

SHORT TAKE

**Minor apprehended,
3 arrested for raping
14-year-old girl**AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 20

Three men were arrested and a juvenile was apprehended on Sunday for allegedly raping a 14-year-old girl in south Delhi's Greater Kailash area, police said. The accused have been identified as Shivam (20), Hari Shankar (30), both residents of Fatehpur district in UP, and Mangesh (18), a resident of Maharashtra, they said. Police said that on Sunday, a PCR call was received at Greater Kailash-1 police station regarding gangrape of a girl by four persons. After reaching the spot at GK-1, the victim, a resident of Madanpur Khadar, was found who stated that she has been working at Greater Kailash for the last four months, a senior police officer said. A 17-year-old boy was also working there, but he left the job one month ago. She was befriended by the boy there. She said that on Saturday, he called her at his friend's place of work in Greater Kailash where three more persons were also present, a senior police officer said. The juvenile allegedly raped her with the help of his associates, police said. Thereafter, a case under sections of IPC and 6 POCSO Act has been registered. Three accused persons have been arrested and the juvenile was also apprehended, the officer said, adding that further investigation is underway.

**18-yr-old boy fires
at self accidentally,
dies in hospital**AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 20

An 18-year-old boy died after he accidentally fired a bullet in his thigh in northeast Delhi's Jafraabad area. Police said that on Saturday around 10.30 pm, information was received from Jag Pravesh Chandra hospital that one Shahzeb (18), a resident of Maujpur, being brought to the hospital with gunshot injury. Later, he was referred to RML hospital. Shahzeb got injured on the left thigh. He later died on the way to RML Hospital, a senior police officer said. Investigation revealed that a pre-marriage function of the sister of Shahzeb was going on. Dance was going on in the street where all the relatives and the neighbours were present. Shahzeb was also there, the officer said. He had a country-made pistol tucked in his pant. It was found that while he was taking out the pistol from his pant, he accidentally fired which resulted in injury to his left thigh, police said. He was immediately rushed to the hospital where he succumbed to his injury, police said. A case under relevant sections of the IPC and 25 Arms Act has been registered at Jafraabad police station and investigation taken up, they added.

**NDMC: Allegation of
waiving off ₹2,457cr
'false and baseless'**

New Delhi: The BJP-led North Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC) on Sunday issued a public notice in various leading newspapers, saying the allegation that it waived off ₹2,457 crore for another civic body is "false and baseless". The ruling AAP had recently alleged "misappropriation of ₹2,500 cr" by the NDMC in connection with the South Delhi Municipal Corporation. Last week, it had demanded a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) inquiry into the alleged irregularity. The public notice, however, does not name anyone, as to who made the allegation. The notice, titled, 'Clarification Against Propaganda' reads, "allegations that ₹2,457 cr of the eSouth Delhi Municipal Corporation was waived off are false are baseless". In the notice, a series of antecedents have also been mentioned, saying the NDMC has acted "in accordance with the Cabinet decision of the Delhi government". The NDMC on Wednesday had also issued a statement, saying it "out-rightly denies the allegation of any misappropriation, on account of waiving off of the ground rent purportedly to be paid by the SDMC to the NDMC". — PTI

India refutes Pak's allegation of firing on UN vehicle in PoK

*Allegation 'factually incorrect, baseless, false and fabricated': MEA*SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI
NEW DELHI, DEC. 20

India on Sunday said it had "investigated in detail" and found as "factually incorrect and false" Pakistan's allegations of firing by Indian forces on a UN vehicle in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) on December 18. New Delhi also said that its findings that the Pakistani allegations are "baseless and fabricated" had been conveyed to Islamabad, adding that Pakistan should instead "responsibly investigate its lapses (on) ... its own failure in ensuring the safety and security of UN personnel in territory under its control". India said its "forward troops were aware of the visit of

UN military observers in the area and did not conduct any firing as alleged" by Pakistan.

MEA spokesperson Anurag Srivastava said: "Allegations by Pakistan regarding Indian forces deliberately targeting a UN vehicle on 18 Dec 2020 have been investigated in detail and found to be factually incorrect and false. Our forward troops were aware of the visit of UN Military Observers in the area and did not conduct any firing as alleged."

He added: "Instead of repeating baseless and fabricated allegations against India to cover up its own failure in ensuring the safety and security of UN personnel in territory under its control, Pakistan should responsi-

▸ INSTEAD OF repeating baseless and fabricated allegations against India to cover up its own failure in ensuring the safety and security of UN personnel in territory under its control, Pakistan should responsibly investigate its lapses. India has conveyed its findings and views on these misrepresentations to the Pakistani side, said MEA spokesperson Anurag Srivastava.

bly investigate its lapses. India has conveyed its findings and views on these misrepresentations to the Pakistani side."

But in a statement from Islamabad on Sunday, Pakistan however contin-

ued to make the allegations of an attack on United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) observers and their vehicle along the Line of Control (LoC) and asked the UN to "initiate a transparent investigation into the incident". In a letter addressed to the UN Secretary General (UNSG) and the president of the Security Council, Pakistan's permanent representative to the UN alleged that "deliberate targeting of the UN observers and their vehicle — which was clearly marked with UN logo and flying a blue flag of the UN — appears to be a new coercive and reckless ploy by India to hinder UNMOGIP's work".



Tourists visit Taj Mahal amid the coronavirus pandemic in Agra on Sunday.

— PTI

At 3.4°C, Delhi records coldest morning so far

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 20

A cold wave swept Delhi on Sunday as it recorded the coldest morning of the season so far at 3.4 degrees Celsius, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said. On Saturday, the minimum temperature at the Safdarjung Observatory, which provides representative data for the city, had settled at 3.9 degrees Celsius.

"The observatory recorded a minimum of 3.4 degrees Celsius, five notches below the normal, on Sunday morning. The maximum temperature is likely to settle around 22 degrees Celsius," an IMD official said. The mercury dipped to 3.3 degrees Celsius at Lodhi Road, as icy winds from snow-

▸ The mercury dipped to 3.3 degrees Celsius at Lodhi Road, as icy winds from snow-laden Western Himalayas barrelled through the city, the IMD said. On Friday, the minimum temperature had plunged to 2.7 degrees Celsius at Jafarpur.

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On Friday, the minimum temperature had plunged to 2.7 degrees Celsius at Jafarpur. The city had recorded a "severe" cold day on Thursday as the maximum temperature dropped to 15.2 degrees Celsius, seven notches below normal and the lowest this season so far. However, it rose to 19.8 degrees Celsius on Friday

and 21.8 degrees Celsius on Saturday. According to the IMD, a "cold day" is when the minimum temperature is less than 10 degrees Celsius and the maximum is at least 4.4 degrees Celsius below the normal. A "severe" cold day is when the maximum temperature is at least 6.5 notches below the normal.

For the plains, the IMD declares a cold wave when the minimum temperature is 10 degrees Celsius or below and is 4.5 notches less than the normal for two consecutive days. However, for small areas such as Delhi, a cold wave can be declared if the criteria is fulfilled even for a day, officials said.

The minimum temperature is expected to hover around 5 degrees Celsius in the next five to six days, it said.

Call centre busted, 42 arrested for duping foreign nationals of ₹70cr

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 20

Forty-two people were arrested for allegedly running a call centre in west Delhi's Peeragarhi area and duping foreign nationals to the tune of ₹70 crore by posing as officers of law enforcement agencies, police said on Sunday.

The accused used to tell foreign nationals that their details have come up in a case of crime and extort money from them in the form of Bitcoins and gift cards, they said. More than 90 digital devices have been seized along with ₹4.5 lakh cash. The accused have duped more than 3,500 people of around ₹70 crore, police

▸ The accused used to tell foreign nationals that their details have come up in a case of crime and extort money from them in the form of Bitcoins and gift cards, police said.

said. Police got information that an illegal call centre is being operated from Peeragarhi area and that those working there targeted foreign nationals, a senior officer said.

"Thereafter, a raid was conducted and forty-two persons — 26 male and 16 female — were arrested. More than ₹4.5 lakhs were also recovered from the spot," Deputy Commissioner of Police

(Cyber) Anyesh Roy said.

During interrogation, the accused persons disclosed that they contacted foreign nationals impersonating various law enforcement agencies and other government agencies such as the Social Security Administration, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the US Marshals Service, he said.

They used to tell them that their bank accounts and other assets are being frozen as their details have been found at a crime scene and there are bank accounts running in their names using which illegal transactions have been made to drug cartels in Mexico and Colombia, the DCP said.

3 men held for robbing, killing minor in Delhi

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 20

Three men were arrested for allegedly robbing and killing a 17-year-old boy in east Delhi's Patparganj Industrial area, police said on Sunday.

The accused have been identified as Piyush (23), a resident of Mandawali, Sumit (19) and Rahul (19), both residents of West Vinod Nagar, Madhu Vihar, they said.

According to police, they received information on Tuesday around 10.30 pm at Patparganj Industrial Area police station regarding a body lying inside the industrial area.

The body, having stab injuries, was sent to LBS hospital. Later, the boy was identified as Ronit Aashish (17), a resident of New Seemapuri. He was a private male nursing assistant, police said. The victim used to look

after old-age patients in IP Extension area, they said.

During investigation, around 50 CCTV cameras were examined. Later, it was revealed that the three men killed the victim. One of them was a resident of Mandawali, and the other two were residents of Madhu Vihar, a senior police officer said.

Raids were conducted and the accused were apprehended, police said.

During interrogation, the accused said that they wanted to earn some quick money and when they saw the victim walking inside the Patparganj Industrial Area at a deserted stretch at night, two of the three accused tried to catch him, while the third stabbed the victim in the chest, they said.

They fled from the spot after taking the victim's phone and purse, police added.

PM Modi to hold virtual summit with Vietnam counterpart today

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 20

In what is being seen as a strong strategic signal to China, the stage is set for a crucial virtual summit on Monday at the Prime Ministerial level between India and its own all-weather close friend in Southeast Asia, Vietnam, after which a number of agreements and announcements are likely, covering areas such as defence, energy, development partnership, and healthcare.

It was reliably learnt on Sunday that India's Defence Line of Credit for high-speed guard boats for the Vietnamese armed forces will "be further progressed." The two countries continue to have a shared interest in a "free, open, peaceful, prosperous, and rules-based regional order" which is expected to be reiterated at the summit.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will co-chair the virtual summit with Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc during which "the



Narendra Modi



Nguyen Xuan Phuc

two leaders will exchange views on wide-ranging bilateral, regional, and global issues and provide guidance for the future development of India-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP). They are also likely to issue a Joint Vision for this.

Both India and Vietnam are understood to have been in constant touch with each other regarding their concerns over the aggressive Chinese military behaviour on various fronts in the past few months. While India is facing Chinese military intransigence in the Ladakh sector, Vietnam has been facing tensions with China in the South China Sea where it has a maritime territorial dis-

pute with Beijing.

Both countries have fought border wars with China in the past and they continue to have military tensions with Beijing.

India had, in August this year, held the 17th meeting of the Joint Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, and Technological Cooperation with Vietnam at the foreign ministerial level in which both nations had discussed their CSP and had "agreed to add new momentum to the economic and defence engagement between the two countries."

New Delhi had then said that the Indo-Vietnam CSP "ensures peace, security, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific," a comment seen as a veiled indication

towards China.

The ministry of external affairs (MEA) had recently stated, "In 2020, both countries continued to maintain high-level exchanges. Vice President of Vietnam H.E. Ms. Dang Thi Ngoc Thinh came to India in February 2020 on an official visit. Both Prime Ministers had a telephonic conversation on April 13, 2020, to discuss the situation arising out of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The 17th edition of the Joint Commission Meeting (virtual) co-chaired by the two foreign ministers was held on August 25, 2020. The defence minister, Rajnath Singh, held an online meeting with his counterpart on November 27, 2020."

Vietnam is an important member of the 10-nation Southeast Asian grouping ASEAN. Both sides had earlier "agreed to coordinate closely at multilateral forums, including at the UN Security Council where both India and Vietnam will serve concurrently as non-permanent members in 2021.

3 MP cops among 5 arrested in Noida for extortion, conspiracy

Noida, Dec. 20: Five people, including two sub-inspectors and a constable of the Madhya Pradesh police, have been arrested in Noida for alleged criminal conspiracy and extortion, officials said on Sunday.

The policemen arrested belong to the cyber cell of Jabalpur zone in MP and have been charged with extortion and criminal conspiracy while the other two are brothers facing a ponzi case, the officials said.

Additional commissioner of police (Law and Order) Love Kumar said a four-member police team from Jabalpur had come to Noida on December 15 to probe the ponzi case lodged there, but three of them were themselves found

involved in extortion and conspiracy.

"Suryabhan Yadav was accused in the ponzi case in which a person identified as Chandrakant Dubey was a complainant. The MP police team had come to investigate that matter but intended to make money from Yadav and offered to release him," Mr Kumar told reporters.

"The police officials had picked up Yadav from his office in Sector 62 here the following day (December 16) and taken ₹4.70 lakh from him. They had also offered to get one of Yadav's bank accounts in Sector 18 defroze in exchange for some money. This account had ₹58 lakh and was frozen by the MP police," he said.

Those held have been identified as Rashid Farvez Khan and Pankaj Sahu, both sub-inspectors at the cyber cell of Jabalpur zone of the MP police; constable Asif Khan; and Suryabhan Yadav and Shashikant Yadav, both natives of Azamgarh district in Uttar Pradesh and accused in the ponzi case, Mr Kumar said.

An Apple MacBook used in the crime and eight mobile phones belonging to different companies have been seized from the accused, the police said. An FIR has been lodged at Noida's Sector 20 police station under the Indian Penal Code Sections 395 (dacoity), 384 (extortion), and 120B (criminal conspiracy), the police added. — PTI

■ Scintillating knock by Rihaan Kohar (210 not out), Aarav Jeph (32)

JB Sports outplay Kuldeep Diwan Academy in U-12 tri-series match

AGE CORRESPONDENT
GURUGRAM, DEC. 20

Outstanding partnership of 268 runs between Rihaan Kohar (210 not out) and Aarav Jeph, the wall of his team, scoring 32 runs with great patience, helped JB Sports, Gurugram to win their U-12 cricket match against Kuldeep Diwan Academy, Gurugram in a Tri-series match at Florence cricket ground by 147 runs on Sunday.

After winning the toss and deciding to bat first, JB Sports were tottering at 49 runs for 5 wickets but exceptional batting by Rihaan, who hit 16 fours & 11 sixes, and Aarav bailed



JB Sports' Rihaan Kohar and Aarav Jeph celebrate their innings at Florence cricket ground in Gurugram on Sunday.

the team out and JB Sports scored 339 runs for 8 wickets in 40 overs. Aarav played defensive to keep his partner Rihaan

on striking end. Chasing the high score, Kuldeep Diwan Academy almost collapsed and were all out for 192 runs in 35.5

overs. Only Poorab could manage to hit a century and he played a very good knock but others could not perform. For JB Sports, Yatharth Sharma took 4 wickets for 42 runs, Vyom Singh took 2 for 26 runs, Naman thakur 2 for 43 and Aarav took 1 important wicket for 20 in 8 overs and bowled exceptionally well.

Scoreboard: JB Sports 339/8 in 40 overs (Rihaan Kohar 210 not out, Aarav Jeph 32, Kush Gaur 4 for 53). **Kuldeep Diwan Academy 192 all out in 35.5 overs** (Poorab 100, Yatharth Sharma 4 for 42, Vyom Singh 2 for 26, Naman Thakur 2 for 43, Aarav Jeph 1 for 20).

SHORT TAKES

BJP, JD-S dismiss reports on merger

Bengaluru: The BJP and JD(S) in Karnataka on Sunday dismissed reports of their merger after a saffron party leader opined that political polarisation was likely in the state, giving rise to speculations about the parties coming together. Both chief minister B.S. Yediyurappa and JD(S) leader H.D. Kumaraswamy termed media reports in this regard as “imaginary”. “I have a feeling that the political polarisation will intensify in the coming days in the country... The Modi wave and the BJP wave is clearly visible... I have a gut feeling that the same polarisation will take place in Karnataka as well,” state vice-president Aravind Limbavali told reporters while briefing them about BJP’s preparations for the coming local body polls in the state. — PTI

CRPF jawan found hanging from tree

Shamli, UP: A Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) soldier was found hanging from a tree in a suspected case of suicide in Uttar Pradesh’s Shamli district, police said on Sunday. “He hanged himself from a tree on Saturday evening. The cause behind him taking the extreme step is yet to be ascertained,” the local police said in a statement. The CRPF soldier identified as Rajeev had come on leave to his native village in Issipur Teel village for three weeks. He was found hanging near his house in the village, Kandhla police station SHO Rojant Tyagi said. The soldier was posted in West Bengal. — PTI

China names Gen. to take charge of India border

■ **Continued from Page 1**
command. The outgoing Gen. Zhao was its commander since 2016 and had headed it during the Doklam crisis in 2017 with the Indian Army. It was under his watch this year that China had launched its most aggressive military buildup against India since the 1962 war. Gen. Zhao had earlier this year reached the upper limit of 65 years to hold such commands in China. The new commander, Gen. Zhang, is reported to have no experience of the Western Theatre Command and was earlier posted in the Central Theatre Command, in charge of the capital Beijing’s security. He will be heading the PLA’s land forces, air force and rocket force in the region. Last week, during the foreign ministry-level talks — Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs — the two sides had agreed to hold the next round of military talks at an early date. However, sources said that right now no date has yet been set for a corps’ commanders meeting between the two sides.

The military standoff between India and China in eastern Ladakh has entered in its eighth month, with no agreement on disengagement in sight. The winter season and snow in the upper reaches has for the time being reduced the possibility of an armed confrontation between the two sides. However, soldiers deployed in frontline bases in Ladakh are now fighting the elements, with temperatures way below sub-zero levels.

26,624 new Covid cases, 341 deaths in India in last 24 hrs

Maharashtra makes wearing of masks mandatory for next 6 months

SANJAY KAW
NEW DELHI, DEC. 20

India recorded 26,624 new cases of the coronavirus disease, 341 related deaths and 29,690 recoveries in the last 24 hours.

Delhi recorded 1,091 fresh cases the lowest in around four months, as the total number of such cases climbed to 6,17,005 in the national capital, authorities said. Twenty-six more fatalities pushed the death count due to the disease to 10,277 in the city. The positivity rate stood at 1.31 per cent.

This is the sixth consecutive day when the positivity rate has remained below two per cent. It stood at 1.3 per cent on Saturday, 1.6 per cent on Friday and

DELHI COVID WATCH

6,17,005
CASES REGISTERED10,277
FATALITIES SO FAR

1.51 per cent on Thursday. Maharashtra, which along with Kerala accounts for 40 per cent of total coronavirus cases, has made wearing of masks mandatory for the next six months. In the US, which accounts for the highest number of coronavirus infections in the world, a study has shown that men have a 30 per cent higher

risk of dying from the deadly virus compared to women of the same age and health status.

While addressing people of the state on social media, Maharashtra CM Uddav Thackeray said experts were in favour of imposing night curfew or another lockdown, but he was not in favour of these steps. He said: “The coronavirus situation in the state is under control, though not completely... Prevention is better than cure. Wearing of mask at public places should be made a habit for another six months at least.”

Globally, UK PM Boris Johnson imposed a full lockdown on London and large parts of southeast England in a desperate

attempt to stop a new strain of coronavirus that is spreading rapidly in the region. Sydney also widened restrictions following 30 new local Covid-19 cases in the past 24 hours amid a growing outbreak in the Australian city’s Northern Beaches area. South Korea also reported a surge after an outbreak in a Seoul prison infected 185 people. In India, the number of fresh infections was 5.8 per cent higher than Saturday, when the country registered 25,152 cases to take the total infections to over one crore mark. The country, however, remained in the number one position in terms of the number of recovered cases, followed by Brazil.

■ Ad has pictures of Modi, Atal and CM Shivraj

MP varsity starts course for quacks, triggers row

RABINDRA NATH
CHOUDHURY
BHOPAL, DEC. 20

A university in Madhya Pradesh has announced to introduce an online certificate course for “jholachap doctors (quacks)” to legalise their profession, inviting criticism from health experts.

Atal Behari Vajpayee Hindi University run by the state government here has issued an advertisement seeking application from quacks for admission into one-year-online certificate course, christened as “First aid treatment specialist diploma course”, costing ₹24,000.

The advertisement which has pictures of PM Narendra Modi, former PM Atal Behari Vajpayee

and CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan, has said the quacks can practice legally by opening their first aid treatment clinics to treat the patients after completing the course.

The ad has invited criticism from health experts and Opposition Congress.

“It (the course) is a move to give legal cover to quacks to save them from law. This will have a serious repercussion on the health sector in the state. The Medical Council of India (MCI) should take note of it urgently”, leading anti-burn specialist of Madhya Pradesh, Dr Bhubaneswar Garg said.

Besides, the university which has announced to give online certificate courses is not a medical institution to module the

particular certificate course, he added.

“Instead of upgrading the knowledge of the traditional healers, the focus of the government should be on exposing them to the modern health facilities to integrate them in the health sector,” he said.

Congress spokesman J.P. Dhanopia described the course as ‘license to kill patients’ and said there was a move by the state government to legalise quackery to cover up its failure to develop health infrastructure in MP.

BJP spokesman Rahul Kothari, however, defended the university saying that those who have opened their clinics have been given an opportunity by the state government to run their business.

‘Farm protests more political in nature’

Union minister V.K. Singh underlines NDA government’s intent to ensure welfare of ryots

Thanjavur (TN), Dec. 20: Union minister Gen. V.K. Singh (Retd) on Sunday said the on going protests by farmers against the three Central farm laws was “more political” in nature and underlined the NDA government’s intent to ensure the welfare of the ryots.

Speaking to reporters here ahead of his interaction with farmers, the minister of state for road transport and highways claimed that “actual farmers are very happy with what has been done in last six months”.

He sought to allay fears on Minimum Support Price (MSP) and other issues, saying MSP will carry on while contract farming will only benefit the farmers.

“Lot of misconceptions are being given where farmer issue is concerned. Farmers all over India mostly are happy, actual farmers are very happy with what has been done in last six months,” he said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has ensured the benefit goes to the farmers, Gen. Singh said, adding, “the present agitation actually is more political than about farmers”.

Farmers, mainly from Punjab and Haryana, have been protesting for the last 25 days outside Delhi against the recently enacted three farm laws, with five rounds of talks with government so far failing



Youngsters play volley ball at the Kundli border during the farmers’ sit-in protest against the Centre’s new farm laws in Sonapat on Sunday.

— PTI

to break the deadlock. Gen. Singh further said that other political parties, whether Congress, AAP or the NCP led by Sharad Pawar, all of them wanted that farmers should have the freedom from the agricultural produce marketing committee (APMC) and “they didn’t want them tied up to these mandis”.

He said Mr Modi has the “highest regard” for the farm sector and assured the government was with the farmer and pointed out at the various schemes, including insurance and soil card, to benefit

them.

“The government wants the farmer, who feeds the nation, to feel protected, to get the benefit of the government’s protection so that his income can be doubled,” he said.

“The farmer must understand that there are people who are misleading them and that is why I have come here to explain to our farmers that things are good, not as being given out by people,” he said.

The legislations in question aim at protecting the farmer and one of them says the farmer is free to

sell his produce anywhere he wants with “India being one market” for him, Gen. Singh said.

“This is beneficial to the farmer since he can get better price.. what happens in the mandi is price is decided by the middlemen, the commission agents,” he said.

The farmer has now been “freed from this,” but some were insisting “we want the mandis”.

“Mandis are going to stay. No problem in that. A voice is raised on MSP. The bill (Act) says minimum support price will stay,” he added. — PTI

Parl session cancelled to avoid debate on stir: Raut

BHAGWAN PARAB
MUMBAI, DEC. 20

Continuing its attack on the BJP-led Union government over the cancellation of the winter session of the Parliament, Shiv Sena leader Sanjay Raut has claimed that the Centre wanted to avoid discussion on the ongoing farmers’ agitation in Delhi. He has also accused PM Narendra Modi going Russian President Vladimir Putin’s way by not holding the Parliament session.

“What is the need of spending ₹1000 crore on Central Vista project of new Sansad Bhavan, when the government was not interested in holding debates and parliamentary work? The Winter Session of Parliament has been cancelled so that there can be no debate on the ongoing farmers’ protest near Delhi,” said Mr Raut in his weekly column Rokthok (forthright) in the Sena mouthpiece Saamana on Sunday.

Thousands of farmers from Punjab and Haryana have been protesting against the new farm laws.

BJP leader finds name in elected youth Cong body

AGE CORRESPONDENT
BHOPAL, DEC. 20

A BJP leader has found his name in the reconstituted Madhya Pradesh unit of youth Congress, leaving the grand old party red faced.

Harshit Singhal who resigned from Congress and joined BJP 6 months ago has been shown “elected” as general secretary (Jabalpur north assembly seat) of state youth Congress, much to his surprise.

“I quit Congress 6 months ago and joined BJP. I had campaigned for BJP in the November 3 byelections to 28 Assembly constituencies in the state. I am surprised to learn that I was elected to a post of office bearer of youth Congress in the state,” Mr Singhal said on Sunday.

The polls for the posts of office bearers of state youth Congress were completed on December 12 and results of the polls were announced a couple of days ago.

ing home, to be replaced by their family members at the protest sites.

As the protests against the new laws entered the 25th day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday made a surprise visit to Delhi’s Gurdwara Rakabganj and paid tribute to Guru Tegh Bahadur for his supreme sacrifice. Farmers in different parts of India also observed “Shradhanjali Diwas” with prayer meetings to pay homage to those who had lost their lives in the ongoing protests against the three farm laws.

“Those who have died during the protest against the farm laws are the martyrs of Punjab. After getting free from the protest, we will also fight for compensation and government jobs for the families of the martyrs,” said Dharminder Pashore, Lehra block president of BKU

(Ugrahan). So far, 24 farmers have died in the last three weeks during the agitation at the capital’s four key border points — Singhu, Tikri, UP Gate and Chilla.

Seven farmers reportedly died due to the cold and heart attacks at the Tikri border, and six others passed away at the Singhu border. Nine farmers died in road accidents on their way to the protest venues from their villages or while returning home from the protest sites.

One of the leading farmers’ groups playing a major role in the protests has been accused of accepting foreign funds without proper clearances. The Bharatiya Kisan Union (Ugrahan), the largest and most dominant in Punjab which has a huge base, has been issued a warning by a bank and been told to get the mandatory registration done.

Sukhdev Singh Kokri Kalan, its general secretary, said he was called by officials of Punjab and Sindh Bank in Punjab’s Moga district and told about a mail from the forex department.

The group had got ₹8 lakhs to ₹9 lakhs in the past two months, which was cited by bank officials, Mr Singh said. The money is usually sent from Punjabis living abroad who regularly donate for social causes. The group, Mr Singh added, will take a call on its response once they get something in writing from the bank.

Over the last years, the NDA government has tightened implementation of the laws on foreign donations and cracked down on many NGOs for violation of rules. Punjab CM Amarinder Singh has said, however, that the use of tax laws against farmers’

struct the car shed at Aarey Colony and moved the project to salt pan land at Kanjurmarg area. However, the Bombay high court has stayed the work at Kanjurmarg.

Responding to Mr Thackeray, Mr Fadnavis alleged that the CM is still misleading the people and he doesn’t seem to have read the incriminating report submitted by the committee set up by his own government.

Addressing the people of state via social media for 34 minutes, Mr Thackeray said that he was called



“arrogant”, but if wanting the best for Mumbai and Maharashtra was “arrogance” then he acceded to his fault.

“I am being called ‘arrogant’ on the subject of the

Metro car shed. Yes, I am arrogant for Mumbai. We sent the car shed to Kanjurmarg because building it in Aarey was destroying the forest there. First, trees would have been chopped off for a car shed... then for something else... and slowly the whole forest would have been eliminated,” the chief minister added.

Justifying the choice of land at Kanjurmarg for the Metro car shed, Mr Thackeray said the state government gave “costliest” land in the Bandra-Kurla Complex (BKC) for

the central government’s bullet train project, despite opposition. “We did not create obstruction. If you create problems in Kanjurmarg and we do in the BKC, creating problems in each others projects will serve no purpose,” he said.

However, Mr Fadnavis dismissed Maharashtra CM’s contention that relocating the metro car shed project to Kanjurmarg would serve future needs, including availability of land that might be needed for expansion of the infrastructure for metro lines.

No implementation of CAA for now due to Covid: Shah

■ **Continued from Page 1**

Comparing the BJP with the Trinamul Congress, he claimed the saffron party does not have the “culture of corruption or extortion or dynasty politics”. Mr Shah, referring to Ms Banerjee’s challenge to the BJP to impose President’s Rule in West Bengal, observed: “She is perhaps trying to gain sympathy. Such issues are limited to (discussion) between the Centre and the state (government). It cannot be decided openly.”

On the home ministry’s recent order for the Central deputation of three IPS officers from the state cadre, Mr Shah explained: “The letter that the Central government wrote to Ms Banerjee is totally constitutional and legal. The letter is very much within the purview of the federal structure. Ms Banerjee should quote the rules to talk to the Central government and the people.”

Amith Shah plans longer visits to poll-bound Bengal

■ **Continued from Page 1**

Rabindranath Tagore. He also attended a musical performance by students in a bid to connect with Bengali culture.

The TMC criticised the BJP for belittling Tagore over a controversial poster in which the iconic legend was depicted below Mr Shah before his visit to Santiniketan. “We condemn this disrespect to Tagore. We are protesting against it at Jorasanko, Tagore’s residence in Kolkata, all through the day. Those who do not even know Tagore want to grab Bengal,” said TMC minister Subrata Mukherjee.

Mr Shah later had lunch at the home of a Baul artist, Basudeb Das, and led a mega BJP roadshow in Bolpur to make the saffron party’s presence felt in a stronghold of the Trinamul Congress.

Farmers plan relay fasts today, block toll booths

■ **Continued from Page 1**

against the laws across India to observe a day-long fast at their respective protest sites. Bharatiya Kisan Union leader Rakesh Tikait urged people to skip a meal on “Kisan Diwas” on December 23.

The unions have also decided to write to the NDA allies, urging them to oppose the Centre’s stance and request a rollback of the three farm laws. “If the government’s allies refuse to do so, protests would be held against them as well,” Mr Tikait said.

As Delhi recorded its coldest morning this season on Sunday, with the mercury dipping to 3.4 degrees Celsius, thousands of farmers protesting at the national capital’s borders continued with their agitation and were firm on their demand to get the three farm laws repealed. Some farmers also started return-



quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	46,960.69	0.15
Nifty 50	13,760.55	0.14
S&P 500*	3,709.41	-0.35
Dollar (₹)	73.56	0.04
Pound Sterling (₹)	99.31	0.66
Euro (₹)	90.10	-0.13
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	49,644.21	0.042
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	52.17	0.67
IN 10-Yr bond yield	5.959	0.007
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	0.926	-0.004

* As of 9:30 PM IST

India, US mutual fund sectors get thumbs up

The mutual fund industry of India and the US received "top" grade for robust disclosure practices in areas such as fees and transparency of fund holdings, according to a global study by Morningstar. However, India could work to improve the level of details provided by fund firms in discussions of performance and risk within fund literature, the Morningstar report said in its sixth edition

Foreigners invest ₹54K cr in Indian equities in Dec.



Foreign portfolio investors pumped in ₹54,980 crore in Indian markets in December so far amidst availability of excess liquidity in global markets and expectation of fresh stimulus package by various central banks. As per data, FPIs invested a net ₹48,858 crore into equities and ₹6,122 crore into debt segment between December 1 and 18. This took the total net investment to ₹54,980 crore during this period.

BoB completes integration of Dena, Vijaya

Bank of Baroda on Sunday said it has completed integration of 3,898 branches of erstwhile Vijaya Bank and Dena Bank with itself. In a first such amalgamation, Vijaya Bank and Dena Bank were merged with BoB from April 1, 2019. It has completed the integration of 1,770 erstwhile Dena Bank branches in December 2020, and had completed the integration of 2,128 erstwhile Vijaya Bank branches in Sept. 2020.

Power usage in India grows in first half of Dec

India's power consumption grew 4.8 per cent to 50.36 billion units (BU) in the first half of December this year, showing consistency in economic activities, as per government data. Power consumption was recorded at 48.04 billion units during December 1-15 last year, according to the power ministry data. For the full month of December 2019, power consumption was 101.08 billion units.

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RIL, BP to get \$4.06 price cap for KG gas

New Delhi, Dec. 20: Reliance Industries and its partner BP will get only \$4.06 a unit for the new gas they have started to produce from the eastern offshore KG-D6 field even though they have discovered a higher rate in an open market auction, sources said.

Reliance-BP in November 2019 auctioned initial gas from the R-Series field at a biddable percentage of Brent crude oil price. If Brent crude oil stays in the current range of \$50 to \$51 a barrel, the price comes to \$4.2 to 4.4 per million British thermal unit, two sources at the buyers of R-Series gas said. Even though operators have pricing freedom, they can't sell gas at a rate higher than the cap the government notifies every six months. The cap for six months to March 31, 2021, is \$4.06 per mmbtu and so Reliance-BP would get only that amount for the remainder of the current fiscal, they said.



Essar Steel, Adani Group and state-owned GAIL in November 2019 bought the majority of the initial 5 million standard cubic meters per day of gas planned to be produced from R-Series in the KG-D6 block by bidding between 8.5 and 8.6 per cent of dated Brent price. Emails sent to Reliance and BP for comments remained unanswered. The rate discovered in the November 2019 auction at the lower end of the Brent price band is the same as the one that Reliance got in the first

five years of production from Dhirubhai-1 and 3 and MA fields in the KG-D6 block. These fields ceased to produce a few months back. Reliance got \$4.205 per mmbtu for gas from D1 and D3 and MA fields during April 2019 and March 2014. It would have got double of that rate if a new formula proposed by the Rangarajan committee was approved but the new BJP government scrapped it and brought a new formula on pricing gas at rates prevalent in export surplus nations

such as the US and Russia. The rates came to \$5.05 in 2014 and are currently at \$1.79 per mmbtu. Sources said the government in 2016 allowed a higher price for any new gas to be produced from a difficult project such as the deep sea field. R-Cluster field fell in that definition and gas from it was free to be sold but subject to the price cap. The price cap for October 2020 to March 2021 is \$4.06 per mmbtu, down from \$5.61 in the previous six month. Reliance and BP had on November 18 stated that they have the commencement of natural gas production from Asia's deepest gas project, R-Cluster or R-Series. The two firms are investing USD 5 billion in bringing to production three deepwater gas projects in block KG D6 R-Cluster, Satellites Cluster, and MJ which together are expected to meet about 15 per cent of India's gas demand by 2023. — PTI

Network restructure increases cyber attacks

New Delhi, Dec 20: The sudden rush to provide remote access to employees by restructuring network and security systems during the lockdown made India vulnerable to ransomware attacks in the third quarter of 2020, according to cyber security firm Check Point Software Technologies. Due to the immediate push, several IT companies were unable to scale up their cloud security

postures which led to increased opportunity for cyber criminals to carry out attacks, Check Point Software Technologies India and Saarc managing director Sundar N. Balasubramanian said. According to the company's research, India was ranked second after the US among the top 5 countries most affected by ransomware attacks in the third quarter. Sri Lanka, Russia and

Turkey were at third, fourth and fifth position, respectively, in the list of most affected countries by ransomware attacks. In a survey by Check Point, 71 per cent of respondents globally, including in India, reported an increase in cyberattacks during February-March 2020, and 95 per cent said they faced added IT security challenges with provision of large-scale remote access for

employees and managing shadow IT usage. "The pandemic outbreak resulted in lockdown restrictions being imposed, and working from home became a way of life for most employees. Organisations in India found themselves having to restructure their network and security fabrics overnight, compressing several years' worth of IT changes into just a few weeks," he said. — PTI

GOLD DEALERS OFFER DISCOUNTS FOR FIRST TIME IN SIX WEEKS



Bengaluru/Mumbai, Dec. 20: Physical gold in India was sold at a discount for the first time in six weeks as a rebound in local prices to a one-month peak squeezed demand, while purchases slowed in other Asian hubs ahead of the year-end holidays. India's local gold futures jumped to ₹50,642 per 10 grams on Thursday, the highest level since November 18. "Demand is very subdued. Retail buyers are postponing purchases because of a price rise," said Ashok Jain, proprietor of Mumbai-based gold wholesaler Chenaji Narsinghji. Dealers were offering a discount of up to \$1 an ounce over official domestic prices this week, inclusive of a 10 per cent import tax and three per cent sales tax, down from last week's premium of \$2.5.

In China, discounts of \$16-\$20 an ounce were being offered compared with last week's range of \$19-\$24, while gold was being sold at a premium of around \$0.50 cents in Hong Kong. "It's the year-end and jewellers are trying to finish the inventories and they have adequate, so they are not making any new purchases," said Dick Poon, general manager at Heraeus Metals Hong Kong Ltd. China, traditionally the world's biggest consumer of gold, saw a sharp drop in gold consumption due to the coronavirus pandemic, forcing bullion sellers to offer steep discounts in the past few months. "China is still fighting the aftermath of the virus... People are too cautious to spend their savings right now," said Ronald Leung, chief dealer for Lee Cheong Gold Dealers.

Auto firms drive ahead with hope

New Delhi, Dec. 20: Having endured and managed to recover from the disruptions induced by a once-in-a-century event, the Indian auto sector is cautiously looking forward to 2021 with hopes of putting up a better show in the post-Covid-19 world, although a lot will hinge on how the economy grows. Already battered by an unprecedented slowdown before the coronavirus pandemic, the resilience of the Indian auto industry was tested severely when the nationwide lockdown was announced towards March-end. Passenger vehicle sales in India, the barometer of the automobile industry's performance, plunged 78.43 per cent in the April-June period this year hit by the pandemic, declining for the ninth straight quarter and making it the longest slowdown in 20 years. It is estimated that during the prolonged lockdown, the auto industry suffered losses of more

than ₹2,300 crore in turnover for every single day of closure. In order to overcome the unprecedented challenge, the auto industry players embraced digitisation to adapt to the new normal to serve customers while learning to be nimble footed to keep factories running under Covid-19 SOPs and concentrating on financial health by reducing costs and generating free cash flows. The pandemic-induced lockdown also had an impact on the country's transition to BS-VI emission norm from April 1. Reflecting on the impact of the global health crisis on the sector, Society of Indian Automobile Association director-general Rajesh Menon said that the growing preference for personal mobility and the gradual opening of economic activities have lent some momentum and the industry is now seeing signs of recovery in some of the industry segments. — PTI

Stainless steel firms seek zero duty on input metals

New Delhi, Dec. 20: Ahead of the Budget, the Indian Stainless Steel Development Association (ISSDA) has urged the government to remove import duty on ferro-nickel and stainless steel scrap. Currently, ferro-nickel and stainless steel scrap attract basic customs duty

(BCD) of 2.5 per cent. In its recommendations to the finance ministry for the upcoming Budget for financial year 2021-22, ISSDA has also sought removal of import duty on graphite electrodes. ISSDA said "it has appealed to exempt the 2.5 per cent BCD levied while

importing key raw materials, including ferro-nickel and stainless steel scrap". At present, both the raw materials are unavailable in India, making their import mandatory, it said. Removal of duty on ferro-nickel and stainless steel scrap is a long-standing demand of the indus-

try. The Ministry of Steel has also at times batted for zero duty on these items. Stainless steel industry meets the bulk of its nickel requirements through ferro-nickel and stainless steel scrap route. ISSDA has also sought removal of existing 7.5 per cent import duty on

graphite electrodes, a critical component in stainless steel manufacturing which constitutes a major share of input cost. Besides, it has sought an increase in import duty on stainless steel flat products to 12.5 per cent to bring it at par with carbon steel products. — PTI

US inches closer to \$1-trillion relief

Washington, Dec. 20: Top Washington negotiators, propelled by a late-night agreement on the last major obstacle to a Covid-19 economic relief package, said a Sunday agreement is all but inevitable to deliver long-overdue pandemic aid of almost \$1 trillion. "I am very hopeful that we get this done today," House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif.,

told Fox News Channel's Sunday Morning Futures. The breakthrough involved a fight over Federal Reserve emergency powers that was resolved by the Senate's top Democrat and a senior conservative Republican. Aides to lawmakers in both parties said the compromise sparked a final round of negotiations on a handful of remaining issues. An aide to a key GOP

lawmaker said it would likely require all of Sunday to finalise and draft the final agreement, which is already guaranteed to be the largest spending measure yet, combining Covid-19 relief with a \$1.4 trillion omnibus spending bill and reams of other unrelated legislation on taxes, health, infrastructure and education. The measure is finally nearing passage amid a

frightening spike in coronavirus cases and deaths and accumulating evidence that the economy is struggling. Lawmakers and aides say it would establish a temporary \$300 per week supplemental jobless benefits and \$600 direct stimulus payments to most Americans. It would provide a fresh round of subsidies for hard-hit businesses and money for schools, health

care providers and renters facing eviction. President Donald Trump is supportive, particularly of the push for providing more direct payments. "GET IT DONE," he said in a late-night tweet. It would be the first significant legislative response to the pandemic since the \$1.8 trillion CARES Act passed virtually unanimously in March. — AP

Centre identifies 1.3 lakh housing units for poor

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, DEC. 20

The government has identified 1.32 lakh government-funded vacant housing units for the Affordable Rental Housing Scheme meant for migrant workers in 21 states. However, all the states, which have such identified units, have not signed Memorandum of Agreement for the scheme.

As per the ministry of housing and urban affairs, 29 states and Union Territories have already signed the MoA (Memorandum of Agreement) for implementation of ARHC. The Centre has also identified 1,32,988 housing units for ARHC in 21 states.

The highest number of units identified for the scheme falls in Delhi. Though Delhi has 39 per cent share or 51,594 identified units, it has not signed the MoA for the scheme yet, as per the data available on the website of ministry of housing and urban affairs. Though the government has identified units in Jammu and Kashmir, the Union Territory also has not signed the MoA. Among those already signed MoA, Maharashtra has the highest number of units- 32,202. As per the ministry data, 3,363 identified units – 1703 in Chandigarh, 830 each in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand – have been allocated. "We are not sure whether these units have been allocated to concessionaires who will



convert them for the scheme or migrants have started occupying the units," said Anuj Puri, chairman of Anarock Property Consultants. As per the first model of ARHC, concessionaires selected through a bidding process, will repair or retrofit, develop, operate and transfer (RDOT) by converting existing government-funded vacant houses into Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHCs) for a period of 25 years. "Several units built under previous housing schemes of the Central government are lying vacant in different cities. The first model aims at utilizing them for the scheme," said Puri. As per the second model, public or private entities can construct, operate and maintain AHRCs on their own vacant land. Under this model, the Ministry had issued an Expression of Interest on October 14. The last date of submission of EOI is January 11, 2021.

HOME LOAN TICKET SIZE UP TO OVER ₹26 LAKH IN 2020 ON INCENTIVES



New Delhi, Dec. 20: The average home loan ticket size increased to over ₹26 lakh in 2020 despite the pandemic as Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, fall in interest rates as well as lower registration costs in some circles evinced customers' interest in buying properties, according to a study by BankBazaar.com. Due to the pandemic, people's priorities have changed and they are evaluating their spends and investments very closely, the fintech player said. The online marketplace for financial products, which also provides free credit scores, said even as 2020 had very lean months during the lockdown, gradual economic revival and safe access to credit through digital KYC pushed credit uptake to about 80 per cent of pre-Covid levels. Change in social and work structure due to the pandemic also convinced investors to look at bigger properties and loans. "Consequently, the average home loans ticket size saw a strong increase from ₹23.82 lakh in 2019 to ₹26.41 lakh in 2020. The average ticket size for women went up from ₹25.66 lakh to ₹31.20 lakh compared with an increase from ₹23.64 lakh to ₹26.04 lakh for men," the report said. However, the traction was the lowest in high-value segment.

Share of home loans below ₹30 lakh decreased to 68 per cent from 72 per cent a year ago. Demand from non-metros is the biggest driver for recovery, it said. During the year, the biggest home loan of ₹1.46 crore was from Bengaluru, while among non-metros, the highest was ₹64.50 lakh from Lucknow.



THE ASIAN AGE

21 DECEMBER 2020

Oz ‘summer of 36’ a blot that can never be erased

Team India were bowled out for their lowest score (36) after 88 years in Test cricket. Compare that with a home record of eight victories in home Tests in the last three years, each win by huge margins and the genesis of the batsmen’s problems becomes apparent. The fact that this stunning collapse of technique happened in the most modern professional era, in which players even have mental conditioning coaches aiding their preparation and fine-tuning, multiplies the shame heaped upon Virat Kohli’s men at the Adelaide Oval. This is the first time in 143 years of Test cricket that 11 batsmen plus Mr Sundries have failed to get into double figures in an innings. Such a statistical adornment further erodes the reputation of Indian batting, built by such men as Col C.K. Nayudu, Nawab of Pataudi Jr, Sunil Gavaskar, Sachin Tendulkar and many others.

The Australian bowlers were brilliant in executing flawlessly their plan of attack on a fresh day of the Test. They preyed upon an atavistic weakness of Indian batsmen on foreign pitches and atmosphere against a ball that moves in the air and/or off the seam at great pace.

And they did so with sustained precision with the trio of fast bowlers suppressing their egos and invariably pitching the ball right up to the batsmen and moving it just that fraction to entice the edge and bring into play the cordon of close-in catchers. Indian batting collapses may have been common enough in South Africa, England, Australia and New Zealand where Team India has won only one series in the last eight years, and that against an Australian team weakened by the absence of Smith and Warner. This one stung more.

The fear is not without basis that Indian cricketers have become too complacent in life and career as “white ball” millionaires. That none except the captain Kohli averages 40 in away Tests in the last three years is illustrative of the current teams failures. On the slow, turning pitches of home, the same men can appear invincible. The quality obviously lacking in our batsmen is mental toughness to perform their best in alien conditions, which is the eternal barometer of cricketing merit in which M.S. Dhoni’s team excelled. The team led by the current captain boasts of neither winning World Cup performances nor great Test wins outside the subcontinent.

Kohli is coming back home on paternity leave, which is an empathetic concession to family in modern life. Kane Williamson of New Zealand is another who availed of it most recently. Brian Lara named his first daughter Sydney after his favourite city with an attractive cricket ground but it is unlikely that Kohli would name his daughter after Adelaide, a British queen. While the granting of such latitude for to-be fathers in pro sport is to be lauded, Kohli would have to mind what he says publicly as any contentious comments like his being a “representation of a New India” would be subject to severe scrutiny after the Adelaide “day & nightmare”. At most times, Kohli’s bat does the talking and it is better it remains that way.

High-stakes game in J&K

The Enforcement Directorate, a financial fraud investigation agency of the Centre, on Saturday attached residential and commercial properties of Farooq Abdullah, inarguably Kashmir’s most eminent mainstream political leader. Dr Abdullah is the president of the storied political party of Kashmir, the National Conference, which had been founded by his late father, the legendary Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah. This is the party that ushered in the modern era in Kashmir with the closure of feudal rule and voluntarily opted to link its fate with “Gandhi’s India”, as Dr Abdullah recently had occasion to remind Delhi. Dr Abdullah is also a former chief minister and president of the Gupkar Alliance, a coalition of mainstream parties committed to restore J&K’s autonomous state ended forcibly — constitutionally speaking — on August 5 last year.

The ED is evidently investigating a scam in the J&K Cricket Association of which Dr Abdullah was president for about 10 years. The investigating agency’s action against Dr Abdullah rests on its belief — it is no more than that — that the former CM swindled about ₹12 crore of JKCA funds by laundering money. This is not a new allegation and there has been ample opportunity over the years for the Centre to investigate and bring charges. But instead of proving its case before a competent court, the investigating agency has taken *suo motu* action. On the face of it, this doesn’t sit right at all.

Under the Narendra Modi government, prominent opponents of the BJP in several states have had serious allegations of corruption against them scuttled once they switched sides to join BJP. Dr Abdullah has done the opposite. He has mobilised mainstream political opinion in Kashmir along with PDP leader (and also a former CM) Mehbooba Mufti to challenge New Delhi’s action of ending J&K’s constitutional autonomy on which its joining the Union of India was conditional in 1947. It is easy to see that Dr Abdullah’s political stance has irked the Centre. If it hopes to break him and by doing so break the mood of resistance in Kashmir to the ending of autonomy, New Delhi is playing a high stakes game.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Kishwar
Desai
London Diary



End in sight to Brexit limbo; Xmas lockdown a big dampener

It was the worst news that could have come for Londoners preparing for Christmas. Just as the high streets spilled over with people shopping for presents (with social distancing) the news came that a new strain of the Coronavirus is rampaging through the southeast of the country. Suddenly infections are going up more than 25 per cent. Instead of being freed up — Londoners are now looking at a very severe lockdown as this new strain has to be stopped in its tracks. The only good news is that the new strain will not “nullify” the impact of the vaccine. The Pfizer vaccine has already been administered to more than three lakhs in the UK... but of course that is just the first shot! The second shot is still awaited.

The reimposition of a severe lockdown has meant that instead of queuing up to buy presents — suddenly people are queuing up to abandon London. A Christmas spent in lockdown will be the worst blow to families who need to bond emotionally after a whole year spent, off and on,

in isolation. We have been lucky as where we live in London there are vast open green spaces — but other areas which are more crowded face the brunt of the problem.

Not more than a fortnight ago, we were told that for the five days around Christmas we will be free to celebrate Christmas almost as we used to. Three households could get together and celebrate and then part. It was great news.

No longer. Rules are changing so rapidly that it is hard to remember what you can and cannot do and there are severe and very public penalties for abandoning the rules.

Kay Burley heads the morning slot of Sky News. She can claim to be the woman with the longest time in front of camera on live TV as a journalist. We were even entertained with graphic details of her facelift a few years back, in the glossy magazines. So she is a celebrity with no hope of privacy! The morning slot is competitive and Kay has the biggest following. Recently, she

had a party for her sixtieth birthdays with friends — 10 people in all. They booked two tables at a “Covid-compliant” restaurant, one with six and the other with four guests. But then she was seen briefly popping into another club. Someone took a photo on their phone and it was in the news on an online channel, Guido Fawkes.

Sky News management took this breach (popping into another restaurant) very seriously. Kay Burley was reprimanded and put on suspension till sometime in the New Year. She had to apologise. Her invited guests included Beth Rigby who is the Sky political correspondent. She was also suspended. No one is quite sure which regulation was broken but it looked bad in the public eyes. Yes, ministers and advisers had broken the rules six months back without as much as an apology. No longer.

Of course, there is also the continuing good news of the vaccine being administered systematically, largely to the 80 years and above group. Beginning Tuesday

of last week, the first few to be vaccinated included an Indian couple, Hari Shukla and his wife Ranjan. The Queen will get it soon along with Prince Philip. This is the first bit the government has got right after a year of blundering around Covid. But who is complaining? Meghnad just got his shot! NHS, that national treasure, follows up on each case, ensuring no one is left out.

Sadly, theatres had just opened full of hope 10 days ago but they have had to shut again. The Christmas Pantomime shows, which are a favourite of children where stars and even famous politicians play bit parts, were also revived. William and Kate took their children to see one. They were lucky. Now the Pantos are shut.

Our other anxiety is about Brexit. That is another contagion that gobbled up UK and spat out another Partition... when the UK leaves the European Union. It is a complicated process and negotiations have been going on forever.

It is a sort of push me plus pull you. We hear one day that the deal is done and the next that we will “Brexite” with no-deal. Either way the uncertainty will be over in the first week of January. But, meanwhile, we may run out fresh fruit and medicines, which come daily from the continent! Our export lorries will also be held up in long queues. The deadline is midnight on December 31. At least, they are promising that Big Ben (which is still under repair) will chime the arrival of the New Year.

But the rest, no one knows. Between A for anxiety, B for Brexit and C for Coronavirus, we may need a new alphabet and a new language very soon to express our feelings about 2020, as it leaves us with a parting shot. V is both for victory and for vaccine!

Kishwar Desai is an award-winning author. The Longest Kiss: The Life and Times of Devika Rani is her new book.

Subhani



Parl dysfunctional due to competitive politics



Mohan
Guruswamy

Nothing much need be said as to how dysfunctional our Parliament has now become. The blight has been a long time in the making and Parliament has now become a place more for political theatre than thoughtful consideration of the nation’s many problems. The first Lok Sabha worked for almost 4,000 hours while the 16th Lok Sabha functioned for just 1,615 hours.

Democracy is not just about an elected Parliament and periodic elections. Democracy is point-less without debate and discussion. Democracy is a system of government by compromises and accommodation. That is why it’s called a reconciliatory system, where the myriad aspirations of individuals, groups, regions and nations are sought to be reconciled towards the common good. It is hence a government by discussion and debate, for the method of making choices is by common consent and acceptance. A prime prerequisite for democratic functioning is institutional order and coherence.

Unfortunately, what we have been witnessing in the recent past is the collapse of institutional order and coherence. Parliament is where these aspirations are intended to be reconciled, and Parliament has become increasingly dysfunctional.

Politics in India has been becoming increasingly adversarial and anything goes as long as it accrues to the gains of the adversaries. Imagine a game of chess where instead of two sides — black and white — we have one more side say in red playing on a three-sided board. The objective of each of the players would be to destroy the pawns and powers of the other sides and capture

their kings. Now complicate this a bit more. The rules of the game could allow any two sides to combine for a certain length of time against the third or any other combination. This game then gets very complex, with colours switching sides at will to make gains.

The Indian political system might very well have more than three colours. But we can see three major sides in the political spectrum for now. These are the BJP, the Congress and the loose alliance of the former Janata Dal factions and the regional parties, commonly called the Third Front. From 1969 to 1989 the BJP (formerly Jan Sangh) and the precursor factions of the Janata Dal used to combine against the Congress. The political and economic goals of the three major groupings in Indian politics do not differ very much. They are all committed to a raucous democracy and an increasingly populist economic system.

The evolution of our politics into a non-ideological political competition has seen the demise of discussion and debate within Parliament. The expansion of 24x7 television news channels and their vacuous talk shows aimed at garnering TRPs rather than spreading light has only accelerated this process. Parliament still meets and passes bills and enacts laws, but most of this is done without the debate and discussion that they require and which we expect. Even the Union Budget is barely discussed. The defence budget has not been discussed for years now. Parliament even functions without quorums for most of the time.

In this situation, the political adversaries pick issues to stall important political statements the ruling party is invested in. The GST Bill is a case in point. The BJP opposed

a GST as long as it was in the Opposition. The BJP states, including Gujarat led by Narendra Modi, were very vociferous in their opposition. To the Congress then, the GST was a symbol of its commitment to the reforms process. Now the sides have been reversed. The Congress is hoisting the BJP on its own petard.

One has to look beyond sundry ambitions of individual politicians for this dysfunctionality. There are serious institutional flaws in our parliamentary system too. For instance, the Opposition has little say on the agenda for discussion. Our rules allow for somewhat stronger governmental control over the agenda than many other Parliaments.

The Speaker of Britain’s House of Commons presides over its debates, determining which members may speak, for maintaining order during the debate, and may punish members who break the rules of the House. Unlike the presiding officers of legislatures in many other countries, the Speaker remains strictly nonpartisan, and renounces all affiliation with his or her former political party when taking office as well as when leaving office.

Customarily, the House of Commons re-elects Speakers who desire to continue in office for more than one term.

On the other hand, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives is an active and partisan leadership position, and the incumbent actively works to set the majority party’s legislative agenda.

The office of the Speaker of the Lok Sabha is modelled after the British Speaker. But in India, with its rather lesser regard for convention, the Speaker continues to be a

The BJP opposed a GST as long as it was in the Opposition... Now the sides have been reversed. The Congress is hoisting the BJP on its own petard.

party hack and works closely with the government that chose him or her to further the party’s political agenda. It is little wonder then that the Lok Sabha Speaker, despite the show of deference and frequent reference by the MPs, actually commands little authority to control the House. On the other hand, Opposition members often feel stonewalled because of the Speaker’s political affiliations. This is perhaps why the Lok Sabha ever so often witnesses so much disorder and wilful disobedience. This convention of having a Speaker from within must be re-examined and we might be better served by having Parliament presided over by an eminent and commonly trusted individual, perhaps like a retired Chief Justice, who might bring a more enlightened view of right and wrong to the office.

Then there is the Anti-Defection Act that seriously limits free discussion by muzzling inner-party discussion and expression of dissent. This law disrespects the essential reality that Members of Parliament or the state legislatures are representatives of the people. That they are members of a political party is only incidental. The elected members are intended to represent and protect the interests of the people who elect them, and not that of a handful of leaders. It makes them subservient to the whip on the pain of expulsion. This tyranny of the whip has turned MPs virtually into marionettes who are forced to act according to the wishes of the party leadership. Most party leaderships are now vested within families and clans, and leadership is usually hereditary or extra-institutional.

So where do we go from here? And where will we discuss and debate just that?

The writer, a policy analyst studying economic and security issues, held senior positions in government and industry. He also specialises in the Chinese economy.

LETTERS

DYING PRINT

Shocked to read that *Mumbai Mirror* and *Pune Mirror* published their final daily print editions. On December 5, the Times Group, which published the papers, said that the economic crisis induced by the Covid-19 pandemic made them unviable. *Mumbai Mirror* will now be launched as a weekly while continuing to publish online. This is a huge blow to journalists. Many papers across the nation closed their editions during the lockdown. Is the print media dying at last?

Bhagwan Thadani
Mumbai

GROWING FOOTPRINT

IN YET ANOTHER sign of the BJP’s growing clout, six MLAs and one MP of the Trinamul Congress, including former minister and CM Mamata Banerjee’s once-trusted lieutenant, Suwendu Adhikari, joined the saffron party at a rally addressed by Union home minister Amit Shah in Kolkata. The defectors were not limited to the ruling Trinamul as one legislator each from the CPI(M), the CPI, and the Congress also broke ranks to join the BJP. Sounding an ominous warning, the Home minister declared that the tsunami he was witnessing in West Bengal would leave Ms Banerjee alone by election time. The developments do not portend well for the Trinamul.

N.J. Ravi Chandar
Bengaluru

SYCOPHANTS ALL

IN AUGUST, 23 senior leaders of the Congress sent a letter to interim party president Sonia Gandhi calling for sweeping changes. How much importance the party leadership attached to it is clear from the fact that four months later Sonia Gandhi met some of the G-23 leaders and a day before the meeting, party spokesperson Randeep Surjewala declared that 99.99 per cent Congressmen want Rahul Gandhi to continue as president of the party. The real problem with the Congress is the culture of sycophancy in it. Those nourishing it are the ones responsible for the party’s downfall.

M.C. Joshi
Lucknow

₹500 for the best letter of the week goes to R. Narayanan (Dec. 14). Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com.

SHORT TAKES

NOV. 2 VIENNA
ATTACK: TWO
MORE NABBED

Vienna, Dec. 20: Austrian prosecutors said Sunday that another two suspects have been arrested for alleged involvement in the November 2 terrorist attack in Vienna.

The two men — one of whom is a 26-year-old Austrian of Afghan origin — were arrested on Friday, a spokeswoman for the prosecutors' office said.

She declined to reveal the nationality of the other suspect.

A request would be made later on Sunday for them to be held until trial, the spokeswoman added.

Last month, an Islamic State supporter who had been convicted and imprisoned for trying to join the IS group in Syria went on a shooting rampage in central Vienna, killing four people, aged between 21 and 44.

JIHADISTS KILL 5
SOLDIERS, KIDNAP
35 IN NIGERIA

Kano, Nigeria, Dec. 20: Five Nigerian soldiers were killed when Islamic State-aligned jihadists ambushed a military convoy and more than 30 civilians were also kidnapped in another attack, military sources said on Sunday.

The military convoy was hit in northeast Borno state on Saturday, and militants also attacked a transport convoy in the same region a day before, abducting 35 people and killing one woman.

Nigeria's Boko Haram and a splinter group, the Islamic State West Africa Province, have killed 36,000 people and displaced around two million as part of a decade-long conflict. Saturday's attack on the military convoy took place outside of Mafa, 41 kilometres north of the regional capital Maiduguri. "The terrorists fired an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) on the convoy which hit one of the vehicles with five soldiers in it," one security source said.

BIDEN, MEXICO
PREZ DISCUSS
MIGRATION

Washington, Dec. 20: US President-elect Joe Biden told Mexico's president Saturday he was committed to addressing the root causes of poor Latino migrants crossing the border into America.

Outgoing President Donald Trump made tightening the southern frontier against what he called the free and dangerous flow of people entering the US from Mexico and Central America a key pillar of his US-centric policy on immigration, including his fitful plan to build a border wall.

Biden spoke Saturday with President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and emphasized "the need to reinvigorate US-Mexico cooperation to ensure safe and orderly migration," the Biden transition team said in a statement.

"The two leaders noted a shared desire to address the root causes of migration in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and southern Mexico and to build a future of greater opportunity and security for the region," the team said.

'ICE MAN' SETS
NEW RECORD IN
FREEZING CABIN

Wattrelos, France, Dec. 20: Frenchman Romain Vandendorpe on Saturday set a world record for sitting immersed in ice cubes for the longest time, enduring the extreme challenge to raise money for childhood cancers.

The 34-year-old health worker remained buried up to his neck in ice in a plexiglass cabin for two hours, 35 minutes and 43 seconds, breaking the previous record by 40 minutes in the northern French town of Wattrelos.

He said he trained to "overcome human limits" by neuro-cognitive techniques based on "imagination and concentration" to put himself in "a state of daydreaming." The feat was performed before some 50 people and Vandendorpe's mantra for success was simple.

"If we train, if we give our all, we can advance (and) obtain results that can improve things." His training techniques included sitting in an ice-cold jacuzzi, training in a 500-litre freezer and then remaining buried in snow in the French ski resort of Chamonix.

He aims to donate the money raised through his feat to the Wonder Augustine association founded in Wattrelos.

England, Italy get ready for curbs

As Christmas approaches, Europe battles a winter surge including a more infectious new strain

Belgians, Dutch
halt UK flights
over virus variant

Berlin, Dec. 20: The Netherlands and Belgium on Sunday banned flights from the UK and Germany considered limiting such flights in attempt to ensure that a new strain of Coronavirus sweeping across southern England does not establish a strong foothold on the continent.

The Netherlands banned flights from the UK for at least the rest of the year while Belgium issued a flight ban for 24 hours starting at midnight and also halted train links to Britain. German officials were considering "serious options" regarding incoming flights from the UK, but have not yet taken action.

The Netherlands said it will assess "with other European Union nations the possibilities to contain the import of the virus from the United Kingdom."

The three EU governments say their response comes in reaction to tougher measures imposed Saturday in London and surrounding areas by British PM Boris Johnson. He immediately put those regions into a new Tier 4 level of restrictions, saying that a fast-moving new variant of the virus that is 70 per cent more transmissible than existing strains appears to be driving the rapid spread of new infections in London and southern England.

"There's no evidence to suggest it is more lethal or causes more severe illness," the British prime minister stressed, or that vaccines will be less effective against it.

Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said Sunday said he was issuing the flight ban for 24 hours starting at midnight "out of precaution." "There are a great many questions about this new mutation and if it is not already on the mainland," he said. He hoped to have more clarity by Tuesday.

Germany has not yet

● **THE WORLD** Health Organisation is calling on its members in Europe to strengthen measures against Coronavirus due to the new variant circulating in the United Kingdom, its European branch said.

● Outside Britain, nine cases of the new strain have been reported in Denmark, as well as one case in the Netherlands and another in Australia, according to the WHO.

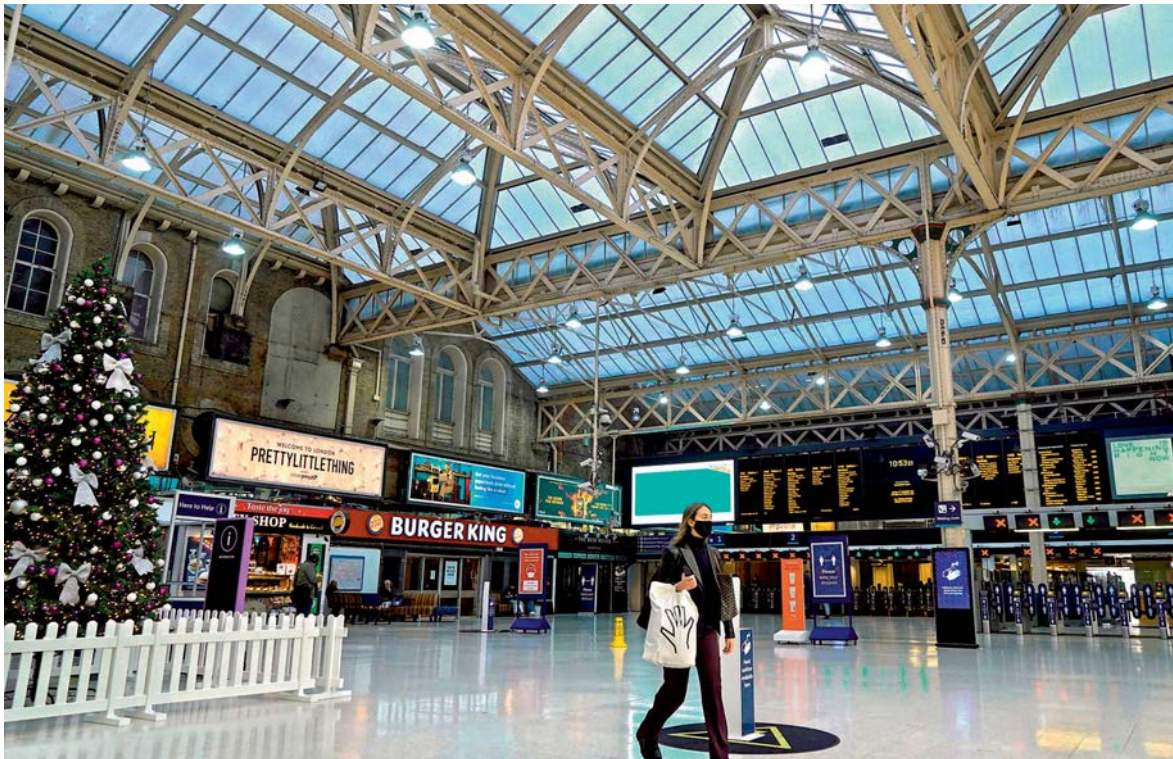
● "Across Europe, where transmission is intense and widespread, countries need to redouble their control and prevention approaches," a WHO Europe spokeswoman said.

spelled out a ban but is considering limiting or halting flights from the UK as well. A high-ranking German official said that restrictions on flights from Britain are a "serious option." Germany, which holds the rotating presidency of the 27-nation EU, was in contact with its neighbours and was following all developments about the new variant closely. Europe has been walloped this fall by soaring new infections and deaths due to a resurgence of the virus, and many nations have reimposed a series of restrictions to reign in their outbreaks.

Britain has seen over 67,000 deaths in the pandemic, the second-highest confirmed toll in Europe after Italy.

Johnson on Saturday closed all non-essential shops, hairdressers, gyms and pools and told Britons to reorganise their holiday plans. No mixing of households is now allowed indoors in Tier 4 areas, including London, and only essential travel is permitted into and out of such areas.

— AP



A pedestrian, wearing a face mask or covering due to the Covid-19 pandemic, walks through an almost deserted concourse at Charing Cross train station in London on Sunday.

— AFP

Bibi gets Covid vaccine
jab, Israel rollout starts

Ramat Gan, Israel, Dec. 20: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu received a Covid-19 vaccine jab on Saturday, kicking off a national rollout over the coming days.

Netanyahu, 71, and Israel's health minister were injected with the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine live on TV at Sheba Medical Center in Ramat Gan, near Tel Aviv. "I asked to be vaccinated first, together with Health Minister Yuli Edelstein, to serve as personal examples and encourage you to be vaccinated," Netanyahu told the television audience.

Each recipient must receive a booster shot in three weeks for optimal protection from the novel coronavirus. Latest Israeli health ministry figures reported over 370,000 people had tested positive for the

● **SANTA CLAUS** can safely deliver gifts to good girls and boys on Christmas, after a special visitor went all the way to the North Pole to deliver a Coronavirus vaccine. Anthony Fauci, the top infectious disease official in the United States, said Saturday he personally gave Old St Nick his jab.

Netanyahu spent Monday to Friday in self-isolation after coming into contact with a confirmed virus patient.

— AFP

SYDNEY REPORTS
30 COVID CASES
IN LAST 24 HOURS

Sydney, Dec. 20: The outbreak in Sydney's northern beach suburbs has grown to 70 cases with an additional 30 in the last 24 hours, and authorities say they may never be able to trace the source.

While the numbers are rising, New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian said Sunday there has not been evidence of massive seeding outside the northern beaches community. A new list of cases, however, shows the virus had spread to greater Sydney and other parts of the state. The government has imposed a lockdown in the area until Wednesday.

Residents will only be permitted to leave their homes for five basic reasons, including medical care, exercise, grocery shop, work or for compassionate care reasons. State Chief Health Officer Kerry Chant said that contact tracers are yet to locate patient zero.

— AP

HIGHEST DAILY
SPIKE OF 548
IN THAILAND

Bangkok, Dec. 20: Thailand reported more than 500 new Coronavirus cases on Saturday, the country's highest daily tally.

The 548 new cases, most of them connected with an outbreak at a wholesale seafood market on the outskirts of Bangkok, came after the country saw only a small number of infections over the past several months due to strict border and quarantine controls. Health officials said 516 of the new cases, most of them migrant workers from Myanmar, were found in connection with the outbreak at the Klang Koong shrimp market in Samut Sakhon province.

All of those infections were linked to a 67-year-old seafood vendor who tested positive for the virus earlier, the director-general of the Department of Medical Sciences, Opas Karnkawinpong, said in a news conference broadcast to all TV channels on Saturday night. The first case at the market was confirmed on Thursday.

— AP

'Be transparent in
rollout of vaccine'

Tokyo, Dec. 20: Pharmaceutical firms must be "very transparent" about the risks and benefits of vaccines in efforts to end the coronavirus pandemic, the head of Asia's largest drugmaker has said.

Takeda, one of the world's biggest pharmaceutical companies, is not developing its own vaccine but has contracts with several firms to distribute their jabs in Japan and is also testing a virus treatment.

"We have to manage the situation well, be very transparent and extremely educative in the way we introduce products," chief executive Christophe Weber said in an interview.

"Medicines or vaccines are never perfect... there are always some side effects," said Weber, who joined Takeda in 2014 and took the top job a year later after nearly two decades at Britain's GlaxoSmithKline. But he is optimistic the industry can explain the risks and benefits properly.

The Frenchman even sees a chance that the inoculation could help push back the growing tide of

uncertainty and outright opposition to vaccination worldwide.

"It will be interesting to see. Vaccine hesitancy is strong, especially in some countries, but many vaccines are protecting against diseases that people never see," he said.

"Here it's different, everybody is seeing the impact of the coronavirus... so it could actually re-demonstrate the value of vaccines."

Takeda inked a deal with the Japanese government and US firm Moderna Therapeutics in October to import and distribute 50 million doses of its vaccine in Japan from the first part of 2021.

The US Food and Drug Administration on Friday granted emergency authorisation for the Moderna jab — the same permission already granted to the Pfizer/BioNTech version.

Takeda has also signed a deal with US biotech firm Novavax to produce and deliver its vaccine in Japan, if ongoing clinical trials prove successful.

— AFP

This German factory races to
churn out Covid-19 syringes

Bad Arolsen, Germany, Dec. 20: The battle against Covid-19 has delivered not just a vaccine at record speed but also a spike in demand for the billions of syringes needed to administer it.

One German factory is already busily churning out the little plastic tubes and is confident global needs can be met.

"There won't be a shortage of syringes, even if we are facing a big challenge," said Otto-Philipp Braun, co-director of Almo, Germany's leading syringe manufacturer.

At the company's production site in the central German town of Bad Arolsen, the loud hum of machinery fills the hall. Employees man the assembly lines, wearing mas-

ks, hair nets and occasionally ear plugs. They churn out disposable syringes 24 hours a day, seven days a week, destined for use in Germany and more than 140 other countries around the world.

One machine moulds high-quality plastic granules into thin, one-millilitre syringes, while another spits out the pistons that fit snugly inside the cylinder and are needed to push out the vaccine.

The plastic piston is green, matching the logo of German parent company B.Braun, a giant in the medical devices industry and still owned by the Braun family. A total of 64 syringes with pistons are assembled every 13 seconds. Every year, Almo churns out more than two billion

syringes of various kinds.

The needles that can be added to the injection devices are produced by a B.Braun subsidiary in Malaysia. The company intends to spend 30 million euros on an additional assembly line, partly to cope with increased demand for the Covid-19 jabs.

The first orders have already rolled in from Germany's BioNTech, whose vaccine developed with US giant Pfizer is already being administered in some countries, and from CureVac, another German company whose vaccine candidate is in final stage trials.

"We can produce 270 million syringes of one millilitre next year, and if needed an extra 200 million from 2022," Braun said.

— AFP

HERCULEAN | TASK

A fire broke out at an ex-lung clinic a few metres from the church in 2013, damaging its structure

Atheists to save historic German church plank by plank

Stiege, Germany, Dec. 20: Ask Hans Powalla if he is a believer and the immediate response is a firm "no".

Yet he and other villagers in and around the German town of Stiege have embarked on the Herculean task of saving a picturesque church by moving it from the middle of a forest into the centre of town.

Former electrician Powalla, 74, said they were driven by the "unique architecture of the building" and the "meaning that it gives to the region" in the Harz mountains.

The object in question is a stave church, or wooden church, complete with dragon ornaments on the

roof, built in the Nordic style in 1905.

It is one of only three such churches from that era still standing in Germany, and is classed as a monument of national significance.

Unlike most churches which have prominent spots in town centres, this site of worship was built as a private sanctuary for patients recovering from lung diseases at a sanatorium located in the woods.

But the sanatorium was shut, and by 2009, the church fell out of use. Its isolated location makes it a target for vandals.

A fire broke out at the former lung clinic just a few metres away from the church in 2013, damaging

its structure.

"From the village, we saw the black plumes of smoke and thought 'oh no, there goes the church'," said Regina Nowolski, 69, a member of the Stiege Stave Church Association, co-founded by Powalla.

But as it turned out, the church was undamaged.

"And there came the idea that something must be done now or the church will one day collapse," said Regina Bierwisch, spokeswoman for the association.

"The only solution to save the church was to take it away." While the idea was clear-cut, it was far easier said than done.

The challenges were plentiful: getting permission to move the structure,

finding a new home, and working out how to get it there. At one point, lifting the whole building with a Bundeswehr military helicopter was mulled.

Linked to all those issues is the million-euro question of how to finance the project. Undeterred, members of the association took the matter to the mayor, wrote to federal authorities on conservation and made public appeals to fundraise.

"In the beginning I found it a funny idea. But I quickly noticed that they're not giving up, they are to see it through," Ronald Fiebelkorn, mayor of the Oberharz am Brocken region, said.

Buoyed by the wave of

enthusiasm, Fiebelkorn took it to state and federal authorities whose initial reaction had been "you're crazy". But soon, the officials also relented.

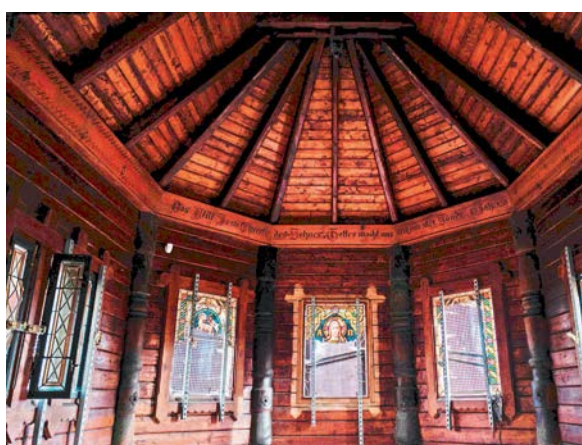
With backing and funding secured, the 1.1 million euro project (\$1.3 million) to move the church is now in its last lap.

A plot of land has been secured in Stiege town, offered by the regional authorities to the association at a symbolic price of one euro.

The association also purchased the private church from current owners, a real estate company in Berlin, for a single euro.

Groundbreaking at the new site began in November.

— AFP



View of vandalised stained-glass windows inside the Stabkirche, a stave church built in 1905 as part of the "Albert House" sanatorium for patients with lung diseases, in a wooded area outside the town of Stiege, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany.

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

PHILLIPINES
FLOODS: 8 DEAD,
10K EVACUATED

Manila, Dec. 20: Nearly 10,000 people were evacuated from their homes in the northeastern Philippines as heavy rain across the country left at least eight people dead, authorities said Sunday.

The storm — which has inundated villages and destroyed scores of houses in recent days — is the latest to batter the disaster-prone archipelago. Floodwaters reached waist-deep in 14 towns in the Cagayan Valley in the north-east of the main island of Luzon — which saw the worst flooding in decades last month — regional civil defence officer Francis Joseph Reyes said.

That forced nearly 10,000 people to seek shelter in emergency centres. The rain, which was intensified by the north-east monsoon, has filled Magat dam near to its critical level.

FIJI CYCLONE
SPARKS FEAR
OF DISEASE

Suva, Dec. 20: Disease threatens to worsen an already desperate situation in Fiji, an official warned Sunday, where thousands of lives have been devastated in the wake of the deadly super cyclone Yasa.

Agencies rushed food and clean water to areas where the storm smashed into the northern islands of the South Pacific nation on Thursday night, forcing more than 23,000 people to flee their homes.

Four people died and entire villages were wiped out, with crops and livestock destroyed.

Agriculture officials are being sent to hard-hit areas to help farmers dispose of dead livestock to reduce the risk of disease, National Disaster Management Office director Vasi-ti Soko said. Fiji is prone to violent storms at this time of year, with Cyclone Winston killing 44 people when it slammed into the islands in 2016.

The Red Cross is now focused on providing relief to Bua and other areas in north Fiji.

SUDAN, ETHIOPIA
BORDER TALKS
TOMORROW

Khartoum, Dec. 20: Sudan and Ethiopia will hold negotiations next week to delineate their shared border, a statement from Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok's office said Sunday.

The talks will be held on Tuesday, a week after Ethiopian forces reportedly ambushed and killed Sudanese troops along the border.

“Hamdok and his Ethiopian counterpart Abiy Ahmed on Sunday discussed the meeting of the committee for delineating the borders which will be held on December 22,” the statement said.

The two leaders met on the margins of a summit underway Sunday in Djibouti of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), an East African regional bloc comprising eight countries.

The last border talks were held in May in Addis Ababa but another meeting scheduled for the following month was cancelled. Sudan and Ethiopia share a 1,600-kilometre-long border.

PUTIN HAILS
RUSSIA'S SPIES,
VISITS INTEL HQ

Moscow, Dec. 20: Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday hailed the country's “courageous” spies as he visited the headquarters of the Foreign Intelligence Service to mark its 100th birthday.

Putin, who has spent most of the Coronavirus epidemic at his residences outside the Russian capital and on the Black Sea, visited the SVR headquarters in southern Moscow amid the controversy surrounding the work of the country's security services.

SVR, Russia's external intelligence agency, which succeeded the First Chief Directorate of the KGB in 1991, marks its centenary on Sunday. But December 20 is also the day in Russia when the country fetes all members of the security services including those from the FSB domestic intelligence agency. Speaking outside the SVR headquarters, Putin, himself a former KGB officer, thanked all those who protect Russia from “external and internal threats” and called them “reliable and courageous people.” “Efficient work of security bodies, which is governed by law and national interests, always was and will be exceptionally important for Russia,”



Damaged cars are seen at the site of an attack in Kabul on Sunday.

— AFP

Nine killed in car bomb
targeting Afghan MP

‘Terrorist attack’ injures women, children: Interior ministry

Kabul, Dec. 20: A car bomb targeting an Afghan lawmaker killed nine people and wounded more than a dozen in Kabul on Sunday, officials said, the latest attack to rock the capital. Kabul has been hit by a wave of deadly violence in recent months despite the Taliban and government engaging in peace talks to end the country's long conflict.

Sunday's bombing targeted parliamentarian Khan Mohammad Wardak who was injured in the attack, officials said.

“Nine people were killed and 20 others were wounded in the car bomb,” Interior Minister Masoud Andrabi told reporters, adding that all the casualties were civilians.

The ministry said in a separate statement that women and children were among those wounded by the “terrorist attack”.

A security source said the car bomb detonated in the west of the capital.

“It was a powerful explosion that has caused a lot of damage to houses in the vicinity,” the source said.

● **TELEVISION FOOTAGE** showed at least two cars on fire, with plumes of thick black smoke billowing into the sky. A security source said the car bomb detonated in the west of the capital.

Television footage showed at least two cars on fire, with plumes of thick black smoke billowing into the sky.

An aide to lawmaker Wardak said the attack occurred when he was travelling in his convoy, and five of his bodyguards were among the wounded.

“The enemies of Afghanistan carried out a terrorist attack on Khan Mohammad Wardak,” President Ashraf Ghani said in a statement condemning the bombing.

“Terrorist attacks on civilian targets and facilities will endanger the opportunity for peace,” he added. No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attack.

The jihadist Islamic State has claimed respon-

sibility for some of the recent attacks in Kabul.

Dozens of people, mostly students, were killed when IS jihadists attacked two education centres, including one at Kabul University that saw gunmen open fire on classrooms.

The group has also claimed a series of recent rocket attacks in and around the capital.

Kabul has seen a spate of targeted assassinations of prominent figures in recent months, including top officials, journalists, clerics, politicians and rights activists.

Last week a deputy governor of Kabul province was killed when a bomb attached to his vehicle detonated while he was on his way to office.

Vice President Amrullah Saleh, a strong opponent of Taliban, was appointed in October to lead a task-force to curb the violence in Kabul.

Saleh's programme was popular with people in the capital and that had prompted the Taliban to launch new attacks in an attempt to discredit him,

said Sayed Nasir Musawi, an independent Kabul-based political analyst.

Sunday's car bomb comes just two days after 15 children were killed and many more wounded when a motorbike laden with explosives blew up near a religious gathering in a remote part of the eastern province of Ghazni, officials said, blaming the Taliban.

The Taliban denied involvement and said the blast occurred when “unexploded ordnance” detonated near the children.

Violence has also surged across several provinces in Afghanistan this year.

Attacks by the Taliban had killed nearly 500 civilians and wounded more than 1,000 others over the past three months itself, the interior ministry said on Saturday.

“Until there is a ceasefire announcement by the Taliban, they will carry out attacks, blasts and target killings as a pressure tactic in the peace negotiations,” Musawi said.

— AFP

Oli gets Nepal Parliament
dissolved amid infighting

Kathmandu, Dec. 20: Nepal's embattled Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli on Sunday sprang a surprise on his rivals and got the President to dissolve Parliament, a controversial move amidst a prolonged tussle for power between him and former premier Pushpa Kamal Dahal “Prachanda” within the ruling dispensation. President Bidya Devi Bhandari dissolved Parliament's House of Representatives at Oli's recommendation and announced mid-term general election in April-May, a decision termed “unconstitutional, impulsive and autocratic” by the Opposition and dissidents in the Nepal Communist Party (NCP).

Earlier in the day, an emergency meeting of the Cabinet chaired by Oli decided to recommend the President for the dissolution of Parliament, a senior Standing Committee member of the NCP told PTI. The first phase of the mid-term election will be held on April 30 and May 10 for the second phase, the Rashtrapati Bhawan said. The 275-member House of Representatives, which is the lower house of Parliament, was elected in 2017 for a five-year term. The upper house is the National Assembly.

The move comes as the intra-party feud reached climax in the ruling NCP which has been witnessing months-long tussle between two factions, one led by 68-year-old Oli and Party's chairman and another led by 66-year-old “Prachanda”, also the executive chair of the party and former premier. Expressing dissatisfaction over Oli's move to dissolve the House, seven ministers from his Cabinet resigned in protest. Those who put in their papers are minister for science and education Giriraj Mani Pokharel, minister for energy and water resources Barshaman Pun, minister for agriculture Ghanashyam Bhushal, minister for labour and employment Rameshwar Raya Yadav, minister for tourism Yogesh Bhattarai, minister for forest and environment Shakti Basnet and minister for drinking water and sanitation Bina Magar.

The seven ministers, belonging to the Prachanda faction, announced their resignation in a joint statement issued during a press conference here.

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The seven ministers, belonging to the Prachanda faction, announced their resignation in a joint statement issued during a press conference here.

The Nepali Congress (NC), the main Opposition in Parliament, said that Oli's recommendation to dissolve the House was against the provisions and spirit of the Constitution, and the party will strongly oppose the move. “We have taken this move as Oli's final attempt to fulfil his authoritarian desire,” the NC said in a statement issued by party's spokesperson Bishwa Prakash Sharma. “It is condemnable to push the country towards instability because of intra-party conflict amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.” The party also called the decision “unconstitutional and impulsive”, and appealed to President Bhandari to fulfil her role as a guardian of the Constitution by rejecting it.

Spokesperson of the NCP Narayankaji Shrestha termed Oli's move as “undemocratic, anti-constitutional and autocratic”. Meanwhile, the NCP's Standing Committee meeting termed Oli's move as “unconstitutional, undemocratic and based on his personal whim”, and recommended to take a disciplinary action against the prime minister, Standing Committee member Ganesh Shah told PTI. The recommendation for action will be forwarded to the Central Committee meeting which will be held on Wednesday, he said.

— PTI

\$2.6 mn diamond fraud:
Nirav brother indicted

New York, Dec. 20: Nehal Modi, the younger brother of fugitive diamondaire Nirav Modi, has been indicted here for fraudulently obtaining diamonds worth over \$2.6 million from one of the world's biggest diamond companies in Manhattan.

Nehal, 41, is charged in a New York Supreme Court indictment with Grand Larceny in the First Degree, Manhattan District Attorney Cy Vance, Jr. said. “While diamonds maybe forever, this flawed scheme was not, and now Modi will face the clarity

of a New York Supreme Court indictment. My Office will not allow individuals who have the privilege of soliciting business in Manhattan's iconic diamond industry to defraud our businesses or consumers,” Vance said in a statement on Friday.

According to the indictment, court filings, and statements made on the record in court, between March 2015 and August 2015, Nehal made false representations to obtain over \$2.6 million worth of diamonds from LLD Diamonds USA on favourable

credit terms and consignment, and then liquidated the diamonds for his own ends. He then pawned the diamonds at Modell Collateral Loans to secure a short-term loan, the Manhattan District Attorney's office said.

Between April and May 2015, Nehal returned to LLD three additional times and took more than \$1 million worth of diamonds for purported sales to Costco. He made a series of payments to LLD, but used majority of the proceeds for personal use and business expenses.

— PTI

BIDEN TEAM TO
FIGHT THREAT
TO EXISTENCE

Washington, Dec. 20: President-elect Joe Biden on Saturday introduced key members of his environmental team and said his administration would make the fight against global warming a pillar of his drive to rebuild the pandemic-hit US economy.

Biden said these nominees will “lead my Administration's ambitious plan to address an existential threat of our time — climate change.” “Folks, we're in a crisis,” Biden said at the event in Wilmington, Delaware. “Just like we need to be a unified nation to respond to Covid-19, we need a unified national response to climate change.”

— AFP

LUCRATIVE VISITS

N. Korea to redevelop
tourist resort

Seoul, Dec. 20: Pyongyang plans to redevelop its flagship Mount Kumgang tourist complex into an international resort, a year after leader Kim Jong Un ordered South Korean-built buildings there demolished, state media reported Sunday.

The resort — once a prominent symbol of inter-Korean economic cooperation — was built by South Korea's Hyundai Asan on one of the North's most scenic mountains, drawing hundreds of thousands of Southern visitors.

But last year Kim condemned the development with the South as an eyesore and described facilities there as “shabby” and built like “makeshift tents

EU-UK trade talks flounder

Brussels, Dec. 20: Deep into a crucial weekend of negotiations, a breakthrough on fishing rights remained elusive for the European Union and Britain, leaving both without a trade agreement that would dull the edge of a chaotic, costly economic break on New Years Day. With hundreds of thousands of jobs at stake throughout the economy, the tiny sector of fisheries continued to drive a wedge between the 27-nation bloc and the UK, highlighting the animosity that drove them to a Brexit divorce over the past four years.

Britain left the bloc in January, but a 11-month economic transition period ends on Dec. 31. “We continue to work hard,” EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier said in a statement as light faded over EU headquarters on Sunday.

● **BRITISH PM Boris Johnson's office** said Sunday that the EU is “continuing to make demands that are incompatible with our independence. We cannot accept a deal that doesn't leave us in control of our own laws or waters.”

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's office said Sunday that the EU is “continuing to make demands that are incompatible with our independence. We cannot accept a deal that doesn't leave us in control of our own laws or waters.” Barnier didn't question that both sides “have the right to set their own laws & control their own waters.” But, he countered, “we should both be able to act when our interests are at stake.”

It left little hope a full deal could be found before midnight, which the European parliament had set as a deadline if it was to have enough time to vet and approve the deal before New Years. Officials on both sides said positions had hardly moved throughout the weekend of near-continuous talks.

The almost mythical sense of Britain's rights to rule its waves was an essential part of what drove Brexiters to victory in the 2016 referendum. Johnson is seeking to make sure that as much as possible of the shared British waters are now returned to UK vessels only. The EU has always maintained that those waters have been shared for decades, if not centuries, and insists if too many fishing rights are taken away, it will punish

Britain by imposing hefty import fees to the mainland market, which is essential to the UK seafood industry. The stalemate has left the overall talks inconclusive with businesses on both sides clamoring for a deal that would save tens of billions in costs.

Johnson, though, could not be budged. “We need to get any deal right and based on terms which respect what the British people voted for,” his office said. One official from an EU coastal nation said the EU was refusing to yield more than a quarter of the fishing quotas the bloc stands to lose now that Britain is regaining full control of its waters due to Brexit. Britain is also steadfast that a 3-year transition period would be long enough for EU fishermen to adapt to the new rules.

— AP

Tours ended in 2008 after a N. Korean soldier shot dead a tourist

N. Korea to redevelop tourist resort

● **THE RESORT** — once a prominent symbol of inter-Korean economic cooperation — was built by South Korea's Hyundai Asan on one of the North's most scenic mountains, drawing hundreds of thousands of Southern visitors.

● The reclusive North has long wanted to resume the lucrative visits, but they would now violate international sanctions imposed on Pyongyang over its nuclear and ballistic weapons programmes -- although the South's President Moon Jae-in has long championed engagement with Pyongyang.

in a disaster-stricken area or isolation wards”, ordering their removal.

On Sunday, the official Korean Central News Agency reported that Kim Tok Hun, the North's premier, stressed “the need to build the tourist area our own way” to turn it into a “cultural resort envied by

the whole world”, during his visit to the area.

He also called for pushing ahead to turn the area into a “modern and all-inclusive international tourist” resort, it added.

The Mount Kumgang complex was once one of the two biggest inter-Korean projects, along

with the now-shuttered Kaesong Industrial Complex, where Southern companies employed North Korean workers while paying Pyongyang for their services.

But its tours came to an abrupt end in 2008 after a North Korean soldier shot dead a tourist from the South who strayed off an approved path, and Seoul suspended travel.

The reclusive North has long wanted to resume the lucrative visits, but they would now violate international sanctions imposed on Pyongyang over its nuclear and ballistic weapons programmes - although the South's President Moon Jae-in has long championed engagement with Pyongyang.

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In June, the North blew up a liaison office with the South on its side of the border -- paid for by Seoul -- saying it had no interest in talks.

“The Kim regime will struggle to find the resources to redevelop Mt. Kumgang and needs outside investment, but is signalling it will downgrade South Korean partners and stakeholders,” said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul.

“By holding Seoul's hopes for engagement at risk, Kim is pressuring the Moon administration to find ways of resuming financial benefits for the North.”

— AFP

Pearl murder key
accused cries foul

Islamabad, Dec. 20: A lawyer representing the parents of slain US journalist Daniel Pearl has produced a handwritten letter in Pakistan's Supreme Court in which the key accused in the case claimed that he was a “scapegoat” arrested under “US pressure” and the real mastermind was a Karachi-based terrorist.

Pearl, the 38-year-old South Asia bureau chief for *The Wall Street Journal*, was abducted and beheaded while he was in Pakistan investigating a story in 2002 on the links between the country's powerful spy agency ISI and al-Qaeda. British-born al-Qaeda leader Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh and his three aides were convicted and sentenced in the abduction and murder case of Pearl.

In April, they were exonerated by the Sindh High Court and an appeal against their acquittal is being heard in the Supreme Court. According to a *Express Tribune* report on Sunday, Faisal Siddiqui, counsel for Pearl's parents, has produced the handwritten letter in the Supreme Court in which Sheikh claimed that the real culprit was a militant, Attaur Rehman, from Karachi.

Siddiqui told the apex court that the letter was submitted to the Sindh High Court on July 19, 2019. In the letter, Sheikh claimed that he was “a scapegoat” arrested on the “US pressure” and that the real culprit was Rehman. The letter was produced during a hearing of the appeals against the acquittal of the four accused in the Pearl murder case. A three-judge special bench led by Justice Mushir Alam

PAK CANCELS 50
PILOTS' LICENCES

Islamabad, Dec. 20: The Pakistan government has cancelled the licences of 50 pilots for flying with fake credentials and authorities will probe how they obtained the certificates through unfair means, the country's Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has informed a top court here.

The issue of fake licences surfaced in the wake of the tragic crash of a Pakistan International Airlines plane in Karachi on May 22, killing 97 people, when Minister of Aviation Ghulam Sarwar Khan told the media that 260 of the country's 860 active pilots had either fake licences or had cheated in their exams.

Their names were made public to avoid any negative impression about other pilots, including those working outside Pakistan. Authorities told the Islamabad high court that under the requirements of the International Civil Aviation Organisation, they reviewed licences of 860 commercial pilots and cancelled 50 of them after a scrutiny. They were working for the national flag carrier PIA as well as other Pakistani private and foreign airlines.

— PTI

heard the appeals of the Sindh government and Pearl's parents, Ruth and Judie Pearl, against the high court ruling. Siddiqui contended that the bench must consider it. However, the apex court will decide on it on the next date of hearing on January 4, the report said.

— PTI

SHORT TAKES

Gold for Simranjit, Manisha at WC

New Delhi: Indian women boxers Simranjit Kaur (60kg) and Manisha Moun (57kg) notched up gold medals with contrasting final wins in the Cologne World Cup in Germany. Manisha defeated compatriot Saskhi Choudhary 3-2, while Simranjit got the better of German Maya Klienahns 4-1 to finish on top in their respective categories. India finished the competition at the second spot overall after claiming three gold, two silver and four bronze medals. On Saturday, Asian Games champion Amit Panghal (52kg) had claimed the sole gold among men. Veteran Satish Kumar (+91kg) had to settle for a silver after an injury forced him to withdraw from the finals. Sonia Lather (57kg), Pooja Rani (75kg) Gaurav Solanki (57kg) and Mohamed Hussamudin (57kg) claimed the bronze medal in their respective categories. — *Agencies*

Hyderabad suffer first loss of season

Vasco: Vignesh Dakshinamurthy pulled off a stunning goal to set up Mumbai City FC's 2-0 win over Hyderabad FC in an Indian Super League match here on Sunday. In a match where both sides struggle to create clear-cut chances, Vignesh's acrobatic 38th-minute strike stood out as a genuine quality moment. Adam Le Fondre put Sergio Lobera's men further ahead in the 59th minute as Hyderabad tasted their first defeat of the season. The eagerness that marked much of the game was evident from the fact that Vignesh's goal was the only shot on target in the first half. With Hugo Boumous missing yet again, Mumbai City's creative struggles that plagued them in their last match against Jamshedpur, continued on Sunday as well. — *PTI*

Pune teen tops Honda Talent Cup

Chennai: With the racing action limited to only two weekends, the 2020 Indian National Motorcycle Racing Championship and Honda India Talent Cup has been a challenging, fun and reckoning experience for riders. Topping the leadership board is the Pune's Sarthak Chavan. The 14 year old has taken over the championship title for NSF20R Open class with his dazzling performance followed by Chennai boys Kavin Quintal at second position and Varoon S. at third position. Throttling fearlessly with the confidence is the Chennai's Shyam Sundar, who became the champion of the CBR150R Novice class followed by Vivek Rohit Kapadia from Belgaum at second position and the youngest of all, the 12 year old Rakshith S. Dave from Chennai securing the third position.

NZ hammer Pak in second T20

Hamilton: Opener Tim Seifert carried his bat for 84 in an unbroken 129-run partnership with Kane Williamson to steer New Zealand to a nine-wicket win over Pakistan in the second Twenty20 international Sunday and an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-match series. Williamson finished 57 not out in his return to the short format as New Zealand overtook Pakistan's total of 163-6 with four balls to spare. Seifert took his runs from only 63 balls with eight fours and three sixes, unleashing a wide variety of shots on a flat wicket against a Pakistan attack that struggled to find consistently challenging lengths. — *AP*

Live on TV

FOOTBALL

English Premier League: Burnley vs Wolves from 11 pm; Chelsea vs West Ham from 1.30 am (Tuesday) on Star Sports Select 1, HD

Indian Super League: Mohun Bagan vs Bengaluru from 7.20 pm on Star Sports 2, 3

WWE

Table, Ladders & Chairs: Bout from 8 pm on Sony Ten 1, HD

UFC

UFC Fight Night: Edwards vs Chimaev from 7 pm on Sony Ten 2, HD

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THE FALL GUYS

Saha, Shaw to be benched; Gill, Rahul, Pant in mix for Boxing Day

New Delhi, Dec. 20: Veteran wicketkeeper-batsman Wriddhiman Saha and young opener Prithvi Shaw are unlikely to be picked for the remaining Tests in Australia as India look to ring in wholesale changes after the batting debacle in Adelaide.

It is understood that young Shubman Gill, after a couple of impressive knocks in the warm-up games, is seen as a replacement of Shaw as senior star Rohit Sharma will not be available until the third Test match in Sydney.

With Saha's batting not giving any confidence to the dressing room, the team management will certainly look at Rishabh Pant, who had scored a hundred Down Under during his previous tour, as keeping might not be a factor on pitches with firm and even bounce.

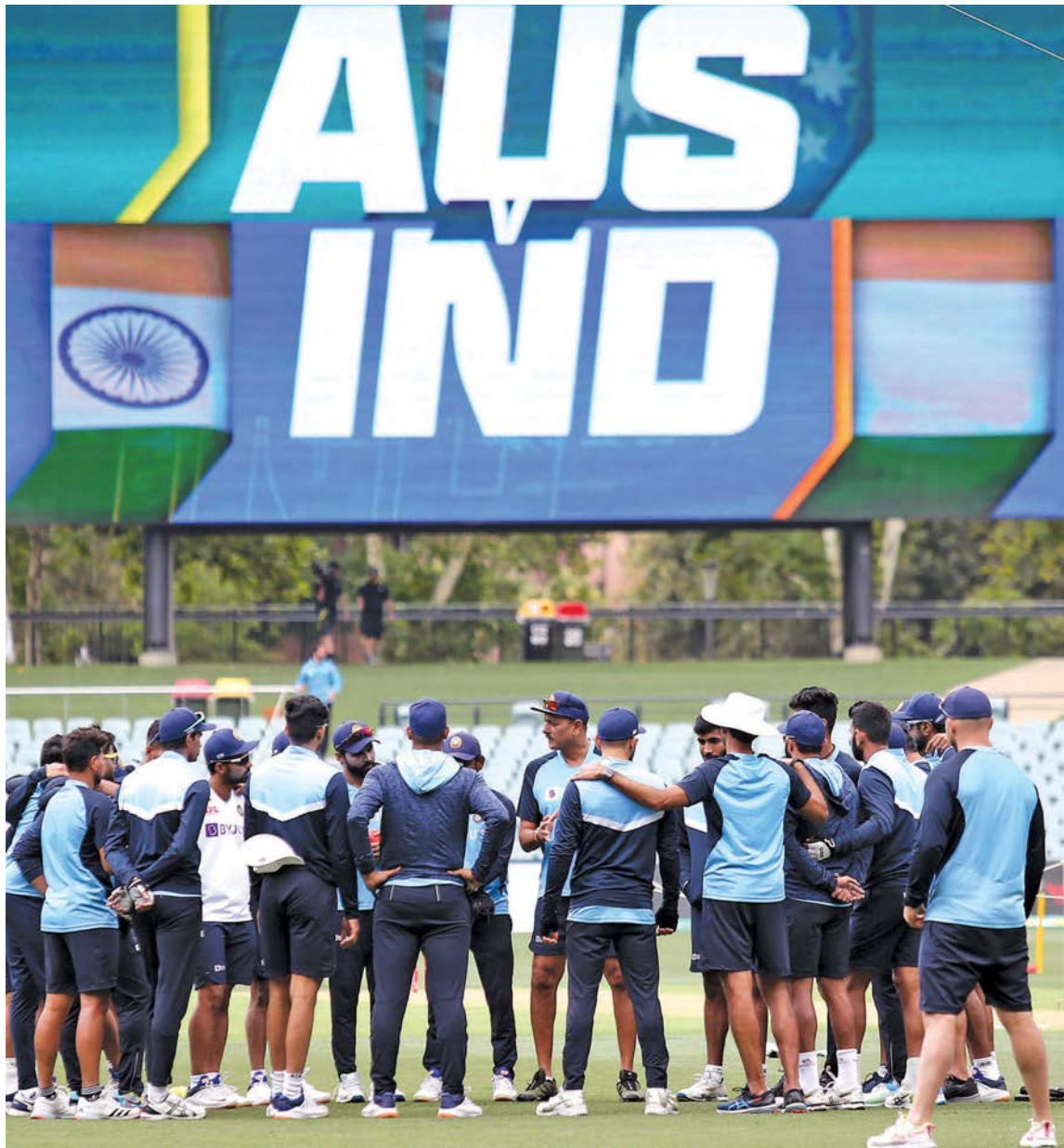
K.L. Rahul and Mohammed Siraj are the two others in fray to enter the playing XI and those would be forced changes due to the absence of skipper Virat Kohli and senior pacer, Mohammed Shami, who is out with a fractured wrist.

The 36-year-old Saha could well be running the last lap of his international career as young and feisty Pant is set to be preferred by the team management over the next three Test matches and if he does well, against England, too.

As far as Saha is concerned, his inept batting in SENA countries hasn't gone unnoticed (he doesn't have a half-century there), but former chairman of selectors M.S.K. Prasad said that during his regime, certain plans were chalked out on the Saha-Pant conundrum.

"Look, our committee was clear that Rishabh Pant will be our first choice keeper in places like England and Australia. Only when we are looking at matches in India where you don't need batting after number six most times, you can have a specialist keeper," Prasad said on Sunday.

"I believe Rishabh has worked on his fitness issues during the past month and looked in good touch during the pink ball practice game. So I would agree with the team management if they give Rishabh a go for the next three Tests," Prasad said. — *PTI*



India players are in huddle before their first Test against Australia at the Adelaide Oval.

— AP

Burns fit for MCG Test, Pucovski out

Melbourne, Dec. 20: Hit on the elbow during the pink-ball series opener, Australia's Joe Burns was on Sunday cleared to play the second Test against India, but young Will Pucovski was ruled out as he continues to recover from concussion. Burns suffered a nasty blow on his elbow off a Jasprit Bumrah delivery during the first Test at Adelaide which Australia won by eight wickets. "Joe Burns has been cleared of serious dam-

● With Australia grappling with injuries in the run-up to the series, there were doubts that Joe Burns too might join the list but scans cleared all fears of any major injury to his arm.

age to his arm, while concussed young gun Will Pucovski has been ruled out of a Boxing Day Test debut," a report in *The West Australian* said.

With Australia grappling with injuries in the run-up to the series, there were doubts that Burns

too might join the list but scans cleared all fears of any major injury to his arm.

Pucovski was set to make his debut in the first Test after David Warner was ruled out due to a groin injury. But he was hit on the helmet

during the first warm-up, ruling him out of the opening day-night Test.

According to the report, "Australia are adopting an understandably conservative approach as the Victorian (Pucovski) recovers from his ninth concussion."

Warner, who was flown out to Melbourne on Saturday due to the sudden outbreak in Sydney, is also racing against time to get fit for the Boxing day Test. — *PTI*

KOHLI CLOSES GAP WITH SMITH IN TEST RANKINGS

Dubai, Dec. 20: India may have suffered an embarrassing defeat in the series-opener against Australia but their skipper Virat Kohli fractionally closed the gap with top-ranked Test batsman Steve Smith, following his 74-run knock in the first innings in Adelaide.

Kohli gained two points for his half-century to get to 888 while Smith (911) lost 10 points in the table after scoring 1 and 1 in his two innings.

Marnus Labuschagne's innings of 47 and 6 in the low-scoring match pushed him to a career-best 839 points in the latest ICC rankings for Test batsmen. — *PTI*

Spurs' title hopes suffer huge blow

London, Dec. 20: Leicester put a major dent in Tottenham's Premier League title challenge on Sunday, climbing to second in the table on Sunday. Spurs were top of the table before their midweek clash with Liverpool but now find themselves six points adrift of the champions after a damaging 2-0 defeat at home.

Vardy put away-day specialists Leicester ahead with the final kick of the first half after Brendan Rodgers's side were awarded a penalty.

Serge Aurier barged Wesley Fofana over and, after referee Craig Pawson watched the incident again on the pitchside monitor, the Foxes striker drilled home his spot-kick.

Spurs had a huge escape early in the second half as James Maddison had a goal ruled out for the most marginal of offside.

But Leicester doubled their lead just before the hour mark via an own goal.

The win — Leicester's sixth in seven away games — lifts them to within four points of Jurgen Klopp's men after 14 matches and will have Foxes fans dreaming again.

SEVEN-STAR LIVERPOOL RUN RIOT

Just five points separate the 2016 champions from Chelsea in eighth spot but Liverpool looked ominous

THE RESULTS	
Brighton (Welbeck 87)	1
Sheffield United (Bogle 63)	1
Tottenham	0
Leicester (Vardy 45+4, Alderweireld 59-og)	2
Crystal Palace	0
Liverpool (Minamino 3, Mane 35, Firmino 44, 68, Henderson 52, Salah 81, 84)	7
Southampton	0
Manchester City (Sterling 16)	1
Everton (Holding 22-og, Mina 45)	2
Arsenal (Pepe 35-pen)	1
Newcastle (Wilson 64-pen)	1
Fulham (Ritchie 42-og)	1

in a 7-0 demolition of Crystal Palace on Saturday. The Reds sent a chilling warning to the rest of the Premier League as Arsenal's crisis deepened following 1-2 defeat at Everton. Jurgen Klopp's champions — despite being dogged by injuries this season — are five points clear of neighbours Everton. It is the first time the Reds have won an away match in the English top flight by a margin of seven goals in their illustrious history. — *AFP*

MESSI EQUALS PELE'S CLUB GOAL RECORD

Madrid, Dec. 20: Lionel Messi scored his 643rd goal for Barcelona on Saturday to equal Pele's record of goals for a single club as the Spanish giants were held 2-2 by Valencia.

Messi, 33, headed in from Jordi Alba's cross after his first-half penalty was saved to equal the mark set by the Brazilian great for Santos.

"These figures are impressive, we will never have a player so effective at this club," admitted coach Ronald Koeman.

"That's why he is the No.1. What he's done for this club, it is impressive."

But Messi was eventually left frustrated on Saturday as a dogged Valencia forced a draw to leave Barcelona eight points behind leaders Atletico Madrid, who beat Elche 3-1 earlier in the day.

"There were times tonight with good football, we had total control of the match, especially after leading 2-1 where we tried to get the third, but there were also times when we lost the ball in the danger zones," added Koeman.

"But the race for the title is not yet lost, we are far behind, but it's a very complicated season for everyone. In two months, the situation may be totally different." — *AFP*

Ronaldo scores twice as Juventus win big

Milan, Dec. 20: Cristiano Ronaldo scored a double as Juventus thrashed Parma 4-0 on Saturday to move within a point of Serie A leaders AC Milan.

The Turin giants, chasing a 10th straight league title this season, remain unbeaten after 13 matches this term.

Ronaldo, who missed a penalty in the midweek 1-1 draw with Atalanta, made amends with his third brace in four games.

"Ronaldo was quite rightly angry with himself after missing a penalty," Juve coach Andrea Pirlo told DAZN.

"But fortunately he didn't have much time to stew over it and immediately got the chance to show just

how much he loves to score goals."

LEAO NETS FASTEST GOAL IN SERIE A

AC Milan forward Rafael Leao scored after just six seconds for the fastest-ever goal in Serie A history on Sunday at Sassuolo.

Milan launched straight into an attack from kick-off, with Turkish midfielder Hakan Calhanoglu setting up Leao to slot home.

The previous fastest goal had been Paolo Poggi's for Piacenza against Fiorentina in December 2001 after eight seconds of play.

It was the 21-year-old's third league goal this season and fourth in all competitions. — *AFP*

Adelaide debacle brought back horrors of summer of '74



Hemant Kenkre Silly Point

Some incidents trigger memories of past episodes like the first session of the third day of the Adelaide Test did. On a sunny morning, the Australians destroyed the morale of team India in 21.2 overs. Their capitulation for a mere 36 runs in the second innings of the first Test match brought back the horrors of the summer of 1974 when India was bowled out for their (then) lowest Test score of 42 at cricket's Mecca, Lord's. The two sessions that

India played, 46 years apart, have a common thread. Virat Kohli was leading his team to defend the Border-Gavaskar trophy that he had wrested from Australia on India's last tour in 2018-19 just the way Ajit Wadekar did in '74 after beating England in two consecutive away and home series'. The debacle in the ill-fated series of '74 brought the Indians back to terra firma just the way their last outing has done at Adelaide. With sparse wins abroad after the 3-0 wipe out that India faced

under Wadekar, it took a remarkable victory at Lord's (the same venue where India had touched its nadir) in 1983 when Kapil Dev lifted the World Cup. That win, followed by a 2-0 Test series win in and against England in 1986 gave us a sense of pride that India could no longer be considered as bad tourists.

Before the start of the current Test series, skipper Kohli made a meaningful statement that described his approach as India's premier cricketer. Former Aussie great, Greg Chappell had likened Kohli as the "most Australian non-Australian cricketer of all time."

The Indian skipper, who is known for his plain-speak accepted Chappell's assessment saying his personality and character is a

representation of the new India. One that is ready for and wants to take on challenges and move forward with optimism and positivity.

The one session at Adelaide took Indian cricket back many steps and made it clear that the current team has a long way to go when it came to performing consistently in Test cricket in SENA countries. Yes, the team deserves full credit for the historic series win the last time they visited the Australian shores, but they also need to accept that with three consecutive Test losses — two against New Zealand, earlier this year — there is a steep mountain to be climbed.

In a post-match media face-off, Kohli opined that the situation isn't alarm-

ing, saying, "We can very well sit here and make a mountain out of a molehill." By dismissing the Adelaide debacle as a molehill and asking his fellow batsmen to follow individual plans with stronger intent, Kohli may be addressing a short term issue but is missing the wood for the trees. One accepts that the 36-run surrender can be termed as a molehill considering the Australian bowlers bowled a fabulous line and length that could have caused the best batsmen, across eras, to struggle.

Having bad sessions, trying to survive in difficult conditions with zero support from lady luck is a part of the game called Test cricket. Not a single Indian batsman threw his wicket and each one was done in by deliveries that

were clinical with almost machine-like precision. The unpredictability of Test cricket is such that has confounded the best strategists whose best laid plans have gone awry. The Adelaide Test is a prime example of the uncertainty that makes the longest format even more interesting.

The important issue that team India face from a long term perspective is the lack of consistency of their players when it comes to Test match cricket.

At Adelaide, the Australians (who were facing a 53 run deficit) came back with the intent to win, a characteristic completely missing in the Indian camp, which was sitting pretty. In the past, we have seen India in similar situations when they

have had their opponents on the mat in Test cricket, only to offer their backs and lose matches after being in a commanding position.

Indian fans will be hoping for a better result in the Boxing Day Test match in Melbourne against a ruthless opponent. With three matches to go in the series, acting captain Ajinkya Rahane will have to put on his thinking cap while leading a team without Kohli and an injured Mohammed Shami in the eleven.

Meanwhile, Kohli could well use the time, during his long haul back to India, to look at the big picture and contemplate on what team India needs to do climb over the mountain (and not a molehill) to be known as a great touring team.