

DECCAN Chronicle

THE LARGEST CIRCULATED ENGLISH DAILY IN SOUTH INDIA
KARIMNAGAR | THURSDAY | 1 APRIL 2021



WEATHER

Max: 39.9°C
Min: 23.2°C
RH: 13%
Rainfall: Nil

Forecast: Partly cloudy sky. Max/Min temp. 41/24°C

WORLD | 6

Biden's dog bites WH staffer again

SPORTS | 8

All eyes on Pant ahead of IPL

TABLOID

The 'Smart' way to health

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ASTROGUIDE

Sarvari: Uttarayana
Tithi: Phalguna Bahula Chavithi till 11.02 am
Star: Visakha till 7.22 am; Anuradha till 5.18 am (Friday)
Varjyam: 11.01 am to 12.29 pm
Durmuhurtam: 10.18 am to 11.06 am; 3.10 pm to 3.59 pm
Rahukalam: 1.30 pm to 3 pm
HIJRI CALENDAR
Sha'ban 18, 1441 AH
PRAYERS
Fajar: 5.10 am
Zohar: 12.30 pm
Asar: 4.41 pm
Maghrib: 6.35 pm
Isha: 7.43 pm
SUNSET TODAY 6.29 PM
SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.10 AM
MOONRISE TODAY 10.22 PM
MOONSET TODAY 8.58 AM

COUNTER POINT



Believe me, the elections are not over... still six more phases are there!

SHORT TAKES

Ishrat encounter: Cops discharged

Ahmedabad: A special CBI court on Wednesday discharged police officers G.L. Singhal, Tarun Barot and Anaju Chaudhary in the 2004 Ishrat Jahan alleged fake encounter case. Special CBI judge V.R. Raval allowed the discharge applications. The CBI said the state declined prosecution sanction.

■ Report on Page 5

Small savings interest rate cut

New Delhi: The government slashed the interest rate on small savings like Public Provident Fund (PPF), National Savings Certificate, Sukanya Samridhi Account Scheme, Kisan Vikas Patra and Senior Citizen Savings Scheme from April 1. PPF will now fetch 6.4% instead of 7.1%. The PPF interest rate hit a 46-year-low after the latest cut.

PAN-Aadhaar link deadline June 30

New Delhi: The government extended the deadline for linking PAN with biometric Aadhaar by three months till June 30. The I-T department said it has received representations from taxpayers that the last date for intimating the Aadhaar number may further be extended in the wake of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

SKY | OPERA

Viewers amused as lunar illusion makes moon 'big'

Moon 'closes in' over earth

T.S.S. SIDHARTH | DC
HYDERABAD, MARCH 31

Tuesday night held a special place for astronomy enthusiasts, as the moon shined brighter than usual and appeared to be closer to the Earth than it usually was. The sight of the moon was such that people began flooding their social media accounts with connected pictures.

While the people were in awe of the moon, amateur astronomers chanced upon the opportunity to have a look at the earth's natural



The moon over Hyderabad on Wednesday.

satellite.

"The moon had reached perigee, which is the nearest point to the earth in its orbit. This means that the

moon will appear slightly larger and brighter in the sky. It was so close that one could use a pair of binoculars or normal telescope to view the lunar surface," said Raghunandan, of the Planetary Society of India.

Saying that the size or distance between the earth and moon had not changed at all, Dr B.G. Sidharth of the Birla Science Centre told *Deccan Chronicle*: "What was witnessed is called the moon-illusion. Like, how the sun appears to be larger at the horizon, the moon appeared to be

larger to the viewer. The mind makes it so."

While several names are given to such moons, like the Blood-moon or the supermoon, he said that there was no particular name for this phenomenon.

In a statement, even the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) stated: "Supermoons have become popular over the last few decades. Depending upon how you interpret this definition, in a typical year, there can be two to four full super moons in a row."

Indo-Pak trade ties to resume

DC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

In a huge step towards the normalisation of India-Pakistan bilateral relations, Pakistan on Wednesday approved the resumption of bilateral trade between the two countries and decided to import cotton from India at least till June 30 this year, according to reports from Islamabad.

Also, Pakistan is expected to soon import white sugar from India.

Reports from Islamabad said this was decided by the Pakistan Cabinet's Economic Coordination Committee and the note put up before that body by the commerce ministry there included proposals to import cotton and cotton yarn from India as well as white sugar.

Media reports said this is also likely to bring considerable relief to the Pakistani textile industry that wants cheap raw materials and also to ease the supply of sugar and reduce its prices in Pakistan's domestic market. More importantly, however, the decision will be seen as a demonstration of goodwill by Islamabad towards New Delhi, thereby setting the

tone for rapid improvement of bilateral ties.

It may be recalled that bilateral trade with India was earlier suspended by Pakistan in August 2019, soon after New Delhi had revoked Article 370 pertaining to J&K. The developments come in the wake of a sudden perceptible improvement in Indo-Pak ties in the past five weeks following implementation of the ceasefire on the LoC.

This also comes just a couple of days after Pakistan PM Imran Khan told Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a letter that Pakistan is "convinced that durable peace and stability in South Asia is contingent upon resolving all outstanding issues between India and Pakistan", in particular the Kashmir issue. He further said Pakistan desires "peaceful, cooperative relations with all neighbours, including India". The "creation of an enabling environment is imperative for a constructive and result-oriented dialogue", the Pakistan PM added. The letter dated March 29 was a reply to Mr Modi's letter last week to wish Mr Khan on Pakistan National Day.

■ Page 2: CM seeks

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■ Page 2: Why permit

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CHRISTIANS DISAPPOINTED WITH CURBS

SANJAY SAMUEL PAUL | DC
HYDERABAD, MARCH 31

Christians across the Telangana state are disappointed as they would be spending the Good Friday and Easter services this weekend at their homes, instead of at churches, following strict instructions from the government against congregations at places of worship.

The curbs are in force due to the fresh rise in Covid-19 cases in the state.

For Christians, the Holy Week follows the 40 days of Lent that ends with Maundy Thursday, commemorating the Last Supper of Jesus Christ. This is the day when the devout have the 'Lord's Supper'.

The next day is Good Friday, the day when Jesus Christ was crucified, which is followed by Easter on Sunday marking the day of Christ's resurrection.

■ Page 2: 'Why permit film theatres?'

■ Page 2: Churches confused over G.O.

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TD merges with BJP, Naidu finalises deal

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, MARCH 31

In a development that marks a tectonic power shift in Andhra Pradesh politics, Telugu Desam (TD) chief and former three-term chief minister N. Chandrababu Naidu has decided to merge his floundering party with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), bringing to an end the saga of a regional entity that had seen a meteoric rise in the country.

TD leaders reportedly felt the party has lost its verve and there is little hope of reinvigorating the party within the next three years and wrest power from the YSRC in the next Assembly polls.

Losing people's support and being deserted by leaders and cadre across all districts and regions of the state, Naidu decided it was time to change the game itself.

Taking a leaf out of the book of Tollywood megastar K. Chiranjeevi, who merged his Praja Rajyam with the Congress, after being routed in the 2009 elections, a besieged and heart-broken Naidu sent feelers to the BJP top brass.

It could not be independently confirmed if any of the former TD Rajya Sabha MPs who joined the BJP acted as facilitators. After some deliberations, the saffron party decidedly



made a tough offer, given the misapprehensions about Naidu's flip-flops among many BJP leaders.

As per the agreement, sources close to the development said Naidu will merge his party with the BJP unconditionally and move to Central politics soon. Though the TD's precondition of rewarding Naidu with a key post in the Union Cabinet was turned down, he may soon

be made a Cabinet-rank minister.

The BJP also did not make any promises regarding the political future of Nara Lokesh, who is currently an MLC and the TD party's national general secretary.

Despite the lukewarm response he got from the BJP top brass, Naidu decided it was time to go ahead and surrender the party, founded by the Telugu cine-

ma and cultural idol and father-in-law N.T. Rama Rao, to the saffron behemoth. The merger will take effect within a month.

The BJP hopes to utilise Naidu's strategic acumen and understanding of Telugu politics to strengthen itself in both the states - Andhra Pradesh and neighbouring Telangana.

■ Page 2: YSRC, BJP bonhomie to end

SEC GEARS UP FOR RURAL POLLS IN TELANGANA

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, MARCH 31

Telangana State Election Commission (TSEC) is making arrangements to conduct elections for rural local bodies (RLBs) to fill up casual vacancies that arose after Panchayat Raj (PR) elections in 2019 following the disqualification of some elected candidates.

Several elected representatives in 32 districts were disqualified for failure to submit election expenditure details to Election Commission within 45 days from the date of election and for other reasons like state government removing them from the posts for negligence in discharging duties as stipulated under the new Panchayat Raj Act.

TS Election Commission Commissioner C. Parthasarathi said the total vacancies in PR bodies as on March 31, spread over 32 districts, includes sarpanches (125), ward members (2,288), MPTCs (60) and ZPTCs (1).

He said the election processes had started in 20 gram panchayats of nine districts, and for mandal parishad elections in Burganpachad of Kothagudem district and Jachherla in Mahbubnagar.

variation there is a lack of coordination between the counsels and the Board officials. In many cases, counsels complained that the officials did not provide material on time," he added.

Mohammed Khairul Hasan said there are only three standing counsels in the High Court to handle more than 2,000 cases.

Wakf blamed for prime property loss

ATHER MOIN | DC
HYDERABAD, MARCH 31

Despite tall claims of protecting its properties, the Wakf Board recently lost prime lands (whose ownership it claimed) in legal battles.

The Telangana High Court recently rejected the Board's claims over prime land parcels in Mamidipally, Hitec-City

and Hafeezpet worth crores of rupees. Wakf activists have expressed concern over the Board's inaction in defending the cases.

As per Wakf records, 490 acres in Mamidipally was attached to Ashoorkhana Ali Saad, 90 acres in Hitec-City to Idgah Guttala Begumpet while the Board issued a gazette notification in 2014 over a piece of

50 acres in Hafeezpet.

Though the Wakf Board has spent lakhs of rupees on special counsel's fees in challenging the judgments, it failed to convince the court. Wakf activist Syed Fareesuddin has alleged that the Board failed to avail the services of advocates who are well versed in Wakf Act and other revenue laws. "It is our obser-

IN BRIEF

**33-YR-OLD THIEF
JAILED FOR
10 MONTHS****DC CORRESPONDENT**
HYDERABAD, MARCH 31

A local court within Cyberabad Commissionerate limits sentenced a 33-year-old thief Dasari Naresh to 10 months' imprisonment on Wednesday. Naresh hails from Nalgonda district.

Police said the accused had been involved in many cases under Balanagar, Sanathnagar and Miyapur police stations of Cyberabad Commissionerate and Sultan Bazar of Hyderabad Commissionerate.

**NIA CARRIES OUT
SEARCHES IN
TELANGANA, AP****DC CORRESPONDENT**
HYDERABAD/VIJAYAWADA,
MARCH 31

Officials from the National Investigation Agency (NIA) along with police teams from Telangana state and Andhra Pradesh searched several houses of people associated with Virasam and alleged links with Maoists in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh on Wednesday. The searches were going on till late in the night.

Sources said that the NIA officials were carrying out investigations pertaining to the Bhima Koregaon case.

In Telangana, the houses of V. Raghunath, High Court Advocate and Vice-president of Civil Liberties Committee (CLC) in Dilsukhnagar were raided.

Raids were also conducted at the residence of Dappu Ramesh, a leader of several public associations. NIA officials are alleged to be conducting searches to ascertain their links with the Maoists. Earlier, NIA officials have arrested several people, including Professor Kashim and Nalamasa Krishna, on the same charges.

In East Godavari at Rajamahendravaram, the NIA officials searched the residence of APCLC state president Chitti Babu. In Visakhapatnam, they searched the residence of lawyer K. Padmain Pithapuram Colony and also at the residence of another lawyer K.S. Chalam at China Waltair.

In Proddatur of Anantapur district, they searched the house of Virasam leader Varalakshmi.

In Kurnool, they conducted searches at the residences of Pinakapani and Somasekhar Sarma alias Arun. Pinakapani is the state executive committee member of Virasam while Sarma is the president of Rayalaseema Vidyavanthula Vedula.

"Several such leaders are already arrested and now they are targeting others, we demand immediate release of the arrested individuals as they are deliberately and intentionally imposing cases on them," said Prof. G.Laxman, President of the Civil Liberties Committee.

**CYBER STALKER
ARRESTED FOR
HARASSMENT****DC CORRESPONDENT**
HYDERABAD, MARCH 31

A 25-year-old cyber stalker, who would not let go of a contact he found on a social media app, and went to the extent of threatening the woman's husband to leave his wife, was arrested by Rachakonda Cybercrime police on Wednesday.

The accused, identified as Mohammad Kareem, had contacted a woman on a WhatsApp group and after a few days, sent her a marriage proposal. Upon being told that she had no interest as she was already married, Kareem, according to the police, downloaded the woman's pictures from her Instagram and Facebook accounts. Subsequently, he created fake accounts of the woman on these platforms and began posting her morphed images. During this period, Kareem was in Dubai, the police said.

At one point, he contacted the woman's husband and threatened him if he did not leave his wife. When this did not work, Kareem began posting the morphed pictures of the woman as well as some morphed videos of her which he created, on YouTube.

Following a complaint, the Rachakonda Cybercrime police tracked the man's account and after his return to his home in Siddipet district, arrested him. He has been sent to judicial custody.

**HC quizzes govt
over excessive
school fees****VUJJINI VAMSHIDHARA |
DC**
HYDERABAD, MARCH 31

Telangana High Court on Wednesday sought details from state government on action taken against errant private schools in TS, which violated norms while collecting tuition fees from students during academic year 2020-21.

A Division Bench comprising Chief Justice Hima Kohli and Justice B. Vijaysen Reddy directed the government to submit a report detailing how many complaints it had received against schools that violated the Telangana government's order on collection of fee.

The state government had issued an order at the beginning of academic year restraining all private un-aided schools from collecting any other fees from students, except tuition fee.

The government also restrained schools from increasing the fee for the academic year.

However, several petitions have been filed before the High Court complaining about several private schools violating the government's order.

Petitioners contended schools like St. Andrews at Bowenpally and others had even not allowed students to attend exams on reasons that they had not paid the excess fee demanded by school managements.

When the court intervened, St. Andrews allowed students to attend the exams, but it neither released their results nor allowed them to attend higher classes.

All petitions related to such contempt cases came for hearing on Wednesday.

The High Court closed the contempt case against St. Andrews School though after directing it to declare the results of students.

The court adjourned the case to April 23 for submission of further details.

**HSPA threatens
with contempt****DC CORRESPONDENT**
HYDERABAD, MARCH 31

The Hyderabad Schools Parents Association (HSPA), concerned over the absence of a school fee regulation policy despite repeated demands from the government, has now threatened that they will file a contempt case against the government if a policy is not formulated

for unaided private schools in Telangana.

It said that while the Telangana High Court had last March passed orders in related petitions, the state government has neglected it. In a notice, they demanded that the government apprise them of the issue in the coming weeks, failing which they would decide their next course of action.



Commuters are covering their heads from summer heat in Karimnagar on Wednesday.

**TS in grip of
heat wave****T.S.S. SIDDHARTH | DC**
HYDERABAD, MARCH 31

The warning of a heat wave sweeping much of Telangana from Wednesday came true as several places recorded the highest temperature for the day - its height being an unbearable 43.3 degrees C reported from Yellandu in Bhadradi-Kothagudem district.

Hyderabad city too was not spared though the heat wave warning on Tuesday did not mention Hyderabad district. According to the Telangana state development planning society, which has a slew of automated weather stations across the state, Saroornagar experienced 40.2 degree C on Wednesday, followed by Bandlaguda and Manikonda with 40 degrees each.

The lowest maximum for the day was still a searing 38 degrees in Medak. In the city, it was 39 degrees in Saidabad, according to TSDPS weather data.

Other places in Telangana that experienced 40-plus temperatures for the day were Garimellapadu in Bhadradi-Kothagudem district with 43.2 degrees, Wyra, and Gubbagurthy in Khammam district with 43.1 and 43 degrees respectively.

Speaking to *Deccan Chronicle*, IMD Director K Naga Ratna said: "The temperatures will continue

to be on the rise for the next 24 hours. As we have predicted in the pre-summer bulletin, the temperatures would increase by two to three degrees this season."

The health implications of the rise in temperature are also a matter of serious concern.

"Owing to climatic changes, the earth is going to get hotter. This means people will have to protect themselves from the heat and Sun's rays. It is mostly considered that swimming pools, lakes and other water bodies are ideal places to cool off. But one must avoid the reflection of the Sun's rays in the water's surface. People can use sunscreen lotions that are higher than SPF-30," said Dr Radha Shah, consultant dermatologist, Apollo Hospital, Jubilee Hills. He added that heads should be covered while going out in the Sun.

Those who do not use sunscreen lotions in urban or rural areas must adopt physical methods of shielding themselves, like limiting as much of the skin as possible from direct exposure to the Sun, using scarves, or chunnis.

"Another recommendation is of consuming fresh fruits and vegetables, especially those rich in vitamin-C. While this vitamin is available in the form of chewable tablets, getting it from the vegetables and fruit is more beneficial," she added.

Govt calls meet on Covid crisis**Senior health officials, superintendents of hospitals to attend meet****DC CORRESPONDENT**
HYDERABAD, MARCH 31

Health minister Etala Rajender has on Thursday called an emergency meeting to discuss the increasing number of Covid-19 cases in Telangana. Senior health officials, superintendents of hospitals and nodal officers dealing with Coronavirus will attend the meeting.

There are also concerns

over the increasing number of Covid-19 cases in states neighboring Telangana and what must be done to take precautions within the state.

The minister has asked health officials to increase the number of tests to more than 50,000 every day. At the same time, surveillance in terms of tracing contacts and treating them must be strictly followed, he underlined.

It is learnt senior gov-

ernment doctors have raised concerns about rising cases of Coronavirus among healthcare workers. A senior doctor said, "There are young doctors and surgeons who have contracted Coronavirus. Though their disease is mild, they need to be quarantined for recovery. This is increasing the load of patients on remaining staff, putting them under stress."

Covid-19 situation is

such that Gandhi Hospital is admitting only severe patients. It is providing kits to other patients and asking them to quarantine themselves at home.

A senior Gandhi Hospital doctor disclosed, "Among the cases we see daily, 25 per cent are moderate to severe. They require oxygen and high-end medicines for treatment. We are also noting severe cases where patients are

asymptomatic, but their lungs are full of virus."

Rajender has asked health department to expedite the process of vaccination, so that a large number of people can be vaccinated against the dreaded disease.

The health minister also appealed to people that they cooperate by avoiding unnecessary travel, public gatherings, wearing masks properly and maintaining social distance.

**684 new Covid
cases in state****DC CORRESPONDENT**
HYDERABAD, MARCH 31

Covid-19 cases have crossed the 500-mark in a day with 684 new cases being reported in the last 24 hours. Of them 184 are in Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation limits, 61 in Medchal Malkajgiri and 45 in Ranga Reddy.

Districts are also seeing a surge with Nizamabad registering 48 cases, Nirmal 30, Nalgonda 24 and Karimnagar and Mahabubnagar 23 each.

In the districts, it is increasing because of regular movement of people from different states on business or work purposes.

In Hyderabad, it is being attributed to the tendency of people to move around without wearing masks and ignoring the protocols. It has been noted that across offices, toilets and common corridors are the sources of infection.

A senior government official in the district medical and health department on condition of anonymity said,

● In Hyderabad, it is being attributed to the tendency of people to move around without wearing masks and ignoring the protocols. It has been noted that across offices, toilets and common corridors are the sources of infection.

"Offices have been told to call staff alternatively and maintain distance. Masks must compulsorily be worn and it must not be removed. Many are complaining of suffocation due to heat and removing it but that makes them susceptible to infection."

Three deaths were recorded in the state taking the overall total to 1,697. The total cases in the state are 3,07,889.

On Tuesday, sample testing was done of 56,122 people of which 45.9 per cent are primary contacts and 13.1 per cent are secondary contacts. Government and private hospitals are giving kits for home treatment for mild cases while doctors are available for online consultations.

**COVID-19 VACCINE
WASTAGE AT
2.01% SAYS GOVT****DC CORRESPONDENT**
HYDERABAD, MARCH 31

Around 44, 566 beneficiaries were vaccinated across 935 centres in the city. This included 23, 736 senior citizens and 18,076 in the 45 to 59 years age group. Meanwhile, the second dose also began for the two age groups.

Healthcare workers numbering 1,108 and 1,646 frontline workers were also given the vaccine.

The overall total vaccination undertaken in the state is 12,30,337 while the government maintains that vaccine wastage is 2.01 per cent.

The wastage of vaccines is because those who have registered are not coming to designated centres on time. Vials of vaccine have to be used within four hours. The rising heat is also leading to wastage in districts where the temperatures have touched 40 degrees Celsius.

A senior government official said, "The sudden rise in temperature has affected the vaccination drive this month. A cold storage chain is maintained but once removed it has to be used and that is the challenge as all beneficiaries are not present at the stipulated time."

**4 HELD FOR USING
TS VEHICLES FOR
SMUGGLING****DC CORRESPONDENT**
KURNOOL MARCH 31

The Kurnool Special Enforcement Bureau (SEB) police seized 32.3 kg of silver articles and arrested four persons while smuggling by two different vehicles, including Telangana RTC bus and a private vehicle, near Panchalinala check post in the early hours of Wednesday. The seized ornaments were handed over to the Taluka police station.

**KCR seeks reports on
pending bifurcation issues****From Page 1**

The CM directed officials to prepare reports pertaining to pending bifurcation issues and present TS government arguments effectively before the MHA in the meeting.

In its latest report (2018-19) tabled in

Legislative Assembly on March 26, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) had pointed out that ₹1,51,349 crore under capital heads, ₹28,099 crore under loans and advances, ₹4,474 crore under deposits and advances, ₹238 crore under suspense and miscellaneous, and ₹310 crore under remittances are yet to be apportioned between AP and TS ever after bifurcation of state in

2014. Both states continue to lodge complaints against each other with the Centre, besides knocking doors of High Court and Supreme Court for control over common institutions listed under Schedule IX, and X, mostly located in Hyderabad.

The two states are also engaged in disputes over sharing of Krishna and Godavari river waters, accusing each other of flouting the AP Reorganisation Act and taking up new projects without seeking required approvals from the Centre or other regulatory bodies.

The state government is planning to depute senior officials from industries, irrigation, general admin-

istration and other departments for the meeting.

The CS directed officials concerned to come prepared with relevant documents and files in support of arguments made by the state government in the past.

Some of the major issues that are expected to figure in the meeting include division of assets and liabilities of Schedule IX and X institutions, AP Bhavan in New Delhi, Singareni Collieries Company Limited, AP Heavy Machinery and Equipment Ltd., AP State Finance Corporation, apart from claims and counterclaims on payment of power dues by distribution companies of the two states.

**Churches confused over GO 69
Devotees ask why film
theatres are kept open****DC CORRESPONDENT**
HYDERABAD, MARCH 31

Churches are confused over GO 69 which bars congregations at places of worship. The orders, dated March 27, placed curbs on public celebrations for festivals at places of worship and elsewhere until April 30.

According to a senior Catholic Archdiocese functionary, the government order was confusing. It made a specific mention of Good Friday being barred from public celebrations, but there was no clarity on Maundy Thursday, Easter and regular services till April end.

Methodist Churches under the Hyderabad Regional Conference advised all its churches that they be closed for physical worship till April 30.

Pastor Sumanth Perumalla of Hope Unlimited Church said, "The GO 69 mentioned about barring Good Friday, whereas Easter is a festival of celebrations, which it did not bar." He added: "We will be having our regular services and wait for government to clarify about Good Friday."

From page 1

However, the decision against congregations at places of worship, as per GO issued on March 27, came as Covid-19 cases in the country rose over the past few weeks. The GO said public celebrations of festivals should not be allowed till April 30.

Many Christians are deeply upset over the decision and are questioning the government as to why so when cinema halls are permitted to exhibit movies with full strength audiences, commercial malls are allowed to conduct business as usual, and no restrictions are in place for pubs and bars.

"Why can't they allow the churches have congregations during this holy times? Churches are maintaining all the Covid-19 safety protocols. Good Friday holds more prominence for all

Christians. There has been a Christian leader's representation to the chief secretary of Telangana, seeking a waiver.

According to Church representatives, the government is looking into the matter. Sis Joy Cherian of the United Fellowship Church said: "The congregation is disappointed by the decision taken by the state government. We have been fasting and praying during the 40-day Lent. On Good Friday, special prayers take place. The government should reconsider its decision, as churches have been following all the safety protocols so far."

Kusumalatha, a member of John Wesley church, Goutam Nagar Malkajgiri said, "It's very sad denying as Maundy Thursday and good Friday are important for Christians. The govern-

ment should have allowed churches to function normally at least on these days."

Peter Jadalula, a senior manager at a private firm, said, "Last year's Good Friday and Easter were not celebrated because of the lockdown. Now, all the commercial establishments are allowed to function normally. Why can't the government allow the festival with minimum presence?"

Robert Surya Prakash, general secretary for United Christmas celebration committee, said, "We, along with a few Christian heads, approached the chief secretary, requested him to reconsider the government decision and allow the Good Friday service. We also explained to the CS how churches have been scrupulously following all the Covid-19 precautions ever since the lockdown was eased."



SHORT TAKES

Jeevan consoles farmer's kin

Mancherial: The Congress MLC T. Jeevan Reddy on Wednesday found fault with the Rythu Bandhu scheme and said the scheme was only helping the landlords but not real tillers like tenant farmers and the recent incident of four members of a tenant farmer's family committing suicide due to mounting debts and loss in agriculture was an example.

971 CENTRES TO COLLECT PADDY

DC CORRESPONDENT
WARANGAL, MARCH 31

With the suspense over the procurement of paddy cleared with the announcement of Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao, the officials prepared plans and submitted them to the government.

Officials intend to set up 971 procurement centres across erstwhile Warangal district and procure an estimated 11.45 lakh metric tonnes of paddy from farmers.

Under the current yasangi season, various crops were cultivated to an extent of 7,09,842 acres. Of this, paddy was cultivated in 5,39,980 acres.

Accordingly, the officials estimated that they will have to procure 1,65,100 metric tonnes from Warangal Urban district, two lakh metric tonnes from Warangal Rural district, 1,22,100 metric tonnes from Jayashankar Bhupalpally district, 2,68,500 from Jangaon district, 2.80 lakh metric tonnes from Mahabubabad district and 1,10,800 metric tonnes from Mulugu district.

The officials proposed more centres in view of the coronavirus pandemic. While the civil supplies department is procuring paddy from MEPMA, cooperative societies, DCMS so far, it has been proposed to procure through market committees too from now on.

₹1-CR FIXED AS BASE PRICE FOR CATTLE FAIR AUCTION

DC CORRESPONDENT
KHAMMAM, MARCH 31

The increasing auction amount of Pandita-puram cattle fair in Kamepalli mandal turned out to be a curse to the farmers, who are selling and buying their cattle, sheep and goats in it.

The unhealthy competition to get the cattle fair posed a problem to the farmers during Covid-19 conditions. The farmers are losing a lot due to Covid-19 and the farming is burdensome due to increasing the costs of all inputs. The farmers from Bhadradi, Krishna and Mahabubabad districts apart from Khammam district will come and lift or sell their cattle or goat. The fair will be conducted every Wednesday.

The farmers used to pay ₹200 to ₹300 per each cattle buying or selling in the fair. The contractor, who stood first in the bidding for managing the fair for a year at high price, used to hike the prices as per the contract amount. The sheep rearing persons have to pay ₹100 to ₹200 per each sheep. The contract price of cattle fair in Paloncha in Bhadradi district that witnesses more cattle than Panditapuram will be below ₹1 crore.

Celebration time



B. Raghunandan Rao was elected as president of district bar association in Karimnagar on Wednesday.

— DC

Faith matters



Devotees in large numbers attend Siva, Parvathi Kalyanam at Sri Raja Rajeshwara Swamy Devasthanam in Vemulawada on Wednesday.

— DC

Mass cultural programmes are spreading Covid in TS

Virus is spreading fast as people are not following the guidelines

PILLALAMARRI
SRINIVAS | DC
ADILABAD, MARCH 31

Cultural events held in villages are spreading Covid virus among the participants. Those surveying the scene feel the government must keep a close watch on the movement of the people and functions being held in border villages for which relatives from Maharashtra are attending.

Lockdown is enforced in bordering Maharashtra following the steep hike in Covid positive cases.

The best example is the recent Bajirao Baba's Saptah (cultural event) held in Sangidi village in Bela mandal in Adilabad district for which hundreds of devotees from bordering villages of

Maharashtra attended. Bajirao Baba is popular in the areas bordering Telangana and Maharashtra.

The event was held for seven days last week at Sangidi village in Bela mandal. The community meals programme was held on its last day in which nearly 5,000 devotees participated.

After that event, 13 villagers of Sangidi tested positive for Covid and an elderly woman among them died.

A village elder said the village shandy held once a week has been cancelled following the incident. It was difficult for them to stop the devotees coming from the bordering villages of Maharashtra to attend the cultural event.

● Government officials are urged to convert the gram panchayat buildings, government schools and offices into quarantine centres for the convenience of the poor. This will help save the poor from exploitation by private hospitals.

The villagers of Sangidi said devotees from bordering district Yavathmal and Chandrapur of Maharashtra attended the event in Sangidi.

This incident clearly shows the local revenue and police officials had no control over the mass events taking place in their jurisdiction.

The Covid virus is spreading fast as people

are not following the guidelines issued against its spread.

Even Covid-related deaths are taking place in the ertwhile Adilabad district. There is rise in the number of patients suffering from Covid symptoms and also of such patients coming to the Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS), Adilabad.

More Covid cases are reported in Boath and other mandals that are sharing borders with Maharashtra. Covid cases are also on the rise in Nirmal, Mancherial and Komaram Bheem Asifabad districts.

District officials are urged to open quarantine centres for the benefit of the poor and middle-class

people. Otherwise, the management of the private hospitals may exploit the situation.

Naturally, the people who tested Covid positive have to isolate themselves and self-quarantine for 14 days but many poor families may not have separate rooms for quarantine in their houses.

In such cases, the Covid positive patients are forced to get admitted to private or government hospitals.

Government officials are urged to convert the gram panchayat buildings, government schools and offices into quarantine centres for the convenience of the poor. This will help save the poor from exploitation by private hospitals.

Operations on hold as MGM staff stages stir

DC CORRESPONDENT
WARANGAL, MARCH 31

The third-party contract, sanitation, security, patient care employees who have been on a strike for six days at the MGM Hospital said they would continue their strike indefinitely until the government agreed to their just demands.

As a result, several services inside the hospital have been hit. Apart from the sanitation situation turning worse, the operations are being put off causing severe inconvenience to the patients.

Sources said at least 100 operations were called off in the hospital since Friday.

"The employee strike is forcing us to call off scheduled operations and



Contract workers protesting at the MGM hospital on Wednesday.

— DC

we are also unable to conduct any more. The state government must take cognizance of the issue and address it immediately to ensure the services are resumed," the source said. Meanwhile, the striking employees want

the KCR government to keep its promise to regularise all contract workers. A sanitation worker S. Maisamma said even though they risked their lives to provide services at the hospital going through situations of

social boycott, the state government does not seem to be considerate towards them.

"We have been working in the sanitation department of the MGM hospital for the past 20 years with hopes of our jobs

getting regularised as promised by Chief Minister K Chandrasekhar Rao. Even after these many years of achieving a separate Telangana state, we continue to work with paltry wages. We cannot continue any longer with wages which range from ₹500 to ₹7,000," she said.

Warangal DCC president Naini Rajender Reddy took part in the stir and extended support to the protesting workers.

He said CM KCR who time and again reiterated that there would be no contract jobs in the State failed to keep his word.

He said the employees' demands are justifiable and within the frame of labour acts and urged the government to fulfil their demands.

DCCB | SWINDLE ₹59 lakh on gifts very less feel directors

Scam exposes bickerings in TRS

A. RAVINDRA SESHU |
DC
KHAMMAM, MARCH 31

The criminal case against 20 directors and former DCCB chairman exposed the internal squabbles in the TRS party. Almost all the former and present directors and former chairman of DCCB facing the case were in TRS.

Nearly 10 directors, whose names in the list of FIR filed by DCCB led by District Cooperative Marketing Societies (DCMS) chairman Rayala Seshagiri Rao, addressed a press meet

● Nearly 10 directors, whose names in the list of FIR filed by DCCB led by District Cooperative Marketing Societies (DCMS) chairman Rayala Seshagiri Rao, addressed a press meet

● FIR on directors will raise various issues with in TRS

DCCB, who did not explain the violation of guidelines while transferring the farmers membership amounts to a private hospital, should be held responsible in it." He said that finding fault only with the governing body of DCCB in it is not

fair in the misuse of funds.

Interestingly, many of the directors, who are facing the DCCB funds misusing case, felt that the FIR on them will raise various new issues within TRS. A director, who is facing a case, said, "The case will lead to a shambles in TRS". He said that the spending of DCCB funds worth ₹59 lakh and ₹55 lakh for the purpose of gifts and knowledge tours is very less in the ₹2,200 crore turnover of the bank in a year. He said that the ₹6.13 crore that was given to the private hospital is not the amount of DCCB and it is donated by the farmers to the hos-

pital for their welfare. It is against the rules and DCCB did not lose a single rupee in it.

"Placing DCCB in a bad position will hit the image of the bank and depositors may withdraw their amounts from it," he said.

The former and present directors Tulluri Brahmaiah, Janagam Koteswara Rao, Mande Veeraha-numantha Rao, Bojedla Appa Rao, Baddulal, Poladas Krishna Murthy, G. Srinivasa Rao, K. Ranga Raju and B. Venkataramanaiah said that violation of cooperative rules is not correct and the CEOs should be held responsibility for it.

GWMC GETS DISINFECTANT MACHINE

DC CORRESPONDENT
WARANGAL, MARCH 31

Greater Warangal Municipal Corporation (GWMC) Commissioner Pamela Satpathy informed that a disinfectant machine has been set up at their head office in Warangal for the convenience of the people.

As part of its corporate social responsibility (CSR), Indra Water Purification Company has donated the Vajra Kavach (Centre for Augmenting War with Covid-19 Health Crisis) machine to the GWMC.

Speaking on the occasion, Pamela said, the machine has been procured in collaboration with ASCII and the Department of Science and Technology as part of the 'Make in India' programme, to work more cost-effectively and efficiently.

"People who visit the office for various purposes should take advantage of this opportunity. By placing the usual masks, N-95 masks, jackets, wallets, gadgets, medical equipment, face shields, goggles, lab coats etc. in the machine for 3 minutes, the UV rays kill bacteria and viruses," Pamela said.

"The ozone (O3) gas kills the SARS virus as well as other pathogenic viruses. This gas destroys the RNA in the virus and prevents it from spreading," she added.

IIT Bombay-based BioSciences & Bio Engineering departments have tested and approved the machine's performance.

The Commissioner said that the GWMC would hire staff for its maintenance and see to it that the process is done efficiently.

Sanitation staff who wear visible jackets, PPE kits and gloves should keep their gloves constantly sterilised.

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DECCAN Chronicle

1 APRIL 2021

Not all gloom, but clearly complacency will be fatal

A recent surge in coronavirus cases across India has triggered concerns over the growth trajectory of the economy. A free hand given by the Union home ministry to state governments to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic and threats to impose lockdown by states like Maharashtra have given rise to concerns about the fragile economic recovery.

Nevertheless, Reserve Bank of India governor Shaktikanta Das believes that the economy will move only upwards from now on. Though the benchmark market indices Sensex and the Nifty were in jitters over the rising viral infections, Mr Das does not see a need for a revision in the central bank's growth estimate, which was pegged at 10.5 per cent for the financial year 2021-22.

The downside of the people's confidence in the government's ability to deal with the pandemic would be complacency, as could be seen across India

The RBI's assessment of the economy appears to be based on three factors — first, an unlikely prospect of a complete lockdown as India had witnessed between April and May 2020; second, Covid is not as unknown to Indians as it was in 2020; third, an improved ability of the Indian healthcare system to handle the Covid-19 disease, though the vaccination programme is going on at a rather slow pace.

Compared to 2020, the Indian industry, too, has adapted itself to working in a new normal

created by the Covid-19 pandemic. People are not as unsure about their future as they were in April 2020, which will not force them to sit tight on their spending. As a result, there won't be any drastic fall in demand and, therefore, the production.

Some economists, however, expressed concerns about the Maharashtra government's threat to impose localised lockdown in the state, which has been contributing around half of the total cases in the country. The western state contributes 14.5 per cent of the Indian GDP and is one of the powerhouses of the country in manufacturing. If the lockdown was imposed in the state, they argue that it would disrupt the supply chain and cause great harm to the economic recovery. After witnessing the economic and social consequences of the 2020 lockdown, no government would ever repeat it again.

The downside of the people's confidence in the government's ability to deal with the pandemic would be complacency, as could be seen across India. People stopped following Covid-appropriate behaviour because of a lower number of cases in January. Politicians should also be blamed for complacency as many of them began to write off Covid by moving around without masks, which inspired people to dodge social distance norms.

After the second wave of cases, governments and people have woken up to reality and have begun to take quick steps to slow down the spread of infection. The reports of healthcare infrastructure being overwhelmed in bigger cities like Delhi and Mumbai would trigger a course-correction in people's behaviour. As a result, an SBI research report claims that the second wave could peak in mid-April and ebb in May. It means the second wave would last for 100 days, which is not a period long enough to push the Indian economic growth into negative territory once again.

Wrong signal in Valley

Former J&K chief minister and PDP leader Mehbooba Mufti was recently informed that her application for passport extension has been rejected. The state CID has given an "adverse" report. If this should cause surprise, no less surprising is the ground for rejection given by the CID. It appears issuing a passport to the former CM — who is a key mainstream politician of Kashmir — will be detrimental to national security.

This is Kafkaesque. Until not long ago, Ms Mufti's party ran a coalition government in J&K with the BJP, the party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Wholly unlike one another in ideology, these parties had come together on account of the unusual Assembly election result of 2014. Many thought that if a Valley-based party got together with a national entity which had a pronounced Hindu community tilt and was well-grounded in the Hindu-majority Jammu region, many of the (then) state's woes will be over.

These were lofty reasons intended to serve the national interest in a troubled part of the country. But BJP and PDP have since split. Ms Mufti was thrown into prison along with hundreds of other Kashmir politicians, not excluding all the leading lights. And Ms Mufti has suddenly become a threat to national security, no less.

Even if the Government of India, to which the state CID reports since J&K is no longer a state but a UT, is being petty since Ms Mufti is an ally-turned political adversary of the ruling party BJP, what about the former CM's old mother, Gulshan Nazir, widow of the PDP founder Mufti Mohammed Sayeed who had brought his party and BJP together? It appears the old lady, too, has been denied a passport for the same reason as her politician-daughter.

This is beyond petty and smells of vendetta. Perhaps all senior mainline Kashmir politicians, not just the separatists, will share the Mufti family's fate if they applied for a passport. Naturally this makes India laughing stock in the world and in the region. It also makes the ordinary people of Kashmir wonder about the Centre's intention about them. For the Modi government, an anxious and dissatisfied populace in the border regions when fresh talks with Pakistan are envisaged cannot be a good sign.

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Subhani



Being politically correct in times of Covid & polls



Devi Kar

Through most of 2020, as the fear of Covid-19 pandemic engulfed the whole world, the stormy American presidential elections took up much of our attention. No matter where you are, you simply can't get away from the tumult of politics. Perhaps I feel this all the more because West Bengal, where I live, is in the midst of the eight-phase Assembly elections while we teachers are struggling to run our schools with full Covid-19 protocols in place. The spectre of the board exams is looming before us; they have to be administered after the election results are out.

Meanwhile, politics began interfering with the distribution of vaccines, and sadly with children's books as well.

At the beginning of this month, it was announced that six of Dr Seuss' titles would be recalled because of the "racist tropes" that people had been talking about. It is well known that banned or unattainable objects are always the most attractive. Therefore, I promptly ordered a copy of the delightful Dr Seuss book *And to Think I Saw It on Mulberry Street* before it became unavailable. Maybe it is a good thing that the United States is finally becoming sensitive to the feelings of non-whites. But removing stereotypical line drawings from books does not really get to the heart of racism. I don't know about others, but if an Indian woman was depicted as a brown sariclad figure eating out of a thali with her fingers, I would not mind at all. It is only if we believe that white is the only acceptable complexion, or that eating with one's hands is unacceptable, that we would feel upset by such illustrations. Come to think of it, there are no "racist tropes" around white people — and it is

not difficult to fathom the reason. Dr Seuss himself explained how he went about changing his original yellow-skinned, pig-tailed "Chinaman" whom he had drawn wearing a conical hat and eating out of a bowl with sticks. He changed "a Chinaman" to "a Chinese man", but after deleting his conical hat and pig-tail and removing the yellow from his skin, Dr Seuss thought that his Chinese man looked more like an Irishman!

Politics dominates society so powerfully that everywhere and at all times we are required to be "politically correct". This has reached such ridiculous lengths that very often the replaced "correct" expression can't be comprehended. These "correct" terms have been especially coined to protect people from feeling hurt. In this context, it has to be mentioned that people seem to have very thin skins these days and get hurt far too easily. So, we have to look out for racist innuendos, references to skin colour, remarks on religion which may be deemed hurtful or even sacrilegious by some group or the other. We must remember not to call short people "short" though it is fine to call tall people "tall". You had better not refer to a person who is hard of hearing "deaf" or for that matter a visually impaired person "blind". You will be called all kinds of names if you use an "incorrect" term — racist, sexist,

Maybe it is a good thing that the US is becoming sensitive to the feelings of non-whites. But removing stereotypical line drawings from books does not really get to the heart of racism.

An ad for 'reliable and hardworking applicants' was seen as offensive! The current euphemism for 'old people' is 'senior citizens', but I suspect that this too will in time offend people of an advanced age.

insensitive to alternative sexual orientation (in some places the term "homosexual" is taboo, you must say "same gender loving"), intolerant of other religions, and so on. A few decades ago, Americans became so self-conscious about being Christian-centric that to be perceived as inclusive, they began to call the Christmas season "the holiday season" and wishing each other "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas". But surely, calling a Christmas tree a "holiday tree" seems a bit too much.

This sort of political correctness without bringing about a radical change in attitudes is quite meaningless. It is true that certain words genuinely acquire connotations which are insulting to groups. For instance, the word "Negro" — although if it merely referred to the Negroid "type", it would be taken as just a scientific fact. Today the term cannot be dissociated with the history of slavery. Unfortunately, "black" has also taken on a similar meaning. But then if you truly believe that "black is beautiful", you wouldn't mind being described as a black-skinned or dark-skinned person. The trouble is that ethnicity is a loaded concept, and simple words have become complex. In India, where colour matters a great deal, people use the word "maila", or dirty, to describe someone's dark complexion.

I hope it was a joke, but I have read that an advertisement for "reliable and hardworking applicants" was rejected as it could offend unreliable and lazy people. The current euphemism for "old people" is "senior citizens", but I suspect that this too will in time offend people of an advanced age.

Recently, I named a virtual classroom "Brainstorming Room", and soon after that I read that the term "brainstorming" could threaten epileptic people. The suggested alternative term was "Thought Showers". It is nerve-racking to even speak these days.

Going back to children's books, it is not only the allegations of racism or "hurtful" religious references that have generated trouble but also certain references to political ideology. "I know up on top you are seeing great sights, but down here on the bottom we too should have rights" — in Dr Seuss' *Cat in the Hat* was found to be "too political" for children. In West Bengal, the withdrawal from the primary curriculum of Tagore's *Sahaj Path* by the former Left Front government had caused a furore. One of the reasons for withdrawing these beloved books, some alleged, were a couple of lines that showed a *zamindar* to be benevolent. This was certainly not in alignment with the CPI(M)'s principles. I know that the now condemned Enid Blyton books were read innocently and with great enjoyment by generations of children without a thought about racism or classism. However, I do believe today that stereotyping the stepmother as evil in children's stories could have a detrimental effect on children's minds. Such stereotypes must be avoided.

In conclusion, it can be stated that a balance must be sought between a genuine need to change terminology and the rush to appease thin-skinned groups.

The writer is a veteran school educator based in Kolkata

However, I do believe today that stereotyping the stepmother as evil in children's stories could have a detrimental effect on children's minds. Such stereotypes must be avoided.

LETTERS

FRAUDULENT CLAIMS

Filing cases to fraudulently claim others property by taking advantage of legal loopholes is rising daily (*Wakf, TS have no right on Hafeezpet land, DC, March 31*). This abuse of system must be dealt with an iron hand by imposing ₹25 lakh fine and at least 5 year jail.

John Samuel

Secunderabad

BJP'S AGE BAR

It was a spectacle to see PM Narendra Modi campaign for technocrat-turned-BJP leader in Kerala (*Modi: Like Judas, LDF has betrayed Kerala, DC, March 31*). It was intriguing that the 88-year-old politician needed a Gujarati-speaking 70-year-old PM to seek votes from a Malayalam electorate. This can happen only in India. What happened to the 75-year age restriction imposed by the party?

N.S. Rajan

Hyderabad

GOVT EMPLOYEES

How wise is it to give an increment to someone with a pay scale and totally neglect people from other occupations during a difficult phase (*KCR gives 30% fitment for staff, DC, March 23*). The state government must help to strike a balance economically for all sections of people. It must support people that elected them in these hard times.

Prathyusha Samudrala

Hyderabad

NOISE POLLUTION

The city police commissioner's contention that noise pollution around residential areas is due to high-decibel multi-tone horns and crackers is faulty (*Noise pollution: NGT acts on DC's report, DC, March 31*). These days, hawkers and mobile vendors are going around with loudspeakers to sell their products.

M.A.H. Asif

Hyderabad

50 YEARS AGO IN DECCAN Chronicle

W. Pak troops ejected from large areas

AGARTALA, March. 31 The liberation forces of Bangla Desh, which have ejected the West Pakistani troops from large areas, and the army, still entrenched in major centres, were today busy consolidating their positions, according to UNI correspondents who travelled into the war-torn land.

Scattered fighting continued in several places, mainly outskirts of cities, and the army continued to use tanks and aircraft.

The Goa government's move to place a serving IAS officer in the State Election Commission has backfired badly for not just chief minister Pramod Sawant but also the state chief secretary Parimal Rai. The Supreme Court has cancelled the appointment of state law secretary Chokha Ram Garg in the post.

er, within babu circles in Panjim, it is chief secretary Rai who has become the most visible face to take the blame for this harsh indictment by the court.

Share a babu experience! Follow dilipthecherian@Twitter.com. Let's multiply the effect.



Dilip Cherian

Dilli Ka Babu

High court pulls up Punjab govt for tainted cops in IPS positions

The Amarinder Singh-led Congress government in Punjab is getting flak from the Punjab and Haryana high court and the issue has had ramifications across the country. The court has directed the state government to explain how and why it has chosen to appoint Punjab Police Service (PPS) officers to IPS-cadre posts of SSPs in the state. The court has held that these appointments are in violation of the IPS cadre rules and has also impleaded the Centre as a party to look into these "apparent violations".

The court noted the instance of PPS officer Rajinder Singh Sohal who was convicted in a criminal case but has been posted as the SSP of Gurdaspur, a post meant for the IPS cadre.

Further, the court has issued a show-cause notice to additional chief secretary (home) Anurag

Aggarwal for "filing of false affidavit" in the matter. Mr Aggarwal may face perjury proceedings if the court is not satisfied with his response. The court has directed the state government to remove tainted or convicted police officers from duty until a policy is framed on action to be taken against these officers. Future proceedings in the court will be watched with great interest. Watch this space for updates.

BIHAR STRUGGLES TO FILL IAS VACANCIES

The Nitish Kumar-led NDA government in Bihar is increasingly re-employing retired officers. Its latest appointment is of retired IAS officer Deepak Kumar as the principal secretary to the chief minister. Mr Kumar, a 1984-batch officer, retired in February and was promptly rehired.

Sources say the government has

little choice when it comes to appointments due to the acute paucity of IAS officers in Bihar. Bihar apparently has only 202 IAS officers against a sanctioned strength of 359 officers. Not surprisingly, the deficit has impacted the quality of administration. It is not unusual for senior officers to be burdened with three or four departments each, apart from their principal task.

It is learnt that Nitish Kumar has requested the Centre to allot 54 IAS officers based on the civil service exam last year. It is reportedly also facilitating appointments to 22 posts from the 2018 batch, 15 posts from the 2019 batch and 16 posts from the 2020 batch under the promotion quota.

GOA CHIEF SECY IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

The Goa government's move to place a serving IAS officer in the

State Election Commission (SEC) has backfired badly for not just chief minister Pramod Sawant but also the state chief secretary Parimal Rai. The Supreme Court has cancelled the recent appointment of state law secretary Chokha Ram Garg as the state election commissioner. In its stinging order, the apex court noted that the move was "a mockery" of constitutional mandate.

The court has further issued directions to all states and Union territories to cancel similar appointments and to appoint only "independent persons to this high constitutional office", nipping in the bud any similar approaches that other states may have been contemplating. Mr Sawant's "innovative" approach is now unlikely to "inspire" other states to attempt something along similar lines.

While political reactions to the decision have been muted, howev-

SHORT TAKES

ARE YOU ABOVE LAW?: HC ASKS PARAM BIR SINGH

SHAHAB ANSARI | DC MUMBAI, MARCH 31

The Bombay High Court on Wednesday reprimanded Param Bir Singh the former Commissioner of Police, Mumbai for approaching the court without registering an FIR against state home minister Anil Deshmukh. Singh has approached the HC seeking CBI probe against Deshmukh for his alleged criminal malpractices.

The court asked Singh if he thought himself above the law. The court also directed the police to bring a station diary to verify what action they took on a complaint filed by one Jayshree Patil. The chief justice praised Patil for showing the courage to file a police complaint against the home minister and police commissioner.

Interestingly, another HC bench had dismissed Patil's petition on Tuesday calling it a "publicity stunt". There are three PILs and two writ petitions before the HC.

Chief Justice Dipankar Datta reserved order on the maintainability of the PIL filed by Singh and other petitions after hearing senior lawyer Vikram Nankani for Param Bir Singh, Advocate General (AG) Ashutosh Kumbhakoni on behalf of the State and Additional Solicitor General (ASG) Anil Singh for CBI.

During the hearing, the petitioner's lawyer Nankari pressed for an investigation by an independent agency like CBI. However, Chief Justice (CJ) repeatedly asked him how the court could issue directions for a probe when there is no FIR.

DELHI TO HIKE TESTING TO 80,000 PER DAY

DC CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

Amid the recent spike in Coronavirus cases, Delhi health minister Satyendar Jain on Wednesday informed that Covid-19 testing will be increased to 80,000 per day in the national capital, adding that the Delhi government has ordered an increase of 220 ICU beds and 838 normal beds in the wards of 33 private hospitals.

Delhi has been witnessing a surge in cases in the past few days, reporting 992 new infections on Tuesday. "Delhi recorded 992 positive cases on Tuesday. The positivity rate was 2.7. The testing has been increased. The testing rate had dropped for the last two days, from today onwards 80,000 tests will be done...30 contacts each of every Covid-19 positive patients are being traced," Jain said.

"An ample number of beds is available in government hospitals. The overall occupancy in private and government hospitals in Delhi is 25 per cent. A shortage of ICU beds has been reported at three to four private hospitals, so we have ordered an increase in ICU beds," he added.

INDIA SEES A SLIGHT DIP IN COVID +VE CASES

DC CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

India recorded 53,480 new Coronavirus cases in the last 24 hours, 4.8 per cent lower than the day before, taking the total tally to 1,21,49,335 on Wednesday. On Tuesday, the country had recorded 56,211 cases, while on Monday; it logged 68,020 cases, the highest single-day spike in daily new cases since October 11 last year.

Maharashtra has witnessed a dip in daily cases count as the state reported over 27,000 infections in the last 24 hours as against over 31,000 cases recorded on March 29. With 27,918 Covid-19 cases on Tuesday, the state tally has now reached 2,773,436.

According to the ICMR, 24,36,72,940 samples have been tested up to March 30 with 10,22,915 samples being tested on Tuesday. On Monday, only 7,85,864 samples were tested, while on Sunday, 9.13 lakh samples were tested, compared to over 10 lakh samples the previous days, according to the data by the apex research body.

Prior to March 30, India registered a steady increase for 19 days in a row. The active cases have now increased to 5,52,566 comprising 4.55 per cent of the total infections, while the recovery rate has further dropped to 94.11 per cent.

RAHUL GANDHI ATTACKS PM MODI, ACCUSES HIM OF LYING

MANOJ ANAND | DC GUWAHATI, MARCH 31

Launching a frontal attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday accused him of lying and said that if you want to listen to lies — about Assam, farmers, about anything — then switch on your TV, look at Narendra Modi's face and listen to him as much as you want.

Gandhi on Wednesday started his two-days visit to the poll-bound Assam by visiting Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati where he interacted with devotees around the temple and also addressed three public rallies.

Addressing a public rally in Kamrup district he said, "I have not come here to lie to you. My name isn't Narendra Modi. If you want to listen to lies — about Assam, farmers, about anything — then switch on your TV, look at Narendra Modi's face and listen to him as much as you want. He lies to India 24 hours."

Pointing out that Congress has given five guarantees to voters of Assam that will be fulfilled, Gandhi said, "I want to give you sixth guarantee that the government of grand alliance will not be run on dictates from Nagpur or New Delhi. Our government will be receiving orders from the people of Assam."

"We are not BJP, we fulfill our promises. Tea garden workers must remember our guarantee of ₹365 per day as minimum wage," Gandhi said.

The Congress has promised in its 'guarantees' that it will not allow the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) to be implemented in Assam, provide employment to five lakh youths, provide 200 units of free electricity per month to every households, give monthly assistance of ₹2,000 to every housewife, besides raising the minimum daily wages of tea garden workers.

Ishrat Jahan case: CBI court discharges 3 cops

Ahmedabad, March 31: A special CBI court here on Wednesday discharged police officers G.L. Singhal, Tarun Barot and Anajul Chaudhary in the 2004 Ishrat Jahan alleged fake encounter case.

Special CBI judge V.R. Raval allowed the discharge applications of Singhal, Barot (now retired) and Chaudhary.

"The CBI has not mentioned anything specific against the sanction order (in which the Gujarat government declined sanction to prosecute the three accused) which also leads to believe the act of applicants/accused was in discharge of official duties," the court observed.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) on March 20 conveyed to the court that the state government had declined sanction for prosecution of the three accused.

The court in its October 2020 order observed that they had "acted in their official duties," so the probe agency was required to obtain sanction for prosecution. Under section 197 of the Criminal Procedure Code, sanction is required for prosecuting government servants for anything done in the discharge of official duty.

Ishrat Jahan, a 19-year-old woman from Mumbai near Mumbai, was killed along with Javed Shaikh alias Pranesh Pillai, Amjadali Akbarali Rana and Zeeshan Johar by Gujarat police in an 'encounter' near Ahmedabad on June 15, 2004.

The police claimed the four were terrorists who



Poll officials leave for their poll duties, ahead of the second phase of Assembly elections, in Haldia, on Wednesday.

— PTI

Didi slams EC as Nandigram comes under aerial vigilance

Already 22 companies of Central paramilitary forces deployed in N'gram alone

RAJIB CHOWDHURI | DC KOLKATA, MARCH 31

Labelling the Election Commission as a "spokesperson" and "broker" of the BJP for meeting the demands of the saffron party, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Wednesday wondered if the President's Rule has been imposed in the state for the ongoing Assembly election.

The Trinamul Congress supremo spewed venom against the EC after the central poll panel, anticipating violence, enforced prohibitory orders under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, also a demand of the BJP, and switched on aerial surveillance from choppers across Nandigram, where the two-time CM is contesting from this time against her nemesis Shuvendu Adhikari of the BJP, a day before the hot seat and 29 others go to the polls in the second phase.

Raja denies violating Model Code in reply to EC's notice

DC CORRESPONDENT CHENNAI, MARCH 31

DMK deputy general secretary and MP A. Raja, denied having spoken anything that violated the Model Code of Conduct or any other provision of the law with regard to the allegation by the AIADMK that he insulted Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami.

In his interim reply to the notice issued by the Election Commission of India, Raja said on

Wednesday that he did not make any derogatory or defamatory speeches against the Chief Minister and did not demean or defame women or motherhood.

"As a student of Ambedkar, Periyar, and Anna, as a person who was guided by Dr Kalaignar Karunanithi and as a member of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, I had or have or will never indulge in such activities which will disrepute women," he said.

When the AIADMK and BJP started propagating

that he had insulted the Chief Minister, he had given his explanation to the media at Perambalur on March 27 and then conveyed his apologies at a press conference at Ooty on March 29.

Though he considered that the matter should have ended there, he gave his explanation to the ECI but was unable to reply to the allegation as he had not been served with the copy of the complaint dated March 27, preferred by AIADMK.

Witnessed growth in the BJP votebank in the last Lok Sabha election. In a virulent speech, Banerjee told a TMC rally at Uleberia East in Howrah, "The EC scheduled

Over 12 die in Bihar under mysterious circumstances

NAYEAR AZAD | DC PATNA, MARCH 31

Over a dozen people across the state have lost their lives under mysterious circumstances in the last 24 hours.

While the administration has not yet confirmed the reason, a section in the Bihar political circle doesn't rule out consumption of illicit liquor as a reason behind these deaths.

Deaths have been reported from Nawada, Begusarai and Rohtas districts. Reports suggest that the incident took place after some of these people consumed spurious liquor during Holi on Monday evening. The incident has exposed administrative failure in controlling the illegal liquor trade in dry Bihar.

Sources from Nawada and Begusarai said that victims were cremated by the families fearing police

● A SECTION in the Bihar political circle doesn't rule out consumption of illicit liquor as a reason behind these deaths.

investigation into the case after they died after consuming adulterated liquor.

After the incident, people have expressed anger and blamed the local police for allowing the rampant illegal liquor trade in villages. According to local political leaders in Nawada, "officials are trying to hide facts. Senior administrative officials have not said anything about these deaths. People have been raising the issue of liquor trade but the police didn't take any action".

Talking about the incident ADG headquarter Jitendra Kumar said that "The police were informed that four people have lost their lives under mysterious circumstances in Nawada. A probe has been

ordered and anything regarding the issue can only be said after the police receive medical reports of the deceased persons".

Liquor prohibition was the first major announcement by Nitish Kumar after he was sworn in as Chief Minister in 2015 following an emphatic election victory.

The complete ban was imposed on April 5, 2016, but the stringent excise law was brought into force in October 2016. Prohibition, consumption and dealing and conniving to sell liquor was made a criminal offence under Bihar's prohibition law which provides for imprisonment up to 10 years and fine of more than ₹1 lakh.

According to RJD leaders, "liquor is easily available despite stringent prohibition law in the state. The state government has failed to check and control illegal liquor trade in Bihar".

Pawar recovering after surgery: Tope

SONU SHRIVASTAVA | DC MUMBAI, MARCH 31

NCP president Sharad Pawar is doing well after undergoing a surgery for removal of a gallbladder stone at a private hospital in Mumbai on Tuesday night, Maharashtra health minister Tope informed. The minister said that Pawar will get relief from abdominal pain as the stone has been removed successfully. "The decision for gallbladder surgery would be taken by the doctors after a few days. Pawar is stable and there is no reason to worry," Tope said.

The NCP chief was supposed to be admitted on Wednesday, but since he had experienced pain in his abdomen, he was admitted on Tuesday afternoon itself.

Tope said that after conducting all diagnosis, the doctors concluded that the main reason behind

SHAH: WILL NOT ALLOW ASSAM TO BECOME HUB OF INFILTRATORS

DC CORRESPONDENT GUWAHATI, MARCH 31

Union home minister Amit Shah here on Wednesday said that the BJP will not allow Assam to become a hub for infiltrators once again while claiming that his party had successfully freed the land encroached by them during the last five years.

Intensifying attack against AIUDF chief Badruddin Ajmal, Shah in chaste Hindi said, "Kaan khol kar sunlo Ajmal, Assam ko ghuspetiyo ke adda phir se nahin banne denge. (Ajmal listen carefully we will not allow Assam to become a hub for infiltrators again)".

Referring to Ajmal at length in his speech in three public rallies that Shah addressed on Wednesday said, "Do you know? Ajmal is claiming that the key of forming the next government is in his hands and he will be deciding who will form the next government in Assam but he doesn't know that the key of forming the next government is into the hands of people."

Shah also accused Congress of failing to stop infiltration. "Hame aur paanch saal de dijiye, aadmi toh kya parinde bhi ghus nahi sakege (give us another five years, and we will ensure that no one not even birds enter illegally)", said Shah.

Reminding as to how late Congress chief minister Tarun Gogoi rejected Ajmal by saying — "Who is Ajmal?" Shah regretted that Rahul Gandhi is saying that Ajmal is Assam's identity.

Asserting that BJP will not allow this to happen, Shah said, "Assam's identity is Vaishnav saint Srimanta Sankardeva, Bharat Ratnas Gopinath Bordoloi and Bhupen Hazarika who represent Assam's identity and the Congress and Ajmal will not be allowed to change it at any cost." He reiterated that it is the BJP's double-engine government at the Centre and the state which successfully ended violence and agitation in the state.



Sharad Pawar

the abdominal pain was the stone developed in gallbladder.

"The stone was removed through endoscopy. He is now feeling relief from night and pain has also been reduced. Doctors have planned to remove the gallbladder, which contains more stones, after eight to 10 days once all the parameters would be stabilised," he added.

"A surgery was necessitated on him following some complications. We will decide on surgery on the gallbladder later. Currently, Pawar is under observation. He is doing well," Dr Amit Maydeo said.

FESTIVE FIRE Officials suspect Holi festival revellers may have caused fire

Fire breaks out in MP tiger reserve

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY | DC BHOPAL, MARCH 31

A massive wildfire has broken out in Bandhavgarh tiger reserve (BTR) in Madhya Pradesh, causing huge damages to flora in some forest ranges under the national park.

However, wildlife animals including tigers have remained unaffected by the forest fire, BTR field director Wincnet Rahim told this newspaper on Wednesday. "No animals including the tigers and

avian species have been affected by the fire", he added.

"The fire broke out on Tuesday. It spread to the 'fire points' in three core ranges and three buffer areas of the BTR. The fire has now been extinguished", he said.

He said that bamboo clumps and grasslands in these areas were destroyed in the fire.

However, locals said the wildfire broke out on Monday and spread very fast in the jungle. The fire could be brought under

control on Wednesday afternoon with the help of ground level forest staff, police and local villagers.

"Dry leaves and dry tree branches had helped the wildfire spread fast in the forest", the local villagers said.

Panic button was pressed among the forest officers when the fire started engulfing the Mahaman and Bhadrasila forest patches under the Magadhi range, the core area of tigers in BTR, prompting the forest staff to intensify firefight measures, sources said.

The wildfire had spread to the forest ranges of Tala, Magadhi, Khitauli, Jaggarh, Panpatha and Pataur, a senior forest officer said.

"We are yet to make assessment of damages caused by the wildfire. Our priority was to extinguish the fire", Rahim said.

Forest officials suspect the Holi festival revellers may have caused the fire.

Sources said lack of forest staff has hampered protection of forest particularly in BTR. "The post of deputy field director of

BTR has been lying vacant since last four months. Out of 3 posts of Sub-Divisional Officer (forest) sanctioned for BTR, only one SDO has been appointed. Similarly, a number of posts of forest rangers in BTR were yet to be filled", a senior forest officer told this newspaper requesting anonymity.

"Local villagers are invariably behind all the fire incidents. It is a difficult task for forest officers to protect the forest if adequate staff are not available", he added.

SHORT TAKES

ATTEMPT TO
HARM QUEEN: 5
THAIS INDICTED

Bangkok, March 31: Prosecutors in Thailand indicted five pro-democracy activists on Wednesday for attempting to harm the queen during a street demonstration last October. Queen Suthida, the wife of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, was not in any evident danger in the incident, which occurred when a limousine carrying the queen and the king's son, Prince Dipangkorn Rasmijoti, passed through a small crowd of protesters mixed with supporters of the royal family.

'99 MASSACRE:
ACCUSED SERB
ARRESTED

Pristina (Kosovo), March 31: Kosovo's police on Wednesday arrested a Serb, identified only as M.A., suspected of taking part in the massacre at Izbice on March 28, 1999, when Serb police, military and paramilitary forces found thousands of ethnic Albanian refugees in a meadow outside a village. They stole money and other valuables before separating the men from the women and children. The 130 men were then shot dead.

SECOND BITING
INCIDENT BY
BIDEN DOG

Washington, March 31: US President Joe Biden's dog, Major, has been involved in another biting incident at the White House, his second in less than a month, according to a media report.

Major, one of President Biden's two German shepherds, attacked on Monday just days after returning from training in Delaware. The incident involved a National Park Service employee on the South Lawn on Monday afternoon, according to CNN.

The employee was working at the time and needed to stop in order to receive treatment from the White House medical unit, the report said.

Major, a three-year-old German Shepherd is the younger of the Bidens' two dogs and the White House's first ever rescue dog.

BBC SCRIBE
LEAVES CHINA
AMID SAFETY

Beijing, March 31: A veteran BBC correspondent whose coverage angered China has left the country amid concerns for his safety, the BBC and a journalist organisation said.

The BBC said John Sudworth had relocated to Taiwan and would continue to be the British public broadcaster's China correspondent. The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China said that Sudworth had left last week "amid concerns for his safety and that of his family."

The organisation said that Sudworth's wife, Yvonne Murray, a correspondent for Irish broadcaster RTE, had left with him. "John's work has exposed truths the Chinese authorities did not want the world to know," the BBC said.

SPYING: ITALY
EXPELS TWO
RUSSIANS

Rome, March 31: Italy on Wednesday ordered two Russian Embassy officials expelled and arrested an Italian Navy captain on spying charges after police caught the Italian allegedly giving classified documents to one of the Russians in exchange for money.

Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio told a joint session of the Italian Parliament's foreign relations committees that the alleged incident was a "hostile act of extreme gravity". The Italian Foreign Ministry said it summoned Russian Ambassador Sergey Razov to protest the "grave incident" after a sting operation on the outskirts of Rome allegedly caught the Italian and one of the Russians in a "clandestine operation" to exchange the documents late Tuesday.

Italy's Carabinieri paramilitary police said in a statement that the Italian naval officer, who is a frigate captain, had been arrested. The Russian observed with him, a member of the Russian armed forces stationed at the Russian Embassy in Italy, was initially detained but not immediately placed under arrest given his diplomatic status. He was ordered expelled along with another Russian Embassy official allegedly involved

Biden to unveil
massive \$2 tn
infra plan

Washington, March 31: President Joe Biden will on Wednesday unveil a \$2 trillion infrastructure plan aimed at modernizing the United States' crumbling transport network, creating millions of jobs and enabling the country to "out-compete" China. The first phase of Biden's "Build Back Better" programme, which he will unveil in a speech in Pittsburgh, will detail massive investment spread over eight years.

It is designed to inject \$620 billion into transport, including upgrading 20,000 miles (32,000 kilometres) of roads and highways, repairing thousands of bridges and doubling funding for public transit. The president, whom Donald Trump tried to caricature as "Sleepy Joe" and a man without strong ideas or motivation, intends to make infrastructure investment one of his flagship policies. "He views his role as laying out... a broad vision, a

bold vision for how we can invest in America, American workers, our communities," White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said.

The cost would be partly paid for by raising corporate tax from 21 percent to 28 percent. "The president is proposing to fundamentally reform the corporate tax code so that it... ensures that large corporations are paying their fair share," a senior administration official said ahead of the speech. The new spending offensive comes soon after the United States passed a nearly \$2 trillion Covid-19 economic stimulus plan.

And Biden's speech is set to open a bitter battle in Congress, where the Democrats hold only a narrow majority and will face strong opposition from the Republicans.

The first criticisms came before Biden even gave his speech, some of it from the progressive wing of his party.

— AFP

Pfizer says its Coronavirus
vax protects younger teens

Vaccinating children will help schools look normal after months of disruption

Washington, March 31: Pfizer announced Wednesday that its Covid-19 vaccine is safe and strongly protective in kids as young as 12, a step toward possibly beginning shots in this age group before they head back to school in the fall. Most Covid-19 vaccines being rolled out worldwide are for adults, who are at higher risk from the coronavirus. Pfizer's vaccine is authorised for ages 16 and older. But vaccinating children of all ages will be critical to stopping the pandemic — and helping schools, at least the upper grades, start to look a little more normal after months of disruption.

In a study of 2,260 US volunteers ages 12 to 15, preliminary data showed there were no cases of Covid-19 among fully vaccinated adolescents compared to 18 among those given dummy shots, Pfizer reported. It's a small study, that hasn't yet been published, so another important piece of evidence is how well the shots revved up the kids' immune systems. Researchers reported



People receive a dose of the BioNTech/Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine at a vaccination clinic set up inside the Derby Arena at Pride Park in Derby, Derbyshire on Wednesday.

— AFP

high levels of virus-fighting antibodies, somewhat higher than were seen in studies of young adults. Kids had side effects similar to young adults, the company said. The main side effects are pain, fever, chills and fatigue, particularly after the second dose.

The study will continue to track participants for two years for more information about long-term protection and safety. Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech in the coming weeks plan to ask the US Food and Drug Administration and European regulators to

allow emergency use of the shots starting at age 12.

"We share the urgency to expand the use of our vaccine," Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla said in a statement. He expressed "the hope of starting to vaccinate this age group before the start of the next school year" in

Experts examine ship bottom
Egypt leader says Nile
water is 'untouchable'

Cairo, March 31: Experts dived under a colossal container ship that had been stuck for nearly a week in the Suez Canal before it was freed, to examine the vessel's underside, officials said Wednesday. The dives were part of a continuing investigation into what caused the grounding of the Ever Given, now anchored in the Great Bitter Lake, a wide stretch of water halfway between the north and south ends of the canal.

Salvage teams succeeded in finally freeing the skyscraper-size vessel on Monday afternoon. The ship got stuck sideways in a narrow stretch of the canal, shaking the global shipping industry when it halted billions of dollars a day in maritime commerce for around a week. Two senior canal officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to talk to reporters, said "slight to

Ismailia, March 31: Egypt's president has said his country's share of the Nile River's waters are "untouchable" in a stark warning to Ethiopia, which is building a giant dam on the Nile's main tributary.

The comment from President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi comes amid a deadlock in the years-long talks over the dam between the Nile Basin countries, which also includes

medium" damage was found at the vessel's bulbous bow. One of the officials, who is a canal pilot, said experts were studying the exact extent of damage, but he said it unlikely would impede the Panama-flagged, Japanese-owned ship's navigation. He said the navigation of the ship would depend on "several legal and procedural" measures that the canal authority would discuss with the Ever Given's operator.

Sudan. In a news conference on Tuesday, el-Sissi warned of "instability that no one can imagine" in the region if the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is filled and operated without a legally binding agreement. "No one can take a single drop of water from Egypt, and whoever wants to try it, let him try," he said. "No one imagines that it will be far from our capabilities."

A media officer at the Ethiopian Embassy in Cairo declined to comment on el-Sissi's remarks. El-Sissi was firm while discussing the dam dispute at a news conference in the Suez Canal city of Ismailia. He visited the crucial, east-west waterway following its reopening on Monday. "I repeat that the waters of Egypt are untouchable, and touching them is a red line," he said. — AP

Investigations were ongoing to determine what caused the ship to become wedged across the canal. When blame gets assigned, it will likely lead to years of litigation to recoup the costs of repairing the ship. — AP

H-1B electronic
registration
selection done

Washington, March 31: The US has received enough electronic applications during the initial registration period to reach the 2022 fiscal year cap for the H-1B foreign workers visa, the most sought-after work visa among Indian professionals.

The US Citizenship and Immigration Services, the federal agency which screens and allocates H-1B applications, said it was randomly selected from among the registrations properly submitted to reach the cap.

The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows the US companies to employ foreign workers in specialty occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise. The technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China. The USCIS has notified all prospective petitioners with selected registrations that they are eligible to file an H-1B cap-subject petition for the beneficiary named in the applicable selected registration.

The federal agency said that H-1B cap-subject petitions for fiscal 2022, including those petitions eligible for the advanced degree exemption, may be filed with the USCIS beginning April 1, if

● WITH THIS, China has achieved the UN goal of poverty eradication 10 years ahead of the 2030 deadline, he said. Over the past eight years, the final 98.99 million impoverished rural residents living under the current poverty line have all been lifted out of poverty.

based on a valid, selected registration.

Last month, the USCIS said it received a sufficient number of petitions needed to reach the Congressionally mandated 65,000 H-1B visa regular cap and the 20,000 H-1B visa US advanced degree exemption, known as the master's cap, for fiscal year (FY) 2021.

The Biden administration in Feb. announced that it was delaying the H-1B policy of the previous Trump administration on the allocation of the popular foreign work visas by continuing with the lottery system until Dec. 31, 2021, to give the immigration agency more time to develop, test and implement the modifications to the registration system.

On January 7, the USCIS announced to do away with the traditional lottery system in deciding the successful applicants for the H-1B visas.

— PTI

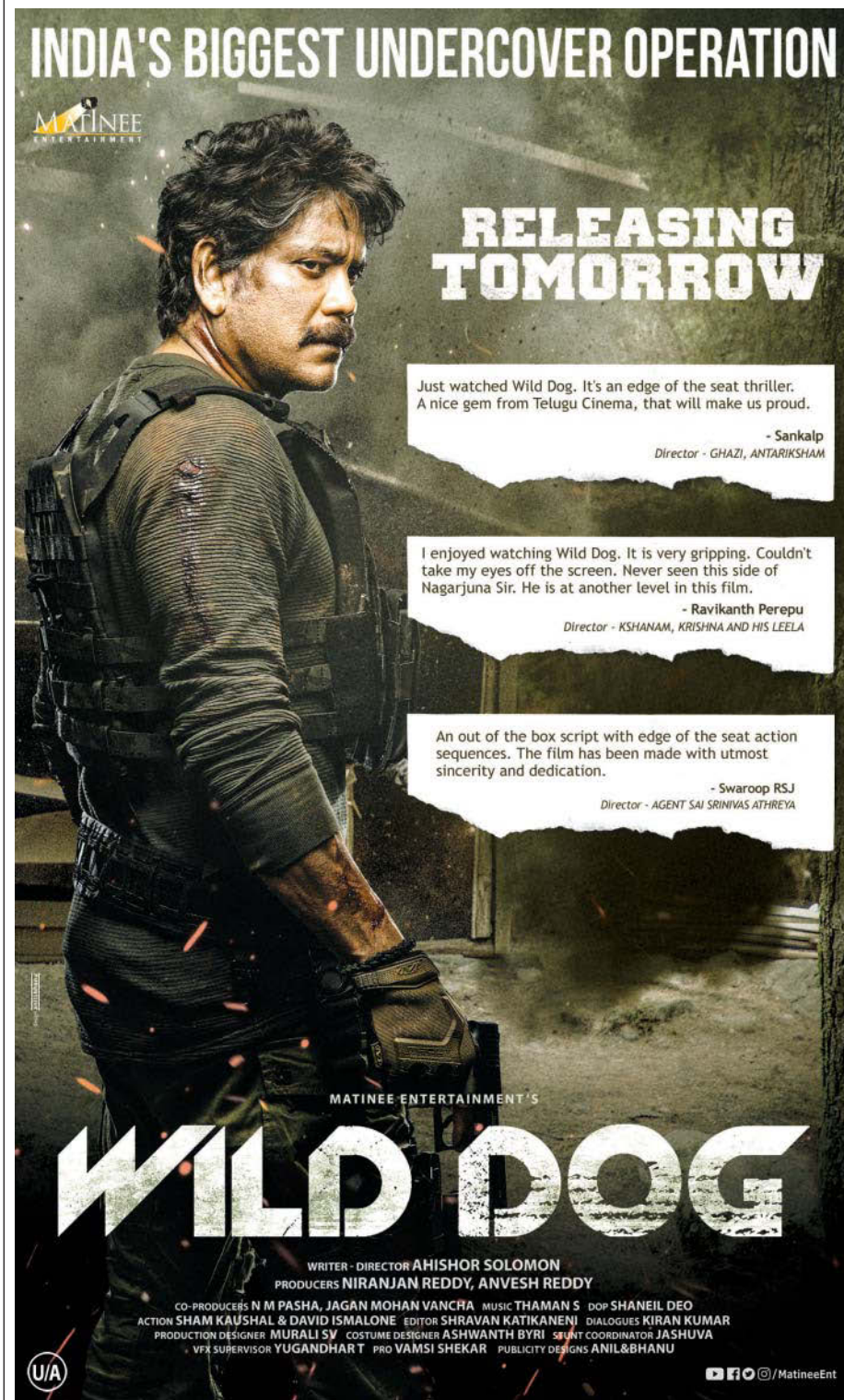
New air strikes
in Myanmar

Mae Sam Lae (Thailand), March 31: The military launched more airstrikes Tuesday in eastern Myanmar after earlier attacks forced thousands of ethnic Karen to flee into Thailand and further escalating violence two months after the junta seized power.

Thailand's prime minister said the villagers who fled the weekend airstrikes returned home of

their own accord, denying that his country's security forces had forced them back. But the situation in eastern Myanmar appeared to be getting more, not less, dangerous.

The Karen National Union, the main political body representing the Karen minority, said the airstrikes were the latest case of Myanmar's military breaking a cease-fire agreement. — AP



quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	49509.15	-1.25
Nifty 50	14690.70	-1.04
S&P 500*	3,986.92	0.72
Dollar (₹)	73.11	0.38
Pound Sterling (₹)	100.76	0.22
Euro (₹)	85.77	0.42
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	43,925▼49	0.11
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	63.89	-0.39
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.177	0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.723	-0.003

* As of 8:30 PM IST

RBI asked to ensure retail inflation at 4%

The government asked the Reserve Bank to maintain retail inflation at 4 per cent with a margin of 2 per cent on either side for another five-year period ending March 2026, economic affairs secretary Tarun Bajaj said. To control the price rise, the government in 2016 gave a mandate to the RBI to keep the retail inflation at 4 per cent with a margin of 2 per cent on either side for a five-year period ending March 31, 2021.

Pakistan set to import sugar, cotton from India



Pakistan will import sugar and cotton from India, newly appointed finance minister Hammad Azhar announced, lifting a nearly two-year old ban on the commodities' import from the neighbour. The economic coordination committee allowed the private sector to import five lakh tonnes of white sugar from India, Azhar said. He also said that Pakistan will import cotton from India starting June this year.

Govt pegs H1 mkt borrowing at ₹7.24 lakh cr

The government will borrow Rs 7.24 lakh crore in the first half of 2021-22 fiscal to meet resources to perk up the economy. According to the Budget for 2021-22, the government's gross borrowing was estimated at Rs 12.05 lakh crore in the financial year beginning April 1. "In the first half of 2021-22, we would be borrowing Rs 7.24 lakh crore, which is 60.06 per cent of the gross issuances," secretary Tarun Bajaj said.

₹32,835 cr raised via disinvestment in fiscal 2020-21

The government has mopped up Rs 32,835 crore from CPSE share sale and buybacks, thus, exceeding the disinvestment target set in the revised estimates (RE) for current fiscal. The realisation is, however, lower than the record Rs 2.10 lakh crore originally budgeted. In the RE, the target was scaled down to Rs 32,000 crore as the pandemic delayed planned big ticket disinvestments.



■ Purchase assurance also part of package Govt to offer \$1 bn each to chip units

SANKALP PHARTIYAL & ADITI SHAH
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

India is offering more than \$1 billion in cash to each semiconductor company that sets up manufacturing units in the country as it seeks to build on its smartphone assembly industry and strengthen its electronics supply chain, two officials said. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Make in India' drive has helped to turn India into the world's second-biggest mobile manufacturer after China. New Delhi believes it is time for chip companies to set up in the country.

"The government will give cash incentives of more than \$1 billion to each company which will set up chip fabrication units," a senior government official told Reuters, declining to be named as he was not authorised to speak with the media. "We're assuring them that the government will be a buyer and there will also be mandates in the private market (for companies to buy locally made chips)."

How to disburse the cash incentives has yet to be decided and the government has asked the industry for feedback, said a second government source. Governments across the world are subsidising the construction of semiconductor plants as chip shortages hobble the auto and electronics industries and highlight the world's dependence on Taiwan for

CHINESE FIRMS JOIN SEMICONDUCTOR RUSH

JOSH HORWITZ
SHANGHAI, MARCH 31

Xiaomi has joined a rush of Chinese tech companies venturing into the semiconductor sector, announcing on Wednesday a new chip to help smartphone cameras process images.

Xiaomi's Surge C1 chip was developed after an earlier unsuccessful attempt at producing a smartphone processor and comes as Chinese internet giants, automakers, and even home appli-

supplies. India also wants to establish reliable suppliers for its electronics and telecom industry to cut dependence on China.

Chips made locally will be designated as "trusted sources" and can be used in electronic equipment, the first source said.

But the sources did not say whether particular semiconductor companies have shown interest in setting up units in India.

India has previously tried to woo semiconductor players but the firms were deterred by India's wobbly infrastructure, unstable power supply, bureaucracy and poor planning.

The renewed government push to lure chipmakers is more likely to succeed, after the success of the smartphone industry, industry insiders say. Moreover, Indian con-

ance firms invest heavily in semiconductor R&D.

The trend is a global one, with major US companies, including Google, Amazon.com Inc and Facebook Inc also investing in their own chipmaking efforts.

Oppo is also developing its own chips for handsets. Baidu already has two chip projects. Tencent and ByteDance too have entered the sector. Appliances makers Midea Group Co Ltd, Gree Electric Appliances, Galanz and Haier have R&D units for chips. —Reuters

glomerates, such as the Tata Group, have also expressed interest in moving into electronics and high-tech manufacturing.

India in December invited an "expression of interest" from chipmakers for setting up fabrication units in the country or for the acquisition of such manufacturing units overseas by an Indian company or consortium.

The government estimates it would cost roughly \$5-\$7 billion to set up a chip fabrication unit in India and take two-three years after all the approvals are in place, one of the auto industry sources said.

The source added that New Delhi is willing to offer companies concessions, including waivers on customs duty, R&D expenses and interest free loans. —Reuters

Small savings rates cut by 50-110 basis points

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO
NEW DELHI, MARCH 31

Fixed income investors have a reason to worry as the Ministry of Finance on Wednesday announced a cut in small savings deposit rates from 4 per cent to 3.5 per cent for the first quarter of the financial year, starting April 1, 2021. This is the second time the Centre has cut interest rates on small savings schemes in the past one year. In the April-June quarter of 2020-21, the government had slashed rates of small savings schemes by 70-140 bps.

According to the circular, the rates of small savings schemes have been reduced by 50-100 basis points for the April-June quarter of financial year 2021-22. However, the interest on one-year term deposit, has been reduced to 4.4 per cent from 5.5 per cent, a cut of 1.1 per cent.

"From 1 April, Public Provident Fund (PPF) will get an interest rate of 6.4 per cent. The interest for National Savings

Steep cut			
Instruments	Interest (%) 2021		
	Jan to Mar	Apr to Jun	
Savings deposit	4.0	3.5	
1-year time deposit	5.5	4.4	
2-year time deposit	5.5	5.0	
3-year time deposit	5.5	5.1	
5-year time deposit	6.7	5.8	
5-year recurring deposit	5.8	5.3	
Sr Citizen Savings Scheme	7.4	6.5	
Monthly Income Account	6.6	5.7	
National Savings Certificate	6.8	5.9	
PPF Scheme	7.1	6.4	
Kisan Vikas Patra	6.9*	6.2**	
Sukanya Samridhi Yojana	7.6	6.9	
* Will mature in 124 months			
** Will mature in 138 months			
Source: Ministry of Finance			

Certificate (NSC) have been reduced to 5.9 per cent. Among other small savings scheme, the Sukanya Samridhi Yojana will fetch the interest rate of 6.9 per cent as well," said the circular.

"Similarly, the interest rate for the five-year Senior Citizens Savings Scheme has been lowered

to 6.5 per cent. The interest on the senior citizens' scheme is paid quarterly. The interest rate on Kisan Vikas Patra (KVP) has been cut to 6.2 per cent. Besides, interest rate on post office savings deposits has been slashed to 3.5 per cent. On the other hand, term deposits of one-five years will fetch interest rate in the range of 4.4-5.1 per cent, to be paid quarterly, while the interest rate on five-year recurring deposit is pegged at 5.8 per cent," it said.

The interest rates for small savings schemes are generally reviewed and notified by the finance ministry on a quarterly basis.

For the April-June quarter of last year, the government had cut interest rates on small savings schemes by up to 140 basis points and since then they have remained steady. With this reduction, the interest rates of small savings schemes have been slashed by a total of 120-250 bps during the current financial year.

PLI scheme for food processing cleared

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, MARCH 31

The Union Cabinet has approved the Rs 10,900 crore production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme for the food processing sector, which is expected to increase output of the industry by around Rs 33,500 crore and create employment for 2.5 lakh persons by 2026-27

The scheme will support food manufacturing entities which have stipulated minimum sales and willingness to make stipulated investment for expansion of processing capacity and branding abroad.

The scheme will provide incentives for six years from 2021-22 till 2026-27. As per the segment-wise incentive data provided by the government, ready-to-cook and ready-to-eat brands will receive a total incentive of Rs 4,181 crore in these six years and processed fruit and vegetables will get a total of Rs 3,582 crore.

Marine products will get Rs 993 crore and mozzarella cheese Rs 283 crore, which adds up to a total of Rs 9,039 crore. Innovative and organic products of SMEs, including free range eggs, poultry meat, egg products, also are covered under the scheme.

Further, Rs 9,040 crore will be provided as an incentive for sales and Rs 1,500 crore for branding and marketing.

Auto debit extended till Sept. 30

FALAKNAAZ SYED
MUMBAI, MARCH 31

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Wednesday extended the timeline for lenders, financial institutions and payment gateways to comply with its guidelines related to recurring online transactions with Additional Factor of Authentication (AFA) by six months till September 30. This is the second time that regulator has extended the deadline, as several players have failed to implement the framework.

₹14,500 cr to be infused in 4 PSBs

FALAKNAAZ SYED
MUMBAI, MARCH 31

The government on Wednesday announced a capital infusion of Rs 14,500 crore in four state-owned banks, namely Central Bank of India (CBI), Indian Overseas Bank (IOB), Bank of India (BOI), and UCO Bank by issuing zero coupon bonds.

According to experts the capital infusion will help CBI, IOB and UCO Bank that are under the RBI's prompt corrective action

Implementation of labour codes deferred

New Delhi, March 31: The four labour codes will not come into effect from April 1 as states are yet to finalise the relevant rules, which means that there will be no change in take home pay of employees and provident fund liability of companies for now.

Once the wages code comes into force, there will be significant changes in the way basic pay and provident fund of employees are calculated.

The labour ministry had envisaged implementing the four codes on industrial relations, wages, social security and occupational health safety & working conditions from April 1, 2021. The ministry had even finalised the rules under the four codes.

"Since the states have not finalised the rules under four codes, the implementation of these laws are deferred for the time being," an official source told PTI.

According to the source, only a few states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Uttarakhand had circulated the draft rules.

Since labour is a concurrent subject under the Constitution of India, both the Centre and the states would have to notify rules under the codes to bring those into force in their respective jurisdictions.

Under the new wages code, allowances are capped at 50 per cent. This means half of the gross pay of an employee would be basic wages.

PF contribution is calculated as a percentage of basic wage, which includes basic pay and dearness allowance.

—PTI

EMERGENCY CREDIT LINE TILL JUNE 30

New Delhi, March 31: The government on Wednesday extended the Rs 3-lakh-crore emergency credit line guarantee scheme by another three months till June 30 and also widened its scope to new sectors, including hospitality, travel and tourism. ECLGS 3.0 would involve extending credit of up to 40 per cent of total credit outstanding across all lending institutions as on February 29, 2020, the finance ministry said. The tenor of loans granted under ECLGS 3.0 would be six years, including a moratorium period of two years.

—PTI

QR CODE ON B2C INVOICE MUST ONLY FROM JULY

New Delhi, March 31: The government has deferred by three months till July 1 the requirement of printing dynamic QR code on B2C invoices generated by businesses. In a notification, the CBIC waived the amount of penalty payable by a registered person for non-compliance of provisions of dynamic QR code in B2C invoices till June 30.

—PTI

6-DIGIT HSN CODE MUST FOR ₹5 CR TURNOVER

New Delhi, March 31: Businesses with turnover of more than Rs 5 crore will have to furnish six-digit HSN or tariff code on the invoices issued for supplies of taxable goods and services from April 1. Those with turnover of up to Rs 5 crore in the preceding financial year would be required to furnish four-digit HSN code on B2B invoices.

—PTI

FTP to run till Sept. end

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, MARCH 31

The government has further extended the Foreign Trade Policy by six months till September 30, 2021. The basic customs duty and IGST exemption for export units also have been extended for one year.

The foreign trade policy for 2015-20, which was due to expire on March 31, 2020 was earlier extended by one year till March 31, 2021 in the event of the

pandemic. Now the policy has been further extended till September 30, 2021, the Directorate General of Foreign Trade said on Wednesday, without providing any reason.

The government has also extended the basic customs duty and IGST exemption benefit for Export Oriented Units till March 31, 2022.

The government said in Parliament that it is in the process of preparing For-ign Trade Policy 2021-26.

VOLVO INDIA ANNOUNCES 24 WEEKS PAID PATERNAL LEAVE



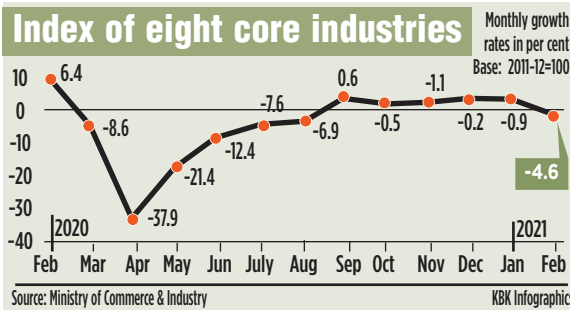
Mumbai, March 31: Swedish car maker Volvo on Wednesday announced a gender-neutral policy, 'Family Bond', that allows the male employees in India to avail up to 24 weeks (120 working days) of parental leave at 80 per cent of total salary.

Women employees will continue to avail 26 weeks of fully paid maternity leave as per the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017. Volvo Car India said in a statement.

"The policy which is line with Volvo Car global directives, applies to all regular salaried (on-roll, full-time) employees in India, including all mothers and fathers, same sex parents, parents to adopted and foster children or through surrogacy, the statement said. There are no limitations on age or marital status, it added.

"Volvo, being an employee-friendly company, believes that both partners should share the joys of parenthood and be available to each other while bringing up children."

—PTI



Mobikwik faces forensic audit

Mumbai, March 31: The Reserve Bank has asked troubled digital wallet firm Mobikwik, which is facing data breach allegations, to get a forensic audit done without any delay.

Though the Gurugram-based firm has been claiming that its systems are secure and that there is no basis to the allegations of data breach, after a group of hackers on Tuesday

said that they accessed personal and financial data of nearly 10 crore Mobikwik customers.

On Wednesday, sources told PTI that the RBI has ordered an immediate forensic audit of the company's systems by a certified auditor.

When contacted, an RBI spokesperson refused to comment.

Mobikwik refused to give a direct answer to a query

on whether the RBI has ordered a forensic audit.

"We take privacy and security of our user data seriously and are working with authorities to conduct an independent forensic audit," it said.

However, the sources said the RBI has asked Mobikwik to get the forensic audit done without delay to ascertain whether there was a data breach or not.

—PTI

