

DECCAN Chronicle

THE LARGEST CIRCULATED ENGLISH DAILY IN SOUTH INDIA

COIMBATORE | WEDNESDAY 24 | MARCH 2021

WEATHER



Max: 37°C
Min: 22°C
Rainfall: Nil

ASTROGUIDE

Sarvari: Panguni 11
Tithi: Ekadashi
Star: Pusam
Rahukalam: 12 noon to 1.30 pm
Yamagandam: 7.30 am to 9 am
PRAYERS
Fajar: 5.01 am
Zohar: 12.21 pm
Asar: 3.34 pm
Maghrib: 6.20 pm
Isha: 7.31 pm

SUNSET TODAY 6.20 PM
SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.11 AM
MOONRISE TODAY 2.16 PM
MOONSET TOMORROW 3.27 AM

CORONA COUNT

CASES	DEATHS
(+47,014)	(+275)
1,17,33,369	1,60,475

covid19india.org

STATE GOVERNMENT BULLETINS

(+1,437)
TN: 8,69,804 12,618

WORLD CONFIRMED CASES

12,45,96,272

DEATHS

27,40,161

COUNTRIES, AREAS WITH CASES
219

worldometers.info

West Bengal Guv says concerned about political violence ahead of polls

Kolkata: Expressing anguish over incidents of violence in the run-up to the West Bengal Assembly elections, Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar on Tuesday asked the police and administration to remain politically neutral. "Anguished and concerned at violence @MamataOfficial in Election process. Democracy has no meaning without fair elections," he said on Twitter.

Police: 10 people killed in Colorado supermarket shooting

Boulder (Colorado): A shooting at a Colorado supermarket killed 10 people Monday, including a police officer who was the first to respond to the scene, authorities said. Police arrested a suspect, but didn't reveal his name or any details about the shooting at an evening news conference where Boulder police Chief Maris Herold fought back tears.

COUNTER POINT



Congrats! You are selected for best actor award for your performance during polls!

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Good response for Cong from public, says Dutt



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Israelis return to polling station to decide Netanyahu's fate

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Cornwall blasts WI back into contention



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COVID-19

Vaccine for all above 45 years from April 1: Govt

VINEETA PANDEY | DC
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

With a major surge in the daily Covid-19 cases in India, the Union government on Tuesday decided to open up the vaccination drive for all persons above the age of 45 years on April 1, irrespective of their comorbidities. This will be the third phase of the vaccination drive against Covid-19. Till now only health and frontline workers, people above 60 and those above 45 but with comorbidities were allowed to take the vaccines.

Information and broadcasting minister Prakash Javadekar, announcing this, said that people above 45 will no longer be required to carry a doctor's certificate and they can simply go and take the vaccine shot. "We request that all eligible persons should immediately register and get vaccinated," he said.

In a letter to all chief secretaries, Union health secretary Rajesh Bhushan asked them to widely publi-

● **The states are free to impose restrictions at the local level but there must be no hinderance on inter-state and intra-state movement of persons and goods**

cise this decision so that more people can take advantage of it. The decision comes in the wake of the sudden spurt in daily fresh cases in several parts of the country. On Tuesday, 40,715 new cases and 199 deaths were recorded. Maharashtra had 28,699 new cases, of which 3,512 were in Mumbai and 5,722 in Pune. The national capital, Delhi, is also witnessing a sharp rise in daily cases. The Delhi and Punjab chief ministers urged the Centre to open up vaccinations for all people.

The home ministry has, meanwhile, issued fresh guidelines for effective control of Covid-19 and asked states to rapidly increase RT-PCR testing to at least 70 per cent. ■ **P7**

Vaccination hits a record as 33 lakh get jab in one day

New Delhi, March 23: More than 32.53 lakh Covid-19 vaccine doses were administered on Monday, the highest single-day vaccination so far, taking the total number of people inoculated to over 4.8 crore, the Union Health Ministry said on Tuesday.

Out of the 32,53,095 vaccine doses administered, 29,03,030 beneficiaries were vaccinated across 48,345 sessions for the first dose and 3,50,065 healthcare workers (HCWs) and frontline workers (FLWs) received the second dose of vaccine. According to a provisional report till Tuesday 7 am, over 4.8 crore (4,84,94,594) vaccine doses have been administered through 7,84,612 sessions. — *PTI*



A. Mohammed John

AIADMK MP suffers heart attack during campaign, dies

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, MARCH 23

AIADMK Rajya Sabha member A. Mohammed John passed away on Tuesday after suffering a heart attack while on electioneering for his party nominee in Wallajapet. He was 72. A former minister in the Jayalalithaa government, John had represented Ranipet constituency in the state assembly.

An industrialist in Ranipet, John suffered a heart attack while he was getting ready for a campaign meeting to seek votes for Ranipet AIADMK candidate, S.M. Sugumar, on Tuesday afternoon and was rushed to the nearby hospital, where he was declared 'brought dead'.

John, who was elected to the Rajya Sabha in 2019, had earned the wrath of the local Muslim community after he voted in favour of the Citizen Amendment Bill.

Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami, Deputy Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam, DMK president K.M. Kader Mohideen were among those who condoled John's death.

No compound, penal interest be charged during loan moratorium period: SC

New Delhi, March 23: In a major relief to borrowers, the Supreme Court Tuesday directed that no compound or penal interest be charged for the six-month moratorium announced last year amid the Covid-19 pandemic and the amount already recovered is to be refunded or adjusted in the next instalment of loan account.

While refusing to extend the period of moratorium, the apex court said there is "no justification" to charge interest on interest or compound interest for the period during the moratorium once the payment of instalment is deferred by last years March 27 notification. — *PTI*

UNHRC adopts resolution against SL's rights record

■ **In balancing act, India abstains from crucial vote**

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI | DC
with agency inputs
NEW DELHI/GENEVA, MARCH 23

In a setback to Sri Lanka, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva on Tuesday adopted a resolution titled "Promotion of Reconciliation, Accountability and Human Rights in Sri Lanka" against the country's human rights record with 22 out of the 47 countries supporting the resolution and 11 opposing it, with 14 countries including India abstaining from the voting.

Asserting its support to both "the Tamils of Sri Lanka for equality, justice, dignity and peace" and also "ensuring the unity, stability and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka", India said "these two goals are mutually supportive and Sri Lanka's progress is best assured by simultaneously addressing both objectives" while urging "the government of Sri Lanka to carry



U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet

forward the process of reconciliation, address the aspirations of the Tamil community and continue to engage constructively with the international community to ensure that the fundamental freedoms and human rights of all its citizens are fully protected".

Striking a balance in its explanation of vote (EoV) statement, India "supported the call by the international community for the government of Sri Lanka to fulfill its commitments on the devolution of political authority... in accordance with the 13th amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution" while at the same

● **The resolution on 'Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka' was however adopted after 22 member states of the 47-member Council voted in its favour**

time making it clear that the "the work of the (UN's) Office of the High Commissioner, Human Rights (OHCHR) should be in conformity with mandate given by the relevant resolutions of the UN General Assembly". The 13th amendment in Sri Lanka stands for devolution of power to the provinces there. India has been a supporter of the "reconciliation process" in the island nation between the majority Sinhala and the minority Tamils.

New Delhi's vote is being seen as an exercise of political balance and one key factor could be the upcoming Tamil Nadu Assembly elec-

tions since some political parties there had already made it an issue. The continuing proximity of the Rajapaksa brothers (President Gotabaya and Prime Minister Mahinda) to China could have also been another key factor in New Delhi's decision.

The UNHRC resolution called upon "the (Sri Lankan) government to ensure prompt thorough and impartial investigation, if warranted, prosecution of all alleged crimes relating to human rights violations and serious violations of international human rights law". The resolution was tabled by a Core Group on Sri Lanka consisting of the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Malawi, Montenegro, and North Macedonia at the 46th Session of the UNHRC in Geneva.

● **Walkout at Geneva to affect votes in TN**

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Court upholds order for 2-year jail term to Somnath Bharti

New Delhi, March 23: A Delhi court Tuesday upheld an order sentencing AAP MLA Somnath Bharti to two years in jail for assaulting the AIIMS security staff in a case registered in 2016.

After the pronouncement of the order, Bharti was taken into custody, a lawyer said.

A magistrate court had in January sentenced him to two years in jail.

Special Judge Vikas Dhull partly dismissed Bharti's appeal and convicted him for the offences under sections 147 (rioting) read with 149 (unlawful assembly) of IPC and under section 3 (mischievous causing damage to public property) of the Prevention of Damage to Public Property Act.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT CASE AGAINST SPECIAL DGP

HC directs investigation officer to file final report in 8 weeks

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, MARCH 23

The Madras high court on Tuesday directed the officer investigating the complaint of sexual harassment against then special director-general of police by a woman IPS officer to make all efforts to complete the probe and file a final report in 8 weeks.

The court, however, said the court will extend the time as time limit should not lead to a hasty investigation as "it is important in this case to conduct an effective investigation".

Justice N. Anand Venkatesh, who was hearing the case, turned down a plea made by the accused to consider his stand during the investigation. "The accused person may not have any locus standi to insist the court to take into consideration his stand in the case during the course of investigation. During



this period, the court is not deciding on the merits of the case and this court is only monitoring the progress made in the investigation. The defence of the accused person comes into play only during the course of trial in criminal case. If courts are to give any finding based on the stand taken by the accused person during the course of investigation, it will directly interfere with the executive domain of the investigating officer."

Justice Venkatesh had on March 1 passed an order to monitor the progress of the probe after taking suo motu cognizance of the

case.

The judge observed that the state's action placing the officer under suspension with immediate effect on an opinion of the court will bring in a lot of confidence in the investigation that was conducted by a subordinate officer. "This positive stand taken by the state will also reinforce the confidence in the minds of the general public who were keenly watching the progress of the investigation in this case," the judge added.

Justice Venkatesh said the court had carefully gone through all the status reports filed by the investigating officer and the case diary and was satisfied in the manner in which the investigation has been carried out. The court noted that the I.O has not reported any interference in the investigation and posted the case to April 30 for filing a status report.

CENTRE DOUBLES LIMIT FOR TAX EXEMPTION ON INTEREST ON PF CONTRIBUTION TO ₹5 L

DC CORRESPONDENT
with agency inputs
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Tuesday raised the limit for tax exemption on interest earned on provident fund contribution by employees to ₹5 lakh per annum in specified cases as

against ₹2.5 lakh proposed in the Budget.

However, the minister in her reply to discussion on Finance Bill 2021 in the Lok Sabha said the concession would be available to employees only in cases where his or her employer does not make any contribution to the retirement fund.

CBI charges 71 for anti-Vedanta riots: Report

New Delhi, March 23: The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has charged 71 people with rioting and arson which occurred during their protests against the copper smelter plant of Vedanta Ltd in Thoothukudi in 2018. As many as 13 protesters were killed when police opened fire to quell the agitation which raised serious environmental concerns

● **As many as 13 protesters were killed when police opened fire to quell the agitation**

related to the plant.

Reports said the CBI, which took up the investigation on the direction of the Madurai bench of Madras High Court,

charged the protestors with damaging public property and possessing deadly weapons.

As per the CBI chargesheet, the protestors were "armed with deadly weapons, committing mischief using fire and explosive substances, using assault and criminal force to deter public servants from discharging duties," reports said.

The police was accused of opening fire at the people without warning in violation of the police manual.

The police action led to widespread condemnation as 12 of the protestors were killed with shots they received on their head or chest, and half of them were shot from behind as per post-mortem reports. — *Agencies*

SC stays proceedings pending in HCs on pleas to regulate OTT platforms

New Delhi, March 23: The Supreme Court Tuesday stayed proceedings pending before several high courts across the country on pleas related to regulation of over-the-top (OTT) platforms.

A bench headed by Justice D Y Chandrachud was told by Solicitor General Tushar Mehta that despite the apex court's earlier order issuing notice on the transfer plea filed by the Centre to club all such petitions filed in various high

courts, the Punjab and Haryana High Court is proceeding in the matter pending there. The bench observed that notice on transfer petition means that proceedings going on have to stay.

Mehta said several fresh petitions are being filed in different high courts on the issue.

Then we will stay proceedings before all high courts and hear the matter in second week after the Holi break, the bench said. — *PTI*

India hammer England to take 1-0 lead

Pune, March 23: India outplayed world champions England by 66 runs in the opening Day International (ODI) here on Tuesday to take a 1-0 lead in the three-match series. Chasing a steep 317-run target for victory, England folded for 251 in 42.1 overs despite making a dazzling start. Rookie pacer Prasad Krishna turned it around remarkably after being taken to the cleaners early on to register figures of 4/54 in 8.1 overs, the best by a debutant.

For England, opener Jonny Bairstow top-scored with a 66-ball 94.

Jonny Bairstow's 135-run opening stand with Jason Roy (46) put England in a commanding position before their it all unravelled for the visitors.

Earlier put in to bat, India produced a solid batting performance.

Opener Shikhar Dhawan roared back to form with a 98-run effort, while skipper Virat Kohli (56), KL Rahul (62 not out) and debutant Krunal Pandya (58 not out) notched up half centuries.

Dhawan and Kohli shared a second wicket partnership of 105 runs that laid the foundation for Rahul and Pandya to accelerate.

The Pandya-Rahul combination put together 112 runs for the sixth wicket. Later, Pandya, a left-arm spinner, also picked up a wicket. — *Agencies*

■ **More on P8**

Prasidh Krishna made an impressive debut as the fast bowler took four wickets to bowl India to a 66-run win over England in the first ODI in Pune Tuesday. — *AP*



OTHER STORIES

Woman candidate approaches police, seeks action against abuser

DC CORRESPONDENT CHENNAI, MARCH 23

A woman candidate of 'My India Party' on Tuesday sought police action against a man who sent her inappropriate videos on WhatsApp. According to police, the woman candidate of 'My India Party' for the Pallavaram assembly constituency, in a complaint to the Shankar Nagar police mentioned that she received inappropriate and vulgar videos on WhatsApp from the accused. The woman in a video alleged that the incident has caused her mental stress and demanded the police to arrest the accused within three days. The Shankar Nagar police have begun a probe.



Kani slams BJP's English, Hindi candidate list

R. VALAYAPATHY|DC TIRUCHY, MARCH 23

The DMK women wing secretary MP Kanimozhi came down heavily on the BJP for not releasing its candidates list for Tamil Nadu assembly elections in Tamil, but releasing it in English and Hindi, and the spineless ruling AIADMK could not even question this.

Kanimozhi was addressing an election meeting at Ponnalaipatti in favour of party candidate and sitting Thiruverumbur MLA Anbil Mahesh Poyyamozhi. She accused the government for laying the foundation for many projects, but not making any progress during the last 10 years. The state government besides failing to provide jobs for people has been very supportive of the Central government in the NEET exam, preventing many poor and down-trodden students from pursuing medical course.

She said if the DMK came to power, the government would fill up the existing 3.5 lakh vacancies and also find out new employment opportunities to the unemployed. Corruption is rampant in every field, especially in the tenders floated for various projects like smart city, highways and PWD departments, which only relatives of Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami managed to get.

She appealed to voters to vote for the DMK front candidates. Later, Kanimozhi addressed the similar meetings in favour of party's principal secretary and sitting MLA K.N. Nehru and Inigo Irudayaraj in Tiruchy west and east constituencies, respectively.

Good response for Cong from public, says Dutt

ARULOLI M | DC TIRUNELVELI, MARCH 23

The response that Congress candidates get from electorates of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry is awesomely positive, said All India Congress Committee (AICC) national secretary, Sanjay Dutt, adding that it was the same type of response towards the DMK-Congress combine during the 2019 LS polls.

Paying credits to the recent electioneering by party leader Rahul Gandhi and also DMK president Stalin's whirlwind campaign, for the positivity created among Tamil Nadu electorates, Dutt predicted a sweeping victory for the DMK headed Secular Progressive Alliance (SPA) in the coming election.

Taking a dig at Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami for his statement that law and order situation in the state would turn bad if the DMK came to power, Dutt quoting the National Crime Record Bureau data about the increasing number of crime against women and children in Tamil Nadu since 2017, said that the conviction rate on crimes committed against the marginal sections of the society was very low in the state.

"This NCRB data gives us a clear picture of the highly deteriorated law and order situation in Tamil Nadu during Palaniswami's rule, said Sanjay Dutt, adding that the government also is to blame for under-utilising Nirbhaya funds, without properly implementing schemes meant for the safety and welfare of women in the state.

Recalling the police brutality against the people during the anti-Sterlite rally in Thoothukudi three years ago, and the death of the father-son duo, Jayaraj and Bennicks, caused by police torture last year in Sathankulam, Dutt stated that the state registered 35 custodial deaths since 2013, and none have been convicted so far, because of the government's indifference in punishing police officers charged of brutality.

Dutt too criticized the chief minister who claimed himself to be a farmer, but is hand-in-glove with the Narendra Modi-led Central government in the enactment of the anti-farmers laws.

The Tamil Nadu Congress party is planning a public meeting in which Rahul Gandhi, DMK president M.K. Stalin and leaders of the other parties in the alliance, would appear before the electorate, added Dutt.

Public want politicians to draft spl manifesto for Nilgiris dt

B. RAVICHANDRAN | DC OOTY, MARCH 23

As the poll fever rises in the state with each passing day, residents here want political parties to come out with a special manifesto for the Nilgiris, which would address various issues here.

S. Manogaran, president, Coonoor consumer protection association, said that over the decades, various governments that ruled the state failed to bring in the much needed industrial development in the hills, which in turn led to the lack of job opportunities for local youth. Hence, there is an urgent need to focus on industrial development here, and to put the region on the development path. This apart, there is a need to

"There is a need to convert some of the existing town panchayats in the district, which are unfit to be town panchayats, into village panchayats to help them avail more funds for development"

solve the ambiguity shrouding the issue of providing patta and patta passbooks to private patta lands owned by hill residents, especially the small farmers.

"There is a need to convert some of the existing town panchayats in the district, which are unfit to be town panchayats, into village panchayats to help them avail more funds for development," Manogaran added.

G. Janardhanan, president, Ooty town public awareness association, said that none of the political parties took efforts to revive the defunct Hindustan Photo Films manufacturing company in Ooty, a central PSE, to set up either software industry or any suitable industry there, to generate employment opportunities. There has been a long pending demand to fix the minimum support price for green tea leaf, as tea cultivation is the dominant farming sector in the Nilgiris. More efforts need to be taken to improve the tourism infrastructure in the Nilgiris to handle increasing tourist inflow to the hills, he demanded.



Vellore collector A. Shanmugasundaram on Tuesday launches Aavin milk packets with 100 per cent voting awareness message printed on the covers for ensuing Assembly election on April 6.

— K. Senthil Nathan



PMK leader Dr Anbumani Ramadoss campaigns at Avadi for Ambattur AIADMK candidate Alexander and Avadi Assembly candidate K. Pandiarajan.

— DC

EC surveillance squad seizes ₹40cr worth gold bars near OMR

DC CORRESPONDENT CHENNAI, MARCH 23

Gold bars worth ₹40 crore have been seized from a vehicle by the Election Commission surveillance squad at Navalur Tollgate on OMR here, a police officer said.

According to sources, the vehicle coming from the neighbouring Puducherry was intercepted by the flying squad of the election commission on Tuesday afternoon. The van however refused to stop. The police team deployed at the spot chased the vehicle and intercepted it. Checks revealed it to be carrying 80 kg of gold bars worth ₹40 cr without proper documents, a senior official said.

The driver of the vehicle was not carrying any documents for legal possession of the said item. He said that the gold was being taken to a gold jewelry making unit in the city. However, since he could not produce any valid documents, the gold was seized.

Ensure no voter is prevented from exercising franchise: HC

DC CORRESPONDENT CHENNAI, MARCH 23

The Madras high court has said the Election Commission should take steps as may be reasonable and necessary to ensure that no voter is prevented from exercising his/her franchise on the ground of caste, creed, religion or any other pretext.

The first bench comprising Chief Justice Sanjib Banerjee and Justice Senthilkumar Ramamoorthy made the observation while disposing of a petition filed by R.Subramanian, which sought a direction to the Chief Electoral Officer and the Thoothukudi District Election Officer to allot separate polling booths as allotted during the local body elections to the people of Scheduled Caste community at Manakkara village, Karunkulam Panchayat Union, Thoothukudi district.

The bench said directions of the nature that the petitioner seeks cannot be issued, particularly in the context of the plenary authority exercised by the Election Commission in how elections would be conducted. At any rate, it was too late in the day now to seek such directions as the elections were scheduled to be held on April 6, 2021.

"At the same time, the Election Commission should take such steps as may be reasonable and necessary to ensure that no voter is prevented from exercising her franchise on the ground of caste, creed, religion or any other pretext", the bench added.

Dispose of election manifestos issues in 2 months: HC to ECI

DC CORRESPONDENT CHENNAI, MARCH 23

The Madras high court has directed the Election Commission of India to consider and dispose of within two months, a representation, which sought to take concrete and decisive action on the issue relating to scrutinising the election manifestos of the political parties in line with the order of the Supreme Court and Model Code of Conduct.

The first bench comprising Chief Justice Sanjib Banerjee and Justice Senthilkumar Ramamoorthy gave the directive while disposing of a public interest litigation filed by Coimbatore Consumer Cause.

In its petition, the petitioner also sought a direction to the Election Commission of India and Chief Electoral Officer to announce a timeline for submitting copies of election manifestos by the political parties and for scrutinizing them and passing final orders on the Election Manifestos taking the assistance of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, in line with the objective of the instructions of the compendium of model code of conduct while issuing the election notification itself and publicize the orders in print and electronic media to create awareness among the voters.

Stalin vows to expedite Hosur IT park work if elected to power

SANJEEVI ANANDAN | DC KRISHNAGIRI, MARCH 23

DMK leader M.K. Stalin on Tuesday promised to expedite works for the Hosur IT park if his party was elected to form the government.

Stalin was here for a meeting held at Shoolagiri, 22 kilometers from Hosur, on the Chennai-Bengaluru national highway. His campaign was for the Bargur constituency Mathialagan (DMK), Veppanahalli (candidate Murugan (DMK), Krishnagiri candidate Senkuttuvan (DMK), Hosur candidate Prakash (DMK), Thally candidate Ramachandaran (CPI), and Uthangarai R. candidate Arumugam (Congress).

Adding local flavour to his campaign, Stalin announced various schemes for Krishnagiri district. He promised to fulfill the long-pending demand of workers who want to upgrade the ESI hospital in Hosur. The government health facility in Hosur, Denkanikottai and Uthangarai will be upgraded with all facilities, he added.

In addition, Stalin promised cold storage facilities for farmers in Krishnagiri, Denkanikottai and Rayakotta regions, bringing surplus water from Hosur Kelavarapalli dam to lakes in Veppanahalli and Hosur constituencies.


All villages in the six assembly constituencies of this district will get drinking water supply from the Hogenakkal drinking water project. New mineral export zone and sunflower oil extraction unit will be constructed at Pochampally in Bargur constituency, in addition to an arts and science college and industrial park for the textile business, added Stalin.

For Krishnagiri, Stalin announced a perfume factory, mango pulping unit, government agriculture college and combined court complex. The existing SIPCOT complex will be expanded in Hosur and at other places across Krishnagiri. Works for the IT park in Hosur, the project implemented by the DMK before the party was defeated in 2011 elections, will be expedited.

Voluntary vaccination at select polling booths?

Sanjay Pinto

Public health emergencies and straitjacket approaches do not go together. A second Covid19 wave is staring us in the face bang in the middle of a high voltage election season. Huge political rallies and people without masks, those removing them to pose for selfies, preserving the moment rather than their lives, or physical distancing is an ominous reality. If the Central Government can open up vaccination to all citizens above 18 years and send extra doses



JUSTICE FOR ALL

Lest no quarter cries foul, no political messages or slogans or party or government emblems, photographs or logos should be allowed at the venue or on vaccination certificates, to obviate any leeway for influencing voters and violating the Model Code of Conduct.

The process must not

to poll-bound States like Tamil Nadu that are witnessing a surge, here's an out of the box idea.

On an average, Tamil Nadu witnesses around 70% polling. This is one occasion when the adult population stirs out carrying valid identity cards.

Subject to logistical challenges and with the strictest precautions like foolproof cold storage, nurses, doctors and ambulances in place, what if vaccination is offered to the electorate in separate rooms in polling booths, or centres adjoining them, or in the vicinity?


A few riders. This must be voluntary. The consent of all political parties is necessary. The vaccination must be offered only after the voter casts his or her ballot.

attract relevant provisions on corrupt practices such as bribery, gratification, public meetings 48 hours before polling, printing of pamphlets or posters covered under Sections 123,126 or 127A of the Representation of People Act, 1951. In any case, polling is videographed for transparency.

At first blush, this task may seem way too daunting. We most definitely do not have resources to cover all the one lakh odd booths. But what if 10% of booths offer this facility only for eligible voters in that jurisdiction? That will still be quite a giant leap in contrast to the present baby steps being taken. The vaccination needs to be a process distinct from polling, capitalising only on the availability of willing citizens at given places.

If the incidence of adverse side effects or anaphylaxis post vaccination, so far, has been negligible, adequate precautionary measures with reinforcement from the Centre in terms of medical professionals, ambulances and tie-ups with local hospitals, both government and private on stand by, can be rustled up.

Everyday we see reports of doses of the vaccine getting wasted. In a medical crisis, can we afford a 'dog in the manger' stance by not opening it out to all age groups? Getting vaccinated against the dreaded virus is a fundamental right guaranteed to all citizens under Article 21 of the



Tirupur District Collector K.Vijayakarthekeyan along with other officials inspects the counting centre at LRG college in Tiruppur on Monday.

— DC

KONKAN RAILWAY CORPORATION LTD.

(A Government of India Undertaking)

NOTICE INVITING E-TENDER

Chief Engineer, Konkan Railway Corporation Ltd., invites Open Tender in Single bid system through E-Tendering on IREPS portal from eligible contractors for the following work. **Tender Notice No.: KR-W-01-58-2020-15. Name of Work:** Permanent Way Zonal Contract for Maintenance of Track under the Jurisdiction of Senior Sectional Engineer, Ratnagiri of Konkan Railway in Maharashtra State. **Estimated Cost:** ₹ 4,18,47,015/- excluding GST. **Completion Period:** Two years including monsoon. **Closing Date/Time:** 15/04/2021 up to 15:00 hrs for submission of online Offers/Bids. Manual offers shall not be accepted. Please visit <https://ireps.gov.in> website for details / participation. Corrigendum / addendum will be hosted in this website only.

SHORT TAKES

Optometry Day fete begins

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, MARCH 23

The week-long programmes organised by India Vision Institute (IVI) to celebrate World Optometry Day began on Tuesday.

Vinod Daniel, CEO, IVI said the week's focus will be on myopia and presbyopia, as well as on protecting people's eyes from harmful UV rays and professional work hazards.

"We will provide 3,000 sun-glasses to fishing communities and traffic police personnel in Chennai, and 1,500 safety glasses to stone sculptors in Mahabalipuram, Kanchipuram district. IVI will work with partners to manage myopia, help create awareness, and provide ground-level support through screenings," said Mr Daniel.

More than 10 crore Indians cannot see or see well as they do not have access to a pair of glasses.

Vision screenings are being conducted in Salem and Chennai for underprivileged communities. An industry forum of senior Indian ophthalmic industry representatives is being held during the week to focus on issues concerning the eye care sector. A panel session on how 'Every Indian can have access to a pair of glasses by 2050' is also organized.

● **Vinod Daniel, CEO, India Vision Institute (IVI) said the week's focus will be on myopia and presbyopia, as well as on protecting people's eyes from harmful UV rays and professional work hazards.**

HC directs NTA to set up more Neet exam centres

Chennai, March 23: The Madras high court on Tuesday directed the National Testing Agency (NTA) to establish adequate/more number of Neet exam centres in Tamil Nadu to enable students appear for the qualifying exam in the state itself, for the next academic year.

The first bench of Chief Justice Sanjib Banerjee and Justice Senthilkumar Banerjee gave a direction to this effect while disposing of a public interest

writ petition from advocate Veerapillai Ramesh of Tiruvannainallur in Villupuram district. According to the petitioner, the NTA on February 23 invited online applications from the students to write the Neet for admission in medical courses for 2021-22.

As many as 255 exam centres had been identified throughout the country. Of them, Tamil Nadu was allotted 28 and Puducherry one. Within a few hours it was declared

that all the 29 centres were full. Challenging this, the petitioner filed the present petition for a direction to the NTA to establish more exam centres in the state.

Disposing of the same, the judges directed the NTA to establish more number of exam centres in the state from the next academic year, as any such direction for the present year at this stage would create unnecessary confusion in the minds of the students. —PTI

SHRC asks 2 cops to pay ₹ 1.5L damages to senior citizen

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, MARCH 23

The State Human Rights Commission (SHRC) has directed two cops, including a woman SI, to pay a compensation of Rs 1.5 lakh to a senior citizen for assaulting him in custody three years ago.

O. Somasundaram, a senior citizen, of Valasaravakkam worked as a constable and opted for voluntary retirement in 1996. A few months before filing the complaint, he received a message from a friend Jehangir, who was arrested by the Guindy police, stating that he wanted to meet him. He met him and gave him the number of an advocate.

He said B. Shenbagavalli, sub-inspector, and

Singaravelu, constable of Semmencherry police station, came to his house and abused and beat him up. He was taken forcibly to the police station and was detained from 11 am till 11.30 pm on October 31, 2018. In the counter, cops have denied the allegations.

On completion of trial, SHRC member Dr. A. Chittaranjan Mohandoss said it is very painful to note that Shenbagavalli, a responsible police officer, had assaulted a senior citizen, who was also a retired constable.

The commission ordered a compensation ₹1.50 lakh and recommended the additional chief secretary, home department to take strict disciplinary action against the errant cops as per rule

Banned tobacco products seized during vehicle check

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, MARCH 23

Police on Monday seized 225 kg of banned tobacco products from a vehicle during routine checks on the outskirts of the city and arrested two suspects in connection with illegal transportation for the purpose of selling.

The state government has the banned sale of gutka, pan masala and chewable food products that contain tobacco and nicotine as ingredients in Tamil Nadu. The city police have been conducting frequent raids in godowns, retail outlets and vehicle checks to curb drug sales. During a routine vehicle checkup by the Tiruninravur police, an auto-rickshaw was stopped on suspicion. As the auto driver and another man who came in the three-wheel-

High Court restraint on NCSCST and TNSHRC in ex-judge Karnan case

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, MARCH 23

The Madras high court has restrained the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, New Delhi and the Tamil Nadu State Human Rights Commission, from taking cognizance of the representation/complaint given or to be given by Justice C.S. Karnan, former judge of the Madras high court, who was arrested in connection with allegedly making derogatory remarks against some of the sitting and former judges of the Supreme Court and High Court, against

the investigating officers, defacto complainant as well as against the Presiding Officers who are dealing with the cases and the officials who are dealing with the matters until further orders.

A division bench comprising Justices M.Sathyanarayanan and A.A.Nakkiran granted the interim injunction on the petition filed by Bar Council of Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, after impleading the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and the Tamil Nadu State Human Rights Commission as party respondents in the case and ordering notice to them.

AC bus services resume to Mahabs after three years

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, MARCH 23

After nearly three years, air-conditioned government bus service from the city to Mamallapuram resumed.

A total of two air-conditioned buses with eight trips per day from Tambaram-Mamallapuram-Tambaram will be operated by the government. Sources said due to reasons like improper maintenance, high fare

among others, the city transport corporation cut down on the Air-conditioned buses plying between Mamallapuram and other parts of the city. Meanwhile, on frequent requests by the tourists and the public, the state transport corporation decided to operate two air AC buses to Mamallapuram.

Sources said that services from places like Koyambedu, Broadway, TNagar to Mamallapuram are expected to resume soon.



Students of GSS Jain College, Vepery, organise a consumer awareness campaign on Tuesday. —DC



With Covid cases on rise, Gurgaon headquartered Lal PathLabs foundation has come forward to provide modern equipment for corona testing and treatment to Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital on Tuesday. —DC

Pirate gang loots Nagai fishermen mid-sea

R. VALAYAPATHY | DC
NAGAPATTINAM, MARCH 23

A 15-member pirate gang snatched away catch, fishing nets, walkie-talkie and GPS instruments worth ₹2 lakh after attacking Indian fishermen fishing in the sea 13 nautical km northeast of Kodiyakarai shore in Nagapattinam district, on Monday.

Official sources said six

fishermen of Serudhur fishermen hamlet in the district ventured out to sea on Sunday. As they were fishing, the pirates came in two speed boats and attempted to take away the belongings of the fishermen, at knife point.

When the fishermen resisted, the pirates severely attacked them with sharp iron rods and pushed them into the sea, and made away

with the booty. About an hour later, as the fishermen were struggling for life, they were noticed by another fishermen group from Nagapattinam, who rescued them and brought them ashore and admitted them to the government hospital, Nagapattinam. Two fishermen Kannan and Murugan were referred to the government hospital, Velankanni.

On information, Thanga Kathiravan, AIADMK Nagapattinam town secretary and candidate for Nagapattinam constituency, called on the injured fishermen at the hospital and consoled them. He assured them that he would take up the issue to Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami through Handloom and textile minister O.S. Manian, for suitable remedy.

Walkout at Geneva to affect votes in TN

G. BABU JAYAKUMAR | DC
CHENNAI, MARCH 23

The Indian representative abstaining from voting on the resolution, 'Promotion of Reconciliation, Accountability and Human Rights in Sri Lanka,' at the 46th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council on Tuesday has given rise to widespread anger in the state and could be a setback for the AIADMK-led alliance in the April 6 elections.

DMK president M. K. Stalin and MDMK general secretary Vaiko have already come out with scathing attacks on the BJP government for betraying the interest of the Sri Lankan Tamil people though the resolution was passed with 22 members of the UNHRC supporting it in Geneva, thus setting the mood for their future campaign.

If there had been no elections in Tamil Nadu, India

would have joined the 12 other members, including China, in voting against the resolution that accused Sri Lanka of human rights violations during the final days of its armed conflict with LTTE in 2009, both Stalin and Vaiko said.

The nine crore Tamil people across the world would not forget or forgive India's betrayal, Stalin said in his statement after the passing of the resolution that also threatens to take officials responsible for human rights to international courts.

India refrained from voting despite several political parties in the State urging the government in advance to vote in favour of the resolution that would lead to the imposition of targeted sanctions against errant Sri Lankan officials also.

Besides Stalin, Dravidar Kazhagam President K Veeramani and Vaiko had issued statements on the need for India to take a defi-

nite stand against Sri Lanka on the contentious issue.

Many other activist groups had also asked the Indian government to support the resolution that was coming up for voting after a long time due to the sustained efforts made by several rights groups and nations.

Now that the BJP government had let the world know that it was least inclined to take Sri Lanka to task for what many people in Tamil Nadu consider as a ruthless genocide of Tamils, the campaign in the coming days is likely to portray it as BJP's inherent hatred towards Tamil people.

So, it is not the BJP alone that is going to face the onslaught of the political parties and the other Tamil activists groups but also the other parties that have aligned with it like the AIADMK and the PMK.

Ironically, the PMK founder S Ramadoss expressed happiness over the passing of the resolu-

tion, saying that it would help Sri Lankan Tamils get justice. He did not mention that India was not part of the group of 22 nations, including England, Holland, Korea, Italy, France and Germany, that voted in favour of the resolution.

Hence the election campaign in the next 12 days could take a different contour, slamming the BJP and its allies, including the PMK, for being antipathetic to the Tamils. Such a campaign could also swing the votes in favour of the DMK-led front and also expose Naam Tamizhar Katchi (NTK) founder Seeman.

For Seeman, who has been projecting himself as an ardent LTTE supporter, did not put any pressure on the Indian government to vote in favour of the resolution even when the subject was debated animatedly in the State before it came up for voting at Geneva on Tuesday.

Rajya Sabha returns appropriation bills for Puducherry and J&K

New Delhi, March 23: Rajya Sabha on Tuesday returned appropriation bills for the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Puducherry for the financial year 2021-22.

The bills authorise payment and appropriation of certain sums from and out of the consolidated fund of the two union territories for the services of the financial year 2021-22

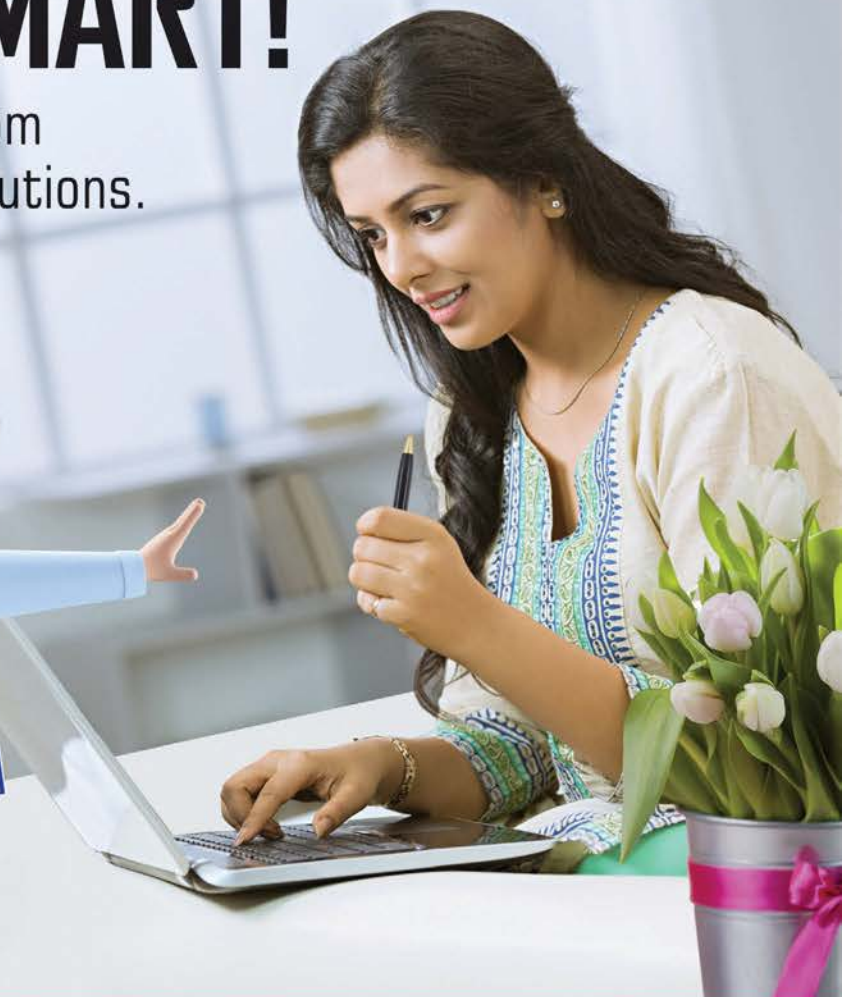
in their respective jurisdictions.

The Jammu and Kashmir Appropriation Bill, 2021, the Jammu and Kashmir Appropriation (No.2) Bill, 2021, the

Puducherry Appropriation Bill, 2021, and the Puducherry Appropriation (Vote on Account) Bill, 2021, were considered and returned by the Upper House of Parliament. —PTI

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DECCAN Chronicle

24 MARCH 2021

Optics key, Uddhav must act fast to kill racket stink

It is no exaggeration to say that the political situation in Maharashtra has turned fragile following on allegations levelled by a DGP rank IPS officer, Param Bir Singh, who was removed from the post of commissioner of Mumbai Police by the state government last week.

The allegations are grave. After being displaced from the post of CP, Mr Singh told chief minister Uddhav Thackeray in a letter that home minister Anil Deshmukh had ordered junior officers, including assistant sub-inspector Sachin Vaze who has been suspended for his suspected role in an explosives-laden SUV near the residence of business magnate Mukesh Ambani, to collect ₹100 crore per month, obviously sanctioning extortion.

The former CP followed up his letter with a petition in the Supreme Court on Monday, seeking a CBI inquiry in this matter and in an alleged transfer-posting racket run by Mr Deshmukh.

It is up to the apex court to consider the reliability of Mr Singh as a complainant, not least because he had been removed for not being exercising sufficient control of the police force and, by implication, letting API Vaze run amok. It may also need to be considered why the former CP had kept quiet over the alleged criminality of the home minister for over a year. Did he stand to gain through prolonged silence? At the same time, delayed disclosure — provided allegations in question are not ungrounded — cannot justify inaction.

NCP leader Sharad Pawar, widely thought to hold the whip hand in politically shepherding the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) coalition government, at a Delhi press conference on Monday, strongly defended Mr Deshmukh, who is from the his party. Mr Pawar appeared to stoutly refute the factual basis of Mr Singh's allegation against Mr Deshmukh.

But this supposition has been emasculated by Mr Deshmukh himself. In the public mind, now, serious doubts are apt to have arisen about the integrity of the state government although Mr Thackeray did appear to be gaining in popularity and stature since he took office in November 2019. The CM has kept mum on the Vaze-Singh-Deshmukh matter, allowing Mr Pawar to call the shots. Circumstances now do not permit him to withhold comment — and action — for long, else he will be at risk of completely losing the initiative in a wobbly situation.

At the risk of annoying NCP, the first logical step is to oblige Mr Deshmukh to step away from the position of home minister and simultaneously set in train a probe conducted by a retired Supreme Court or high court judge. Even if it is true, as many suspect, that the BJP, which has no love lost for Mr Thackeray and his party Shiv Sena, may have manipulated events behind the scene to trigger the current denouement, with a view to playing politics to return to power in Maharashtra, the CM is obliged to discharge his *raj dharma* not only politically but by being technically and constitutionally correct.

Wins for merit, politics

Controversies, politics and criticism of the incumbent government for using the National Film Awards to reward its darlings are now par for the course. Almost every year, as soon as the long list of awards is announced, congratulatory messages and carping begin a parallel race. Questions are raised about the relevance of the awards, faults are pointed out in the selection of the jury, processes and choices. And yet, National Film Awards remain the most prestigious and respected. Were it left to the devices of Mumbai's film-magazine backed awards, it would seem that India only churns out melodramas that prance around five songs.

The National Film Awards are the only truly "national" awards that celebrate cinema and artists from across the country.

Given Indians' obsession with films and movies' power to influence, it is naive to think that the government of the day won't use the national awards to its benefit. And the 67th National Awards, announced on Tuesday for films released in 2019, is no different.

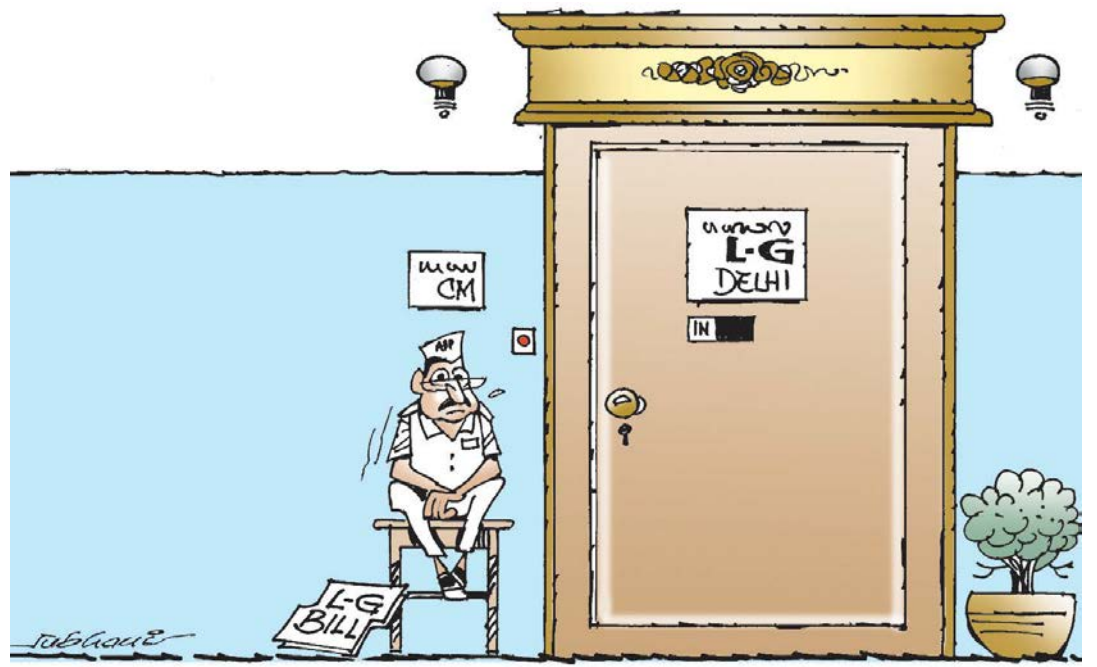
Kangana Ranaut, the BJP's most vocal flag-bearer on social media, has received her fourth national award for her performance in two films — *Manikarnika* and *Panga*. Ms Ranaut is a very talented actress, but this would be her third national award since 2014. In these six years there have been other, much better performances, but they have only been on the screen.

This year's list also includes several films that neatly align with the BJP's ideology, like the best direction award for Sanjay Puri's film *Bahattar Hoorein* (72 *Virgins*), and *Holy Rights*, Farha Khatun's film on Triple Talaq bagging the award for the best film on social issues.

It would be churlish to cast aspersions on the merit of these films based simply on the fact that deal with issues that are currently palatable because also included in this year's list are two sublime performances by actors portraying characters very relevant to our times. Manoj Bajpayee and Dhanush have both won the best actor award — the former for his performance in and as *Bhonsle* (Marathi), and Dhanush for his role in Vetrimaaran's Tamil film, *Asuran*. Bajpayee plays an ageing police constable who fights the rise of communalism in his chawl and Dhanush plays a dalit villager who fights off upper caste landlords to save his family. In these bleak times, that's reason enough for celebration.

DECCAN CHRONICLE
KAUSHIK MITTER
Editor
K. SUDHAKAR
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Chennai: SP 3 Developed Plot, Industrial Estate, Guindy, Chennai 600032. Phones: (044) 22254747, 22254748
Coimbatore: 77 Vivekananda Road, Rannagar, Coimbatore 641009. Phone: (0422) 2231255, 2231256
Hyderabad: 36, Sarojini Devi Road, Secunderabad 500 003. Phone: (040) 27803930-4. Fax: (040) 27805256.
Bangalore: 5th Floor, BMTC Commercial Complex, 80 Ft. Road, Koramangala, Bangalore-560095. Ph: 08043460500; Fax: 080-22960551/52/55
Visakhapatnam: Survey No. 1/3A Beach Road, Near Kailasagiri Roadway, Sector-9 MVP Colony, Visakhapatnam - 530 017. Phones: (0891) 2552333/2552334. Fax: (0891) 2755285
Vijayawada: No. C 3 & 4, Patamata, Industrial Estate, Auto Nagar, Vijayawada (A.P.). Phones: (0866) 2555284/ 2555287, Fax: (0866) 2555234
Rajahmundry: Vemagiri, Dhawleswaram Rd, Rajahmundry 533125. Phones: (0883) 2417208, 2417618
Anantapur: Thapovan Colony, Bangalore Bye-Pass Road, Anantapur 515004. Phones: (08554) 276903, Fax: 08554-276904
Nellore: Survey No. 527/2, Buranpur Village, Venkatachalam (M), Chemudugunta Panchayat, Nellore. Phone: (0861) 2348581/82, Telefax: (0861) 2348580
Karimnagar: Survey No. 1341, Vavilala Colony, Jagitayala Road, Karimnagar 505 001.
Phone: (0878) 2228908; Telefax: (0878) 2220433
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Kozhikode: No 6/1002 E, First Floor City Mall, Opp. YMCA Kannur Road, Kozhikode - 673 001
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Subhani



India should not fall for China's charm offensive



Abhijit Bhattacharyya

Is gullible India once again falling for the Dragon's charm offensive? After the betrayal and battering this country and its valiant forces faced at the hands of the People's Liberation Army in Galwan Valley, Pangong Tso, Depsang and Gogra/Hot Springs last summer, and at the Doklam tri-junction earlier, why do we forget this humiliation and treachery when, for good reasons of its own, the adversary puts on its benign mask and pretend to place all animosities on the backburner. How else does one deal with the words of Wang Yi, China's foreign minister, who also holds the weightier post of state councillor, as he appeared to reach out to New Delhi earlier this month: "China and India are friends. Should end suspicion." "Should not undercut each other." "Boundary dispute not the whole story", as the "rights and wrongs of the Line of Actual Control conflict clear", and "let's resolve border issues".

Too good to be true? It's all beautifully crafted, carefully scripted and tries to bypass the real issues to paint India as the villain, with the aggressor playing the victim card! The press, of course, laps it all up, and forgets to play its real role — to ask the tough questions? Of WHY China is doing this, and at the present juncture. Instead, there are headlines like: "Dragon turns dove, talks peace, partnership with India".

It is a truism — but worth repeating now — that peoples and nations which forget their own history are condemned to repeat it. Have we forgotten that when Chairman Mao's People's Republic was born in October 1949, India, which had attained independence just two ears earlier, was one of the first major countries outside

the Communist bloc to extend the hand of friendship to the new revolutionary nation? And how did Mao and his cohorts respond to Jawaharlal Nehru's overture for peace and partnership across the Himalayas? By invading Tibet in 1950, driving out the Dalai Lama into exile in 1959 and then, just three years later, trying to invade India in 1962. For Nehru, who actually believed in the concept of "*Hindi Chini bhai bhai*", it was a shock and a betrayal from which he never recovered, but what excuse do we have today for forgetting the lessons of history? Is that what Wang hopes for, that Nehru's successors in Delhi will similarly be taken in by Beijing acting nice?

But why criticise Wang alone? Is he the only one showing India in poor light? Aren't Indians themselves busy pulling down their country in the face of the Communist Party of China's ferocious aggression? It's because China's biggest consumer-supporters are inside India; along with Delhi's powerful business and trade elite. So even if India's Prime Minister ceaselessly impresses upon the nation to pursue the goal of "Atma Nirbhar Bharat", top Indian corporates are singing a different tune. Said one corporate leader: "We like to believe we are global company... and must continue to trade with China. Because if we conduct our business by excluding such a large country ... and market ... we will be poorer for the loss of that experience".

This unabashed dependence on China, and by extension of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC), is all pervasive, and extends to the nation's largest corporations, whose motto clearly seems: "Company first, country later". This, of course, is

true for most large companies worldwide. No wonder several countries, from the United States to Australia, and to China, are now busy trying to rein in mega corporates who have become too big for their boots — and feel emboldened to challenge the State with impunity!

But some business deals have more serious implications than others. It was recently reported in the Indian media that "Bharti Airtel has awarded a telecom infrastructure expansion contract worth ₹300 crores to China's Huawei". What is disturbing is that Airtel's national long-distance network — which will carry inter-circle and international traffic, as well as Internet traffic and that from main landing stations — will now be run by Huawei, which has connections to the CPC.

Is this a Greek tragedy? At a time when the PLA soldiers are forcibly entering Indian territory and killing Indian soldiers, a CPC-run Chinese company will earn crores in the guise of managing sensitive, secret, critical communications deep inside India. Is this the kind of unequal war we want to engage in?

That's a basic contradiction in India today. The PM is pushing for self-reliance, while our corporate honchos appear to have another agenda.

Sadly, the matter doesn't end there. The entire world knows about China's global cyberattacks, with India being a priority target due to the CPC's deep penetration in Delhi. So, when reports emerge of a "Red Echo over India", there's

The Chinese have dug so deep within India that they have learnt to take in their stride the occasional outbursts by Delhi, with some minor glitches like a few anti-dumping duties or the ban on a few Chinese apps...

hardly a whimper, only deafening silence. It's akin to acceptance of the Dragon's malice: with Chinese malware on the rampage, targeting India's power grid utilities.

The Chinese have dug so deep within India that they have learnt to take in their stride the occasional outbursts by Delhi, with some minor glitches like a few anti-dumping duties or the ban on a few Chinese apps — which are really too insignificant for the CPC to worry about. For they know that Indians have a weakness for all things Chinese — from consumers to corporate bosses — just as in the nineteenth century the Middle Kingdom was addicted to Indian produce. Today, in a bewildering role reversal, Indians seem totally addicted to Chinese cars, computers, cellphones, toys and lamps.

At the same time, the rising anti-Chinese sentiments among some sections are giving birth to new forces and alliances like the "Quad". Has Delhi suddenly become the pivot for both the success and failure of China's geostrategic goals in 2021? As Xi Jinping's CPC looks ahead to celebrating its centenary on July 1, 2021, this year is critical to establishing the success of "Xi's Way" in its capitalist wonderland. Beijing thus suddenly feels the need to mend fences, but can Delhi take advantage of such overtures, and for once act in its own self-interest?

Post-script: As the "Quad" raises the heat, the Dragon is at it again, trying to blackmail soft target Delhi. A new dam on the Brahmaputra will control the waters flowing into India, and no Indian will get a Chinese visa without a "Made in China" Covid-19 jab. Can India reciprocate, using the same formula to deny Indian visas to aspiring Chinese without an India-made jab? How long can India take this Chinese blackmail, humiliation and battering?

The writer is an alumnus of the National Defence College. The views expressed are personal.

LETTERS

BEING HUMAN

This is with reference to your editorial *Let Myanmar refugees stay* (March 23). Dalai Lama and his loyalists who escaped the onslaught of China are happily rehabilitated in HP and Karnataka. During Bangla liberation in 1971, millions of refugees were provided succour in our country. Angela Merkel of Germany won accolades for opening borders to millions of refugees from Syria and Iraq. As a neighbour, India is placed in a comfortable position to provide shelter and assistance to several Myanmar citizens who escaped the onslaught of its illegal military ruler. We are bounden to support Ang San Su Kyi, Nobel peace prize winner to come back to power when democratic process is restored.

Parthasarathy Mandadi, Tirupati

WELCOME DECISION

THE DECISION of the Indian government to allow citizens above 45 years without co-morbidities to get vaccinated against Covid-19 from April 1 is welcome, especially at a time when the infection rate is on the rise. The government should ensure that all pandemic protocols are followed at vaccination sites and enough stock of vaccines are available (at both private hospitals and government vaccination centres). People should be educated by the government on the importance of getting vaccinated.

M.C. Vijay Shankar, Chennai

FREEBIE CULTURE

THE CULTURE of 'freebies' started and perfected by the chiefs of the two major Dravidian political parties in Tamil Nadu under the cover of 'populist schemes', has indoctrinated the rural voters and brought about a well-rounded welfareist ideology in the state. Dole-outs are nothing short of bribes, and that a government has no imperium to create private assets out of public funds. Free distribution of goods is not a substitute for a truer welfare model that seeks to achieve growth through enhancing productive resources in the economy. It provokes rancour that both these parties have spent crores of tax-payers' money to provide free stuff, and in the process left the state's revenue-deficit soaring. The peculiar nature of Tamil Nadu politics makes a few things harder to comprehend. Conventional wisdom dictates that rampant populism and widespread corruption are not only endemic to politics, but are antithetical to economic growth and human development. But in Tamil Nadu, they coexist comfortably, and that is the bane of this State.

R. Sivakumar, Chennai

Maleeha Lodhi



US peace plan for Afghanistan to face critical challenge ahead

The Biden administration has launched its first diplomatic initiative to accelerate the Afghan peace process even as it continues its review of Afghan policy. This is reflected in a leaked letter from secretary of state Antony Blinken to President Ashraf Ghani that sets out its proposed plan. It is also evident from the discussion draft of a peace agreement shared by the US with Afghan parties and the regional diplomacy now underway by special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad.

These moves signal three things — a renewal of US commitment to withdrawal from Afghanistan, its desire to do so after securing a peace settlement among the warring Afghan parties and the willingness to use pressure to quickly achieve this. This raises several questions. Is the Biden administration overreaching with an ambitious plan that it wants to accomplish in a limited timeframe? In deciding to mount pressure on the parties does the US have the leverage to get them to agree? Is the proposed "new, inclusive" interim government an achievable goal as bitter foes will have to share power? With Washington having drafted a peace agreement, albeit for discussion, will Afghan parties take ownership of this?

The Biden team is vigorously engag-

ing Kabul, the Taliban and other Afghan leaders in discussions over the peace plan and the May 1 deadline for US withdrawal with the proviso that final decisions will emerge once the review concludes. President Joe Biden has said that meeting the May 1 deadline will be tough but it won't be extended by "a lot longer". Meanwhile, the Taliban have warned against any delay in this deadline and of an unspecified "reaction" if this happens.

The US diplomatic initiative — according to the leaked letter — has four elements. One, a meeting to be convened by the UN of representatives of Russia, the US, Pakistan, Iran and India to forge regional consensus to support the peace plan. Two, a draft peace agreement to expedite negotiations on a settlement and ceasefire. A key proposal is to set up a transitional government once agreement is reached. Three, Turkey to host a meeting between the two sides to seal a peace deal. And four, a 90-day reduction in violence to avert a spring offensive by the Taliban. This plan is punctuated by the US warning that it is considering full withdrawal of forces by May 1 but not ruling out other options.

By clearly communicating that a political settlement is a priority — not just the military withdrawal, as it was for president Trump — a prudent path

seems to have been outlined especially as diplomatic parleys underway will shape the conclusions of the US review.

Regional consensus to back a peace deal is clearly necessary. This is also a way for Washington to ensure that Iran is included in the diplomatic process. No timeframe has been set for this. But the UN will have to deftly play the role expected of it. Moscow, while welcoming the transitional government idea, has not said anything on the US plan and is embarked on its own regional diplomacy including a peace conference hosted last week on Afghanistan. The Pakistan-India dynamic also has to be kept in view; Islamabad has already conveyed its misgivings over India's inclusion in the proposed conference to US officials.

With two new processes now envisaged in addition to that in Doha it would be important not to allow the intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha to be diluted or complicated by the proposed new ones. They should facilitate the Doha process and not replace it. The principal diplomatic effort should remain in the Doha talks.

Washington is clearly in a hurry. Trying to force the pace of the peace process reflects US frustration with the stalled intra-Afghan talks. It also shows impatience with President Ghani's obstructive tactics, evident from the

tough tone of Blinken's letter. The tight timeframe in which the US wants a settlement done and dusted aims to compel the two sides to negotiate seriously. Even so the expectation for negotiations to yield an expeditious outcome runs up against an ineluctable reality that the tough compromises needed for an agreement are unlikely to emerge quickly just because Washington has set a deadline. The US can intensify pressure on both sides but that doesn't mean it has enough leverage over them to reach a speedy settlement. A senior Afghan official recently told PBS that the US has adopted a "fast food" approach, forcing everybody to consume something that is "too quick to succeed".

There is also the question of whether in order to expedite the process Washington has overprescribed the elements of an agreement — drafting one itself rather than letting it emerge from negotiations. This lays it open to being viewed as an "imposed" solution. While the US says it is not seeking to dictate terms and its peace agreement is a discussion draft it is yet to be determined whether Afghan parties see it the same way.

The idea of a transitional government, vehemently opposed by Ghani, makes sense before a more permanent government can be installed following

adoption of a new constitution and elections. But can the two sides and other Afghan leaders show the accommodation needed for a workable power-sharing arrangement? In an initial response a Taliban spokesman asserted that interim governments have proven ineffective in the past but the Taliban have yet to take a firm position.

Pakistan's interest lies in the success of intra-Afghan talks that can produce a negotiated end to the war and a lasting settlement before the full withdrawal of US forces. That is what Islamabad means by its repeated calls for a "responsible withdrawal". It does not want its neighbour to descend into political chaos or a civil war, and sees an inclusive post-settlement government in Kabul as the best way to ensure peace and stability. It seeks assurances that Afghan territory will not be used against Pakistan. US officials have also been told that Islamabad stands ready to do what it can to help the peace process. It is however up to the Afghan parties to seize the moment as the US plan starts to unfold and faces critical tests in the months ahead.

The writer is a former Pakistani ambassador to the United States and the UN By arrangement with Dawn

Bhatija & Co. looted ₹10k-cr, will go to jail, says Shah

Home minister says Didi hasn’t fulfilled even 82 of 282 promises made

RAJIB CHOWDHURI | DC KOLKATA, MARCH 23

Going all out against West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee’s MP nephew Abhishek with large-scale corruption charges, union home minister Amit Shah on Tuesday accused “Bhatija & Company” of amassing central funds to the tune of ₹10,000 crore which were disbursed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi for relief and rehabilitation to the state after it was devastated by Cyclone Amphan last year.

Mr Shah also made it clear that the entity would be sent to jail by a special investigation team (SIT), mentioned in the BJP manifesto, following a probe after the party forms its first government in the state.

In a blistering attack on

the Trinamul Congress supremo, he then ridiculed her for running “115 scams” in comparison to “115 schemes,” run by Mr Modi while mocking her for failing to fulfill even 82 out of her 282 promises made last time.

The union home minister told a BJP rally at Gosaba in South 24 Parganas, “Modiji has been sending a lot of funds here. Cyclone Amphan hit the state. Modiji released ₹10,000 crore. Did you get anything out of it? Where did it go? Bhatija & Company amassed it. You do not need to worry. Forming an SIT the BJP government will put those, who looted each and every pie of the funds sent by Modiji, behind bars. All scams, be it on Cyclone Amphan or Bulbul or Aila, will be probed by us through the

SIT.”

Mr Shah, in view of a portion of Hindu migrants’ votebank in the district, also touched the party’s top electoral promise. He said, “We will implement the Citizenship Amendment Act to give citizenship to the refugees after coming to power here.”

According to him, “For the poor, the PM has undertaken 115 Yojana which is called scheme. But Didi has started 115 scams. The money of the poor is looted by those who take cut-money. The BJP government will bring an end to it.”

Training his guns on Ms Banerjee over her false promises, Mr Shah highlighted the sops for the Sundarbans delta in the BJP manifesto.

He claimed, “Didi had announced 282 promises

but could not meet even 82 of them. In 2016 she talked of building a multiple integrated fisheries zone. Till date no one knows where it is. She should furnish an account but she would not. So you will give your account on April 1 by pressing the button of Kamal (Lotus). We had also sent ₹5,000 crore for the development of the Sundarbans. But the fund was misappropriated. In 2015, 2017 and 2019, Didi had claimed to turn Sundarbans into a district. Did it happen? Cast your vote for a BJP CM. We will make Sundarbans a district within a year.”

Later the union home minister and BJP president J P Nadda led roadshows at Midnapore and Ghatal in West Midnapore respectively in the after-

BJP promises corrected NRC in Assam

MANOJ ANAND | DC GUWAHATI, MARCH 23

Bharatiya Janata Party national president J.P. Nadda on Tuesday released the manifesto called “Sankalp Patra” for the Assembly polls in Assam, promising to increase the amount of — Orunodoi scheme, a cash transfer scheme for women from ₹830 to ₹3,000 besides two lakh government jobs and correct National Register of Citizens (NRC) to protect the state from influx.

The Orunodoi scheme launched months before polls, a cash scheme for women is proving to be the game changer for the BJP in the polls. In every constituency, over 15,000 women have started getting ₹830 per month. The BJP has promised to extend this scheme to 30 lakh deserving families.

Maoist attack in C’garh leaves 5 jawans dead

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY | DC BHOPAL, MARCH 23

Five jawans were on Tuesday killed and 12 others injured when the mini bus in which they were traveling was blown up by Maoists in Chhattisgarh’s south Bastar district of Narayanpur.

Maoists triggered three command initiated improvised explosive device (IED) explosions targeting the bus carrying jawans of district reserve group (DRG) when it was passing through a bridge over a culvert in Kodenar region, leading to the tragedy, director general of police (DGP) (anti-Naxal operation) of Chhattisgarh Ashok Juneja said.

The mini-bus fell off the bridge under the impact of the explosions, he added.

While three jawans including the driver of the police bus died on the

spot, two others succumbed to their injuries in the hospital.

At least 12 jawans were injured, three of them grievously.

All the 12 injured jawans were admitted in the district hospital in Narayanpur. Three of them were later airlifted to Raipur for treatment when their condition deteriorated.

This was the biggest Maoist attack on security forces in Bastar in the current year so far.

The bus was carrying around 44 DRG jawans, Narayanpur district superintendent of police Mohit Garg said.

The incident took place at around 4.15 pm.

The jawans were returning to their base camp in district headquarters of Narayanpur in the ill-fated bus after carrying out counterinsurgency operations in the region when the incident took place, Mr Juneja

said.

He said a road opening party comprising jawans of Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) as well as a de-mining party passed through the route a few minutes before the incident.

“DGP of Chhattisgarh D M Awasthi along with some senior police officers are visiting the blast site on Wednesday to probe the incident”, he added.

Sources in Bastar police told this newspaper that several Maoists in plain clothes were spotted at the attack site.

“Maoists may have planted IEDs under the culvert to target the bus carrying jawans and waited at the site for the bus to pass through the route to blow it up”, a senior police officer of Bastar told this newspaper requesting not to be quoted.

Prima facie, it appears a security lapse led to the tragedy, he added.

ATS: Waze key conspirator in Hiren’s case

SHAHAB ANSARI | DC MUMBAI, MARCH 23

The Maharashtra ATS has claimed that its investigation has revealed that suspended API Sachin Waze was prime conspirator in Mansukh Hiren murder and the agency is likely to seek his custody for interrogation in this case.

Meanwhile the NIA has claimed that Waze used a fake Aadhaar card to book a room in a 5-star hotel in South Mumbai a day before the Scorpio car, which was later parked near Mukesh Ambani’s residence with explosives, was reported to be missing. He was seen carrying five bags in CCTV footage of the hotel.

ATS chief Jaijeet Singh on Tuesday revealed that very next day of registering the FIR in connection with the death of Mansukh Hiren, in which his wife Vimla has stated that she suspect involvement of Waze, the probe officers had recorded Waze’s statement in which

he had refuted the claim that the Scorpio was in his use.

He had also said that he didn’t have any relation with Hiren and denied any role in his death, the ATS chief informed.

However, the subsequent investigation revealed that Waze’s statement was a lie.

According to ATS chief Singh, the probe revealed that at the instance of Waze the SIM card used in the crime was procured by bookie Ramesh Ramniklal Gaur from Gujarat.

The said SIM card was bought in the name of a Gujarat based company. It has also come to light that Gaur had given this SIM card to Waze’s aide, former police constable Vinayak Shinde.

Shinde was sentenced to imprisonment for life in connection with the fake encounter of Ramnarayan Gupta alias Lakhna Bhaiyya. But in 2020, he was released on parole due to Covid pandemic. After coming out of jail, Shinde got in touch with Waze and started working

for him.

The ATS has claimed that they have procured evidence showing their involvement in Hiren’s murder. The ATS so far has recovered 14 SIM cards from the accused persons.

But it has been revealed that the mobile phones that were used in the crime have been destroyed.

With the help of inputs received from interrogation of accused and suspected persons an ATS team on Tuesday returned from Union Territory Diu Daman with a seized Volvo car and suspect. This car is allegedly owned by Waze’s business partner and is suspected to have been used in the crime.

A team of forensic experts from Kalina Forensic Science Laboratory is inspecting this car.

Even though the accused have destroyed CCTV footage from some vital places, the ATS has seized CCTV footage of various routes and spots leading to offices and other places

believed to have been used in the crime.

The ATS chief also claimed that statements of many witnesses have been recorded and some important witnesses have agreed to record their statements under section 164 of CrPC that could be used as evidence in the court of law.

He said that since Waze is in NIA’s custody, they have procured a transfer order from Thane court and have moved an application seeking Waze’s custody before NIA court which has posted it for hearing on March 25, the day his custody is getting over.

This development could lead to another faceoff between the central and state agencies. The NIA has already sought to take over the murder case investigation on the ground that it was related to the case of explosives they are investigating. In fact, the ATS probe picked up pace only after the NIA decided to take over the murder case last Saturday.

15 % quota for govt school students in Odisha cleared

AKSHAYA KUMAR SHAHO | DC BHUBANESWAR, MARCH 23

The Odisha Legislative Assembly of Odisha on Tuesday adopted a resolution proposing reservation for government school students in higher educational institutes in the state.

Chief minister Naveen Patnaik had introduced the resolution for 15 per cent reservation for state-

run school students in the engineering and medical courses. The CM’s proposal came in the backdrop of recommendation by a High Power Committee suggesting quota for the government-run school students in the state.

“As per the pass percentage indication, 86 per cent of government high school students occupy 23 per cent in medical and 21 per cent engineering colleges. In the same

breath, 12 per cent private school pass-outs occupy 57 per cent of government medical colleges 63 per cent government engineering colleges,” the Chief Minister said while introducing the resolution.

He said that the reservation will help students of government high school students especially in rural belt get better avenues to stay ahead at the national level.

‘Vaccine for all above 45 years from April 1’

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The states are free to impose restrictions at the local level but there must be no hindrance on interstate and intra-state movement of persons and goods, including for cross land border trade under treaties with neighbouring countries, and no separate permission or permit will be required for such movements.

The new guidelines will be effective from April 1 to April 30. In a letter to the chief secretaries, Union home secretary Ajay Bhalla asked states/UTs to take all measures to promote Covid-19 appropriate behaviour among the public, especially in crowded places and during festivals, while saying there was a general laxity in the observance of Covid-19 appropriate behaviour by people now.

WORLD

Israelis vote to seal Bibi fate

Fourth poll in two years as Netanyahu’s corruption charge trial continues

Jerusalem, March 23: Israelis returned to polling stations early Tuesday for an unprecedented fourth time in two years in what is being largely seen as a referendum on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s continuance at the helm of affairs amid his ongoing trial on corruption charges as well as his handling of the pandemic.

The elections were called barely seven months after the last government was formed after the Likud and Blue and White party failed to agree on a budget by a December 23 deadline. The two parties had fought each other bitterly in the three ultimately inconclusive elections throughout 2019 and 2020 but agreed in May 2020 to form a power-sharing government with a rotating premiership between PM Netanyahu and Blue and White leader Benny Gantz. The unity government collapsed in December.

As per the election commission, 6,578,084 Israelis are eligible to vote for any

of the 38 parties running in the elections in 13,685 polling stations across the country, including 750 special polling stations for the sick and quarantined due to COVID-19.

Exit polls will be broadcast by the leading channels Tuesday night but the final results will be out only on March 31 after the votes from special polling stations, of soldiers, emissaries and prisoners are also properly tallied by Thursday or Friday.

Buoyed by a successful vaccination drive, one of the fastest in the world per capita, Netanyahu, 71, has put it at the forefront of his campaign claiming that under his leadership Israel has become the first country in the world to beat the Covid-19 pandemic. He yet again faces a tough challenge of putting together a coalition post-elections with some determined “friends turn foes” looking to end his long-run. The PM has made Israel’s handling of the pandemic, especially its

robust vaccine drive, personal by regular appearances in nationally televised addresses towards the beginning of the pandemic and later obsessively negotiating vaccine deals with pharmaceutical companies. Israel has reported 828,764 Coronavirus cases so far with 6,109 deaths.

Netanyahu’s early recognition of the perils of the pandemic has been hailed by several international leaders, and also political analysts who appreciated his political acumen in identifying an opportunity in a crisis while most of the world failed to grasp the intensity of the problem.

Netanyahu hailed the country’s “green” Covid-19 vaccination passports recently, saying Israel was “coming to life”, and his latest campaign slogan, bringing Israeli society “back to life”, may be his best chance at keeping his political career alive.

The Likud campaign has made two consistent promises - a government it

leads will prioritize economic recovery from the pandemic and that it will expand the circle of peace treaties already signed with four Arab nations over the past year to include as many as four additional countries.

The vexed Palestinian issue has been largely out of political discourse.

The prime minister is fighting charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust. He denies the accusations against him, which he says are politically motivated.

A sixth term for Israel’s longest-serving Prime Minister could protect him from an ongoing corruption trial.

Opinion polls have consistently predicted the Prime Minister’s ruling Likud party gaining the most seats and an overwhelming majority for the right-wing bloc, which was also seen in the previous elections, but he failed to bring them all together under his leadership.

The number of parties

and right-wing leaders opposing his continuance as prime minister has only grown with his main rival in the Likud party, Gideon Sa’ar, breaking away to form a separate party with the declared intent to unseat Netanyahu.

Opinion polls suggest as many as thirteen parties could cross the electoral threshold and secure representation in the 120-seat Knesset. A party needs to win 61 seats to be able to form a government without the support of other parties. If no bloc can achieve a workable majority, a fifth round of elections could be called.

Netanyahu’s party has stood by him despite defections insisting on forming a government only under his leadership. The two ultra-orthodox parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism, have pledged their allegiance to him.

Netanyahu has been in power continuously since 2009, having served an earlier three-year term in the late 1990s.

— PTI

Certify Rana extradition, US admin to court

Washington, March 23: The Biden administration has urged a federal court to certify India’s request to extradite Pakistani-origin Canadian businessman Tahawwur Rana, who is sought for his involvement in the 2008 Mumbai terror attack.

Assistant US Attorney John J. Lulejian, in his submission before a federal US court in Los Angeles, said Rana, 59, meets all the criteria to be extradited to India for his trial in the Mumbai terror attack.

On February 4, Rana’s attorney had opposed his extradition. US District Court Judge in Los Angeles Jacqueline Chooljian has scheduled the extradition hearing for April 22.

“The United States respectfully requests that following the April 22,

2021, extradition hearing, the Court certify India’s request for Rana’s extradition for the Secretary of State’s surrender decision,” Lulejian said in his court submission on Monday.

Rana, a childhood friend of David Coleman Headley, was re-arrested on June 10 in Los Angeles on an extradition request by India for his involvement in the Mumbai attack in which 166 people were killed.

He has been declared a fugitive by India.

“Fugitive Tahawwur Hussain Rana is wanted in India to stand trial for offences related to his role in the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India, that resulted in the death of 166 people, injury of 239 people, and damage to property in excess of \$1.5 billion,” Lulejian said.

— PTI

10 SHOT DEAD IN COLORADO SUPERMARKET

Boulder (Colorado), March 23: A shooting at a Colorado supermarket killed 10 people Monday, including a police officer who was the first to respond to the scene, authorities said. Police arrested a suspect, but didn’t reveal his name or any details about the shooting at an evening news conference where Boulder police Chief Maris Herold fought back tears.

Investigators had just begun sorting through evidence and witness interviews and didn’t have details on a motive for the shooting at the King Soopers store in Boulder, which is about 25 miles northwest of Denver and home to the University of Colorado, said Boulder County District Attorney Michael Dougherty. “This is a tragedy and a nightmare for Boulder County,” Dougherty said.

“These were people going about their day, doing their shopping. I promise the victims and the people of the state of Colorado that we will secure justice.” The attack was the seventh mass killing this year in the US, following the March 16 shooting that left eight people dead at three Atlanta-area massage businesses, according to a database compiled by *The Associated Press, USA Today* and Northeastern University.

It follows a lull in mass killings during the pandemic in 2020, which had the smallest number of such attacks in more than a decade, according to the database, which tracks mass killings defined as four or more dead, not including the shooter.

The slain officer was identified as Eric Talley, 51, who had been with Boulder police since 2010, Herold said. He went to the store after a call about shots fired and someone carrying a rifle, she said.

“He was by all accounts one of the outstanding officers of the Boulder Police Department, and his life was cut too short,” Dougherty said of Talley. Identities of the other victims were not disclosed as police were still notifying family members. Matthew Kirsch, the acting US attorney for Colorado, pledged that “the full weight of federal law enforcement” will support the investigation.

US: AstraZeneca ‘used’ dated info in vax trial

Washington, March 23: Results from a US trial of AstraZeneca’s Covid-19 vaccine may have included “outdated information” and that could mean the company provided an incomplete view of efficacy data, American federal health officials said early Tuesday.

AstraZeneca said in a statement that the data it released Monday included cases up to Feb. 17, as the

study rules specified, and that it was continuing to analyse cases that have occurred since then. The company said that a preliminary analysis of data that has continued to roll in was consistent with what it had already reported. It promised an update within 48 hours. AstraZeneca reported Monday that its Covid-19 vaccine provided strong protection among adults of all ages in

a long-anticipated US study, a finding that some experts hoped would help rebuild public confidence in the shot around the world and move it a step closer to clearance in the US. In the study of more than 30,000 people, the company reported that the vaccine was found to be 79 per cent effective at preventing symptomatic cases of Covid-19 — including in older adults. — AP

14 ULTRAS GIVEN DEATH FOR B’DESH PM KILL BID

Dhaka, March 23: Fourteen Islamist militants were on Tuesday given death sentence by a Bangladesh court here for attempting to kill Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2000.

Judge Abu Zafar Md Kamruzzaman of Dhaka’s Speedy Trial tribunal-1 pronounced the verdict as nine of them were brought to the court from jail to face the trial in person.

The rest five convicts are on the run. They were tried in absentia and defended by state-appointed lawyers.

“The verdict will be executed by a firing squad to set an example, unless the law barred it,” the judge said. Otherwise, the convicts could be hanged in line with the prevailing practice, following mandatory review of the death sentences by the High Court Division of the Supreme Court under the Bangladesh law, the judge said. Under the Bangladesh law, the death sentences would require to be endorsed by the High Court following an automatic death reference hearing. The convicts are allowed to file an appeal as well.

For the five convicts who are at large, the judge ordered the verdict to be executed after their arrest or surrender. All the convicts are operatives of outlawed Harkatul Jihad Bangladesh (HuJI-B).

HuJI-B’s chief Mufti Abdul Hannan, who was found to be the mastermind of the plot, too was indicted in the case but his name was dropped from the trial as he was executed in 2017 in another case involving attempted assassination of the then Bangladeshi-origin British High Commissioner.

The convicts had hatched the plot to kill Hasina by planting a high-powered 76 kilogram bomb near a ground in her constituency in Kotlipara area in southwestern Gopalganj district where she was supposed to address an election rally in July 2000.

However, security agencies detected the device ahead of the rally at the spot where the premier’s helicopter was set to land.

Days later, another device weighing 40 kilograms was detected from a nearby spot.

— PTI

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