Brazil. Experts have not singled out a reason for the potential second wave but one reason can arguably be the lackadaisical approach people have towards the pandemic. People in most states have long stopped wearing masks while social gatherings go on uninterrupted as if there was no pandemic around. The opening of educational institutions and recreation avenues would have only accentuated the scene. Elections in five states scheduled for March and April are unlikely to help the situation either.

At present, six states together contribute more than four-fifth of the total number of active cases but there is no guarantee that it will not spread further. The government will have to revisit the restrictions it had imposed last year when the pandemic began spreading if it were to avoid a total national lockdown. True, there is Covid fatigue among the people but we are left with few options.

The government must re-energise the vaccination programme in the meanwhile. Reports suggest that it could take years to vaccinate at least 70 per cent of the population and attain herd immunity. This is unacceptable. India has exported more vaccines than it has used to inoculate its people. It must work with the vaccine manufacturers and the private sector in healthcare to speed up the process. A comprehensive multi-pronged approach is needed to stop a second wave, if it is in the offing.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Kishwar Desai
London Diary



Women’s Week: Meghan vs Kate, let-down nurses & Sarah Everard

Hell hath no fury than a woman scorned? Right or wrong? Those of us who had seen Meghan Markle blow into the UK, play the princess and then storm out may find it a little difficult to take everything on Oprah’s show at face value. Luckily I can’t be called a racist as I am probably as brown as her. My background in television also ensures that I automatically discount some of all “reality TV” especially if there is big money at stake. The reality is that the moment the camera is switched on, everyone acts just a little bit — because no one wants to come out looking like the bad guy or gal. I have seen it far too often — there are no re-takes in life, but plenty in television. No one “lies” but everyone has a version of what happened. And if you have an axe to grind —do the hatchet job before the opponent can step in.

International Women’s Day was on Monday last but the storms had already gathered. In sunny California, Oprah Winfrey interviewed Meghan Markle and Harry Sussex last Sunday night West Coast time on CBS. Even before the ITV showed it on

Monday, it was all over the newspapers and TV and has not gone off the air all week. That is real global TV clout. Eleven million people watched it in UK and apparently 70 million (roughly as many as UK population) worldwide.

Harry has not featured very much in the subsequent discussions. It is all about Meghan and Catherine, the Duchess of Cambridge with the Queen in the background. It would be an ideal Ekta Kapoor serial — multi- generation, multi racial family with dogs and horses and palaces and international locations. May be Netflix will come back with Crown: the American sequel.

It was the apparent mention about the possible colour of the baby Meghan was carrying — which seemed to have shocked the TV audience; they should know that in India most people —without even knowing the meaning of racism — prays for a ‘gora’ child! But this one will run and run. When the wedding took place, everyone was impressed by the choir with Black British singers, the dignified presence of Meghan’s mother and the Bishop from Chicago giving his

radical sermon. At the time the Palace bathed in praise about its modern attitude. But then as we know in Indian movies, it is after interval that the tragedy sets in.

The tabloids are having a great time with the *Daily Mail* doing scores (literally) of items on Meghan every day. Piers Morgan ex Tabloid editor and TV pundit stalked off his “Good Morning Britain” show when his fellow presenters upbraided him for badmouthing Meghan. But then Meghan officially complained he had called her a liar. ITV shares fell that afternoon and Morgan went permanently next day. The Royal Family has launched a retaliatory barrage of talking up the Queen, their best weapon. There are reminiscences from round the Commonwealth as to how non-racist she is and what a sense of humour she has. All in a week’s work.

Despite the success of reaching 24 million vaccinations, Boris Johnson seemed to lose the plot, again. The week after the Budget saw millions of pounds being given away to all and sundry, he announced unapolo-

getically that nurses on the NHS will only get one per cent increase in their pay. There was widespread consternation. These are the Carona warriors — who had been applauded every Thursday evening during the first lockdown by everyone including Boris and his fiancée Carrie Symonds and their dog. And now this.

In the meantime, there is news that Carrie has refurbished the living rooms in 10 Downing Street lavishly. But the British government is so mean that there is no budget for spending any money on interior decoration of the official residence; neither at Downing Street nor Chequers the weekend home of Prime Minister which is a private donation run on private charity money. Carrie seems to have raised the money from Conservative Party donors which has caused even more mockery than if she had won it in a lottery. The moral of the story is there are those who know how to get the money— and the others can wait.

Women remained in the news, in tragic circumstances. Sarah Everard, a young woman grad-

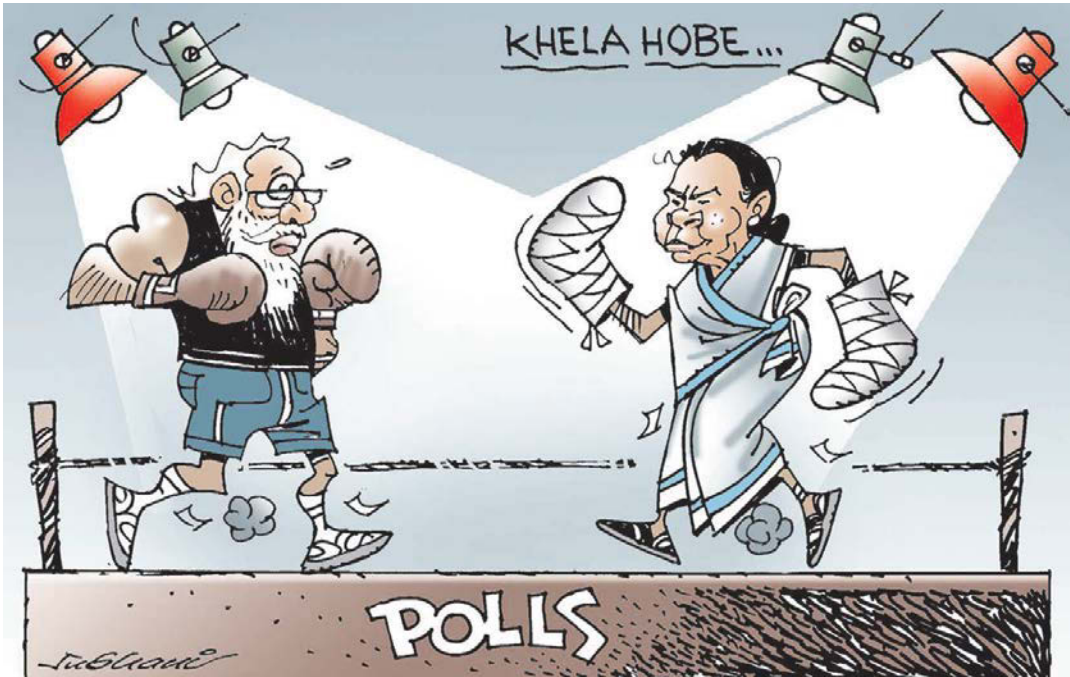
uated from Durham University and working in a middle managerial position in London was walking across Clapham Common in South East London, not far from where we live, around 9 pm. She was returning to her home in Brixton on the other side of the Common. She never reached home and her mobile phone went silent. This was around ten days ago. On Friday the police confirmed abduction. Even worse news followed. Her body was found in the rural areas of Kent. Shockingly, the man responsible was a police officer in a senior responsible position.

On Thursday both Houses of Parliament had set aside all other business to celebrate International Women’s Day. The murder dominated the discussion, including the radical suggestion that men should be banned from stepping out after 6 pm.

What do you think?

Kishwar Desai is an award winning author and playwright. Her latest book *The Longest Kiss: The Life And Times of Devika Rani* has just been published.

Subhani



To fulfil Quad promise, will India ‘self-correct’?



K.C. Singh

President Joe Biden’s decision to hold the first-ever “leaders’ summit” of the Quarilateral, or “Quad”, hosted “virtually” with the Prime Ministers of India, Japan and Australia, early in his tenure on March 12, days before his secretary of state Antony Blinken visits Japan, South Korea and China, sent a clear and unmistakable message to Beijing. Mr Biden wanted the group, with a nebulous agenda so far, to get more focused on meeting a number of contemporary challenges, many emanating from China.

The Quad has a chequered history, shaped by political developments in each country, amid unsettled debate in each nation on whether China was best managed through engagement or containment or a subtle mix of the two. The group was born in May 2007, on the sidelines of a Asean Regional Forum meeting in the Philippines. The then leaders of the four nations favoured closer engagement between the major democracies of the Indo-Pacific. Japan’s PM Shinzo Abe was a strong proponent; Australia had a right-wing Liberal Party government and US President George W. Bush was in the penultimate year of his second term. It was only in India that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh faced resistance from the Communists, who were giving “outside support” to the ruling UPA.

Thus, the preponderance of opinion favoured a low-profile meeting at the additional or assistant secretary level. I had the privilege to represent India at that historic meeting, which built on a rudimentary engagement between the four nations for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief during the deadly 2004 tsunami. China immediately understood that, the criteria for

membership being a democracy, it stood excluded, if not targeted. It made strong demarches in all the capitals opposing it.

But the favourable domestic factors altered when Prime Minister Abe lost power in September 2007 and the Labour Party won in Australia in the following December. New Australian PM Kevin Rudd, former diplomat and Sinologist, chose engagement with China over light containment or regional balancing.

Chinese assertiveness is generally traced to the 2008 financial crisis which rattled the Western financial markets. China saw itself as the bulwark that stabilised the global economy. The Chinese leadership began its power grab in a world in which the United States seemed weakened and distracted by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, it took another decade before the four nations again had their domestic politics align in the hands of right-wing parties. Prime Minister Narendra Modi won power in May 2014, President Donald Trump took charge in January 2017, Liberals trounced the Labour Party in Australia in 2013 and Mr Abe was back in office in Tokyo in 2012, to rule till 2020. The scenario was thus ripe and the Quad reincarnated in 2017. It matured gradually with meetings elevated to the ministerial level, including one hosted by Japan in person in 2020 despite the pandemic.

Moreover, the China problem became clear after four years of Trumpian trade sanctions and fist-waving. Despite Chinese responsibility in letting the Covid-19 virus spread abroad, it was silent in the crucial initial phase, and after its quick economic rebound turned more aggressively to gain strategic advantage. Both its maritime ambitions and its continental territorial claims, such as the Ladakh intrusions into

Soft power is at the root of the Quad. Will the government finally realise, as foreign parliaments debate whether democracy is degrading in India, that denial is not the answer?

Indian territory in mid-2020, were pursued ruthlessly.

All that remained to be seen, before the Quad could be rallied to reach the next level, was the China policy of President Joe Biden. He showed early that with decades of experience as a senator and later as vice-president, he was for continuity with smarter calibration. The Quad leaders’ summit last week displays this new China policy. The US realises the European powers are unwilling to rock the Chinese boat as they are dependent on the Chinese market, especially the Germans and French. The British, having detached from the European Union, have little leverage to rouse their erstwhile partners and risk Chinese ire by taking up its clear violations of the Hong Kong handover agreement, contemptuously abandoning treaty obligations.

The Quad leaders delivered their statements and then interacted. The joint statement, poetically titled “The Spirit of Quad”, spells out the immediate agenda in five paras. It opens by stating two nostrums: desirability of “free and open Indo-Pacific”; and the region “anchored by democratic values”. The first addresses the core anxiety of most Asean nations on whose maritime space China has unilaterally encroached. The second was always the *raison d’être* for the Quad, including at its birth in 2007. Both send a powerful signal to the region as indeed China that, unlike President Trump who used rough instruments like trade sanctions, Mr Biden will use an eclectic mix of moves to corral and undercut China.

Three working groups are to cover vaccinations, which posits the Quad as the saviour of the region from what Mr Trump

called “China flu”, climate change and critical technologies. It is realised that developed nations can’t or will not decouple from China by cutting off all trade. The strategy now is to undermine what Chinese President Xi Jinping calls “dual circulation”, a version of self-dependence on itself for markets and critical technologies. China controls over 58 per cent of the global supply of rare earths like neodymium and lithium, needed for batteries of electric vehicles or wind turbines for clean power generation. Four years ago, China controlled 90 per cent of that supply. On February 24, Mr Biden issued an executive order for a 100-day review of critical product supply chains. China continues to be critically dependent on imported advanced chips.

Therefore, in para 3 of the joint statement, the common goals and global challenges adumbrated are: economic and health impacts of Covid-19, climate change, cyber space, critical technologies, counterterrorism, quality infrastructure development and disaster relief. The need for a Quad plan for infrastructure development is a recognition that China has managed to embed its influence all across Eurasia by its Belt and Road Initiative, which need to be countered. India’s prowess in vaccine manufacturing has been recognised and financing and knowhow promised to multiply India’s vaccine exports.

But as soft power is at the root of the Quad, even Mr Modi conceded that the Quad members were “united by democratic values”. President Biden echoed that strongly. Will the BJP government finally realise, as foreign parliaments debate whether democracy is degrading in India, that denial and anger is not the answer? Nor is an agitated media counterattack or new laws to control independent news platforms. Self-correction is the answer. Otherwise, the Quad will merely be a limping Triad-plus.

The writer is a former secretary in the external affairs ministry. He tweets at @ambkcsingh.

LETTERS

WELL DONE, JAGAN

The stellar performance of the Yuvajana Shramika Rythu Congress Party led by Andhra Pradesh chief minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy in the urban local body elections, close on the heels of a massive victory scored by the party in panchayat elections held in the last month, is attributable to the plethora of welfare schemes that benefited people from all parts of the state. It put paid to the Opposition’s malicious campaigns. Welfare is a key component of Jagan’s playbook of governance.

N. Sadhasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

HANDOUT CULTURE

THIS REFERS TO “DMK manifesto offers 75 per cent jobs for locals, fuel rate cut”. Invariably, the manifestos of all political parties are riddled with lofty promises, made without any action plan for their fulfilment. Parties strongly feel that time is a great healer and voters shall forget as usual. By all accounts these are fake promises with the sole objective to win over the gullible voters. Why is there no mechanism to drag them to court for overtly misleading and deceiving people? Does coming to power amount to securing a licence to squander public money? All parties manifestos are myopic and competing in terms of giving handouts.

Deepak Singhal
Noida

EDEN MEMORY

DID YOU KNOW that March 15 is a golden day in Indian cricket? On this day in 2001, India registered a memorable victory against Australia in Eden Gardens, winning by 171 runs. India become the third country in the world to win a Test match after follow-on. Even after 20 years, the victory is fresh in our minds. It all happened when V.V.S Laxman and Rahul Dravid held out on the fourth day and registered a partnership of 376 runs. Harbhajan Singh bowled Australia out and that’s how the Aussie steel was tempered.

D.B. Madan
New Delhi

₹500 for the best letter of the week goes to Anthony Henriques (Mar. 12). Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com.

SHORT TAKES

BODIES OF 6
PAK MINERS
RECOVERED

Quetta, March 14: The bodies of six coal miners who were killed in a methane gas explosion in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province have been recovered. The explosion occurred on Friday at a depth of 1,000 feet in the Marwar area near the Afghanistan border, said Director-General of the Provincial Disaster Management Authority Naseer Khan.

He said eight workers were on duty at the time of the explosion. It is believed that the mine had collapsed due to a build-up of methane gas. "One worker, who went down to rescue his colleagues, also died after inhaling the deadly gas," Khan said.

2 KILLED, 13
HURT AT PARTY
IN CHICAGO

Chicago, March 14: Gunfire erupted at a party on Chicago's South Side early Sunday, killing two people and wounding 13 others, authorities said.

Officers responded at around 4:40 a.m., police spokesman Jose Jara said in a statement. Those shot were between the ages of 20 to 44.

Jara earlier said 12 people had been shot, but police later raised the figure to 15. Seven of the wounded were taken to hospitals in serious to critical condition, fire department spokesman Larry Merritt told the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

Speaking to reporters near the scene of the shooting in Chicago's Park Manor neighbourhood, Police Superintendent David Brown said investigators were still seeking a possible motive.

IVORY COAST
PM'S BODY
FLOWN HOME

Abidjan, March 14: The body of Ivory Coast Prime Minister Hamed Bakayoko was flown home on Saturday, two days after he died in Germany.

Bakayoko, who turned 56 last Monday and died following cancer treatment in Germany, was popular for reaching across the political spectrum in the bitterly divided West African country. His death came just days after a rare trouble-free election in which all sides took part.

President Alassane Ouattara, dressed in a dark suit and wearing a black hat, welcomed the coffin at Abidjan's international airport.

Hundreds of supporters of Bakayoko looked on from the sidelines as the coffin was taken to a funeral home.

'COUP' PROBE:
BOLIVIA EX-PREZ
ANEZ ARRESTED

La Paz, March 14: Bolivia's former acting president Jeanine Anez was arrested Saturday on terrorism and sedition charges linked to the ousting of her predecessor and political rival Evo Morales.

Police were also rounding up former ministers who backed the conservative politician's caretaker government, which was in place for a year after Morales fled the country in November 2019 amid disputed elections, media reports said.

The arrests came months after Morales returned to Bolivia from exile on the back of a fresh election victory in October 2020 for the leftist Movement for Socialism (MAS) party he founded. The presidency and congress are now under the control of MAS.

POLLS: MERKEL
PARTY BRACES
FOR DRUBBING

Stuttgart, March 14: Germans headed to the polls in two key regional elections on Sunday, with Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives bracing for a drubbing on anger over a corruption scandal and a series of pandemic setbacks.

The votes for new regional parliaments in the states of Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Wuerttemberg are seen as a bellwether ahead of September 26's general election — which will be the first in more than 15 years not to feature Merkel. Recent surveys have shown that support for Merkel's CDU/CSU alliance has fallen to a one-year low at around 30 percent as Germans sour on its coronavirus crisis management.

"Merkel's CDU is facing a disaster," the top-selling *Bild* tabloid said.



Well-wishers turn on their phone torches as they gather at a band-stand where a planned vigil in honour of murder victim Sarah Everard was cancelled after police outlawed it due to Covid-19 restrictions, on Clapham Common, south London on Saturday. — AFP

Crackdown on vigil for woman
murdered: UK cops criticised

London, March 14: Police in London drew widespread criticism on Saturday after handcuffing mourners at a vigil for a woman who was murdered after setting out to walk home, in a case that has sparked a national debate about violence against women.

Officers scuffled with some members of the hundreds-strong crowd that gathered despite Coronavirus restrictions for a candlelit tribute close to the spot where 33-year-old marketing executive Sarah Everard disappeared on March 3.

Reclaim These Streets — who initially organised the event in south London's Clapham — condemn-

ed the actions of officers "physically manhandling women at a vigil against male violence."

Social media footage showed police restraining and handcuffing some mourners, leading to an outpouring of criticism from across the political spectrum.

Both Home Secretary Priti Patel and London mayor Sadiq Khan said they had asked for explanations from the Metropolitan police over how the vigil was handled.

And Liberal Democrats leader Ed Davey called for Metropolitan police chief Cressida Dick to resign, having "lost the confidence of millions of women in London".

The murder of Everard, who vanished after setting out to walk home from a friend's flat, has shocked the country and brought discussion around women's safety to the fore once again.

Organisers had cancelled the vigil after police outlawed it because of Covid-19 restrictions, but hundreds still turned out, with tensions overspilling as Saturday night fell.

Mourners shouted "shame on you" at police, with tensions running high as a man arrested in connection with Everard's murder is an officer.

In the hours following the vigil, rage mounted with pressure groups and politicians condemning

police actions.

Opposition Labour MP Harriet Harman condemned the "terrible" scenes at Clapham in a tweet, adding: "Met mishandled vigil plan from the outset. They should have reached agreement."

Labour leader Keir Starmer called the scenes "deeply disturbing" and also criticised the way the vigil was policed.

Caroline Nokes, the conservative chair of the women and equalities committee, said she was "truly shocked at the scenes from Clapham Common — in this country we police by consent, not by trampling the tributes and dragging women to the ground". — AFP

SNOWSTORM:
2K FLIGHTS OFF
IN DENVER

Denver, March 14: More than 2,000 flights have been cancelled over the weekend at Denver International Airport as a major snowstorm strikes the region.

The National Weather Service has issued a winter storm warning, saying it expects 18 to 24 inches (46-61 cm) of heavy, wet snow to fall in Denver and Boulder from Saturday afternoon through Sunday night.

The Colorado Department of Transportation warned that road closures are likely and asked people not to make unnecessary trips. — AP

China, N. Korea loom as
Blinken, Austin head to Asia

Washington, March 14: Threats from China and North Korea will loom large over the Biden administration's first Cabinet-level trip abroad, part of a larger effort to bolster US influence and calm concerns about America's role in Asia.

A senior administration said Saturday that US officials have tried to reach out to North Korea through multiple channels since

last month, but have yet to receive a response, making consultations with the reclusive country's neighbours, Japan, South Korea and China.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin are heading to Japan and South Korea for four days of talks starting Monday as the administration seeks to shore up partnerships with the two allies.

Blinken and Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, will then meet with senior Chinese officials in Anchorage, Alaska. Their first official overseas visits are intended to restore what Biden hopes will be a calming and even-keeled approach to ties after four years of transactional and often temperamental relations under the previous president, Donald Trump. — AP

WATER VISION

It will rival Ice Cube, an observatory under the Antarctic ice at a US station

Russia deploys space telescope in Lake Baikal

Lake Baikal, Russia, March 14: Russian scientists on Saturday launched one of the world's biggest underwater space telescopes to peer deep into the universe from the pristine waters of Lake Baikal.

The deep underwater telescope, which has been under construction since 2015, is designed to observe neutrinos, the smallest particles currently known. Dubbed Baikal-GVD, the telescope was submerged to a depth of 750-1,300 metres (2,500-4,300 feet), around four kilometres from the lake's shore.

Neutrinos are very hard to detect and water is an

effective medium for doing so. The floating observatory consists of strings with spherical glass and stainless steel modules attached to them.

On Saturday, scientists observed the modules being carefully lowered into the freezing waters through a rectangular hole in the ice. "A neutrino telescope measuring half a cubic kilometre is situated right under our feet," Dmitry Naumov of the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research said while standing on the lake's frozen surface.

In several years the telescope will be expanded to

● **ON SATURDAY,** scientists observed the modules being carefully lowered into the freezing waters through a rectangular hole in the ice.

measure one cubic kilometre, Naumov said.

The Baikal telescope will rival Ice Cube, a giant neutrino observatory buried under the Antarctic ice at a US research station at the South Pole, he added.

Russian scientists say the telescope is the largest neutrino detector in the Northern Hemisphere and Lake Baikal — the largest

Myanmar: Four
people shot dead

Will oust junta: Leader of govt in hiding

Yangon, March 14: At least four people were shot dead during protests in Myanmar on Sunday, as security forces continued their violent crackdown against dissent following last month's military coup. Two of the victims were killed in Yangon, the country's largest city. One of them was shot in the head and another was shot in the abdomen in Hlaing Thar Yar Township.

A third person died in the northern city of Hpakan when police fired into a crowd of demonstrators, local media reported. A fourth victim, a woman, died after being shot in the head in Mandalay, the country's second-largest city, as security forces were conducting clearance operations.

In Yangon, video posted on social media showed crowds of people, some wearing hard hats and gas masks, running down a street amid sounds of gunfire. The demonstrators quickly sprayed vapour from fire extinguishers as they retreated.

The use of fire extinguishers common now in protests across Myanmar is intended to smother tear gas and also create a vapour screen that makes it harder for police to pursue or shoot demonstrators. There were also reports of injuries from live rounds and rubber bullets

● **IN YANGON,** video posted on social media showed crowds of people, some wearing hard hats and gas masks, running down a street amid sounds of gunfire. The demonstrators quickly sprayed vapour from fire extinguishers as they retreated.

in other parts of Yangon, including Insein district, where billows of black smoke could be seen after security forces reportedly set roadblocks on fire.

On Saturday, the civilian leader of Myanmar's government in hiding vowed to continue supporting a revolution to oust the military leaders who seized power in the February 1 coup. Mahn Win Khaing Than, who was named the acting vice president by Myanmar's ousted lawmakers and is a member of deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi's political party, addressed the public for the first time since the coup. This is the darkest moment of the nation and the moment that the dawn is close, he said in a video posted on the shadow government's website and social media.

In order to form a federal democracy, which all ethnic brothers who have been suffering various kinds of oppressions from the dictatorship for decad-

es really desired, this revolution is the chance for us to put our efforts together," he said.

He added: We will never give up to an unjust military, but we will carve our future together with our united power. Our mission must be accomplished.

At the end of the message, he flashed the three-finger salute that has become a symbol of resistance to the military rulers.

Also Saturday, security forces again opened fire on demonstrators, killing four in Mandalay, two in Pyay in south-central Myanmar, and one in Twante, a suburb of Yangon. Details of all seven deaths were posted on multiple social media accounts, with some accompanied by photos of the victims.

The actual death toll is likely to be higher, as police apparently seized some bodies, and some of the victims suffered serious gunshot wounds that doctors and nurses working at makeshift clinics would be hard-pressed to treat. Many hospitals are occupied by security forces, and as a result are boycotted by medical personnel and shunned by protesters.

The independent UN human rights expert for Myanmar, Tom Andrews, said last week that credible reports indicated that at least 70 people had died so far. — AP

COVID CURBS: 2
ARRESTED AT
DENMARK STIR

Copenhagen, March 14: Two people were arrested on the sidelines of a weekend protest against anti-Coronavirus restrictions in Denmark's capital Copenhagen, the police said Sunday.

One person was arrested for throwing fireworks at police during the Saturday march, while another was detained over violent behaviour, the police said.

The rally was organised by a group calling itself "Men in Black Denmark" which has called regular demonstrations since the end of last year against what it calls the "dictatorship" of the country's Covid-19 restrictions. Walking through firework smoke, the protesters held torches as they moved through the city centre chanting "Freedom for Denmark" and "Mette Ciao," a reference to Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen.

Local media reported that the march took place in a "sometimes intense" atmosphere, but without major incident.

The protest came a day after a 30-year-old woman was sentenced to two years in jail for calling for violence during a previous "Men in Black Denmark" rally against Covid-19 restrictions in January. The case provoked a debate about the sentence which commentators deemed unusually harsh for her at times ambiguous comments.

"Are you ready to walk around and smash the city in a non-violent way?" she had told the crowd during an impromptu speech. — AFP



quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	50,792.08	-0.95
Nifty 50	15,031.00	-0.95
S&P 500*	3,943.34	0.10
Dollar (₹)	72.79	0.17
Pound Sterling (₹)	101.26	0.44
Euro (₹)	86.74	0.02
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	44,059*291	0.66
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	1.625	0.098
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.232	0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.605	0.078

* As of Friday/Saturday

All-India tourist permits to be given in 30 days

In a bid to promote tourism, all-India tourist permits will be provided to operators within 30 days of online application submission, the government said. The new rules will be applicable from April 1. The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has announced a new scheme, under which any tourist vehicle operator may apply for an "All India Tourist Authorisation/Permit" through online mode.

Restoration of MSME status for traders sought



The Confederation of All India Traders (Cait) has demanded restoration of the MSME status taken away in 2017 from 8 crore retail and wholesale traders who are part of the service industry. The government in June 2017 removed retail and wholesale traders from the MSME category forcing the players either borrow at a higher rate or from informal financial sources, Cait secretary general Praveen Khandelwal said.

Limit independent directors liability: CII tells Govt

Industry body CII has suggested putting in place safe harbours for independent directors, calling for proceedings against them to be initiated only when there is prima facie evidence of their involvement in a matter. The government recently concluded the exercise of decriminalising the Companies Act, 2013. The chamber said it is necessary to expressly exempt independent directors from vicarious criminal liability.

Applications invited for electronics PLI

The government has started inviting applications for the second round of large-scale electronics manufacturing under the production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme with a focus on electronic components like motherboards, semiconductor devices, among others. The application window for the scheme has been opened till March 31, which may be further extended, as per guidelines issued by the MeitY.

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■ MPC may opt for status quo in April meeting
Rising inflation unlikely to trigger rate tightening

FALAKNAAZ SYED
MUMBAI, MARCH 14

Excess liquidity in the banking system combined with volatility in fuel prices could pose an upward risk to inflation. This has led to speculation in some quarters that the Reserve Bank of India could soon be shifting into a tightening mode in tune with its global peers. But experts feel that even with upward risks to inflation, the monetary policy committee (MPC) of the RBI may continue with the rate pause in April policy as well, given that the economic growth is faltering and Covid-19 cases are rising again. However, they expect the RBI to take some measures to drain excess liquidity in the system which has been above Rs 4-lakh crore throughout the pandemic.

Retail inflation (CPI) inched up from 4.1 per cent in January 2021 to 5.03 per cent in February. Separately, the Index of Industrial Production declined unexpectedly by 1.6 per cent in January 2021, after turning positive in December in stark contrast to market expectations. The entire decline was led by the manufacturing sector, which saw broad-based worsening—more than two-thirds components declined. The continued contraction in manufacturing showed that there is still some distance to cover before the economy recovers. The rate setting panel/



RAJAN CAUTIONS AGAINST DRASTIC CHANGES IN MONETARY POLICY

BIJAY KUMAR SINGH
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

As the economy slowly comes out of the pandemic blues, former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan on Sunday cautioned that "drastic changes" in India's monetary policy framework can upset the bond market as the current system has helped in containing inflation and promoting growth. "I believe the (monetary policy) framework has helped bring inflation down, while giving the RBI some flexibility to support the economy. It is hard to think of what would have happened if we had to run such large fiscal deficits without such a framework in place," Rajan said in an

interview. His remarks were in response to a query on whether he was in favour of reviewing the 2-6 per cent target band for inflation under the monetary policy framework. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has the mandate to maintain retail inflation at 4 per cent with a margin of 2 per cent on either side. The current medium-term inflation target, which was notified in August 2016, ends on March 31. The inflation target for the next five years starting April 1 is likely to be notified this month. Against this backdrop, Rajan said, "We risk upsetting bond markets if we make drastic changes in the framework". —PTI

MPC mainly factors in the retail inflation while arriving at its monetary policy. The MPC is sched-

uled to meet during April 5-7 to decide on rates. The RBI has been mandated by the government to keep the retail inflation at 4 per cent, with a margin of 2 per cent on the either side. To arrest the slide in growth, the central bank has used several conventional and unconventional tools such as cutting the policy repo rate by 115 basis points, keeping its policy stance accommodative, ample liquidity support via open market operations, special OMOs, management of the yield curve to keep cost of borrowings for the government under check, regulatory forbearance and the like. "Going forward, the excess liquidity in the system combined with volatility in fuel prices can pose upward risk to inflation. In this situation, the MPC is expected to continue the pause though the RBI might take some measures to drain excess liquidity," said M. Govinda Rao, chief economic adviser at Brickwork Ratings. Nikhil Gupta, chief economist at Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said, "Overall, the pick-up in inflation and fall in IIP is the worst possible combination. We hope IIP would come back into growth territory from February 2021, though CPI may pick up further to around 5.4 per cent in March 2021. Accordingly, we expect MPC to maintain status quo in April's policy." —PTI

Govt to offload remaining stake in privatised airports

JOYEETA DEY
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

The government plans to sell its residual stake in already privatised Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Hyderabad airports as part of the ambitious Rs 2.5 lakh crore asset monetisation pipeline identified to raise additional resources, sources said. Sale of Airport Authority of India's (AAI) remaining stake in the four airports as also 13 more airports have been identified for privatisation in 2021-22 fiscal, two people aware of deliberations at empowered committee of secretaries last month said. The Ministry of Civil Aviation will obtain requisite approvals for divestment of equity stake of the AAI in the respective joint ventures running Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Hyderabad airports, they said adding the issue is likely to go to the Cabinet for approval in the next few days. For the 13 AAI airports identified for privatisation, the possibility of clubbing of profitable and non-profitable airports will be

BIDS INVITED FOR 392 ROUTES UNDER NEW UDAN

New Delhi, March 14: The civil aviation ministry has invited bids for 392 routes under the regional air connectivity scheme to improve domestic connectivity and make flying more affordable. Under the Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik (Udan), which will complete four years this year, as many as 325 routes and 56 airports have been operationalised till now. On the commencement of the Union government's 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav (India@75)', around 392 routes have been proposed under Udan 4.1 bidding process, the ministry said in a release on Sunday. —PTI

explored to make more attractive packages, sources said.

In the first round of airports' privatisation under the Narendra Modi government, the Adani Group bagged contracts for six airports Lucknow, Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Mangaluru, Thiruvananthapuram, and Guwahati last year. The AAI, which works under the Ministry of Civil Aviation, owns and manages more than 100 airports across the country. While in Mumbai International Airport, Adani Group holds 74 per cent stake, the remaining 26 per cent stake is with the AAI. In the Delhi International Airport, GMR Group holds 54 per cent and the AAI holds 26 per cent while Fraport AG and Eraman Malaysia hold 10 per cent stake each. The AAI along with the Government of Andhra Pradesh holds 26 per cent in Hyderabad International Airport Ltd. It holds a similar stake in Bangalore International Airport along with the Karnataka Government. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had last month said the government is targeting monetising 100 assets. —PTI

Insurers to migrate to IFRS 17 by 2023

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO
NEW DELHI, MARCH 14

Insurers are gearing up for implementation of the International Financial Reporting Standard 17, or IFRS 17, and risk-based capital (RBC.) Standardising the insurance accounting IFRS 17 will improve the global comparability of insurers' books and increase transparency while the RBC will ensure better solvency capital for the insurers. Irdai chairman Subhash Chandra Khuntia said in a virtual event said the regulator is working on the implementation of the IFRS 17 and the RBC

regime, urging actuaries to drive this plan. A senior Irdai official told Financial Chronicle that an exposure draft in this regard has been shared by the regulator among the insurers, and is still in the discussion stage. Besides, the Institute of Actuaries of India (IAI) has also set up an advisory group on IFRS 17 (Ind AS 117). "It will provide users of accounts with the information they need to meaningfully understand the insurer's financial position, performance, risk exposure etc.," the official said. The chief of the Insurance Regulatory and

Development Authority of India further asked the insurers to develop products that provide cover after superannuation, saying, we find that people live longer and they need financial protection for their longer age. "How to develop some interesting products in this area should also be the focus of insurers. Some of you can develop such standard products," he said. Subhendu Kumar Bal, IAI president and chief actuary & chief risk officer, SBI Life Insurance, said actuaries are committed to play pivotal role in driving implementation of IFRS 17.

"The effective date of IFRS 17 implementation is January 1, 2023, internationally. However, neighbouring countries like Indonesia and the Philippines would transition to new norm in 2025 and unlisted insurers in China will transition in 2026. The IAI has requested Accounting Standards Board (ASB) for deferring the implementation at least by a year," Bal said. The IFRS 17, issued by the International Accounting Standards Board in May 2017, is supposed to replace IFRS 4 on accounting for insurance contracts on the effective date of January 1, 2023.

Anti-digital monopolies rules may hit e-com biggies

SARITHA RAI
MARCH 14

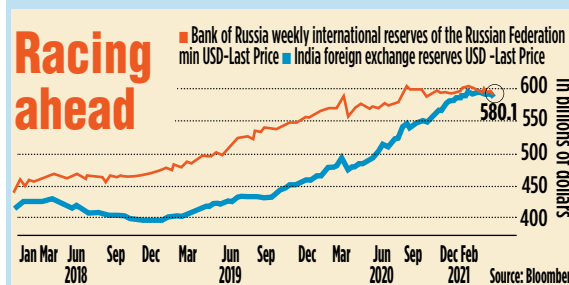
India's draft e-commerce rules to prevent creation of "digital monopolies" and aid local startups may raise costs and stymie expansion plans at companies such as Amazon.com Inc and Walmart Inc. The draft rules seek to prescribe a code of conduct

for online retailers and define cross-border flow of user data, according to a note titled Draft E-commerce Policy. The Narendra Modi government—beset by complaints from its vote base of small retailers—has been framing rules to reduce the dominance of Amazon and Walmart-owned Flipkart in estimat-

ed \$1 trillion overall retail market. The latest proposals build on laws that curb the two US companies from offering deep discounts, deter exclusive arrangements with preferred sellers and investing in merchants offering products on their websites. The new e-commerce policy will address growth

and aim to "reduce prevalent market distortions," the note said. The nine-page document formed the basis of a discussion by officials of various ministries at a DPIIT meeting on Saturday. The draft proposals seek to ensure algorithms created by e-retailers do not discriminate against sellers. —Bloomberg

India FX reserves surpass Russia's, now 4th biggest



ANIRBAN NAG & SUBHADIP SIRCAR
MARCH 14

India's foreign exchange reserves surpassed Russia's to become the world's fourth largest, as the nation's central bank continues to hoard dollars to cushion the economy against any sudden outflows. Reserves for both countries have mostly flattened out this year after months of rapid increase. India pulled ahead as Russian holdings declined at a faster rate in recent weeks. India's foreign currency holdings fell by \$4.3 billion to \$580.3 billion as of March 5, the Reserve Bank of India said on Friday, edging out Russia's \$580.1 billion pile. China has the largest reserves, followed by Japan and Switzerland on the International Monetary Fund table. India's reserves, enough to cover 18 months of imports, have been bolstered by a rare current-account surplus, rising inflows into the local stock market and foreign direct investment. —Bloomberg

Analysts say a strong reserves position gives foreign investors and credit rating companies added comfort that the government can meet its debt obligations despite a deteriorating fiscal outlook and the economy heading for its first full-year contraction in more than four decades. "India's various reserves adequacy metrics have improved significantly, particularly in the last few years," Kaushik Das, chief India economist at Deutsche Bank, said before the latest data were released. "The healthy FX reserves position should give enough comfort to RBI for dealing with any potential external shock-driven capital-stop or outflows in the period ahead." The RBI bought a net \$88 billion in the spot forex market last year, central bank data show. That helped make the rupee the worst performer among Asia's major currencies last year and earned India a place on a US Treasury watchlist for currency manipulation. —Bloomberg

SEARING | HEAT Firms expect to clock double-digit growth
ACs to become costlier this summer

New Delhi, March 14: Leading AC manufacturers are betting on high double-digit growth this year even as they are firming up plans to increase prices of residential air conditioners by 5 to 8 per cent before the crucial summer season starts. Leading players such as Voltas, Daikin, LG, Panasonic, Haier, Blue Star and Samsung are expecting a high double-digit growth, as they are betting on pent-up demand, sweltering summer and continuance of work from home, which will create demand for additional cooling products. This season, several makers have introduced health and hygiene fea-



tures in their range of ACs, claiming to protect their customers from the virus amid the pandemic. They are also providing no-cost EMI, cashback and easy accessibility to boost sales. Daikin is going to increase the prices by 3 to 5 per cent this month as prices of metals and compressor, which are largely

imported, have gone up. "It will have some impact on the sales but the pent-up demand is there and summers would be hot this year. We are expecting that even if there is some price increase, demand would be there," Daikin Airconditioning India MD & CEO Kanwal Jeet Jawa said. Panasonic, which is having "robust sales" across regions, primarily helped by the pent-up demand from last year, is also going for a price increase and expects a high double-digit growth this season. "We are looking at market trends and plan to raise prices of ACs in the range of 6-8 per cent while refrigerators will see an

increase in the range of 3 to 4 per cent," said Panasonic India and South Asia president and CEO Manish Sharma. Voltas has already increased the prices. "We have already implemented a price hike in the AC category...we remain optimistic about consumer sentiments," said Voltas MD & CEO Pradeep Bakshi. Blue Star, which has increased prices from 5 to 8 per cent in January, would again increase prices by around 3 per cent from April. Despite that, the company expects around 30 per cent growth this season in comparison to 2019, said Blue Star MD B. Thiagarajan. —PTI

36 MF schemes have over 10% exposure in AT1, AT2 bonds

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, MARCH 14

Mutual fund portfolios in February show none of the fund houses have crossed the threshold of 10 per cent of additional tier I and II (AT1 and AT2) bonds at the asset management company (AMC) level. However, 36 schemes spread across 13 fund houses breach the cap of 10 per cent per scheme in securities, according to an analysis done by rating agency Crisil. The analysis also finds that the banking and public sector undertaking (PSU) fund category has the highest number of



schemes (seven) exceeding the 10 per cent cap in such securities. It is followed by the credit risk fund (five), medium duration fund (four), medium to long duration fund (four), and dynamic bond fund (three) categories. Says Piyush Gupta, director, Crisil Funds Research, "The regula-

tor's move to 'grandfather' limits previously held is a positive move. In the medium to long term, with the restrictions in place, it could reduce appetite among MFs for these securities, thus, limiting the risk for investors. This is prudent given the advent of hordes of individual investors into debt funds. They may not have the ability to understand MF portfolios and gauge risk, especially in such types of bonds— we saw how they were caught unaware by the recent write-offs," said Piyush Gupta, director, Crisil Funds Research.

SHORT TAKES

Bhavani to be first Indian fencer at Oly

Chennai: Tamil Nadu's C.A. Bhavani Devi has become the first ever Indian fencer to qualify for the Tokyo Olympics. The sabre fencer secured a spot in the World Cup in Hungary after the hosts lost in the quarter-finals of the team event, allowing South Korea to progress to the semi-final. Bhavani Devi qualifies through the Adjusted Official Ranking (AOR) Method. Two individual spots were up for grabs for the Asia and Oceania region based on the World Rankings as of April 5, 2021. She is ranked 45th and occupies one of the two available slots based on the ranking. The 27-year-old's qualification will be confirmed when the rankings are made official on the aforementioned date. However, she stepped up efforts to secure qualification for the Tokyo Games and continued to train abroad in Italy under coach Nicola Zanotti before the Covid-19-induced shutdown halted the qualification process. — *PTI*

Man City stretch lead at the top

London: Manchester City showed their strength in depth as a much-changed side by Pep Guardiola won 3-0 at Fulham on Saturday to stretch their lead at the top of the Premier League to 17 points. All three goals came in the first 15 minutes of the second-half as John Stones, Gabriel Jesus and Sergio Aguero struck to take City ever closer to a third league title in four years. Manchester United have two games in hand on the runaway leaders, but City need a maximum of just 14 points from their final eight games to claim the title. "The dynamic of the season is good," said Guardiola. "The second-half was so important. It is an important victory for us and we are closer." Guardiola's men are still on course for a historic quadruple of trophies this season. The Catalan coach made seven changes with Kevin De Bruyne, Ilkay Gundogan and Riyad Mahrez among those left on the bench for the full 90 minutes. — *AFP*

Afghanistan win, level series 1-1

Abu Dhabi: A career best wicket haul by leg-spinner Rashid Khan helped Afghanistan level their two-match series against Zimbabwe with a hard fought victory in the second Test in Abu Dhabi on Sunday. The 22-year-old continued his fairytale rise at international level with 7/137 in a marathon 62.5 overs effort to end Zimbabwe's resistance-packed second innings on 365, soon after lunch on the fifth and final day. That gave Afghanistan 108 runs to win in 45 overs which they achieved for the loss of four wickets, two each to pacer Blessing Muzarabani and spinner Ryan Burl. But Rahmat Shah with 58 and Ibrahim Zadran 29 ensured Afghanistan achieved the target to win by six wickets and level the series at 1-1. — *AFP*

Brief scores: Afghanistan 545/decl. & 108/4 (Rahmat 58, Burl 2/16, Muzarabani 2/25) beat Zimbabwe 287 & 365 (Williams 151 n.o., Tiripano 95, Rashid 7/137).

Giannis stars in Bucks victory

Los Angeles: Giannis Antetokounmpo's triple-double of 33 points, 11 rebounds and 11 assists propelled the Milwaukee Bucks to a 125-119 NBA victory over Washington on Saturday, despite Russell Westbrook's 42-point triple-double for the Wizards. It was part of an explosion of five triple-doubles on the day — an NBA single-day record. Westbrook added 10 rebounds and 12 assists for Washington, but even with his league-leading 11th triple-double of the season the Wizards missed the production of NBA leading scorer Bradley Beal, who sat out with a sore knee. — *AFP*

Live on TV

FOOTBALL

English Premier League: West Ham vs Leeds United from 1.30 am (Tuesday) on Star Sports Select 1

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JAI KISHAN

Ishan hits half-century on debut, powers India to series-levelling win

Ahmedabad, March 14: Ishan Kishan's fearless half-century on debut and skipper Virat Kohli's perfectly paced knock set up a series-levelling seven wicket win for India in the second T20 International against England here on Sunday.

Kishan smashed 56 off 32 balls at the top of the order and felt completely at home on the big stage, having played enough IPL cricket in a similar environment. Chase master Kohli (73 not out off 49 balls) took charge after Kishan's dismissal to power India to victory with 13 balls to spare.

The Indian bowlers put up a disciplined effort to restrict England to 164 for six in 20 overs after Kohli opted to bowl.

India did not have the best of starts in the chase as they lost K.L. Rahul in the opening over for naught, caught by Jos Buttler behind the stumps off left-arm pacer Sam Curran.

Kishan, known for his attacking batting, made a formidable England attack look ordinary with his disdainful hitting. His sensational knock comprised five fours and four sixes.

Kishan and Kohli took the attack to the opposition to stitch a quickfire 95-run stand for the second wicket.

Kishan was caught plumb in front of the wicket by Adil Rashid in the 10th over but he had done his job by then.

Kohli and Rishabh Pant (26 off 13) then shared 36 runs for the third wicket before the latter gave a simple catch to Jonny Bairstow off Chris Jordan in the 14th over to raise England's hopes. But it was not to be as Kohli anchored the chase perfectly. The skipper ended the game with a six off



India's Ishan Kishan en route to his 56 off 32 balls against England in their second Twenty20 at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad on Sunday. — *AFP*

SCORECARD

England: Jason Roy c Kumar b Washington Sundar 46, Jos Buttler lbw b Kumar O, David Malan lbw b Chahal 24, Jonny Bairstow c Yadav b Washington Sundar 20, Eoin Morgan c Pant b Thakur 28, Ben Stokes c Pandya b Thakur 24, Sam Curran not out 6, Chris Jordan not out 0. Extras (lb-1, nb-1, w-1) 3. **Total (For 6 wkts, in 20 overs) 164.**

FoW: 1-1, 2-64, 3-91, 4-119, 5-142, 6-160.

Bowling: Bhuvneshwar Kumar 4-0-28-1, Washington Sundar 4-0-29-2, Shardul Thakur 4-0-29-2, Hardik Pandya 4-0-33-0,

Yuzvendra Chahal 4-0-34-1.

India: K.L. Rahul c Buttler b S. Curran O, Ishan Kishan lbw b Rashid 56, Virat Kohli (c) not out 73, Rishabh Pant c Bairstow b Jordan 26, Shreyas Iyer not out 8. Extras (lb-1, nb-1, w-1) 3. **Total (for 3 wkts, in 17.5 overs) 166.**

FoW: 1-0, 2-94, 3-130.

Bowling: Sam Curran 4-1-22-1, Jofra Archer 4-0-24-0, Chris Jordan 2.5-0-38-1, Tom Curran 2-0-26-0, Ben Stokes 1-0-17-0, Adil Rashid 4-0-38-1.

Proteas blow India women away

Lucknow, March 14: The South African women's team's top-order batters fired in unison and helped their team clinch the five-match series against India with a seven-wicket victory in the fourth ODI here on Sunday.

Chasing 267, Lizelle Lee (69), Laura Wolvaardt (53), Mignon du Preez (61) and Lara Goodall (59 not out) shone as the visitors completed the task in 48.4 overs for an unassailable 3-1 lead in the rubber.

A poor squad selection by our committee under Neetu David cost India dearly as the hosts paid the price for ignoring Shafali Verma's flair in batting and Shikha Pandey's experience in bowling.

The win meant seasoned Punam Raut's third ODI hundred and veteran Harmanpreet Kaur's scintillating 35-ball 54 went in vain.

South Africa were in the game when the opening duo of last match centurion Lizelle Lee and skipper Laura Wolvaardt

MITHALI FIRST WOMAN TO SCORE 7000 ODI RUNS

Lucknow, March 14: Veteran batter Mithali Raj on Sunday added another feather to her cap by becoming the first player to complete 7,000 runs in women's ODI cricket.

The Indian skipper reached the 7,000-run milestone in her 213th match, which was the fourth ODI of the ongoing five-match series against South Africa here.

"Magnificent Mithali! #TeamIndia ODI skipper becomes the first woman cricketer to score 7000 ODI runs. What a performer she has been!" the BCCI tweeted.



The 38-year-old, who made her international debut in 1999, was also the first player to score 6,000 runs in women's ODIs. England's Charlotte Edwards, who retired from international cricket in 2016, is second the list of leading run scorers with 5,992. — *PTI*

were going great guns, putting on 116 runs in 23 overs.

Mixing caution with aggression, both kept the

scorecard moving at a fairly rate until Harmanpreet Kaur effected a having the dangerous Lee trapped in front of

the wicket for a 75-ball 69. Joined by Lara Goodall, Wolvaardt could not stay long enough after Lee's dismissal, getting out shortly after reaching her half century.

Goodall got a life when Sushma Verma missed a stumping and in the next delivery, the batter stepped out and played an inside-out shot for a boundary.

After that, Goodall hit off-spinner Deepti Sharma waist-high full toss outside off to the cover boundary.

Earlier, the 31-year-old Raut struck 10 boundaries in her unbeaten 104.

Harmanpreet smashed seven fours and a six, reaching her half-century in only 33 balls before falling to a slower ball.

Soon after, Raut got to her century in 119 balls with a single. — *PTI*

BRIEF SCORES

India 266/4 in 50 overs (Raut 104 not out, Kaur 54, Mithali 45, Sekhukhune 2-63) lost to South Africa Women 269/3 in 48.4 overs (Lee 69, du Preez 61, Goodall 59 not out, Wolvaardt 53).

MOTERA PITCH FOR D/N TEST RATED 'AVERAGE'

New Delhi, March 14: The pitch for the day-night Test between India and England in Ahmedabad has been given an average rating by the ICC, escaping sanctions after the game got over inside two days on that controversial surface.

The ICC in its "Rules and Regulations" page has updated the ratings of all recent games and the pitch at Motera was rated "average" for the third 'Test' and "Good" for the final Test. It was rated "Very Good" for the first T20International.

Incidentally, the pitch at the SCG for the third Test between India and Australia was also rated "average".

A standard pitch could have attracted sanctions for the refurbished Narendra Modi Stadium. The pitch was a subject of intense debate during the four-match series which India won 3-1 to qualify for the World Test Championship final. — *PTI*

VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY FINAL

Shaw, Tare guide Mumbai to title

New Delhi, March 14: Skipper Prithvi Shaw's marauding 73 off 39 balls followed by former skipper Aditya Tare's unbeaten hundred guided Mumbai to their most deserving Vijay Hazare title triumph with a crushing six-wicket victory over Uttar Pradesh in one of most lopsided final on Sunday.

Opting to bat, UP rode on opener Madhav Kaushik's unbeaten 158 to post 312/4, but it was overshadowed by the Shaw blitzkrieg which set the platform for Tare to finish off the chase in style with as many as 51 balls remaining.

This is Mumbai's fourth Hazare title and the one to remember for Shaw (827 runs), who now holds the record for highest runs scored in single edition of this competition.

Shaw (73 off 39 balls; 10x4, 4x6) and fellow opener Yashasvi Jaiswal (29; 3x4; 1x6) gave the side an aggressive start by conjuring 89 runs in 9.1 overs.

Shaw started with a cover-drive, off left arm seamer Yash Dayal. He got a life on 5, after being dropped by Karan Sharma at mid-off, and he then smashed three fours in the second over off Aaqib Khan.

He then took on Dayal, hammering two bound-

aries and a six over mid-wicket, his trademark pull-shot, as Mumbai raced to 32/0 after three overs.

Shaw continued his onslaught and notched up his 50 in only 30 balls, with a six, another pull shot, but then holed in the deep off Shivam Mavi when another hundred looked imminent.

Veteran Tare, who hammered 18 boundaries in his 107-ball knock, anchored the innings and found an able ally in Shams Mulani (36), as the duo took the game deep, as Mumbai cruised to the target, with 174/2 after 25 overs.

Earlier, UP rode on opener Kaushik's unbeaten 158 to post 312 for four.

Kaushik, who hammered 15 fours and four sixes, in his 156-ball knock and Samarath Singh (55 off 73 balls; 4x4; 3x6) added 122 runs for the first wicket to lay the foundation of a big score. It will be some consolation that Kaushik is now the highest individual scorer in a National One Day Championship final, surpassing Mayank Agarwal's 125 against Punjab in 2014. — *PTI*

Brief Scores: Uttar Pradesh 312/4 in 50 overs (Madhav Kaushik 158 n.o., Akshdeep Nath 55; Tanush Kotian 2/54, Prashant Solanki 1/71) lost to Mumbai 315/4 in 41.3 overs (Aditya Tare 118 n.o., Prithvi Shaw 73, Shivam Mavi 1/63).



Members of the Mumbai team pose with the Vijay Hazare Trophy in New Delhi on Sunday. — *BCCI*

DROPPED FROM INDIAN TEAM SHAW COMES BACK STRONGER

New Delhi, March 14: He had no option but to go back to drawing board, rectify his mistakes and come back stronger like never before which Mumbai captain Prithvi Shaw did with aplomb after being dropped from the Indian team.

The former India U-19 captain after a disastrous Adelaide Test was benched for the next three and then dropped from the national team for the England series.

However it did wonders for the right-hander, who created a national record in Mumbai's Vijay Hazare triumph, ending with 827 runs in the tournament.

"It was a bit difficult but you know, my only thing was go-back and work hard, just those small mistakes, what was happening in Australia, just to fill those blanks and come back stronger..." — *PTI*

Shaw said at the post match presentation when asked how did he come back stronger after the Australia tour.

With a pronounced back-lift and the bat coming down at an angle from gully, made Shaw a candidate for bowled and leg before to deliveries coming in. However nothing of that sort has been visible in the Hazare Trophy where he smashed four tons including a record double hundred against Puducherry.

Did captaincy help his batting?

"I (have been) doing captaincy from a very young age, so I have done U-14, U-16 and U-19. I have done India-A as well. I really enjoy captaining the side and you know focused every ball, so I just love doing this and it affects my batting as well, so I am more focused." — *PTI*

SA series has given a big sense of relief to women cricketers



Hemant Kenkre
Silly Point

When Mithali Raj tucked Proteas medium pacer Anne Bosch for a boundary, she entered the pantheon of greatness. By becoming the second batsman (and first Indian) to cross 10,000 international runs, the petite Hyderabad created another record, something she's been adept at ever since she made her debut against Ireland at Milton Keynes in June 1999.

And what a debut it was, smashing 114 unbeaten runs in a partnership of 258 runs with opening

partner Reshma Gandhi. Just 16-years old then, Mithali announced herself in style and has been the backbone of women's cricket in India for over two decades. Having led the Indian team to two International Cricket Council (ICC) World Cup finals and holding many records, Mithali must have kept milestones out of her mind focusing on the primary task on hand — of beating the visiting South Africans in the current One Day series.

Her secondary objective (an important one at that)

will be to prepare the Indian team for the Womens ODI World Cup that begins in New Zealand in March 2022. Mithali's career resume shows her many accolades in One Day cricket including in World Cups and the only one missing is the world championship under her belt. Becoming the first player to complete 7,000 runs in women's ODI cricket with a fluent 45 runs in her 213th ODI match, she will be totally focused on the larger task on hand at the end of the India-South Africa One Day series.

The current series, played in Lucknow has given a big sense of relief to women cricketers in India and their fans who had high hopes from the eyes after their stellar performances abroad. Having

been a finalist at the ICC T20 World Cup played in Australia in March 2020 had boosted the popularity of womens cricket in India. The worldwide spread of the Covid virus soon after that event caused a lot of planned matches (including the tour of England) to be cancelled or postponed.

The only time, the Indian eyes got an opportunity to step on the field of play after March 2020 was to play the Womens Challenger series during the Indian Premier League (IPL) which was played in the United Arab Emirates last November. The ODI series against the Proteas has seen the Indian team struggle in two of the three matches played thus far and have posted a challenging total of 266 for 4 wickets bolstered by a century

by Poonam Raut and a 54-run cameo by Harmanpreet Kaur.

With the 50 over ICC World Cup on the anvil next year, the ICC recently announced an expansion of their events which will start post the 2023 cycle. Both the ODI and the T20 World Cups (for women) will have more teams participating, the objective being the spread of cricket across the world. This does augur well for those who follow the shorter formats of the game with eight tournaments being played across T20 and ODI formats from 2024 till 2031.

Once again, the ICC much like the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) seem to have put Test cricket for women on the back burner. A quick look at the Test matches played by women

will show that India played their last Test against South Africa in 2014 while Australia and England played against each other in 2019. From an ICC perspective, they could have also included a world Test championship for the eves like they did for the men. For Indian women not to have played a single Test match for over six years shows BCCI's apathy towards promoting Test cricket for women.

For two senior players like Mithali and Jhulan Goswami who made their Test debuts in 2002 to have played just ten Test matches so far in their journey is a matter of concern for the BCCI. At 38-years each, the duo who have served Indian women's cricket with distinction do not have too much time left in

the game which is dominated only by the shorter formats with Test cricket totally ignored.

The BCCI could well take an example of England and Australia who do host Test matches even if occasionally. It was in Lucknow, that Mithali and Jhulan made their bow into Test cricket fourteen years ago.

The same city which is hosting the current ODI series. One can rest assured that the ladies (along with their colleagues) will be happier to play more Test cricket than what has been offered to them. For Mithali, having the Test cricket component standing at just 6 percent of her total tally of international runs is an indicator of the treatment meted out to women's Test cricket.