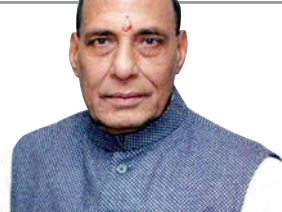


DECCAN Chronicle

THE LARGEST CIRCULATED ENGLISH DAILY IN SOUTH INDIA
RAJAMAHENDRAVARAM | WEDNESDAY | 24 FEBRUARY 2021



NATION | 4

Arjun main tank's purchase cleared



WORLD | 5

US calls China just a 'strong competitor'

SPORTS | 8

India take on England in day-night Test from today



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WEATHER

Max: 35.0°C
Min: 18.0°C
RH: 73%
Rainfall: NIL

Forecast: Clear.

Max/Min temp.

35/18 °C

COVID-19

COUNT

CASES

DEATHS

(+10,705)

(+77)

1,10,15,776

1,56,495

STATE GOVERNMENT BULLETINS

NA*

TS: 2,97,712

(+70)

AP: 8,89,409

NA*

1,625

(+1)

7,168

CASES AROUND THE WORLD

11,24,33,431

DEATHS

24,89,661

COUNTRIES, AREAS WITH CASES

219

worldometers.info/coronavirus

* TS stopped daily updates

ASTROGUIDE

Sarvari: Uttararyana

Tithi: Magha Shuddha Dwadasi till 5.59 pm

Star: Punarvasu till 1.11 pm

Variyam: 9.11 pm to 10.47 pm

Durmuhurtam: 12.06 pm to 12.52 pm

Rahukalam: 12 noon to 1.30 pm

HIJRI CALENDAR

Rajab 11,1442 AH

PRAYERS

(ROYAL MOSQUE)

Fajar: 5.40 am

Zohar: 1.30 pm

Asar: 4.30 pm

Maghrib: 5.48 pm

Isha: 8.30 pm

SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.23 AM

SUNSET TODAY 6.08 PM

MOONRISE TODAY 3.20 PM

MOONSET TOMORROW 4.49 AM

COUNTER POINT

Mantriji? He is always touring poll-bound states!

SHORT TAKES

Flood: 136 missing presumed dead

Dehradun:

The Uttarakhand government has issued a notification authorising officials to declare "presumed dead" 136 people still missing after the flash flood in Chamoli district over two weeks ago. Sixty-eight bodies have so far been recovered after the February 7 disaster possibly triggered by an avalanche. A devastating flash flood demolished a 13.2 MW hydel project along the river besides causing extensive damage to the NTPC's Tapovan-Vishnugad hydel project along Dhauliganga. The move to declare those who continue to be missing as presumed dead has been initiated to expedite the process of distribution of compensation, a state health official said.

Jawan killed in accidental fire

Jammu:

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

Jagan approves welfare scheme for EBC women

Decides to allocate 5% land in private layouts for the poor

DC CORRESPONDENT VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 23

The State Cabinet headed by Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy on Tuesday gave its nod to a new welfare scheme — EBC Nestham — that will benefit poor women belonging to forward castes.

Announcing this, information minister Perni Venkataramaiah alias Nani said the new Economically Backward Caste (EBC) scheme — EBC Nestam — will be implemented from the coming financial year. Under it, the government will provide financial assistance of ₹45,000 to each woman beneficiary aged between 45-60 years at the rate of ₹15,000 per annum for three years. He said the government has allotted ₹670 crore per annum for the scheme, totalling to ₹2,010 crore for three years. The cabinet also approved the welfare scheme calendar for 2021-22.

Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy is being felicitated by his ministerial colleagues in Amaravati on Tuesday. — DECCAN CHRONICLE

He said the cabinet has decided to allocate five per cent of land in private layouts for the poor. Serious action will be initiated against parties violating this rule. He said earlier 300 sq. ft. TIDCO houses had been given for ₹2.65 lakh each, whereas the YSRC government is giv-

ing it for only ₹1. This government is allotting the same house for ₹3.4 lakh. The 465 sq.ft. houses had been allotted for ₹4.65 lakh each, while they are now being given for ₹4.15 lakh. The state will take a burden of ₹5,579 crore on account of the various decisions taken on

Tuesday.

The cabinet has given its nod to roll out Kadapa Steel Plant works at a cost of ₹10,082 crore. It will be implemented in Phase1 and 2 through a joint venture partnership with a capacity of three million tonnes in each phase.

The cabinet approved the decision to complete investigation within 100 days with regard to those caught red-handed in the ACB cases. The earlier limit was two years. The government has decided to amend the law providing for action against ACB officials if they do not complete the inquiry before the stipulated deadline.

The minister said that the cabinet approved allotment of new fire stations and personnel in Kadapa and Chittoor districts. It gave its nod to upgrade PHCs to 50-bed hospitals in Penumuru and Karvetinagar of Chittoor district. Medical and non-medical staff will be recruited to that extent.

OTHER ID CARDS ALLOWED FOR MLC POLLS: EC

DC CORRESPONDENT VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 23

The Election Commission has issued an order stating that all the electors should produce EPIC card or any other document to establish their identity in the AP Legislative Council polls from the teachers' constituencies on March 14.

The EC made it clear that those who were issued EPIC should produce it when they arrive at polling stations. They would also be allowed to produce any other valid document to prove their identity.

The alternate documents are the Aadhaar card, driving licence, PAN card, Indian passport, service identity card, official identity card issued to MPs, MLAs and MLCs, service identity card issued by educational institutions, certificate of degree or diploma issued by the university in original and certificate of physical handicap issued by a competent authority.

In AP, two teachers' constituencies including East-West Godavari and Krishna-Guntur are up for polls. On Tuesday alone, eight independents and one nominee from BSP filed their notations from East-West Godavari constituency and 10 independents and one from the National Nava Kranthi Party filed their nominations for Krishna-Guntur seat.

Kakinada farmers to get back 2,180 acres SEZ land

VADREVU SRINIVAS | DC KAKINADA, FEB. 23

The nearly one-and-a-half decades' struggle of farmers under Kakinada Special Economic Zone (KSEZ) fructified with the state cabinet on Tuesday deciding to return around 2,180 acres of land in the zone to farmers who have refused to take any compensation.

If small extents of 5-10 acres of land adjacent to KSEZ are there, these farmers will be given the same extent of land at another place the "land-for-land" policy.

Following the decision, some of the farmers have called Chief Minister Y.S.

The CM took a decision to give back farmers about 2000 acres of land acquired for Kakinada SEZ.

During his padayatra when he was the opposition leader, Jagan had visited the KSEZ area and promised to sort out the issue.

Jagan Mohan Reddy as "saviour of farmers".

Particularly delighted are farmers of U. Kothapalli and Thondangi mandal in East Godavari district.

During his padayatra when he was the opposition leader, Jagan had vis-

ited the KSEZ area and promised to sort out the issue. "The Chief Minister has fulfilled his promise and proved his credibility," said KSEZ Vyathireka Porata Samithi convener Chinta Suryanarayana Murthy.

He thanked Kakinada MP Vanga Gita, Tuni MLA Dadiseti Raja, Pithapuram MLA Pendem Dorababu and others who fully supported farmers on the issue. Samithi leader Bavisetti Narayana Swamy alias Pedakapu said the announcement has come on the auspicious "Bhishma Ekadasi" day. "People of the area will worshipping Jagan as a saviour," he stated.

Assembly to resolve against privatisation of VSP's RINL

DC CORRESPONDENT VISAKHAPATNAM, FEB. 23

The Andhra Pradesh Cabinet on Tuesday decided to pass a resolution in the state Assembly against privatisation of the Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Limited, the corporate entity of Visakhapatnam Steel Plant. The resolution will be introduced in the budget session of the Assembly after the municipal elections.

Minister for transport

and information, Perni Venkataramaiah Nani said in his media briefing after the cabinet meeting that Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy visited Visakhapatnam and held lengthy discussions with trade union representatives and mass organisations on the privatisation move.

The Chief Minister told them that he had already written a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to explore alternatives to

the privatization and keep the steel plant in the public sector in the interest of the people of Andhra Pradesh. A team of MPs was also sent to New Delhi to meet Central leaders and apprise them of the situation, he said.

"Keeping these in view, the Cabinet has decided to pass a resolution in the assembly in the budget session," Perni Nani said.

■ More reports on Page 2

WATER | WATER

KCR opposes AP building canal at Rajolibanda

Another TS, AP water row erupts

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

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

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

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

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

deny Telangana its rightful share and adversely affect the erstwhile Mahabubnagar district.

Public representatives of Gadwal and Mahabubn-

agar districts complained to TS CM K. Chandrashekar Rao that AP had started making markings to dig a canal on the right side of the RDS.

Official sources said that Rao discussed the issue with officials on Tuesday and directed them to lodge a complaint with the Krishna River Management Board, the Central Water Commission and the Apex Council of the Jal Shakti ministry against the AP government and ensure that it suspends these works. Though TS is supposed to get 16 tmc ft of water through the RDS, it is getting less than five tmc currently due to leakages.

■ Page 2: Farmers worry about AP's parallel project

Protest drums

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

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

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

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

Commenting that the police's case against Ms Ravi was based on "scanty

and sketchy" evidence, the court said that "the offence of sedition cannot be invoked to minister to the wounded vanity of the governments".

Ms Ravi is accused of creating and disseminating an online document that lists out how people can support the farmers' protest against the three news laws. Police has claimed that the document was meant to revive a Khalistani group and was part of a global conspiracy to "spread disaffection against the Indian state". The court rubbished that allegation in its order.

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

"The resistance to the bail plea," additional sessions judge Dharmendra Rana said, "seems to be more of ornamental in nature... Considering the scanty and sketchy evidence available on record, I do not find any palpable reasons to breach the general rule of 'Bail' against a 22-year-old young lady, with blemish free criminal antecedents."

In Kerala, Rahul slams BJP, CPM

DC CORRESPONDENT THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, FEB. 23

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

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

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

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

they were destroying their lives.

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

IMRAN KHAN ALLOWED TO USE INDIAN AIRSPACE

DC CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI/COLOMBO, FEB. 23

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

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

The Pakistan Prime Minister reached Colombo on Tuesday evening for an official visit to the island nation.

The external affairs ministry in New Delhi did not issue any comment on the permission that was reportedly granted.

■ Full report on Page 4

Illegal quarry explosives set off accidentally, kill 6 in Karnataka

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

The government has ordered a CID probe into the blast.

Police said preliminary investigation indicated use of petroleum gel and Ammonium Nitrate in the quarry that was operating clandestinely and was closed a few days ago following raids.

POLICE SAID preliminary investigation indicated use of petroleum gel and Ammonium Nitrate in the quarry that was operating clandestinely and was closed a few days ago following raids.

lowing raids.

The incident comes close on the heels of a similar blast at a quarry site in Yediyurappa's hometown of Shivamogga on January 22, which left six dead. Karnataka health minis-

ter K. Sudhakar, who represents the Chikkaballapur constituency, visited the spot and said the bodies of the victims were badly mutilated and scattered all over the place.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted his condolences to the families of the victims of the blast.

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

■ Full report on Page 4

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SHORT TAKES

TD LEADERS IN GANTA SEGMENT JOIN YSRC

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, FEB. 23

Second run leaders of the Telugu Desam Party, including former corporators and senior party workers from the Visakhapatnam North Assembly constituency represented by the former minister Ganta Srinivasa Rao, joined the ruling YSRC party in Visakhapatnam on Tuesday.

They include former corporator and senior TDP leader Pakalapati Narsimha Raju, popularly known as Boxer Raju from 14th ward, general secretary Seeram Tataji from 42nd ward, senior party leader Dadi Srinivasa Rao and senior members of the party from 24th, 25th and 26th ward and their followers.

A meeting was held in the north constituency in which these leaders were welcomed into the ruling party. Local MP M.V.V. Satyanarayana, north constituency coordinator K.K. Raju, Visakha Dairy vice-chairman Adari Anand, Varudu Kalyani and others were present.

A senior TDP leader told this correspondent that this was just the beginning and more leaders and party workers would be joining the ruling party in the ensuing days.

They are threatening the party leaders in the trading activities and real estate business with cases and tax raids.

He also added that it was happening in Ganta Srinivasa Rao assembly constituency only and nowhere else.

“Senior YSRC leaders including elected representatives are poaching the potential TDP leaders while campaigning in the wards,” said vice president of the party Pasarla Prasad.

Former minister and TDP State president K. Atchannaidu said the ruling party is coercing the leaders to join their party, and this was a state-wide phenomenon in the name of Akarsh.

“We are counselling our leaders to stay firm and to not get lured by the ruling party,” Atchannaidu said and added that he would be meeting the MLAs and top leaders of the Visakhapatnam city to discuss important issues relating to the GVMC elections on Wednesday.

HC RESERVES VERDICT ON ULBs PETITIONS

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 23

Andhra Pradesh High Court completed a hearing on a batch of petitions seeking cancellation of the State Election Commission's order to resume the election process for urban local body polls and reserved its verdict here on Tuesday.

A single-judge bench headed by justice D.V.S.S. Somayajulu heard the counsels for petitioners saying that the SEC did not have the right to resume the election process for urban local bodies as it issued notification for conducting polls in March 2020 and deferred them due to the prevalence of Covid-19. Some petitions were also filed, seeking the issue of a fresh notification for conducting the urban local body polls.

SEC's counsel N. Ashwani Kumar argued that the SEC issued a notification in March 2020 to conduct urban local body polls and followed prevalence of Covid-19 at that point of time, it deferred the polls and maintained that once a notification was issued, there was no provision to cancel it and issue a fresh notification. He informed the court that the Supreme Court also upheld the SEC's decision to defer the polls due to Covid-19. He argued that the writ petitions filed on the issue were not entertainable.

Advocate general S. Sriram appearing for the state government, informed the court that the SEC consulted the state government for going ahead with the urban local body polls from the stage where they were deferred. After hearing both the parties, the judge announced the hearing's completion in the case and reserved the judgement.

In a related development, the High Court extended the interim order up to March 1 directing the SEC not to inquire in cases related to prevention of contestants from filing nominations or compelling the contestants to withdraw their nominations under duress in the earlier election process to MPTCs/ZPTCs held in March 2020.



The YSRC activists hold flags and placards during a campaign rally for the upcoming GVMC elections at the 30th ward near Relliveedhi in Visakhapatnam on Tuesday.

— K. MURALIKRISHNA

CM firm on developing Amaravati, says Perni

Govt will go ahead with decentralisation plan: Minister

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 23

Chief Minister Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy is adhering to development of Amaravati, information and public relations minister Perni Venkatramiah alias Nani asserted on Tuesday, refuting allegations that the CM is neglecting Amaravati. He charged that it is the farmers who have abused ministers, MPs and MLAs whenever they went to them to resolve the executive capital issue. He said that executive capital would come at Visakhapatnam in the coming days.

Briefing media about a meeting of the Cabinet on Tuesday, the information minister maintained that while the state government will go ahead with its decentralisation plan of executive, judicial and legislative capitals, it would not shun development of Amaravati as the legislative capital. He said despite Amaravati farmers being against the government, CM Jagan has decided to construct a bridge and barrage on Krishna River to provide road connectivity to Amaravati. An outer ring road (ORR) will also be established linking Amaravati to the national highway, thereby providing connectivity to all villages in the vicinity of Amaravati.

Nani asserted that it is not Chandrababu Naidu but Jagan Mohan Reddy who is developing Amaravati. As a result, the area is developing and land rates are also rising in the city. The minister said the cabinet discussed the results of gram panchayat elections. The CM congratulated ministers for ensuring victory of ruling YSRC in over 80 percent of the seats. Jagan asked ministers to further ensure victory of the ruling party in the scheduled municipal and MPTC / ZPTC elections too.

● **THE INFORMATION minister maintained that while the state government will go ahead with its decentralisation plan of executive, judicial and legislative capitals, it would not shun development of Amaravati as the legislative capital.**

MANA BADI-NADU NEDU SECOND PHASE TO START IN APRIL: SURESH

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 23

Minister for education Adimulapu Suresh said the first phase of infrastructure work on 15,700 schools in the state under “Mana Badi - Nadu Nedu” will be completed in the coming month. Addressing a press conference on Tuesday, he said till date ₹2,570 crore have been spent on the project.

He stated that the reverse tendering has saved ₹245 crore on the purchase of fans, furniture and green boards.

He said the second phase of Nadu Nedu will start from April 1.

Suresh said as per the directions of CM, high priority is being to the quality of works in the schools with usage of tiles and granite.

He said that in 45,000 schools, work was carried out in three phases.

● **SURESH SAID** as per the directions of CM, high priority is being to the quality of works in the schools with usage of tiles and granite.

● **HE SAID** that in 45,000 schools, work was carried out in three phases.

He claimed that the YSRC government was giving high priority to education under which thousands of crores of rupees are being spent.

The minister disclosed that admissions in degree colleges have increased in the current academic year compared to last year.

More than 40,000 additional students have taken admissions in 1,336 public, private and aided degree colleges than the previous year.

KSEZ struggle is successful: farmers

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, FEB. 23

Farmers of Kakinada Special Economic Zone (KSEZ) have succeeded against all odds with the state government finally deciding to return certain extent of lands back to the farmers.

Political parties including BJP, CPI, CPM, Telugu Desam and many non-governmental organisations visited the area and had expressed support for the farmers. The Kadali Organisation led by its secretary K. Rajendra launched the agitation in initial stages by creating awareness among farmers on the environmental issues they could face in the future. Rajendra brought to the area many environmentalists including Medha Patkar and Balagopal. They created awareness among farmers and submitted representations on their behalf to

● **TOTAL LAND** involved in KSEZ area is 10,400 acres.

● **FARMERS OF 2,180 acres** refused to take compensation.

● **APIIC ACQUIRED 2,180 acres** of land in Kona area of Thondangi mandal of which 550 acres has been allotted to Divis Labs.

central and state governments.

When Chandrababu Naidu was in opposition in the united AP, he promised KSEZ farmers to give back their lands if he came to power. But after assuming power, he did not fulfil his promise despite ruling the state from 2014 to 2019.

“All political parties supported the farmers’ agitation and we thank all of them. We will never forget CM Jagan as he has finally done justice to us,” said KSEZ Vyathireka Porata Samithi convener Chinta Suryanarayana Murthy.

DGP PRAISES POLICE FOR PEACEFUL POLLING

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 23

DGP Gautam Sawang has stated that the four-phased Gram Panchayat elections passed off peacefully in Andhra Pradesh as the police officers and other government personnel acted in unison to ensure fair polling.

The dedicated performance of each and every police personnel in duty management, as also their service spirit, punctuality, precautionary measures and coordination with all departments helped ensure peace, he said.

The DGP said that compared to the big clashes in the 2013 gram panchayat elections, this time there were only “minor incidents.” Pre-binding of criminals, money laundering and special surveillance by the police and the special enforcement bureau to prevent distribution of alcohol have all contributed to the successful conduct of the elections.

He said, as a result, a positive change was evident in trouble-prone Anantapur, Prakasam and Nellore districts.

The DGP said the state election commissioner and chief minister lauded the services of the police department for ensuring peace in the panchayat polls. He said cops even postponed their vaccination and gave first priority to attending to the call of duty during the election time.

DGP Sawang noted that the elections were held without causing any situation for re-polling. “There was fear that there will be an atmosphere of conflict. The police department overcame them all and helped hold the polls peacefully.”

He stated that as many as 70,000 police personnel performed duties in each phase.

● **DGP Sawang noted that the elections were held without causing any situation for re-polling. There was fear that there will be an atmosphere of conflict. The police department overcame them all and helped hold the polls peacefully.**

MINISTER’S KIN ATTACKED ME, ALLEGES JS WORKER

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, FEB. 23

Minister for Fisheries and Animal Husbandry Seediri Appalaraju’s brother S. Chiranjeevi allegedly attacked Jana Sena worker Padma Reddy in Devanattada village in Srikakulam on Monday night.

Padma Reddy told reporters that he had a verbal duel with Chiranjeevi over social media for some time, and he allegedly abused his mother in some of the posts. After he raised objections, Chiranjeevi and 30 others attacked him and his mother, causing a head injury. After dialling 100, a home guard came to them and collected a statement. The police later registered a case.

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

AP govt issues show cause notice to ex-bureaucrat

N. VAMSI SRINIVAS | DC
HYDERABAD, FEB. 23

Andhra Pradesh government on Tuesday issued a show cause notice to retired bureaucrat Preeti Sudan for alleged misuse of power and influencing subordinates to derive financial or material benefits.

The government’s move has shocked the babudom as severe allegations and the show cause notice are related to a trivial issue of regularising her extraordinary leave into an earned leave.

Though both the competent authorities – Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) at centre and the state government – agreed in principle to her request, Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy-led government has taken objection to the manner in which orders were issued regularising the official’s leave. What is more shocking is that the AP government dug into the closet a year after the regularisation was done and four months after she retired from service.

According to Tuesday’s G.O., under secretary of Health and Family

● **THE STATE government is the competent authority to regularise the leave period in concurrence with DoPT and not the Health Department at the centre.**

Welfare Department at the centre issued orders in February, 2020, regularising her leave as per her request. The state government, however, argued that DoPT had addressed a letter to Chief Secretary, AP.

Hence the state government is the competent authority to regularise the leave period in concurrence with DoPT and not the Health Department at the centre.

AP government has levelled allegations against Preeti Sudan that she violated provisions of All India Services (Conduct) Rules 1968, and influenced subordinates under her control to get a favour. The retired bureaucrat has been asked to explain within two weeks why disciplinary proceedings should not be initiated against her.

Why Z plus security to Sarada Peetham Swami: Ashok Babu

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 23

Telugu Desam MLC P. Ashok Babu on Tuesday charged “fake Swami” of Visakhapatnam-based Sarada Peetham with sheltering criminals and corrupt elements.

He questioned the Andhra Pradesh government to explain why Z+ security has been given to the Swami who is carrying out nefarious activities from his peetham with total disregard to Hindu dharma.

The MLC said the Swami has turned the Visakha Sarada Peetham into a dumping ground of corruption money belonging to ruling party leaders. “That is the reason

why utmost importance and security is being given to the Swami right now,” he maintained. He stated that YSRC ministers have no moral right to talk about Swamiji who have not come forward to defend temples when there had been 168 instances of desecrations.

Ashok Babu demanded that Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy explain to devotees why he failed in ordering a detailed CBI probe into all incidents of desecrations in the state.

The MLC accused YSRC leaders of disrespecting Tirumala temple by allowing other religions to launch their religious propaganda over SVBC and TTD tickets.

BJP senior leader slapped with slipper during TV debate

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 23

A live TV debate on raising funds to develop capital city Amaravati ended abruptly when one of the participants, identified as Amaravati JAC leader K. Srinivasa Rao slapped BJP senior leader S. Vishnuvardhan Reddy with a chappal in his Hyderabad studio on Tuesday. A private TV channel was discussing the development of the capital city Amaravati. Taking part in it, BJP senior leader S. Vishnuvardhan Reddy commented that the previous TDP regime carried out publicity stunt to raise loans for developing the capital city. However, Amaravati JAC leader K. Srinivasa Rao objected to it. Enraged at it, senior BJP

● **A private TV channel was discussing the development of the capital city Amaravati. Taking part in it, BJP senior leader S. Vishnuvardhan Reddy commented that the previous TDP regime carried out publicity stunt to raise loans for developing the capital city.**

leader advised Rao to work in the Telugu Desam party office and do ‘bhajan’ to the party leadership. He also called Rao a paid artist of the Telugu Desam Party. With this, both of them entered into a heated argument, and in a fit of rage, Rao slapped Vishnuvardhan Reddy with his chappal live on the show, and they were just short of exchanging blows when the anchor intervened and tried to calm them down.

DIGITAL | INDIA

DigiLocker is a platform initiated by the Centre under its flagship programme Digital India

Centre plans issue of soft copy of passports to citizens

SAMPAT G. SAMRITAN | DC
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 23

Air passengers could soon be relieved of the burden of carrying their passport for checks at airports. The Centre is working on a project to integrate Passport Seva with a mobile app called DigiLocker. Passengers need get a soft copy of their passport and keep it with them during the travel.

DigiLocker is a platform initiated by the Centre under its flagship pro-

gramme Digital India, for issuance and verification of documents and certificates in a digital format. This would eliminate physical carrying of documents. “The Union ministry of external affairs is contemplating to integrate the passport seva with DigiLocker shortly,” an official said here.

Accordingly, those who visit passport offices with application for fresh passports or for renewal need carry soft copies of their Aadhaar card, Class X pass certificate, PAN Card

● **VIJAYAWADA REGIONAL** passport office has come back to its normal service levels by attending to 500 to 600 applications per day.

● **PASSPORT SEVA** kendras located in other parts of AP are slowly picking up pace in providing services to the citizens.

and any other proof of residence like driving licence, and show them to the passport authorities on their DigiLocker app for verification.

As DigiLocker-issued documents are at par with original documents as per IT Act, 2000, the authorities will need only download such documents on the app, verify them and

issue the clearance for issue or renewal of passport.

Of late, several Class X educational boards are issuing soft copies of pass certificates to the students so that they can show a soft copy of their Class X pass certificate for verification at passport offices.

Once the passport

authorities issue new passport or renew the old one, those who got it can upload the soft copy on DigiLocker, similar to online storage of other documents, and keep it ready for verification on their mobile app and avoid carrying the hard copy.

Vijayawada regional passport officer DSS

Srinivasa Rao said, “The Centre would integrate passport seva with DigiLocker shortly so that the air passengers can be relieved of burden of carrying a hard copy of their passport during travel. They can upload their soft copies on the app DigiLocker and show them before officials for verification when needed.” “Passport offices are becoming paperless as we would accept soft copies of various documents for providing a series of services including

issue/renewal of passports to the citizens,” he said.

On the other hand, services like issue/renewal of passports are slowly picking up pace to the pre-Covid-19 levels. AP is having three regional passport seva kendras, a passport seva laghu kendram and 20 post office passport seva kendras at present. Nearly 1,600 to 1,700 cases are being attended to daily for fresh issue or renewal of passports and other services.

SHORT TAKES

AP REPORTS 70 COVID-19 CASES, ONE DEATH

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 23

Andhra Pradesh registered 70 fresh Covid-19 infections and one death.

The state health authorities reported that out of 28,268 samples tested, 70 persons were infected with Covid-19. Out of a total number of 1,37,75,253 samples tested so far in the state, 8,89,409 persons were found infected with the virus and of them, 8,81,666 were recovered in the course of treatment, while 575 are still active with the virus.

Among daily cases of Coronavirus, Chittoor topped the state with 18 followed by nine each in East Godavari and Visakhapatnam, seven in Krishna, six in Nellore, five in Guntur, four each in Srikakulam and West Godavari, three in Vizianagaram, two each in Anantapur and Prakasam, one in Kadapa and zero cases in Kurnool.

With regard to the cumulative Covid-19 active cases, Krishna reported the highest number of 91 followed by 75 in Chittoor; 67 in East Godavari, 66 in Nellore, 60 in Kadapa, 45 in West Godavari, 44 in Guntur, 38 in Prakasam, 27 in Anantapur, 22 in Srikakulam, 20 in Visakhapatnam, 13 in Kurnool and seven in Vizianagaram.

Among daily Covid-19 deaths, one patient died in Visakhapatnam district, raising toll to 7,168.

SOBTI TAKES CHARGE AS CHIEF OF EASTERN FLEET

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, FEB. 23

Rear Admiral Tarun Sobti took over the Command of the Eastern Fleet, the sword arm of the Eastern Naval Command, from Rear Admiral Sanjay Vatsayan, on Tuesday. The change of guard took place at an impressive ceremony held at the Naval Base in Visakhapatnam.

Rear Admiral Tarun Sobti was commissioned into the Indian Navy on 1 July 1988 and is a specialist in navigation and direction. The Flag Officer is an alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, College Interarmées de Défense, Paris, France and College of Naval Warfare, Mumbai.

He also served as the Naval Attaché at the Embassy of India, Moscow. Before assuming command of the Eastern Fleet, the Flag Officer was Deputy Commandant and Chief Instructor of Indian Navy's premier officer training establishment Indian Naval Academy at Ezhimala.

ACB ON HUNT FOR PORT OFFICER ADINARAYANA

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, FEB. 23

ACB officials are searching for Port officer B. Adinarayana for interrogating in a case. The ACB officials made a trap on the Port Conservator in Kakinada for taking a bribe of ₹60,000 last year in changing the inland vessel as Craft Harbour. The accused officer has told the officials that as per instructions of the Port Officer, he had to take it. The officials questioned the Port Officer twice and recorded his voice. When the officials called Mr Adinarayana again for taking further information from him, Mr Adinarayana did not attend and also applied leave till the end of February.

GODDESS IDOL TO BE INSTALLED AT GADALA

DC CORRESPONDENT
RAJAMAHENDRAVARAM, FEB. 23

An idol of Goddess Sri Mahalakshmi is going to be installed in accordance with traditional rituals at Gadala village in Korukonda mandal of East Godavari on June 4. Sri Mahalakshmi Sametha China Venkannababu Peetham chief Mr China Venkanna Babu told the reporters here on Tuesday that the Goddess Mahalakshmi idol would be installed in first floor and Lord Sri Venkateswara Swamy idol will be installed in second floor.

He said that the God and Goddess would fulfil the desires of the devotees.

Healthcare worker's kin demand ex gratia

She took vaccine on Feb. 15, admitted to KGH with fever

D. SIVA RAMI REDDI | DC
KURNOOL FEB. 23

The fear psychosis among Healthcare Workers (HCWs) who had been administered Covid vaccine about the after-effects like dizziness, vomiting, convulsions, and fever is driving them to hospitals. Kurnool General Hospital Superintendent G. Narendranath Reddy said that people have been complaining of the after-effects in the past few days. In the past two days alone, three HCWs got admitted in the hospital, he said.

The death of a Healthcare worker (HCW) due to the Covid-19 vaccine in Nandikotkur on Monday sent panic signals among other HCWs. She has com-

● Health workers under psychological stress after death of a health worker

● Kurnool General Hospital Superintendent G. Narendranath Reddy said that people have been complaining of the after-effects in the past few days.

● The relatives of the deceased did not agree to a post-mortem and the ICDS staff disposed the body, said Bhagya Rekha, ICDS project director.

pleted the full course of the vaccine by taking twice. The HCW identified as Noorjahan, 55, of Malyala Village in Nandikotkur mandal got admitted into KGH due to fever. She did not reveal that she had taken the vaccine, and died while undergoing treatment. Later her relatives staged a dharna before Nandikotkur ICDS

office demanding compensation. The relatives of the deceased did not agree to a post-mortem and the ICDS staff disposed the body, said Bhagya Rekha, ICDS project director.

She said there are about 4,200 Anganwadi workers in the district, and all of them got the Covid-19 vaccine twice as per the course. Only

a few complained of after effects, she said. The son of the deceased lodged a complaint with the Nandikotkur police to probe the matter.

KGH superintendent further said that the HCW who died has multiple problems, including respiratory disease and sore throat. We have conducted RT-PCR test, which came negative, he said.

The deceased has been administered Covishield vaccine produced by Serum Institute of India in Pune, the authorities said. Kurnool district has been supplied with Covishield (75 per cent) and Covaxin of Bharat Biotech Ltd of Hyderabad (30 per cent) of total supplies to cater to 42,500 targetted people.

Chariot festival



A large number of people take part in the Chariot festival of Lord Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy at Antarvedi in East Godavari district on Tuesday.

— DC

16 employees of Durga temple suspended

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 23

As many as 16 employees working in the hilltop Durga temple were suspended due to their involvement in various illegalities in the temple. The ACB officials conducted checks in the temple for five days and found a lot of corruption and submitted a report to the government. Based on the ACB report, 16 employees were suspended.

The five-day inquiry by the ACB officials on the irregularities in the temple administration and other key departments concluded on Monday. During their inquiry, the ACB found many flaws in various departments and submitted a preliminary report to the state government.

The ACB found irregularities in Laddu prasadam department, Tickets, Saree counter, Tollgate, Tonsuring, Provisions and Engineering departments. Based on the preliminary report submitted to the government and the Endowments Department, Commissioner P. Arjun Rao issued suspension orders to 16 employees of various departments in the Durga temple on Tuesday. As per the commissioner's orders, the temple Executive Officer M.V. Suresh Babu suspended six superintendents, 10 clerical staff of the temple. Out of the suspended staff, eight belong to Saree, Prasadam and

Annadanam department. The suspended temple staff are K. Srinivas Rao, (Prasadam, preparation, Saree department Superintendent) K. Srinivas Murthy, (Annadanam department), A. Amrutha Rao and K. Hari Krishna (main store Superintendent), P. Bhagya Jyothi (Sanitation Superintendent), K. Srinivas Rao (Lease department Superintendent), G. Yeshwant Senior Assistant Lease Department, B. Nageswara Rao Senior Assistant Saree Department, Ch. Chennakeswara Rao Junior Assistant Saree Department, M.S. Prakash Rao, Junior Assistant Sanitary Department, P. Ravi Kumar, Record Assistant Darsanam tickets, K. Ramesh, Record Assistant Arjitha Seva, P. Rambabu Record Assistant.

VU OFFERS SCHOLARSHIPS TO STUDENTS

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 23

Dr M.Y.S. Prasad Vice-Chancellor of Vignana's Deemed to be University, released the admission notification for the academic year 2021-22 towards admission into B.Tech programmes, B.Pharmacy, and all other UG, PG and PhD programmes. He said that admissions into B. Tech and B.Pharmacy programmes will be based on the performance in the "Vignana's Scholastic Aptitude Test (V-SAT)", an online examination conducted across 36 test centres on all India basis from 24 to 30 May 2021 in AP and TS.

Dean, admissions Dr V. Ravi Kumar informed that VU is offering scholarships for VSAT rankers and meritorious students and appealed students to make good use of the opportunity. He informed that under the scholarship scheme, the first 100 rankers would get 75 per cent scholarship in tuition fee, 101 – 200 rankers will get 50 per cent scholarship in tuition fee and 201-400 rankers will get a 25 per cent scholarship in tuition fee and further 401-2000 rankers will get 10 per cent.

Training session



NCC women Air Wing cadets at the camp in SAS college in Vijayawada on Tuesday.

— DC

NGT panel to identify lapses in green laws

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, FEB. 23

The National Green Tribunal would set up an oversight committee headed by a retired high court judge to find lapses relating to compliance of environmental norms during execution of the Polavaram irrigation project.

The NGT principal bench headed by its chairman Adarsh Kumar Goel held the hearing in the case in New Delhi on Tuesday and issued a direction to set up an oversight committee comprising experts from IITs from New Delhi and Hyderabad and also from Indian Institute of Soil Science.

Goel said that after consulting the Andhra Pradesh High Court Chief Justice Arup Kumar Goswami, the name of the retired judge to head the panel would be finalised. He called upon the AP government to extend all support to the panel to find out how the project works were failing to comply with environmental norms.

The NGT expressed displeasure over the failure to comply with a series of directions issued earlier and also recommendations of the experts' panel on environmental norms while executing the Polavaram project and wondered as to why there was no proper prior planning on environmental impact while taking up project works.

● The NGT principal bench headed by its chairman Adarsh Kumar Goel held the hearing in the case in New Delhi on Tuesday and issued a direction to set up an oversight committee comprising experts from IITs from New Delhi and Hyderabad and also from Indian Institute of Soil Science.

It was critical of the authorities for "shifting the blame on others" after landing in trouble, instead of anticipating such issues in advance and taking up necessary preventive steps.

Noted economist Dr Pentapati Pulla Rao filed a petition in the NGT in 2018 alleging a series of environmental lapses while executing the Polavaram project. Petitioner's counsel K. Sravan Kumar informed the NGT bench that the Polavaram project got environmental clearances in 2005. "Despite the filing of several petitions on violation of such norms during execution of the project since 2015, there was no stoppage for such activities."

He said that in 2016, additional land was acquired without obtaining environmental clearance and this started being used as a yard to dump mud and pieces

of rocks that surfaced while clearing the land, without assessing their impact.

Counsel informed the bench that the dumping of waste resulted in deformation of a stretch of the road and formation of cracks on nearby structures. As no proper precautionary measures were taken in the construction of the cofferdam, it caused inundation of several villages, affecting a large number of people.

He said that if such violations were allowed to be continued in execution of the project, it might even result in a catastrophe as was witnessed recently in Uttarakhand. He also informed the bench that petitioner Rao and his family members were denied payment of relief for land acquisition as they petitioned the NGT and sought its intervention for payment of early relief.

In response, the NGT chairman directed the AP government to pay the relief with immediate effect.

Petitioner Pentapati Pulla Rao said, "We are expecting the NGT's order to set up a panel to oversee shortcomings in implementation of environmental norms in execution of the Polavaram project. Payment of relief to the project-affected people will ensure the project is safe and justice is done to the affected people."

1 DIES AND 50 HOSPITALISED DUE TO GASTROENTERITIS

DC CORRESPONDENT
KURNOOL FEB. 23

One person died and 50 others have been hospitalised on Tuesday after taking non-vegetarian food at Ternekal village

in Devanakonda mandal of Kurnool district. The villagers complain that the water tank was not cleaned for several months, and the village's general hygiene is very poor. The deceased has been identified as Mala Venkatesh. The villagers allege that drinking water pipes have developed leaks, and the dirt water was mixing with it, due to which diarrhoea

has been widespread in the village. A villager recalled how 12 people had died due to diarrhoea about 12 years ago when more than 200 people fell ill.

"We only pray that such curse should not befall on us again," said B. Sattenna, president of Muthukur Gowdappa society in the village.

District collector G. Veerapandian said that local doctors had been alerted and a medical camp was set up to take care of the villagers. The water tank in the village has been cleaned and the officials have been asked to take up sanitation.

TG BHARATH DENIES LEAVING TELUGU DESAM

DC CORRESPONDENT
KURNOOL FEB. 23

Kurnool TD president T.G. Bharat said there was no truth in the rumours about his switch over to other parties. He said that a concerted effort is being made to concoct and spread lies about his imminent cross-over to the YSRC.

On Tuesday, he said he has been gearing up the cadre to face the Kurnool Municipal Corporation elections. He had interacted with corporators fielded from 43,49,50,51 and 52 wards and said the party was on a strong foundation.

"The ruling YSRC is playing mind games, and we are aware of their games, he said.

KMC NOT TO SUPPLY WATER TODAY

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, FEB. 23

The Kakinada Municipal Corporation will not supply drinking water to Vidut Nagar Reservoir areas from 46 to 50th wards on Wednesday evening as interconnection would be given to the new pumping line with D Pumping line. The Superintendent Engineer of KMC said that the people of the area can contact 08842373131 and 18004350325 numbers, if they want the drinking water urgently, the KMC can supply the water through water tanks.

Meanwhile, the East Godavari district collector D. Muralidhar Reddy reviewed the drinking water position in Kakinada on Tuesday. He said that due

to the cofferdam works to the Polavaram project, the Godavari canals would be closed from April 1 and the people of the Kakinada should take steps for saving the water. He said that power will be cut, if the water can be pulled up with motors. He said that to save the water, the power would be cut from 5 pm to 6.30 pm from February 26. He instructed the officials to create awareness among the people on using motors, water using saving methods, power cut and other issues through volunteers and the officials should notice the water levels at Maharshi Sambamurthy reservoir at Samalkota and Aratlakatta. He said that the Irrigation Department would release 20 to 25 cusecs of water to these reservoirs.

LUCKY MASCOT

Every year the bird appears during Brahmotsavams

Miracle eagle mesmerises devotees

DC CORRESPONDENT
KURNOOL FEB. 23

It is incredible but true that an eagle has been hovering around the Hari Hara Kshetra on the day when Brahmotsavams began at Sri Venkateswara Swamy Temple at Sankalbagh in Kurnool every year for the past 20 years.

This year it was no different, and it made its presence at the appointed day much to the delight and merriment of Bramhana Archakas and the temple managing committee. This temple was located



An eagle hovers around Hari Hara Kshetra on Tuesday.

at Sankalbagh on the bank of the river Tungabhadra. The tem-

ple has come up with the land donated by industrialist and MP T.G.

Venkatesh, who had also seen the temple's completion.

● The temple has come up with the land donated by industrialist and MP T.G. Venkatesh

He said that it was a miracle that eagle has been coming to the temple once a year when the Brahmotsavams begin and end. He said Kurnool citizens have been visiting the temple for its Shthala vishistata and been benefitted from the diving blessings.

The Puranas refer to the eagle as Lord Vishnu's vehicle and it was the chief servant of the Lord.

SHORT TAKES

U'KHAND: 136 MISSING PEOPLE 'PRESUMED DEAD'

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

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

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

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

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

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

SIX KILLED WHILE DISPOSING GELATIN STICKS IN K'TAKA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

RAJIB CHOWDHURI | DC KOLKATA, FEB. 23

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ICMR: Strains not linked to surge in Covid cases

Punjab orders new restrictions on indoor, outdoor gatherings

DC CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 23

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

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

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

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

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

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

The E484Q strain was earlier detected in four sequences in Maharashtra as early as March and July 2020.

The N440K mutation has been reported on 13 different occasions between May and September 2020 in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Assam.

"The current upsurge in Maharashtra cannot be attributed to the currently discussed point mutations," Dr Bhargava said.

The spike in Coronavirus numbers in some states comes as 240 new strains of the virus have emerged across the country. Health ministry sources said that between 800 and 900 samples — from Maharashtra and Kerala — had been sent for genome sequencing in the past month. Samples for genome sequencing — to understand the complete genetics of the virus — have also been sought from Punjab and Bengaluru, where, in the past few days alone, two apartment complexes have been declared

Kerala CM writes to PM over virus curbs

GILVESTER ASSARY | DC THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, FEB. 23

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

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

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

Meanwhile, the workers of CPM, CPI, Congress and Muslim League led organisations took out separate marches to the Karnataka border demanding the lifting of restrictions on interstate

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

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

Union home minister Amit Shah held a meeting and

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

travel. The workers took out processions towards the Talapady interstate border and blocked vehicles coming from Karnataka. They demanded that the restrictions which warrant mandatory Covid negative test reports for entering Karnataka should be lifted completely.

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

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

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

directed multiple central agencies to monitor the situation on a daily basis in states where Covid-19 cases have started increasing again. India on Monday had 10,584 fresh cases and 78 deaths.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Narendra Modi

GUJ CIVIC POLLS: MODI TERMS RESULTS 'SPECIAL'

New Delhi, Feb. 23: With the BJP set to retain power in six Gujarat municipal corporations, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday termed the results "very special" and said that for a party serving a state for over two decades to record such a phenomenal win is noteworthy.

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

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

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

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

India nods for Pak PM flight plan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maha minister denies links to woman's death

BHAGWAN PARAB | DC MUMBAI, FEB. 23

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

Rathod visited Pohradevi temple in Maharashtra's Washim district, where he sought blessings and took part in rituals. The temple is revered by the Banjara community, to which he belongs.

The Shiv Sena leader was conspicuous by his absence in public eye after his name was connected to the death of Pooja Chavan (22). On February 8, the deceased, hailing from Beed district, allegedly

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praveen Darekar, Leader of Opposition in the Maharashtra Vidhan Parishad, said, "The way Rathod organised a huge gathering at the temple in Washim is condemnable. We have asked a district administration to take strict action against him for violating the norms."

State BJP chief Chandrakant Patil said that the state government has been shying away from taking action against the minister despite many evidences of him connecting to the death of a deceased woman coming out in open. The culprit should be punished, he added.

DEFENCE | PROPOSALS

Prime Minister had formally handed over the Arjun Mk-1A to Army**DAC clears 118 main battle tanks for ₹ 8,379 cr**

PAWAN BALI | DC NEW DELHI, FEB. 23

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

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

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

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

● **THE ARJUN Mk-1A tanks** would be joining the fleet of the first batch of 124 Arjun tanks which have already been inducted into the Army and are deployed in the western desert along the Pakistan front.

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

The tank has been fully designed and developed by the DRDO in close coordination with the Indian Army.

Last week Prime Minister Narendra Modi had formally

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

The Indian Army will now issue Request for Proposal (RFP) to DRDO and after which a contract will be signed.

The Arjun Mk-1A tanks would be joining the fleet of the first batch of 124 Arjun tanks which have already been

inducted into the Army and are deployed in the western desert along the Pakistan front.

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

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

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

SHORT TAKES

U.S. CURBS ON 2 MORE MYANMAR JUNTA LEADERS

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

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

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

ZUMA GRAFT TRIAL SET TO BEGIN IN MAY

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

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

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

NEPAL: HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES REINSTATED

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

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

PUTIN HOSTS BELARUSIAN PREZ FOR TALKS

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

AFGHAN PEACE TALKS RESUME IN QATAR

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

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

FB to restore news services in Oz

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

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

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

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

local news organisations.

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

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

ions of dollars with local media companies, including the two largest: Rupert Murdoch's News Corp and Nine Entertainment. Commentators described the eleventh-hour amendments — which came as parliament looks set to pass the law this week — as "a reasonable compromise". "Everybody can walk away saying, well we

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

but politically connected traditional media.

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

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

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

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

— PTI



Javad Zarif

IRAN IMPOSES CURBS ON UN N-INSPECTIONS

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

"The law has gone into effect from this morning," said Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, reiterating that Iran would no longer share surveillance footage of its nuclear facilities with the UN agency. "We never gave them live video, but (recordings) were given daily and weekly," Zarif said of the IAEA's access to information recorded by camera monitors. "The tape recording of our (nuclear) programme will be kept in Iran."

— AP

DRUG KINGPIN EL CHAPO'S WIFE ARRESTED

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

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

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

— AP

Volcano erupts in Italy



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

Sex assault: Jail for Queen's kin

London, Feb. 23: A relative of Queen Elizabeth II was on Tuesday sentenced to a 10-month prison term for sexually assaulting a woman at his ancestral home in Angus, Scotland. Earl of Strathmore Simon Bowes-Lyon, who is the son of a cousin of the 94-year-old British monarch, was found to have forced his way into the sleeping woman's room during an event he was hosting at Glamis Castle. The 34-year-old was sentenced at Dundee Sheriff Court after he had pleaded guilty.

According to the BBC, Sheriff Alastair Carmichael told Bowes-Lyon in court that he had repeatedly ignored his victim's pleas during the attack. "Even now — one year on — she still, occasionally, has nightmares and feels panicked because of being sexually assaulted by you. This has also had an impact on her emotional

wellbeing," said Sheriff Carmichael. Last month, Bowes-Lyon apologised for his actions after entering his guilty plea, saying he felt "greatly ashamed" for causing "such distress to a guest in my home".

He said he had "drunk to excess" on the night of the assault, although he noted that this was "no excuse" for what transpired. "I did not think I was capable of behaving the way I did but have had to face up to it and take responsibility," he said outside the court.

"Over the last year this has involved seeking and receiving professional help as well as agreeing to plead guilty as quickly as possible. My apologies go, above all, to the woman concerned but I would also like to apologise to family, friends and colleagues for the distress I have caused them," he said.

— PTI

Bomb plots: Nine women arrested

Manila, Feb. 23: Philippine forces have arrested nine women who were related to Abu Sayyaf commanders and militants in the south and could have been "potential suicide bombers," the military said Tuesday.

The women were captured Friday in raids on houses in three towns in the predominantly Muslim province of Sulu, said Lt. Gen. Corleto Vinluan, Jr., who heads the military's Western Mindanao Command. The southern province is the stronghold of Abu Sayyaf, which is known for ransom kidnappings, beheadings and bombings. Troops also seized bomb parts, including batteries, detonating cords, suspected explosive powder and oil, an iron pipe and nails, along with

a grenade, cellphones, backpacks and a sketch of a suspected targeted bombing area.

"We are always ready to welcome those who wish to return to the folds of the law but if you will refuse to do so, we will surely hunt you down and prevent you from inflicting havoc in the communities," said Maj. Gen. William Gonzales, who heads government forces in Sulu. "May this serve as a clear message to the supporters and remaining members of the Abu Sayyaf," Gonzales said.

"The suspects would face criminal charges for illegal possession of explosives, military officials said, adding that intelligence and surveillance helped troops track down the suspects. — AP

Biden: 5L deaths heartbreaking

Washington, Feb. 23: The United States on Monday crossed a grim "heartbreaking milestone" in its fight against Covid-19 as the death toll due to the disease crossed 500,000, a staggering figure that is more than the combined American casualties during World War I, World War II and the Vietnam War. "As a nation, we can't accept such a cruel fate. We've been fighting this pandemic for so long. We have to resist becoming numb to the sorrow. We have to resist viewing each life as a statistic or a blurb on the news," President Joe Biden said on Monday as he led the nation in mourning the dead. "Today we mark a truly grim, heartbreaking milestone — 500,071 dead," Biden said at a can-

dle-lighting ceremony at the White House to mark the grim milestone.

More than 28.1 million Americans have also been infected — another global record. He also participated in a moment of silence, standing by 500 lighted candles outside the White House, joined by first lady Jill Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and second gentleman Doug Emhoff.

Biden, a Democrat, said efforts should be made to end the politics and misinformation that has divided families, communities in the country. Noting that the pandemic has cost too many lives already, he said it is not the Democrats and the Republicans who are dying from the virus — it's the fellow Americans. — PTI

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

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

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

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

— AP

China relation is one of strong competition: WH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— PTI

3-MINUTE | TRAILER Rover searching for signs of ancient microscopic life

Nasa releases video of Mars landing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— AP

DECCAN Chronicle

24 FEBRUARY 2021

Puducherry: Democracy on backfoot, hold polls on time

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

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

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

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

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

Judiciary’s late intervention

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

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

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

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

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Subhani



Afghan challenges for India & Taliban factor



Anand K. Sahay

Far & Near

In the Afghanistan context, the present juncture can be characterised as the twilight hour embedding the deepest uncertainty. India cannot but be greatly concerned as it has indicated interest in being invested over the long term. It has unmistakable strategic interests in a geopolitical (and geo-economic) area that marks the junction of South Asia, West Asia and Central Asia.

India’s interest has lately been underlined in spite of the unsettling political and military situation in Afghanistan, which may well permit the return of the Taliban to the seat of power in Kabul. Indeed, India’s commitment to the people of Afghanistan was restated when earlier this month it signed the \$300 million Shahoot dam project that will provide clean drinking water to the once great city of Kabul, which has fallen on hard times in recent decades.

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

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

And yet, it must remain engaged with Afghanistan. Whether the Taliban’s recapture of Kabul comes to pass or not, staying engaged with Afghanistan is India’s foremost challenge in the region. New tools need to be devised. A new diplomacy with the friendly countries of the region, in particular Iran and Russia, which enjoy contiguity with Afghanistan (Russia via Tajikistan, where Moscow’s influence is paramount), must be envisioned. Indeed, the process of better gauging the Taliban, and forging the terms on which a relationship with this group can be reached, is also a part of the challenge for India.

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

The Taliban have, however, scuttled meaningful negotiations. They have instead unleashed violence on an unheard-of scale, killing around 50 people daily over the past year, and engaging in targeted assassinations. The prognosis is dire. If the American forces pull out wholesale as planned, it is widely thought that civil war will break out. Armed factions are likely to emerge to resist the Taliban as the latter attempt to take control in Kabul with the help of Pakistan (and possibly China), while some

groups may strike deals with the Taliban.

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

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

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

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

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

uttering diplomatic pieties and doing little else.

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

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

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

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

LETTERS

OIL FROM IRAN

Evidently, the war was one-sided even as the senior-most politician in the country with 40 plus years of industry experience had faltered for the umpteenth time in assessing the mood of the rural electorate. Telugu Desam chief and former chief minister N. Chandrababu Naidu has apparently miscalculated the situation thinking that people in general are not happy because of the economic conditions and wanted the gram panchayat polls to be held. But the people voted diligently to teach a bitter lesson once again to the TD and its leadership.

Govardhana Myneedu
Vijayawada

RISE IN FUEL PRICES

There seems to be no respite in the near future from ever-growing fuel prices in India. It’s ironic that a litre of petrol costs ₹100 in India when the barrel of crude oil in international market is around \$60 now, whereas it was ₹60 only when the crude oil barrel was hovering at \$100 in 2012. The taxes levied on fuel are more than the actual price. Instead of passing the buck to oil companies for the entire woes and blaming the previous regimes for the present need of imports, the government should cut the taxes.

Dr D.V.G. Sankararao
Vizianagaram

50 YEARS AGO IN

DECCAN Chronicle

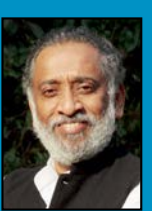
Separation will be suicidal for Telangana: CM

HYDERABAD, February. 23

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

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

Dilip Cherian
Dilli Ka Babu



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

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

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

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

21st-century norms”.

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

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

The agency, a part of the revenue department of the Union finance ministry, is responsible for enforcing economic laws and fighting economic crime. But with a wider jurisdiction now with new responsibilities under the FEMA, PMLA and FEO acts, it will need to expand its footprint.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

quick BITES

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

* As of 8:30 PM IST

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

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

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



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

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

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

Bajaj launches new Pulsar 180 priced at ₹1.08 L

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



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

DEBJIT CHAKRABORTY & ARCHANA CHAUDHARY
FEB. 23

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

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

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

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

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

SLICING AND DICING VALUE

- ▶ RIL to house only upstream oil and gas E&P biz, including KG-D6 block, financial services, group treasury and legacy textile businesses
- ▶ Even though the O2C assets will move into a new arm, its debt will continue with RIL
- ▶ O2C unit houses Singapore and UK-based oil trading subsidiaries and Reliance Industries Uruguay Petroquimica SA.
- ▶ It also houses Reliance Ethane Pipeline Ltd that operates a pipeline between Dahej and Nagothane as well as a 74.9% stake RIL holds in the JV with Sibur

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

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

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

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

RIL holds 85.1 per cent of Reliance Retail and 67.3 per

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

RIL owns and operates twin oil refineries at Jamnagar in Gujarat, with a combined capacity of 68.2 million tonnes per annum.

It is also the country's largest petrochemical manufacturer with units at Jamnagar, Dahej, Hazira, Nagothane, Vadodara, Patalganga, Silvassa, Barabanki, and Hoshiarpur.

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

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

—Bloomberg/PTI

INDIA INC MAY OFFER 7.7% SALARY HIKE

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, FEB. 23

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

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

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

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

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

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

China returns as top trade partner amid border standoff

KARTHIKEYAN SUNDARAM & ARCHANA CHAUDHAR
FEB. 23

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

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

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

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



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

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

"Still a very long way to go" is how Amitendu Palit, an economist specialising in international trade and investment at the National University of Singapore, described New Delhi's efforts to wean itself away from Beijing. "The PLI schemes will take at least four-five years to create fresh capacities in specific sectors. Till then reliance on China would continue."

—Bloomberg

Broking income set to hit ₹27,500 cr

RAVI NANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, FEB. 23

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

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

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

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

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

Large established enti-

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

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

Airtel partners with Qualcomm to drive 5G services

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

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

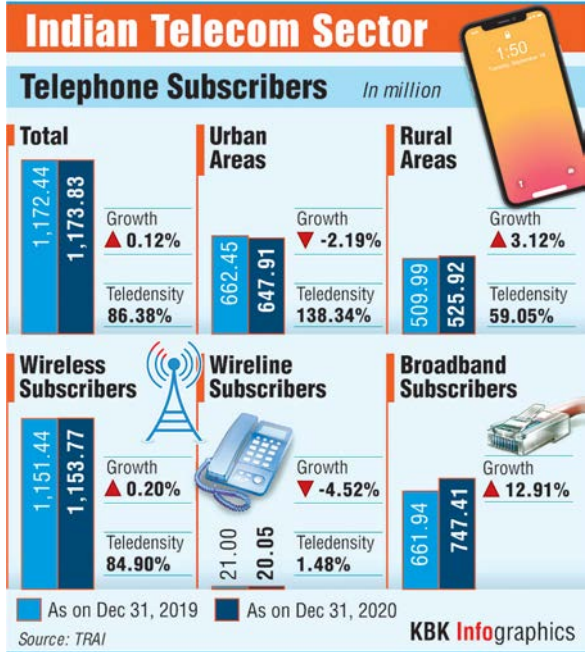
exchanges that it will use Qualcomm's Radio Access Network platforms, which runs services on the cloud, to roll out 5G networks in the country.

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

first society," Airtel said.

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

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



PIAGGIO ENTERS CARGO ELECTRIC 3-WHEELER SPACE

MICHAEL GONSALVES
PUNE, FEB. 23

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

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

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

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

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

—Bloomberg

SHORT TAKES

Bedi undergoes bypass surgery

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

Deepak in last 8 of Strandja meet

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

Shooters look to shine in Cairo WC

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

Jazz hammer Hornets in NBA

Los Angeles: Donovan Mitchell had 23 points and eight assists as the NBA-leading Utah Jazz gained a franchise-record 28 three-pointers in a 132-110 rout of the Charlotte Hornets on Monday. Joe Ingles and Georges Niang scored 21 points apiece as the Jazz got a superb offensive performance from their bench to win for the 21st time in their last 23 games and improve to 25-6 overall. Jordan Clarkson (five threes), Mike Conley (four threes), Mitchell (three threes) and Royce O'Neale (two threes) contributed to the Jazz's domination from beyond the arc. Conley also had 15 points. Gordon Hayward scored 21 points but had to leave the game in the fourth quarter with a hand injury as the Hornets' six-game road trip got off to a rocky start. — AFP

Live on TV

CRICKET

India vs England: Third Test, Day 1 from 2:30 pm on Star Sports 1, HD

South Africa T20 Challenge: Titans vs Warriors from 1:30 pm; Lions vs Dolphins from 5:55 pm on Star Sports Select 2

FOOTBALL

Europa League: Tottenham Hotspur vs Wolfsburg from 10:30 pm; Atalanta vs Real Madrid from 1:30 am (Thursday) on Sony Ten 2; Monchengladbach vs Manchester City from 1:30 am (Thursday) on Sony Ten 1

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MOTERAW

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joe Root would have opted for a green top at the Headingley or the Old Trafford.

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

Will the extra lacquer on the 'SG Test Pink' make it difficult for the Ashwin-Axar combo which wreaked havoc on the Chepauk snake pit? And with a 2:30 pm start, how much will the dew have a bearing during the final session? The ball would be difficult to grip at that point for slow bowlers and the pitch, despite grass being shaved off, might ease out with ball skidding off the surface.

His opposite number James Anderson however has no doubts whatsoever that by the time clock ticks 2:30 pm on Wednesday, the track will bear a bald look, similar to Chepauk.

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

Spinners, pacers both in game: Virat

Ahmedabad, Feb. 23: A rank turner is being anticipated at Motera but India captain Virat Kohli expects pacers to have as big a role as spinners in the day-night third Test against England, a side riddled with "many weaknesses" according to him.

Both teams have won a game each in the four-match series and ahead of third Test here starting Wednesday, the talk has been incessantly focussed on the nature of the virgin track at the refurbished stadium.

Asked if the ball is unlikely to swing much in the third Test, Kohli said he expects the pacers to be in the game till the ball is "nice and shiny".

"I don't think that is an accurate assessment (that bowl will not swing). The pink ball does tend to



Virat Kohli trains at Motera on Tuesday. — BCCI

swing a lot more than the red ball. We experienced that when we played for the first time in 2019 (against Bangladesh)," Kohli said.

Kohli also rejected the assessment that England would have an edge if the pitch favours pacers.

"...Not really bothered about what the strengths and weaknesses of the English team are. We

have beaten them in their home as well, where the ball does way more and hold them out every time so we're not really bothered with that. It's just about playing well as a team," he said.

"And yeah, there are many, many weaknesses in the opposition side as well, if you are keen to exploit them. If it's a seamer friendly track for

LEACH READY FOR NEW ROLE IN THIRD TEST

Ahmedabad, Feb. 23: England's lead spinner Jack Leach says he is ready for a new role as the day/night pink ball Test against India looks set to bring the seamers back into the forefront after the 'tweakers' domination in the first two matches.

Leach is aware that with the pink ball, which tends to move around a lot more than the traditional red cherry, his role could change over the next few days. "We want to be adaptable, we feel like we've got all bases covered in our squad so I think it's going to be a fascinating Test match if the ball is moving around, and if so, it might be a slightly different role for me," Leach said.

"I've definitely thought about that — it'll be a different challenge and I'll be ready."

Both sides are wary of how the pink ball would behave under lights on a newly laid strip. Batting in the twilight phase has been one of the talking points going into the game.

On England's preparations, Leach said, "We had a good session under lights that started in that twilight period and while I don't have much experience of playing in these day-night games, I've heard that during twilight can be a tough time to bat." — PTI

Iyer hits century in Mumbai win

Jaipur, Feb. 23: Mumbai rode on skipper Shreyas Iyer's unbeaten 103 to beat Maharashtra by six wickets in their Elite Group D game of the Vijay Hazare Trophy here on Tuesday.

This was Mumbai's second successive win after they had beaten Delhi in the lung-unpacer.

Opting to bat first, Maharashtra posted 279/9, with centuries from Yash Nahar (119) and Azim Kazi (104) despite experienced Mumbai pacer Dhawal Kulkarni (5/44) running through their top-order.

But it was Iyer, who anchored the Mumbai chase and saw them home in 47.2 overs.

Chasing 280, Mumbai openers Yashasvi Jaiswal (40) and Prithvi Shaw (34) conjured 67 for the first wicket.

Iyer, who walked in at three, was in his elements and hammered nine boundaries and one six, in his uneaten knock and after Jaiswal perished, he found able partners in Suryakumar Yadav (29), Shivam Dube (47) as they played their roles to perfection. Dube took the game away from Maharashtra, with his hitting, smashing five fours and a six, and

took Mumbai on the cusp of a win.

CHANDIGARH CLIMB TO TOP OF TABLE

Chandigarh continued their giant-killing run in their Elite debut, stunning hosts Bengal by five wickets in a Group E clash at the Eden Gardens.

Fresh from their win over neighbours Haryana, Chandigarh who were playing their second domestic season chased down Bengal's 253/9 with seven balls to spare to climb up to the top of the group table, ahead of Saurashtra on net-run rate.

BIHAR PLAYER TESTS POSITIVE FOR COVID-19

The event has seen its first case of Covid-19 with a Bihar player returning positive for the virus, following which all the other cricketers are being tested.

"It is confirmed and the concerned player has been isolated from other players. He is currently in Bangalore as he cannot travel," a senior official of the state's cricket body said.

A Bihar Cricket Association official believed that the game would go on as scheduled. — PTI

BRIEF SCORES

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



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

ENGLAND SKIPPER WARY OF 'TRICKY' NEMESIS ASHWIN

Ahmedabad, Feb. 23: Ravichandran Ashwin has proved to be England's nemesis in the first two Tests and, well aware of his abilities now, visiting skipper Joe Root on Tuesday described the India off-spinner as a "world-class performer" in all conditions.

Ashwin has already taken 17 wickets in the series so far and is expected to add some more to his kitty in the third Test beginning here on Wednesday.

"Yeah, he (Ashwin) is a world-class performer. I think it's been quite tricky for everyone but as you mentioned, in particular, the left-handers is against him... Because you know how skilful he is, how good his record is against left-handers in world cricket," Root said.

The 34-year-old Ashwin has been Virat Kohli's go-to man in this series. Besides his nine wickets in the first Test and eight in second, Ashwin has also scored a century on a Chepuak track.

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

Ronaldo brace floors Crotone

Turin (Italy), Feb. 23: Cristiano Ronaldo scored twice as Juventus got back to winning ways by beating bottom club Crotone 3-0 in Serie A.

Ronaldo could even have had a hat trick in the first half.

Weston Mckennie sealed the result after the break.

Juventus moved up to third on the table, eight points behind Serie A leaders Inter Milan, having played a match less.

It was Crotone's fifth successive defeat and left them eight points from safety.

Ronaldo hadn't scored for Juventus since the start of the month.

He came close on a couple of occasions before breaking the deadlock in the 38th minute when he headed in an Alex Sandro cross.

Ronaldo doubled his tally in first-half stoppage time with another impressive header, this time from an Aaron Ramsey cross.

SEVILLA MOVES TO 3RD PLACE IN LA LIGA

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

for the first time this season.

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

PALACE STUN BRIGHTON

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

Victory takes Palace 10 points clear of the relegation zone, while Brighton remain just four clear of Fulham. — Agencies