

DECCAN Chronicle

THE LARGEST CIRCULATED ENGLISH DAILY IN SOUTH INDIA
RAJAMAHENDRAVARAM | SUNDAY | 4 APRIL 2021

WEATHER
Max: 39.0°C
Min: 26.0°C
RH: 73%
Rainfall: NIL

Forecast: Humid and Mostly Cloudy.
Max/Min temp. 39/26 °C

ASTROGUIDE
Sarvi: Uttarayana
Tithi: Phalguna Bahula Ashtami till 3 am (Monday)
Star: Poorvashada till 2.07 am (Monday)
Variyam: 12.02 pm to 1.36 pm
Durmuhurtam: 4.48 pm to 5.37 pm
Rahukalam: 4.30 pm to 6 pm
HUIRI CALENDAR
Sha'ban 21, 1442 AH
PRAYERS
(ROYAL MOSQUE)
Fajar: 5.40 am
Zohar: 1.30 pm
Asar: 4.30 pm
Maghrib: 5.48 pm
Isha: 8.30 pm
SUNRISE TOMORROW 5.54 AM
SUNSET TODAY 6.16 PM
MOONRISE TODAY 00.14 AM
MOONSET TOMORROW 12.33 PM

Deccan Chronicle wishes its readers A HAPPY EASTER

IN BRIEF

Prof. G.N. Saibaba sacked by DU

New Delhi: Delhi University's Ram Lal Anand College has terminated the service of assistant professor G.N. Saibaba, who is currently serving life term in Nagpur Central Prison for alleged Maoist links. According to a memorandum received by Saibaba's wife Vasantha on Thursday, his services have been terminated from March 31.

■ Report on Pg 5

EC reduces ban time for Himanta

New Delhi: The Election Commission on Saturday reduced the 48-hour campaign ban imposed on Assam minister and BJP leader Himanta Biswa Sarma to 24 hours after he assured the poll panel to abide by the provisions of the model code. He was on Friday initially barred from campaigning till April 4 for threatening Bodoland People's Front chief Hagrama Mohilary.

NIA custody of Waze extended

Mumbai: A court here on Saturday extended the NIA custody of suspended police officer Sachin Waze till April 7 in the case of an explosives-laden SUV found near industrialist Mukesh Ambani's house and businessman Mansukh Hiran's death. Waze, arrested on March 13, was produced before the special NIA court here after his earlier remand expired.

Six burnt to death by family member

Madikeri : Six people, including four children, died while four others suffered burns after their house was allegedly set ablaze during the early hours of Saturday near Ponnampet, 60 km from here, by an inebriated family member, police said.

COUNTER POINT



Happy to hear that our party will get 200 plus seats... but we are contesting only in 120 seats!



WORLD | 6

B'desh to impose 7-day lockdown



SPORTS | 8

Covid scare: Hyd, Indore likely standby venues

TABLOID

'I am not an actor by accident, but by choice'



TTD reinstates Deekshitulu, 10 priests retired by TD govt

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, APRIL 3

Dr A.V. Ramana Deekshithulu along with more than 10 hereditary priests, who were forcibly retired from their respective posts by the previous TTD trust board during the erstwhile Telugu Desam regime in May 2018, is going to be reinstated to the positions they held prior to their retirement.

The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) has issued fresh orders reinstating the retired hereditary priests associated with the Lord Venkateswara temple at Tirumala, the Govindaraja Swamy temple at Tirupati and the Sri Padmavathi Ammavari temple at Tiruchanoor.

Going by the order, Dr Ramana Deekshithulu — in all probability — would be back as the chief priest of the Tirumala temple after a long drawn political and legal battle. The other hereditary priests associated with the Govindaraja Swamy temple and Padmavathi Ammavari temple would also join back their respective posts.

“Quashing all orders issued previously by the TTD board and in terms of the representation of Dr Deekshithulu and in compliance of the judgement of AP High Court, all Pradhana Archakas/Archakas belonging to erstwhile Mirasi families, who were

Arjitha Sevas at Tirumala put off

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, APRIL 3

In view of the increasing Covid-19 cases across the country, TTD has decided to postpone resuming Arjitha Sevas at the Tirumala temple. Earlier, the TTD trust board had resolved, during its board meeting held last month, to resume Arjitha Sevas in Tirumala temple from April 14 onwards.

However, with the Covid-19 second spell, TTD has decided to postpone the resuming of Arjitha Sevas in view of health security of pilgrims. After the situation turns to normalcy, the devotees will be informed prior about the resuming of Arjitha Sevas by TTD, a release from the temple body stated.

Meanwhile, the traditional temple cleansing

fete, Koil Alwar Tirumanjanam will be observed in this temple on April 6 in view of the Telugu New Year's Day Ugadi on April 13. On Tuesday, the temple, sub-temples inside Tirumala temple, puja utensils, roofs, walls, ceilings will be cleansed with an aromatic mixture called Parimalam, which will be sprayed all over between 6 am and 9 am.

While the cleansing process is on, the Mula Murthi (Presiding deity) will be covered with a white veil. After the cleaning process of the temple is completed, the veil is removed and the remaining rituals and pujas will be carried out to the presiding deity by the Archakas. After that the devotees will be allowed for darshan after the special pujas on that day.

the hereditary priests' families across AP in the run up to the 2019 elections, that he will reinstate their hereditary rights once he was voted to power.

Fulfilling the promise, the Jagan-led government passed a GO No.76, restoring hereditary rights or the retired priests in October, 2019, but the order could not be implemented entirely because of various reasons. However, the TTD has finally resolved to reinstate the retired hereditary archakas back into the TTD fold.

It may be recalled that following the allegations made by Ramana Deekshithulu that several precious jewels gone missing from the temple and also the claims he made of financial irregularities in TTD, the then trust board under the chairmanship of Putta Sudhakar Yadav, in May, 2018 had passed a resolution fixing up a retirement age for hereditary priests. Implementing the controversial resolution, the trust board forcibly made four chief priests including Dr Deekshithulu to ret-ire. The TTD also implemented the same resolution at Tiruchanoor temple and retired hereditary priests including A.B. Seshadri and M.G. Murali associated with that temple in June, 2018.

■ Page 3: Archaka Samakhya hails TTD

PM urges ultras to quit arms

Modi urges them to join mainstream for 'Aatmanirbhar' Assam

MANOJ ANAND | DC
GUWAHATI, APRIL 3

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday appealed to militants who are still on the path of violence to lay down their arms and join the mainstream in order to build a peaceful and ‘Aatmanirbhar’ Assam.

Addressing his last public rally before the third and final phase of polling in Assam at Tamulpur, Modi said, “I assure our mothers and sisters here that your children will not have to carry guns, they do not have to spend their lives in jungles, they do not have to fall prey to anyone's bullet. This is the commitment of the NDA government which will tirelessly work for development and prosperity of the state.”

Asserting that people have decided to form the NDA government in Assam, he said that people have rejected parties attacking the identity of Assam for decades. “The ‘mahajhoth’ of ‘mahajot’ (grand alliance) has been disclosed. On the basis of my political experience, I can say that people decided to form the NDA government in Assam. They



A BJP supporter seeks blessings from Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his election campaign rally for State Assembly polls, in Hooghly district, on Saturday.

— PTI

can't bear those who insult Assam's identity and propagate violence,” he added.

Modi said, “The people of Assam are with vikas, stability, peace, brotherhood and unity. The people of Assam couldn't tolerate those who don't give due respect to the Assamese pride and identity. In the last five years, the NDA's

Pg 5 | ED attaches assets of TMC man

double engine government has given double benefits to the people.”

Pointing out mega development projects completed by the BJP led alliance government Prime

Minister said, “In the last five years, Bhupen Hazarika Setu, Bogibeel Bridge were built. Besides, construction work of half a dozen bridges are going on in the state.

Whenever we make a scheme, we want that the benefits of schemes to reach every section of the society.

5 jawans killed in Maoist ambush

Ultras too suffered ‘huge loss’ in Bastar: Cops

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY | DC
RAIPUR, APRIL 3

Five jawans were killed and 12 others injured when Maoists ambushed a search party of security personnel in Chhattisgarh's south Bastar district of Sukma on Saturday, police officers said.

The body of a woman Maoist was also recovered from the encounter spot, they said.

The encounter took place near Jonagunda village situated along the Sukma-Bijapur border when a joint team of security forces were out on a counter-insurgency operation. Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of police (Naxal Operation) O.P. Pal said.

“Five jawans were killed and 12 others injured in the incident. Body of a woman Maoist was also recovered at the encounter site,” Pal said.

According to Pal, a joint search party comprising personnel of Commando Battalion for Resolute

Action (CoBRA), Bastaria Battalion of CRPF comprising exclusively of youths of Bastar, district reserve group (DRG) and special task force (STF) of Chhattisgarh police were out on anti-Naxal operation since Friday night following specific intelligence input on gathering of Maoist cadres in large numbers in the area.

Drones spotted the Maoists' movement, sources said. A senior police officer posted in Bastar told this newspaper that two joint search parties were mobilised from Sukma and Bijapur districts to launch anti-Naxal operation in Terram forest area following intelligence inputs on presence of Maoists' battalion number one commander Hidma along with his militiamen in Terram area.

“Maoists laid ambush for one of the two search parties at an open ground on the outskirts of Jonagunda village under Jagargunda police limits at around 12 in the noon. A fierce gun

battle ensued between them, leading to killing of a jawan of CoBRA and two security personnel each of DRG and Bastaria Battalion and injuries to 2 others”.

“Body of a woman Naxal along with an Insas assault rifle was recovered at the encounter site,” the police officer said, unwilling to be quoted since he was not authorised to speak to media.

Two Indian Air Force (IAF) helicopters were pressed into service to evacuate the injured jawans. All the injured jawans were airlifted to Raipur for medical treatment.

This was the second major attack on security personnel by Naxals in Bastar in the last 10 days.

On March 23, Maoists blew up a bus carrying DRG jawans in Kodanar area under Chhattisgarh's south Bastar district of Narayanpur by detonating improvised explosive device explosion killing 5 jawans and injuring 14 others.

HC TO HEAR MP, ZP ELECTIONS CASE TODAY

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 3

Andhra Pradesh High Court heard a batch of petitions with a plea to direct the State Election Commission (SEC) to issue fresh notification for conduct of elections to MPTCs and ZPTCs.

A single judge bench headed by Justice U. Durga Prasad Rao held a hearing on Saturday on the petitions filed by BJP state secretary P. Nagabhushanam, TD leader Varla Ramaiah and others.

The petitioner's counsels Veera Reddy and V. Venkata Ramana argued that under Article 243 K of the Indian Constitution, the SEC enjoys the right to conduct elections as per norms and maintained that in case of postponement and the SEC issues a re-notification, the election process should start from the stage of filing nominations.

They argued that in case the SEC intended to conduct polls, it should clamp a model code of conduct four weeks before the election date and said that the SEC, by issuing a notification to conduct elections for MPTCs and ZPTCs on April 1 has ignored the rule.

They argued that as it was over a year back that elections were deferred, several people were now eligible to contest and denying them that constitutional right was unfair. They informed the court that it was inappropriate to resume the conduct of the election process from where it was stopped and appealed that it direct the SEC to release fresh notification for the elections.

The State Election Commission filed a counter affidavit informing the court that they were resuming the deferred election process and made a plea to allow them to go ahead with the conduct of polls.

The judge posted the next hearing to Sunday.

● **THEY INFORMED** the court that it was inappropriate to resume the conduct of the election process.

Revolt in TD on election boycott

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 3

Revolt within the Telugu Desam has been expanding to several parts of the state on Saturday after TD chief N. Chandrababu Naidu announcement that TDP will boycott MPPTC and ZPTC elections objecting to violation of norms by ruling YSR Congress.

Within 24 hours, several leaders have openly opposed the boycott decision. They asserted that they will take a decision on the issue according to the wishes of local cadres and leaders.

Notification for MPPTC and ZPTC election was first issued in 2020 but polling was postponed by then state election commissioner Nimmagadda Ramesh Kumar following the Coronavirus pandemic. This was after candidates had spent huge sums to get votes from locals in the elections. Thus, Chandrababu Naidu's decision to now boycott elections has come as a shocker for TDP candidates. Most of them have decided to ignore their party chief's dictum.

In Mangalagiri segment, where Nara Lokesh lost the election in 2019, TD leaders have decided to remain in election fray for the 18 MPPTC and one ZPTC seat in Duggirala. TD leaders Pothineni Srinivas Rao, Guduru Venkata Rao and Unnam Jhansi Rani said chances of TD candidates winning

BJP, JANA SENA EUPHORIC AFTER TD SKIPS POLLS

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 3

Telugu Desam's decision to boycott parishad elections is turned into a blessing in disguise for BJP, which has been ardously trying to strengthen its base in Andhra Pradesh to emerge as the main opposition party. Ever since the yellow party suffered humiliation in 2019, the BJP has been trying to take over as the main opposition party. They went in vain as TD successfully countered those efforts through various acts, including showing itself as the saviour of Hinduism. But now the BJP can gradually attract TD supporters into its fold.

The TD, BJP and Jana Sena boycotted the all-party meeting conducted by the SEC for the Parishad elections.

■ Page 2: Analysts: TD's skip in polls a body-blow

are bright and local TD cadres are pressuring them to remain in fray. “We have to honour their wishes,” the TD leaders remarked.

■ Page 2: Cadres unhappy with Naidu's decision

Thunderstorms on Saturday night helped to bring down temperatures a bit

SUMMER | BLUES

Coastal districts under heatwave threat

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, APRIL 3

Thunderstorms lashed north coastal districts of Srikakulam, Vizianagaram, Visakhapatnam and East Godavari on Saturday evening bringing down the temperatures. An IMD report said southerly winds also caused the fall of temperature

Many districts in coastal Andhra Pradesh continued to reel under heart wave conditions, which, according to IMD reports, could

continue till April 7. The report said that severe heat wave conditions prevailed over many places in Guntur, Prakasam, Nellore and Krishna district and some isolated pockets of Chittoor district.

Nellore and Prakasam districts will experience severe heat wave conditions from April 4 to April 7.

On Saturday, Ongole and Kavali recorded the highest temperature in the State with 43.3 degrees

● Sources in IMD said the departure from normal maximum temperature in Andhra Pradesh was the highest in the country.

Celsius. The departure from normal temperature was eight degrees in Kavali and 7.7 degrees in Ongole. Similarly Bapatla recorded 42.6 degrees and the departure from normal was 9.4 degrees.

Sources in IMD said the departure from normal maximum temperature in Andhra Pradesh was the

highest in the country. Meanwhile, a cyclonic circulation lies over Andhra Pradesh coast and neighbourhood at 2.1 km above mean sea level.

The trough from Odisha to north interior Karnataka has become less marked. However, the cyclonic circulation embedded in that over south Odisha and neighbourhood now lay over south Chhattisgarh and neighbourhood and extends up to 1.5 km above mean sea level.



A huge branch of a tree collapses due to heavy rain at Lalithanagar in Visakhapatnam on Saturday.

— DC

SHORT TAKES

VPT AIMS TO ACHIEVE 80 MN TONNES TARGET

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, APRIL 3

Visakhapatnam Port Trust is aiming at achieving 80 million tonnes cargo handling during the current financial year. During the last financial year, the port handled 69.84 million tonnes, the second highest annual cargo throughout the history of port. The turnover was 72.72 million tonnes in the 2019-2020 financial year.

Addressing a press conference in Visakhapatnam on Saturday, VPT chairman K. Rama Mohan Rai said the port recorded an operating surplus of ₹698 crores and the net surplus before tax was ₹306 crores. A capital expenditure of ₹79 crores was incurred during 2020-2021 for various development works, he said. The port maintained third position among the major ports for the second consecutive year.

The chairman said VPT could restrict the decline to 4 per cent whereas it was 7 per cent in all other major ports.

The highest cargo handled was iron ore and pellets with 31 per cent increase. However, the port lost 45 per cent in import of steam coal and 27 per cent in coking coal.

Decline in economic activity led to less consumption of steam coal by the power sector and coking coal by the steel sector.

Explaining about the efficiency parameters, the chairman said, "The average waiting time of a ship improved to 1.15 hours during 2020-21 as against 1.22 hours recorded during 2019-2020. Number of ships handled during 2020-2021 was 2,040 as against 2,099 during 2019-2020."

Among the projects targeted this year, he said development of cruise terminal at an estimated cost of ₹103 crores is likely to be awarded in August 2021. Similarly, development of covered storage of 16,000 square meters at an estimated cost of ₹36 crores is scheduled to be awarded in June 2021. Visakhapatnam Port Trust finalised 27 MoUs worth ₹28,875 crores investments as part of MIS 2021 with different business partners such as HPCL, Arcelor Mittal & Nippon Steel India Ltd., Dredging Corporation of India Ltd., IPRCL, ITD Cementation Ltd and SAIL.

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CONTINUE FIGHT AGAINST GO NO. 2 SAYS LOKESH

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 3

Telugu Desam national general secretary Nara Lokesh called upon the Sarpanches to continue their fight against the GO No. 2 brought by the YSRC regime to deny the Sarpanches from their powers and responsibilities.

He claimed that the 73 and 74 amendments of the Constitution gave powers to the Sarpanches for the betterment of the local bodies.

Lokesh, on Saturday, extended his warm greetings to the sarpanches and ward members on their swearing-in in panchayat villages across the state. He lauded and reminded that the sarpanches would not be at the mercy of anybody as they have fought the elections and got elected. He commented that by doing so, the sarpanches rejected and fought against the fascist selection style leadership of CM Jagan Mohan Reddy in the name of unanimous results.

MLC Lokesh called upon the sarpanches to continue their fight against the GO No. 2 that was brought illegally by the YSRC government to deny their powers and responsibilities. Condemning the GO No. 2, he said that it was high time for the sarpanches to assert their rights, powers and responsibilities.

He claimed that the constitution has guaranteed these powers which nobody would be able to take away from them. He alleged that the Chief Minister, who had no faith in the local self-government, had brought in the GO No. 2 to diminish the role of the sarpanches in the village administration.

Lokesh urged the elected sarpanches to utilise the funds for the greater development of their respective villages.



Jana Sena Chief Pawan Kalyan waving to the public and party workers during a walkathon held in Tirupati on Saturday.

— DC

Pawan turns star campaigner for BJP

Milling crowd makes it tough for Pawan to continue walkathon

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, APRIL 3

Jana Sena party chief Pawan Kalyan has turned star campaigner for the BJP-JS alliance in the Tirupati Lok Sabha by-election. He was the star attraction in the temple city on Saturday, taking out a massive rally of thousands of his followers.

Pawan Kalyan started his padayatra from Palli circle and headed for Sankarambadi circle. However, the JS chief changed his plan after a brief while and climbed atop a top-open vehicle.

A huge crowd that gathered along the road made it difficult for him to continue his walkathon.

He reached the public meeting venue in the top-open car, waving to crowds on the roadsides and from balconies and roof-tops.

Traffic came to a standstill on the AIR by-pass road and other connecting roads and police had a tough time controlling the situation.

Pawan Kalyan's padayatra was called a super success. As he hit the road to campaign for BJP, thousands of Jana Sena followers followed him.

This would be a big boost for the saffron party, which has been campaigning in the parliamentary segment for a few days now in a weak manner, with only a few party leaders and workers to boost its campaign.

The BJP will now have to wait and watch how Pawan Kalyan's charisma can help the saffron brigade fulfill its dream of making inroads into AP politics by winning this by-election.

Will rout YSRC in AP, asserts PK

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, APRIL 3

The Jana Sena President Pawan Kalyan has issued a stern warning to the YSRC leaders and functionaries against targeting his party activists and supporters, saying that he will put the ruling party to rout for their attacks on the innocent.

Pawan Kalyan on Saturday campaigned in Tirupati in support of his alliance partner BJP candidate K. Ratna Prabha, who has been contesting the Tirupati Lok Sabha by-election slated to be held on April 17. He made a parade from Palli circle to the Sankarambadi circle along the AIR by-pass road before addressing a public meeting.

Referring to the YSRC party workers' alleged bid to target a Janasena backed sarpanch — wife of a martyred army jawan — at Mysuru-varipalle in Railway Kodur, Pawan Kalyan said that they are maintaining refrain with respect towards democracy and police system, but added that he will not keep quiet if the ruling party leaders don't mend their ways.

"We won't tolerate if the attacks continue on Jana Sena or BJP workers and leaders. We will revolt and teach them a befitting lesson. I am not a person to fear if they resort to attacks and we will revolt strongly", he said, daring

the ruling party to target and attack him personally if they have the guts.

The Jana Sena Chief also mentioned about the ruling party's alleged threats against the locals and vendors, living atop the Tirumala hills. "It came to my notice that the ruling party leaders are threatening to cut rations, government schemes to the locals and destroy their businesses if they do not vote for their MP candidate", he said while asking how long the Jagan government will continue in the same manner?

He said, the chief minister has failed to do justice to his sister in the murder case of Y.S. Vivekananda Reddy. "How can Jagan safeguards the entire state when there is no progress in the murder case of his own uncle till now", Mr Kalyan wanted to know. He also pointed out at the ruling party for not taking any concrete action against those who were involved in vandalizing temples in the state.

Backing his party's move to sacrifice the Tirupati LS seat to the BJP, the actor-turned politician said that his party has taken a decision to support the BJP candidate after considering that the BJP has a strong administration skill and it will change the fate of the temple city by developing it in all fronts with its efforts.

GURUMURTHY SEEKS SUPPORT FOR HIS CANDIDATURE

DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, APRIL 3

YSR Congress nominee for Tirupati LS seat Dr M. Gurumurthy has promised to dedicate himself to the service of the people of the Tirupati parliament segment, while appealing them to back his candidature during roadshows in Naidupeta in the Sullurpeta Assembly segment.

Deputy CM Narayana Swamy and Panchayat Raj Minister Peddiredy Ramachandra Reddy, Sullurpeta legislator Kiliveti Sanjeevaiah also accompanied Dr Gurumoorthy during the campaign.

Ramachandra Reddy claimed that Chief Minister Jaganmohan Reddy bagged third place for his role as CM in the country.

He dwelt at length on the CM's focus towards welfare and development with special attention to the development of rural areas. "This election is an opportunity to the people to showcase their gratitude to the CM," Reddy said.

He rebuked Chandrababu Naidu and the Telugu Desam Party for making false promise to women, youth, and farmers. Deputy CM Narayana Swamy credited Jaganmohan Reddy for bringing Mala and Madiga communities to a single platform.

Analyst says TD's not participating a blow

FROM PAGE 1

While TD announced that it would not contest, BJP decided to make good use of the opportunity. Even Jana Sena, which increased its performance in the recent municipal and Corporation elections, is also banking on the parishad elections to revitalise itself.

Around 7,295 candidates were in the fray for 7,321 MPCT seats in 13 districts. As many as 6,659 candidates were contesting from TD, 1,205 from BJP, 1,154 Jana Sena and 2,687 independent candidates for the MPCT elections.

Similarly, elections would be held for 526 ZPTC seats for which 526 candidates are from YSRC, 482 TD, 275 BJP, 168 Jana Sena and 641 independents. The YSRC won 2,217 MPCT seats unanimously, while 101 were won unanimously by TD, Jana Sena 4 and 49 MPCT seats unanimously by others. In all, 126 ZPTC seats were unanimous and all went into the YSRC kitty.

A total of 7,541 candidates from TD were in the fray in the MPCT and ZPTC elections and they are going to restrain from elections due to the party high command's boycott decision.

Senior political analysts stated that TD had 38-40 per cent, JS had 5% and BJP 1-2 per cent on the basis of 2019

Assembly elections.

They said that the voting percentage of TD dropped to 30% in the recent local body elections but JS showed improvement. They stated that according to the trends nearly 30% of voters are against the government hence they would choose an alternative party to cast their votes in the parishad elections. This will brighten the prospects of both BJP and JS, who can strengthen their base.

They recalled that the Hindutva trademark belongs to BJP but TD hijacked it in order to restrain BJP from consolidating its base. TD launched a series of protests on temple attacks, illegalities in Tirumala Tirupati and other religious issues.

Analysts opined that people would support those leaders, who will fiercely fight on their issues even in opposition.

They stated that they could have won seats with 30% votes but staying away from the parishad elections would be a body-blow to the TD cadre and this could prove costly for the party in the future.

BJP AP president Somu Veerajra said that they are contesting parishad elections to stake a claim as the 'real opposition party' in AP as people believe they can restrain the anarchic acts of YSRC.



Christians in Kurnool organise Run for Jesus event on Saturday. Mayor B.Y. Ramayya flagged off the event from C-camp in Kurnool.

— DC

TD CADRES HEARTBROKEN WITH CHANDRABABU NAIDU'S DECISION

FROM PAGE 1

YSRC MLA of Mangalagiri Aila Ramakrishna Reddy said TD cadres are unhappy with party chief's decision to boycott the polls and hence want to remain in fray.

Senior TD leader Bandaru Satyanarayana is continuing his election campaign in Pendurthi in support of TD candidates.

In Sabbavaram, TD cadres are asking leaders to continue fighting the elections for saving the party from further damage.

In Vizianagaram, former union minister P Ashok Gajapathi Raju is trying to convince party high command to let TD people continue fighting the seats for which they have filed their nominations.

Senior MLA Gorantla

Buchaiah Chowdary has stated that majority of cadres are opposing the boycott decision. Senior TD leader Jyothula Nehru has already submitted his resignation from the party opposing the poll boycott decision. Nehru maintains that the boycott decision will sink the TD ship in AP.

TD leaders of Ungutur Chintala Srinivas and Paturi Vijay Kumar said majority of cadres are opposing the boycott decision and wish to remain in fray.

They pointed out that TD had won the recent local body election in Ungutur. Hence, boycotting the parishad election is needless. They asserted that TD candidates will remain in fray from Ungutur and win the MPCT and ZPTC seats.

POLLS NOT HELD IN DEMOCRATIC WAY, SAYS VASU

DC CORRESPONDENT
KADAPA, APRIL 3

Telugu Desam politburo member Reddeppagari Srinivas Reddy (Vasu) said that the elections were not being held in a democratic manner. "What do ministers say before the council election dates? What does the CM dictate before the election on weekdays? Insult the parties, democracy?" he questioned.

SAJJALA IS THE SEC VIRTUALLY, SAYS SOMIREDDY

DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, APRIL 3

Former Minister and TDP politburo member Somireddy Chandra Mohan Reddy has maintained that the advisor to the AP Government, Sajjala Ramakrishna Reddy, is virtually the State Election Commissioner.

During an interaction with selected media representatives in Manubolu, 30 km from Nellore, on Saturday, Somireddy said the state government has appointed retired Chief Secretary Neelam Sahney as an advisor and as the State Election Commissioner in a hurry to conduct elections for mandals and ZPs.

He alleged that the election schedule came even before she took charge. The former minister observed that dummies are being appointed in key posts, which is an indicator of political bankruptcy of the ruling party.

He said they have decided to boycott the MPCT and ZPTC elections since they do not have confidence in free and fair elections under an officer who worked closely with the CM. Somireddy lamented over the situation where there is hardly any confidence in the election commission.

He took a dig at the CM for his statement recommending retired judges for the post of state election commission while appointing a retired judge Kanakaraj and a retired IAS officer for the post now.

● Somireddy said the state government has appointed retired Chief Secretary Neelam Sahney as an advisor and as the State Election Commissioner in a hurry to conduct elections for mandals and ZPs. He alleged that the election schedule came even before she took charge.

OFFICIALS TOLD TO RUN SMOOTH ELECTIONS

DC CORRESPONDENT
KADAPA, APRIL 3

District Election Officer and District Collector Chevuru Hariikiran directed the concerned authorities to ensure smooth and transparent conducting of MPCT and ZPTC elections in the district. He held a video conference on Saturday with all Mandal Election Nodal Officers, ROs, AROs, MPDOs and Tahsildars on election preparations.

The Collector said that the polling process for the MPCT and ZPTC elections will be held on the 8th of this month from 7 am to 5 pm as per the schedule of the State Election Commission.

A repoll will be held in the required areas on the April 9 and the counting process will be held on the April 10 from 8 am.

Regarding the MPCT and ZPTC elections in the district, he said that out of the nominations filed in the past, 24 mandals were completely unanimous and now elections are to be held in only 26 mandals.

The Collector clarified that the election code will be in force throughout the district even though elections are taking place in only 26 mandals.

In this context, all election officials must implement the Model Code of Conduct. Photo voter slips are to be distributed to voters through BLOs by the April 5 and 6.

He directed the authorities to conduct the election process in accordance with the provisions of the Covid protocol. Everyone who performs electoral duties is required to be vaccinated as a matter of duty. The collector advised all to use masks, sanitisers and maintain social distancing.

DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, APRIL 3

Former union minister and TD nominee for Tirupati Lok Sabha seat, Panabaka Lakshmi demanded that Prime Minister Narendra Modi explain how BJP could promise special category status (SCS) for Puducherry in its manifesto after denying the same to Andhra Pradesh citing planning commission objections.

She underlined that all wings of government are under Prime Minister.

DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, APRIL 3

She ridiculed claims Niti Aayog is an independent body. The TDP candidate asked the electorate to take Tirupati Lok Sabha by-election seriously and teach a lesson to BJP and Narendra Modi who promised SCS to AP at the foothills of Tirumala during the latter's election campaign in 2019 LS general elections.

Panabaka observed that YSR Congress is also a party to deprivation of special status for AP, since it has been supporting NDA government either directly or indirectly.

The former union minister expressed these views while speaking to *Deccan Chronicle* on sidelines of her roadshow at Manubolu in Sarvepalli assembly segment braving the scorching heat on Saturday.

Referring to her long stint as Lok Sabha member and central minister, she appealed to the electorate that they support her candidature for highlighting issues of AP in parliament. She pointed out that 21 MPs belonging to YSRC are maintaining stoic silence in Lok Sabha

and another member of that party in parliament will not make any difference, whereas she could with her experience. Justifying her claim, she pointed out that YSRC MPs maintained silence whenever TD raises public issues in parliament.

The former Union Minister took a dig at the PM for encouraging corporate sector ignoring interests of the poor. She said moves to privatise Visakhapatnam Steel Plant and nationalised banks will be harmful for the country.

FUNDS | AFFAIR

Sarpanches fear they will have no funds for development

Panchayats adjust funds given by FC

DC CORRESPONDENT
KADAPA, APRIL 3

Funds recommended by the Fourteenth Finance Commission for newly formed panchayats are being adjusted by the state government in clearing the electricity arrears payable by panchayats.

This has left the new sarpanches shocked, as they fear they will have no funds to take up any development works in their panchayats.

There are 807 gram panchayats in Kadapa district. Central gov-

● There are 807 gram panchayats in Kadapa district. Central government has released ₹162.33 crore funds as recommended by the 14th Finance Commission in three tranches.

ernment has released ₹162.33 crore funds as recommended by the 14th Finance Commission in three tranches.

These funds could be used for laying C. C. roads, constructing drainages and culverts, apart from supplying drinking water.

These funds were to be spent by

March 31 or otherwise, they would lapse.

However, the centre decided to extend time for using these funds by another year.

Central funds are a major source for panchayats to take up any development works, as they get no separate funding from the state government.

Panchayats get hardly any revenue from collection of house tax, water tax and other taxes, as they are not collected properly at all. Panchayats thus essentially survive on central funds.

Meanwhile, panchayats across Kadapa district have accumulated arrears of nearly ₹45 crore on electricity bills.

Following this, officials say the state government has recently ordered that a part of Finance Commission funds be adjusted to clear electricity arrears and only the remaining amount be given to panchayats.

This has left sarpanches disappointed as to what they could spend on development of their panchayats.

SHORT TAKES

GANG HELD FOR PRINTING FAKE CURRENCY NOTES

DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, APRIL 3

Chirala police apprehended six members of an 8-member gang involved in printing of fake currency notes in a house at Balasai Nagar in Chirala on Saturday.

The police team seized 170 numbers of ₹500 fake notes, 4 numbers of ₹200 notes, a ₹100 note and 4 numbers of ₹50 notes.

This is in addition to a computer, printer apart from several tools and stationary used for printing the notes.

The accused have been identified as N. Ravi, 40, G. Krishna Reddy 45, M. Madhusudhan Rao, 50, Kaki Annapoorna, 38, Soma Eswar Rao. 35, Soma Murali Krishna, 32, of Chirala, Jilla Siva Prasad 25 and Jilla Kiran, 29, of Mangalagiri.

TREATMENT FOR SUNSTROKE VICTIMS

DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, APRIL 3

Joint collector Dr M.N. Harendira Prasad directed the officials of the Primary Health Centres, Community Health Centres and other medical facilities in the district to arrange for sunstroke victims on war-footing.

During a review with officials of Medical and Health, Revenue and heads of Civic bodies here on Saturday, Joint collector told them to ensure the availability of ORS packets in all the health centres. They were also told to offer training on first aid techniques to handle those affected by the prevailing heatwave to the Anganwadi, Asha, and ANMs.

RTC AC BUS CATCHES FIRE IN KAKINADA

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, APRIL 3

There was a panic in the Indra A/C Bus service from Kakinada to Vijayawada which started at 7.30 am from Kakinada Depot on Saturday, as fire broke out in the engine, when the bus reached the Zilla Parishad center, the heart of the town in Kakinada. The driver noticed the flames at the engine and alerted the passengers and asked them to get down from the bus quickly. After the passengers got down, the driver immediately informed the RTC higher officials of the Kakinada Depot and Fire Department Personnel.

RESIGNATIONS CONTINUE IN TELUGU DESAM

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, APRIL 3

Resignations continued in Telugu Desam on Saturday, also in the aftermath of the TD state Vice President Jyothula Venkata Appa Rao (Nehru) resigned to the party post. Following on the footsteps of his leader Mr Nehru, party state associate secretary and also former Zilla Grandhavalva Samstha Chairman S.V.S. Appala Raju also resigned. The newly elected Bhupalapatnam village sarpanch (TD) and other five villages TD cadre resigned to the party membership.

TRADE FAIR EXHIBITION TO START TODAY

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 3

The Vijayawada Trade Fair exhibition would start on April 4 at Swarajya Maidan in the city. The organisers P. Krishna and P. Subba Rao, speaking to the media persons on Saturday said that the exhibition would be held during summer holidays.

They said that the exhibition will be open to the public from April 4 from 5 pm to 9 pm, till May 31 and all Covid precautions are being taken by them. The duo said that the special attractions in the exhibition are handloom, variety of dress materials and readymade garments.

Members of the organising committee R Narayana Rao, Sk Munnabhai and others were present.



Firepersonnel controlling the flames at the Gunadala power station in Vijayawada on Saturday.

— C. NARAYANA RAO

State records 1,398 infections, 9 deaths

The highest addition of cases in a day after Nov. 14

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 3

Andhra Pradesh registered 1,398 fresh Covid-19 cases and nine deaths in the last 24 hours.

The state health authorities reported on Saturday that out of 31,260 samples tested, 1,398 persons were infected with the virus. Out of a total number of 1,51,77,364 samples tested so far in the state, 9,05,946 persons were infected with the virus and of them, 8,89,295 were recovered in the course of medical treatment while 9,417 are still active with the virus.

Among the daily Covid-19 cases, Guntur topped the state with 273, followed by 198 in Visakhapatnam, 190 in Chittoor, 178 in Krishna, 163 in Nellore, 96 in Kurnool, 75 in Kadapa, 51 in Srikakulam, 48 in Prakasam, 47 in Vizianagaram, 36 in Anantapur, 28 in East Godavari and 15 in West Godavari.

Chittoor found to be the worst hit with more number of cumulative active cases at 1,728, followed by 1,444 in Visakhapatnam, 1,414 in Krishna, 1,096 in Guntur, 732 in Nellore, 717 in East Godavari, 496 in Prakasam, 456 in Kurnool, 403 in Srikakulam, 298 in Anantapur, 291 in Kadapa, 188 in Vizianagaram and 154



A woman reacts while taking Covid vaccination in Vijayawada on Saturday.

— DC

Covid protocol must in schools

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 3:

Minister for endowment Vellampalli Srinivas Rao asserted the need for bringing awareness about following the Covid-19 protocol among schoolchildren to contain the spread of the virus in educational institutions.

The minister conducted inspections in various government schools in Vijayawada on Saturday and further checked the mid-day meals offered to students.

He assured about continuing of the welfare schemes and development programmes by the YSRC government and refuted allegations of opposition parties in this regard.

Mr Srinivas laid the foundation stone for ₹1.05 crore worth of development works at the Housing Board colony.

The minister said that Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy aimed to develop Vijayawada into a model city under which municipal divisions will be developed as model divisions.

Mr Srinivas laid the foundation stone for ₹1.05 crore worth of development works at the Housing Board colony.

AP conducted Covid-19 tests on 2,84,220 samples per one million population and registered a positive rate of 5.97.

Fire mishap in power feeder

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 3

A minor fire accident took place at 33 KV Vijayawada city feeder in Gunadala mid-day on Saturday and the firefighters controlled the flames averting a major fire mishap.

The electricity department staff noticed the fire in the power feeder and they immediately informed it to higher officials and further to the fire department who plunged into action and controlled the flames.

CMD of AP Central Power Distribution Corporation Limited (APCPDCL), J. Padma Janardhan Reddy said that the incident took place due to the contact of a bird to live power wire.

He said that the staff immediately informed the fire department who rushed to the spot and controlled the fire.

He said that valuables worth of ₹30,000 were dam-

aged in the fire mishap and the burned material scrap were removed from the place.

District Fire Officer M. Srinivas Reddy said that on receiving the information of fire accident at Gunadala 33 KV Vijayawada city feeder, three fire vehicles with about 15 firefighters swung into action and doused the fire in about an hour.

He said that there were more grass and combustible material in the surroundings. Luckily, the transformer's oil drums which were adjacent to the plastic dump did not catch fire.

He stated that three fire vehicles two from Vijayawada and one from Autonagar were pressed to work to put off the fire.

The DFO further instructed the electricity department officials to clear the combustible material as there are chances of a repeat of the fire mishap.

Archaka Samakhya hails TTD decision

FROM PAGE 1

At that time, the retired hereditary priests knocked the doors of the High court and the Supreme court in separate cases seeking to revoke the resolution of TTD board.

In one of the cases, the High court set aside the resolution of the then TTD trust board and ordered it to reinstate the retired priests of Tiruchanoor temple with immediate effect in December-2018.

Subsequently, Dr Deekshithulu submitted a

representation before the TTD administration, seeking his reinstatement. Taking his representation, the High Court order and the board directions, the TTD administration on Friday issued orders restoring the retired priests in the positions they held prior to their retirement.

Meanwhile, the Andhra Pradesh Archaka Samakhya hailed the decision of TTD board for its decision to continue the services of retired Archakas including that of Deekshithulu.

Unions: BJP spreading rumours on VSP sale

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, APRIL 3

Trade union leaders observing the relay hunger strike against the privatisation of steel plant for the second day on Saturday alleged that BJP was spreading rumours on the operation of Visakhapatnam Steel Plant.

CPM leader M. Jaggu Naidu, who is leading the hunger strike, said BJP leaders were justifying the privatisation move stating that the plant was incurring huge loss.

He said RINL statement said that the company earned a profit of ₹740 crore in three months and the turnover in the last financial year was ₹18,000 crore, highest since the

inception of the plant.

He said many private steel plants closed their operations due to the lockdown and ESSAR steel and Bhushan Steel defaulted bank loans to the tune of ₹70,000 crore.

But Vizag steel plant continued to work in the lockdown and has been paying the bank loans instalments regularly, he said and added that the company contributed its own funds to the tune of ₹6,000 crore and borrowed another ₹6,500 crore to expand the plant to 7.3 million ton capacity.

APSRTC TO RUN SPECIAL BUSES TO KAKINADA BEACH

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, APRIL 3

APSRTC has launched a special service from MSN Charities in Kakinada to Shilparamam at Kakinada Beach near Vakalapudi to meet travel needs of local people as well as tourists.

At present, people going to the beach are facing difficulties as there is no RTC or private bus service from the town to beach road. They have to depend on auto rickshaws, which are unsafe and overcrowded. In response to plea by Shilparamam organisers, RTC authorities have launched the special service for weekends.

RTC buses are currently making three trips during weekends on Saturday and Sunday. If public response is encouraging, the service may be made daily, Kakinada RTC depot manager P. Bhaskara Rao said. The bus will start at MSN Charities at 1:30 p.m., 3:30 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. and return from Shilparamam at 2:30 p.m., 4:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.

The response when the service was formally launched on Saturday was, however, poor. RTC authorities have expressed hope that passengers will gradually get attracted to the bus service and some may even start visiting Kakinada Beach because transport is available. There is also a proposal to introduce city bus services in Kakinada and Rajamahendravaram cities when Godavari Pushkaralu are organised. Citizens, however, want the facility on a daily basis, like in other cities, and not just for pushkaralu.

● There is also a proposal to introduce city bus services in Kakinada and Rajamahendravaram cities when Godavari Pushkaralu are organised.

32.54 L VOTERS TO CAST VOTE IN MPTC, ZPTC POLLS IN EG

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, APRIL 3

As many as 32, 54,395 voters, including 16, 21,130 men and 16, 33,265 women will exercise their votes for 61 ZPTCs and 1086 MPTC posts in East Godavari District in seven divisions. There are 1184 MPTCs in the district out of which 86 MPTCs, there were no elections and 82 MPTCs were unanimously elected with single nomination. 3561 polling stations were arranged and 1319 polling stations were identified as hyper sensitive and 1233 were sensitive.

There are 2628 candidates contesting for 1084 MPTCs and 235 candidates are contesting for 61 ZPTCs in the district.

Nallamala turning into death trap for pilgrims

DC CORRESPONDENT
KURNOOL, APRIL 3

Lack of medical facilities for pilgrims trekking through Nallamala forest to reach Srisaillam for Ugadi is turning fatal for some. During early hours of Saturday, a pilgrim from Karnataka was found gasping for breath. Srisaillam police arrived with an oxygen cylinder but could not save the person.

Thousands of devout from neighbouring Karnataka trek through the Nallamala forest to reach Srisaillam for Ugadi has been a ritual going on since centuries, said Manikanta, a devotee from Srisaillam.

When Srisaillam sub-inspector Hari Prasad came to know through dial 100 about a devotee going breathless, he, along with a team, rushed to the place along with an oxygen cylinder. But all their efforts of carrying the devotee on their shoulders and climbing steep hills proved unfruitful when the police team reached Srisaillam. Doctors pronounced him brought dead. The body was sent to the person's



A patient being shifted to hospital

from Karnataka walking through the Nallamala forest to reach Srisaillam for Ugadi has been a ritual going on since centuries, said Manikanta, a devotee from Srisaillam.

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native place in a special vehicle arranged by Srisaillam temple authorities.

The deceased has been identified as Veda Murthy, 45, of Bommanahalli village in Bellary district of Karnataka.

With the heat wave rising, Sri Bramarambha Mallikarjuna Swamy Temple executive officer K. S. Has Rama Rao appealed to pilgrims coming to Srisaillam on foot to avoid travelling during mid afternoon. He advised them to walk only in the morning and evening times. The five-day Ugadi Mahotsavams of the temple in Srisaillam will start from April 10 and end on April 14.

NIDADAVOLU MUNICIPAL CHIEF'S WIFE DROWN IN GODAVARI CANAL

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, APRIL 3

Nidadavolu Municipal Chairman Bhupathi Adinarayana's wife Andalu (55) who went missing in the Godavari Canal in Basivireddyvaripet in Nidadavolu town of West Godavari and her body was found at Velivenu canal locks. According to Nidadavole police, Adinarayana's house is located very near to the canal. Andalu on Saturday went to the canal to take bath. Due to the heavy flow of the river, Andalu washed away in the canal and drowned.

The Nidadavolu Circle Inspector Mr Appala Swamy and Sub-Inspector Mr Jagadeeswara Rao searched for the body. Nidadavole police registered a case.

● Nidadavole police, Adinarayana's house is located very near to the canal. Andalu on Saturday went to the canal to take bath. Due to the heavy flow of the river, Andalu washed away in the canal and drowned.



Two-wheeler riders do not wear masks, even though police are filing about 2,000 cases every day and increasing the number of Covid-19 cases in Vijayawada on Saturday.

12 Anganwadi children take ill after food poisoning

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, APRIL 3

As many as 12 children of an Anganwadi centre, at Kummuru village in Chinturu mandal of East Godavari suffered with food poisoning and they were admitted in area hospital at Chinturu on Saturday. According to sources, the

children have taken lunch on Saturday afternoon and some of the students had vomiting and other symptoms. Noticing the incident, the village Sarpanch Nagarjuna and others took them to the hospital. The doctors said that due to the digestive problem, they became ill but they recovered well. The ICDS Child

Development Officers and others visited the hospital and took care of the children. The children were sent to their homes, after treatment. Chinturu ITDA Project Officer Akula Venkata Ramana visited the hospital and observed the condition of the children.

DECCAN Chronicle

4 APRIL 2021



Shashi Warriar

Off the beaten track

Of ‘everyone’s friends’ & being a public enemy

The other day there was a message on WhatsApp that our MLA would be visiting the nearby Primary Health Centre, or PHC, the next day, and would be available to the public from 9:30 am to 9:45 am. His practice is to announce a time for the meeting to start, and turn up three hours late. In all fairness, he never specifies when he'll leave, and is usually available until most of the people who've come to meet him have had their say, to one of his assistants if not to himself, so this was unusual. Right, I thought hopefully, maybe we can get some of our problems solved. They made a formidable list: bad roads, a defunct sewage treatment plant, blocked gutters, missing street lamps, and an unauthorised temple that plays painfully loud bhajans, and hillocks of garbage left by people who party on the beach nearby.

I arrived at the PHC a few minutes early to find some hopeful neighbours waiting. We were wondering when the MLA would arrive, given his habit of unpunctuality, when a police jeep with flashing lights turned into the PHC's gate. It was his escort, closely followed by a large white SUV. The doors of the vehicles opened, and, to our immense surprise, there he was, our MLA in person, only a couple of minutes behind time!

Within moments the compound was swarming with his henchmen, and visitors waiting to see him. The henchmen were swaggering young men with strange haircuts, shiny shirts, and flashy cellphones, all clouded in *attar*. The visitors came in all shapes and sizes and ages, all clearly supplicants. As we watched, the MLA and his retinue, instead of heading for the entrance and the staircase to the first floor, where the meeting was supposed to be held, started walking towards the PHC's backyard, to the accompaniment of clicking cameras.

When we followed, we saw a little hole dug in the ground near a tree, a few large stones laid out by it, and, beside them, the ingredients of a puja: flowers and such. My friend spoke to one of the henchmen, it emerged that the MLA had come to inaugurate an extension of the PHC. By now it was clear that we had been suckered into supporting a photo-op for the MLA, so that anyone who reported the event could claim with some truth that several hundred people attended it.

By dint of some vigorous pushing, my friend managed to get within earshot of the MLA, with me following closely. "Good morning," he said. "The last time we met you promised to visit my neighbourhood after three days, and that was more than two years ago."

The MLA smiled. "But I never asked you for votes, did I?" he asked. I could sense that my friend was close to an explosion, and so did some of the henchmen, who moved smoothly into position between their master and my friend, averting what might have been an unseemly shouting match. As we walked away, my friend said in disgust, "I wanted to ask him whether he's MLA only for people who voted for him!"

Another neighbour joined us as we stood wondering what to do next. "Good you didn't," he said. "I've just spoken to his P.A. He'll make sure I get a couple of minutes to speak to the boss." Very sensible, no doubt, but it left a bad taste in the mouth, and I was about to say so when he continued, "Thanks for being here. I'll take this onward. You don't have to wait."

My angry friend and I went home to stew, and, as the hours passed, I moved on to some of the other trivialities that fill in my hours. And then, towards half past four in the afternoon, there was another message on WhatsApp: The MLA will be in your area at 4:45pm.

A few minutes short of 4:45, I was on the road to the beach, as were the neighbours who turned up for the morning's meeting. "He's already here," one of them said. "He's at the beach, inspecting the garbage recycling plant."

A good beach seems a strange spot in which to build a garbage recycling plant but then the ways of government are mysterious. I used to get worked up about it until I saw that the beach is in danger of disappearing thanks to erosion but no one else seems to bother about it and there are always more pressing issues to deal with so it had slipped to the back of my mind. I decided now to bring it up if I got the chance.

At ten to five, he turned up with his retinue of youngsters with strange haircuts, and some new men, older and rougher and far more obsequious. One of them I recognised: a contractor who built a kilometre of road nearby last year that disappeared with the first spell of heavy rain.

To my surprise, the MLA approached our group. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

I poured out my litany of problems, starting with the beach. He heard me out, then said, "The garbage plant is already there. We can do nothing about it. About your other problems, we will deal with them one by one, starting with roads." He turned to the contractor I'd recognised, saying, "How much?"

So now it was clear we'd been suckered again. As I prepared to leave, one of the henchmen, misreading my mood, said, "See? He does what he can. He's everyone's friend."

As I trudged home, I couldn't but think of the old cliché: With friends like these, who needs enemies?

Shashi Warriar has written fairy tales, thrillers, a semi-fictional biography, satires, and a love story. Besides writing, he teaches strategic communication at a business school.

Subhani



If only BJP were as good at vaccination as it's at election



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya's View

The writing is writ large on the wall: vaccinate, vaccinate, vaccinate. We know now that the Covid virus is likely to attack in several waves. This has been seen in many countries, and is in evidence in ours too. To contain successive surges, we should, of course, retain our vigil on all health and social distancing protocols, but the real solution is to universalise vaccination and ensure its delivery in the shortest possible time.

The government I am sure is doing its best, but its best falls short, I am sorry to say, of the optimum. The first in the line to get the shot were health workers, and rightly so. However, a great number of these still remain vulnerable. There are around three crore healthcare and frontline workers. Of these, less than one-third have as yet received both the shots; and a little more than half have got the first shot. This is woefully short of target.

Senior citizens and those with co-morbidities were next in line. Here too performance is far below targets. It is estimated that there are 27 crore senior citizens and those with co-morbidities. But only three crore of these have been vaccinated, including some 78 lakh with co-morbidities. This is really slow going.

It is true that there could have been some vaccine hesitancy in the initial phase. Yet, this is hardly likely to have been that high in vulnerable senior citizens eager to get some protection, and in health workers who know that it is essen-

tial in their own self-interest to get the jab. One can understand greater reticence in rural areas, but a great many have still not been covered even in urban centres.

We need to know the reasons for this tardy pace. India, we are continuously told is not short of vaccines. Government spokespersons loudly proclaim with justifiable pride that we are the vaccine capital, producing 60 per cent of vaccines in the world. Nor do we lack experience in public health campaigns for mass vaccination. Our Universal Immunisation Program, which began in 1985, is today one of the largest and most successful programs in the world. We have the systems in place for such a campaign — Electronic Vaccine Intelligence Network (eVIN), National Cold Chain Management Inventory System (NCCMIC), and the National Cold Chain Training Centre (NCCTS). Thousands have by now been trained in managing stocks of vaccines at the right temperatures and monitoring their safe delivery across the country. Why then are we lagging behind in this highly critical vaccination drive, on which not only the health but the economy of our country is dependent?

In the absence of a ramped up vaccine campaign, several of the worst effected state governments are threatening lockdowns. As many doctors and health specialists have emphasised, lockdowns are hardly a solution, quite

apart from being impractical. We have seen the disastrous consequences of the first nationwide lockdown announced at a notice of four hours, which left millions of migrant workers on the streets walking hundreds and thousands of miles to their villages and hometowns without food, water, transport, money or health support. That lockdown, and the manner in which it was implemented, far from containing the spread of the disease, ensured that it spread with impunity.

Today, when the economy is just showing signs of a revival, a lockdown would be a fatal dampener to these green shoots of resurgence. It would also further aggravate the huge unemployment problem, the highest in years. As one worker said on national television, I would rather die of the virus than out of hunger for lack of a job. Undoubtedly, containment zones cannot be ruled out as a temporary measure, but generically spread out lockdowns, misinterpreted as a decisive response by panicky state governments, is hardly a solution. Even if lockdowns are announced, their efficacious implementation in a country like ours where people live cheek by jowl and in porous habitations, is virtually impossible. All lockdowns do is to give disproportionate powers to state agencies like the police.

The answer, therefore, is to put an expedited and effective vaccination

Even if lockdowns are announced, their efficacious implementation in a country like ours where people live cheek by jowl and in porous habitations, is virtually impossible

campaign in mission mode. For this, the government must get over its own vaccine hesitancy. The imperative is to universalise and go beyond this reticent step by step approach. Secondly, distribution problems must be urgently sorted out, since some states have complained that they are not getting an adequate supply of vaccines, while six per cent of vaccines are being wasted for lack of use. Thirdly, we need to approve more vaccines at the speed of light. Those global vaccines that have Indian collaborations need to be given the licence without the mandatory bridging trials. Regulatory hurdles need to be removed from vaccines such as Johnson & Johnson, Sputnik and Novavax. Fourthly, our vast previous experience of mass immunisation programmes should be aggressively harnessed to increase the pace and footprint of vaccination. There is a widespread network of anganwadi workers and health and education officials who should be roped in for this purpose. Fifthly, the private sector and civil society should be made partners in the ramped up vaccination drive. Sixthly, state governments, under close central supervision, should gird up for the task ahead, since much of the ground implementation is in their hands. And, lastly, Covid appropriate behaviour should be consistently advertised, and containment zones carefully identified and their isolation strictly monitored.

If the BJP, now in power at the Centre, could run the vaccination programme as efficiently as it seeks to run elections, we could perhaps see light at the end of this dark tunnel.

The writer, an author and a former diplomat, is in politics

LETTERS

POLL PREDICTIONS

With Sasikala opting to be silent, AIADMK has to battle the DMK and has no discernible reason to lose power, unless the people discard Modi's BJP candidates (*South India is different, hopes rest on Left, DMK, DC, April 3*). The DMK, as usual, has towed itself with the vanishing Congress. In Kerala, several high-profile cases pitted against the LDF, have surprisingly strengthened the incumbent CM. In these two states, the role of the Congress and the BJP can be viewed as just a spoilsport.

Parthasarathy Mandadi
Tirupati

TD POLL BOYCOTT

The 40-plus years experienced politician N. Chandrababu Naidu is wilting under the silent political onslaught of 40-plus-year-old Y.S.Jagan Mohan Reddy of YSRC. The former CM is apparently not able to cope up with the dismal and pathetic situation of his party staring at him. His reasons for boycotting polls could at best be labelled as lame excuses. All he and his party did during the past 21 months was disinformation campaign against the ruling party. TD would have been in a better position if the leadership thought of exposing the lacunae in the functioning of present AP government. Naidu appears to be bereft of ideas on how to resurrect his party for the 2024 elections.

Govardhana Myneedu
Vijayawada

COVID VACCINE

Last year by this time with the nation under lockdown, everyone was eagerly waiting for the vaccine. After several clinical tests and permissions from various authorities and manufacturing and supply constraints, the vaccine has arrived. But the response from the public is poor. This is not expected by the respective governments. At a vaccination centre, the health workers are facing a lot of queries with regard to taking non-vegetarian food, alcohol and smoking, if vaccine is taken. However, it is not prudent to point out one's habits. Strange are the people's ways.

P. Ramakrishna
Rajahmundry

50 YEARS AGO IN DECCAN Chronicle

More troops on way to Bangla Desh

SHILLONG, April. 3
Martial Law authorities in East Pakistan today asked people living in the vicinity of military airports to quit their homes amidst reports that substantial troop reinforcements were on their way from the western wing.

The order to clear all areas within five kilometers of the airports before 0830 pm tomorrow came as Sheikh Mujibar Rehman's liberation forces kept up their pressure on short-ranged West Pakistani troops in several areas, reports from sources reaching here said.

With their supply completely cut and at all attempts of air-dropping food thwarted the West Pakistanis brought in their long range cannons.

Anita Katyal

Political Gup-Shup



Personality cult infiltrates Left; leaked 'survey' rattles TMC

The Opposition leaders refer to him derisively as "Kerala's Modi" or "Copycat Modi". This may be a classic case of sour grapes but there is no doubt that Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan's ongoing poll campaign is not very different from that of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As in the case of the Bharatiya Janata Party whose election campaigns revolve around Mr Modi, the Kerala Assembly election is all about Pinarayi Vijayan. Like Mr Modi, he invariably makes a rockstar-like grand and dramatic entry at his election rallies and keeps the crowds engaged with his fiery speeches. The student and youth wings of the CPI(M) are deployed in large numbers at each venue to whip up passions and generally set the mood for Mr Vijayan's arrival while chanting cadres line the roads leading to the podium. Often, a fireworks display is also part of the welcome drill. The puritanical CPI(M) cadres must be cringing as the cadre-based Left parties generally have an aversion to building a personality cult but given their political marginalisation, the Marxists have no choice

but to accept that the party in Kerala has become a one-man show.

While Pinarayi Vijayan is on a roll, the Congress-led United Democratic Front is fighting hard to wrest the state from its chief political rival. However, it finds itself in trouble as doubts have arisen about its Christian support base. Unlike the past elections, the various Christian factions are learned to have told Congress leaders that they will not issue any advisory to its followers to vote for the grand old party. Though it is not openly supporting any party, the Church will not issue an appeal in favour of any party. The Christian community has been partial to the Congress in the past but the BJP has also been wooing it, especially the Jacobite Syrian Christians and Catholics. The saffron party is weaning them away from the Congress by convincing the community that the Congress is taking them for granted and neglecting them in favour of Muslims and Hindus. On its part, the Church wants to safeguard its interests as it

has land and other investments it has made across the state.

Chhattisgarh chief minister Bhupesh Baghel and Rajasthan chief minister are a study in contrast. Both were given special duties in the poll-bound states — Mr Baghel was assigned to Assam and Mr Gehlot to Kerala. While Mr Baghel took on his assignment in mission-mode, Mr Gehlot has only made a cursory visit to Kerala, evincing little or no interest in the election even though former Congress president Rahul Gandhi is focusing all his energies on the Kerala poll. Mr Gehlot maintains he is busy with the by-elections in Rajasthan but it is being joked that Mr Gehlot is scared to leave Jaipur for fear that his bete noire Sachin Pilot may start plotting against him in his absence. Mr Baghel, on the other hand, has barely left Assam, immersing himself in the election, providing both funds and manpower from his state. Mr Baghel, it is said, is working overtime to retain his "gaddi" as his rival T.S. Singh Deo was promised the chief minister's post midway during the five-year term, which

happens to be in May.

Keeping a firm eye on the crucial West Bengal Assembly polls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi undertook a well-timed trip to Dhaka to mark fifty years of the liberation of Bangladesh. Though he did make a fleeting reference to Indira Gandhi's role in liberating Bangladesh, Mr Modi managed to make the event all about him. The Congress, which should have and could have, made a big splash by recalling Indira Gandhi's contribution to the neighbouring country's freedom struggle, maintained a studied silence. In fact, Sonia Gandhi had even set up an in-house committee headed by former defence minister A.K. Antony and comprising senior leaders like Amarinder Singh and Prithviraj Chavan, to plan and coordinate the party's programmes to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1971 Bangladesh war. This was last December but nothing has been heard from this panel. It met once but no one knows what activities were drawn up by the committee.

There has been radio silence since then.

There is no end to the twists and turns in the high-decibel West Bengal Assembly election. In fact, there is never a dull moment as charges and counter-charges between the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamul Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party fly thick and fast. In addition, violent clashes between their workers have become the order of the day. But over the past few days, the two parties have been locked in a battle over a "leaked internal election survey", apparently commissioned by poll strategist Prashant Kishor, which shows that the Trinamul is losing. A gleeful BJP has obviously gone to town with this revelation but Mr Kishor's outfit, IPAC, has tied itself in knots issuing a series of denials about its involvement in this survey. It is insisting that this is the handiwork of the BJP's dirty tricks department or its IT cell.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

IN BRIEF

PROF. SAIBABA'S SERVICE TERMINATED

New Delhi, Apr 3: Delhi University's Ram Lal Anand College has terminated the service of assistant professor G N Saibaba, who is currently serving life term in Nagpur Central Prison for alleged Maoist links.

According to a memorandum received by Saibaba's wife Vasantha on Thursday, his services have been terminated with immediate effect from the afternoon of March 31.

"The services of G N Saibaba, assistant professor, Ram Lal Anand College are terminated with immediate effect from the afternoon of March 31, 2021. Three months' salary has been paid in his savings bank account," said the memorandum undersigned by college principal Rakesh Kumar Gupta.

Gupta could not be reached for a comment even after several attempts.

Saibaba, an assistant professor of English, was suspended after his arrest by the Maharashtra Police in 2014. His wife and daughters were receiving half of his salary since the arrest.

Terming the latest development a "witch hunt", Saibaba's wife alleged that it was a "violation of employee's rights" and she would take the matter to court.

FORMER J&K BANK CHAIRMAN ARRESTED

DC CORRESPONDENT
SRINAGAR, APRIL 3

Jammu and Kashmir's anti graft agency on Saturday arrested former chairman of a semi state owned bank for allegedly being involved in tender fraud in housekeeping.

A spokesman of J&K Anti Corruption Bureau said Parvez Ahmad Nengroo, ex-chairman of Jammu and Kashmir Bank Limited, was arrested in connection with the investigation underway in a case pertaining to illegal allotment of tenders for house-keeping to a Mumbai-based Company M/S SILA Solutions Pvt. Ltd "by not following proper tendering norms as provided in the contract to the said firm despite not falling into the criteria of any such allotment".

He claimed that due to the improper tendering processes and ATM cleaning, undue addition of the management fee and other omissions and commissions detected during the course of investigation, the J&K Bank suffered losses to the tune of over ₹6.29 crores from the date of award of contract.

The ACB had earlier filed charge-sheet against Mr. Nengroo in connection with alleged illegal appointments in J&K Bank. As per the charge-sheet, the bank suffered a loss of more than ₹250 crore on account of salary paid to these "illegally appointed employees over a period of time".

FAROOQ TESTS COVID POSITIVE, HOSPITALISED

YUSUF JAMEEL | DC
SRINAGAR, APRIL 3

Former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister and president of National Conference, Farooq Abdullah, was admitted to a hospital here on Saturday, days after testing positive for Covid-19.

Sources close to him said that 83-year-old Mr. Abdullah was taken to Srinagar's Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences (SKIMS) after he showed some health related signs and symptoms of concern.

However, his son Omar Abdullah said in a tweet, "Based on the advice of doctors to enable them to better monitor my father, he has been admitted to hospital in Srinagar". He also said, "Our family remains grateful to everyone for their messages of support & their prayers."

Senior Abdullah who is a Lok Sabha member representing home constituency Srinagar had tested positive for Coronavirus on March 30, four weeks after getting first Covid-19 vaccine jab.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was among the first who wished him a speedy recovery. He had tweeted, "Praying for the good health and speedy recovery of Dr. Farooq Abdullah Ji. Also praying for your and the entire family's good health Omar Abdullah Ji."

Meanwhile, J&K reported 501 fresh Covid-19 cases.

ED ATTACHES ASSETS OF TMC LEADERS IN SARADHA CASE

DC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 3

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has provisionally attached assets, worth several crores, belonging to Kunal Ghosh, former Rajya Sabha MP from Trinamul Congress (TMC), Lok Sabha MP Satadhi Roy and Debjani Mukherjee as part of its money-laundering probe into the Saradha chit fund case.

In a statement issued here on Saturday, the ED said, "A provisional order for attachment of the movable and immovable properties has been issued under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). Assets belong to Kunal Ghosh, former Rajya Sabha MP from TMC (CEO of Media Group Saradha), Satadhi Roy, Lok Sabha MP from TMC (brand ambassador in Saradha), and Debjani Mukherjee who is a director in Saradha Group of companies in Saradha chit fund case." Assets worth ₹600 crore have been attached in this case till now. The ED is probing the money-laundering aspect of the alleged ponzi scam since April, 2013.

The Saradha group allegedly cheated thousands of depositors, promising abnormally high returns on investments in its illegal schemes. Mr Ghosh, who is out on bail in the case, was suspended from the TMC in 2013 for alleged anti-party activities. Ghosh had earlier spent 34 months in jail and was in the custody of West Bengal Police and CBI. He was granted bail on October 5, 2016. The former TMC MP headed a TV channel and a daily, which was funded by the now-defunct Saradha group.

Several other leaders of TMC are under the scanner of the central investigation agencies, including ED, in the Saradha chit fund scam. The CBI has already summoned and questioned several TMC leaders in connection with the case. The CBI is also preparing to record the statements of several TMC leaders again in connection with the case.

Odisha clamps night curfew

AKSHAYA KUMAR
SAHOO | DC
BHUBANESWAR, APRIL 3

The Odisha government on Saturday decided to clamp night curfew restrictions in 10 districts which witnessed a surge in Covid-19 cases in the past four days.

As per a latest notification issued by the Special Relief Commissioner, the night curfew will be clamped in Sundergarh, Jharsuguda, Sambalpur, Bargarh, Nuapada, Bolangir, Kahalandi, Nabarangpur, Koraput and Malkangiri.

The night curfew restrictions will come into effect from April 5.

Covid cases are at six-month high

DC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

India on Saturday recorded 89,129 new Covid-19 cases in a day, the highest daily rise in around six-and-half-months, taking the nationwide tally of infections to over 1.23 crore, according to the Union Health Ministry data on Saturday.

The toll increased to 1,64,110 with 714 more fatalities in a day, also the highest since October 21.

The jump in cases reported on Saturday was the highest since September 20 when 92,605 new infections were recorded in a span of 24

Modi advises Mamata to control goons of her party

Modi mocks Didi, speculates she may leave the state for safe location

RAJIB CHOWDHURI | DC
KOLKATA, APRIL 3

Prime minister Narendra Modi on Saturday accused West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee of abusing the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM), Election Commission (EC) and the central paramilitary forces over her failure to engineer 'Chhappa Vote' (rigging) for her victory in the ongoing Assembly Election.

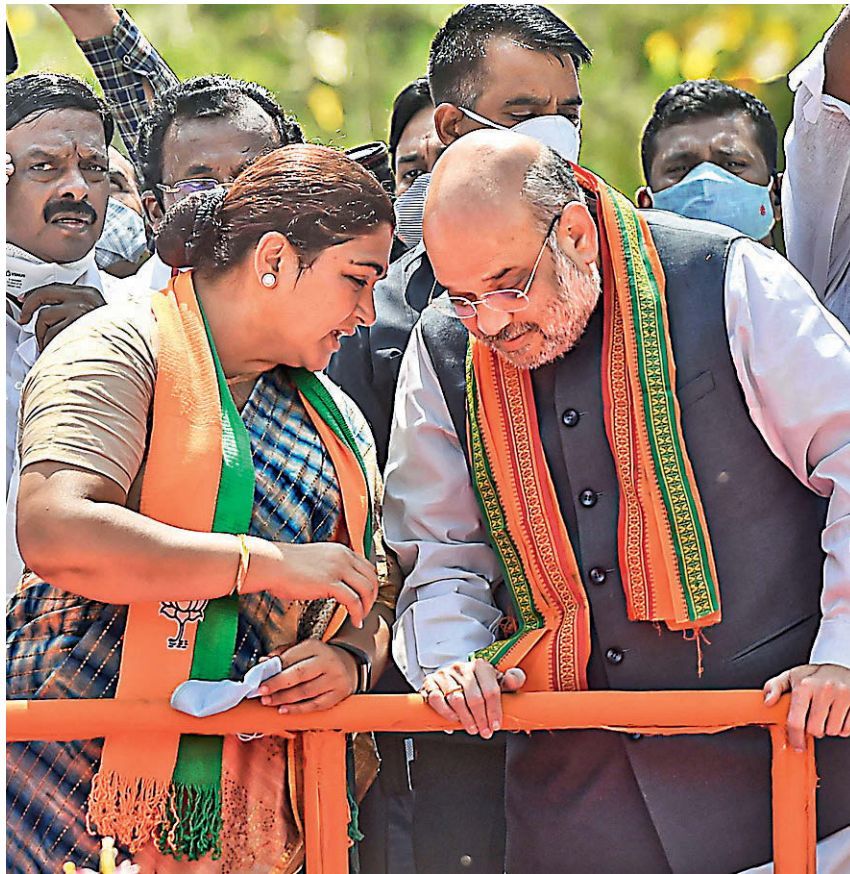
Mr Modi also advised the Trinamul Congress supremo to "accept" her much awaited defeat and warned her to "control" the goons of her party referring to his presence in the state.

"If a player repeatedly raises questions on the umpire, it means there is something wrong in his game. In poll-battle, if someone blames EVM and EC, it means her game is over. Didi, defeat is in front of you. It is better if you accept it," Mr Modi told the two-time CM, over her allegations of foul play in the polling, from a BJP rally at Haripal in Hooghly.

Showing a mimicry of rigging with his two hands above his head, the PM later said at another campaign rally in Sonarpur of South 24 Parganas, "Didi, Chhappa Vote, Huh!? You are abusing the EC and raising questions on the central forces for not getting a chance of engineering Chhappa Vote! Just recall how much you used to depend on the central forces ten years ago. You were fine with this very EVM, EC and central forces then."

A day after Ms Banerjee asked Mr Modi to "control" union home minister Amit Shah, the PM suggested her, "*Aapni Nije TMC Goondader ke Samlan. Oderke Bolun Ekhan TMC Esecche. Ekhan Aar Goondagiri Cholbe Na. Bangla Chayna TMC Caderder Hingshar Khela. Bangla Chayna TMC Goondader Otyachar* (You control TMC goons. Tell them, Modi has arrived here. No goondaism will be allowed. Bengal does not want the TMC cadres'

All the shops, commercial establishments, offices, institutions and movement of individuals shall remain closed/prohibited between 10 PM and 5 AM, except for essential activities in these districts. The district Collectors/municipal commissioners shall issue orders for their respective jurisdictions, under appropriate provisions of law, such as Section 144 of CrPC, and ensure strict compliance. The state recorded 452 new cases since Friday, taking the total Covid-19 cases to 3,42,224. As many 2,615 active cases are under treatment while 3,37,635 have recovered.



Union Home Minister Amit Shah during a roadshow in support of BJP candidate Kushboo Sundar (L) ahead of Tamil Nadu Assembly polls, at Thyagaraya Nagar, in Chennai on Saturday. - PTI

DEVELOPMENT CAN HAPPEN ONLY IF AIADMK WAS ELECTED BACK: SHAH

G BABU JAYAKUMAR &
D SEKAR | DC
CHENNAI, APR 3

The penultimate day of electioneering for the April 6 polls saw a high pitch campaign across the State with BJP top honcho Amit Shah launching his broadside against the Congress-DMK alliance on Saturday morning at Teynampet in Chennai, accompanied by Khushboo and other candidates of the BJP-AIADMK alliance.

Shah gave a call to the voters to reject the 'corrupt and dynastic' parties as he began is outing in Thousand Lights constituency, where BJP's Khushboo is pitted against DMK candidate, Dr Ezhil Naganathan, a renowned

medical practitioner.

Other candidates like Saidai Duraisamy, Kandan, John Pandian and Ashok contesting in various city constituencies were also on board the van, from where Shah delivered his speeches in Hindi, which were translated into Tamil.

Speaking at T Nagar, Shah said that development in the State can happen only if the AIADMK was elected back to power as the State needed the support of the government at the Centre. He appealed to the people to bring in a double engine government for growth.

He said Edappadi K Palaniswami and O Panneerselvam had been doing a good job in bringing development to the State.

and Bishnu Sethi – were suspended by Speaker Dr Surjya Narayan Patro for the remaining period of the ongoing Budget Session of the Assembly.

Ruckus broke out after the Speaker Dr Patro refused to allow an adjournment motion on the topic 'mining business determining the politics in Odisha' brought out by Congress.

Joining the chorus, BJP

MLAs also created pandemonium demanding a discussion on the matter. Later, shoes, headphones and other items were hurled at the Speaker's podium.

"Congress had brought the adjournment motion on mining scam and no discussion was possible after the Speaker rejected the proposal. The government today passed some Bills which is unfortunate. I came to know that shoes were hurled at the Speaker's podium which is not acceptable and I condemn it," said senior Congress leader Narasingha Mishra.

BJP MLA Jayanarayan Mishra said, "The way the Speaker is managing the function of the Assembly is not appropriate as all the rules and norms are being thrown to wind."

Delhi Dy CM gets Covid jab

New Delhi, Apr 3: Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia took the coronavirus vaccine jab at the Maulana Azad Medical College here on Saturday and requested the Centre to start the inoculation of people under the age of 45 years.

He also said mass vaccination is key to defeat Covid-19. "We aim to vaccinate all the citizens of Delhi by May 3-4, once the Delhi government receives a good number of Covid-19 vaccine doses from the central government," Sisodia said in a statement. "I request the Government of India to increase the supply of COVID-19 vaccines in Delhi and begin the vaccination drive for citizens below the age of 45, if we want to stop the spread of the virus," he added.

The only way to fight

NO EXAMS FOR CLASS 1-8 STUDENTS IN MAHARASHTRA

BHAGWAN PARAB | DC
MUMBAI, APRIL 3

Considering an alarming Covid situation in the state, students in Maharashtra for the first to eighth standards have been spared from the examination this year too.

Owing to the rising coronavirus cases, the state government has decided to promote all students from Class one to eight to the next class sans examinations.

"In view of the ongoing situation due to #Covid 19, all state board students across Maharashtra state from Class 1st to Class 8th will be promoted to the next class without any examinations. A decision regarding students of class 9th and 11th will soon be taken," Ms Gaikwad tweeted on Saturday.

Last year too, class one to eight students were promoted without examinations. In Maharashtra, schools have been shut since mid-March 2020.

For the students of 9th and 11th, students had demanded online exams as the entire academic year has been held online.

Ms Gaikwad said that the decision regarding these classes will be announced soon.

OVER 10 POLL OFFICIALS REPLACED AFTER TESTING POSITIVE

Kolkata, Apr 3: Over 10 election officials, including a few observers and one returning officer have been replaced in West Bengal after they tested positive for COVID- 19, a senior official said.

"Yes, several officials have been replaced after they tested positive for COVID-19. We have replaced some observers who had tested positive for the disease before coming to West Bengal and also those who were diagnosed with the contagion after coming here. Naturally, they were replaced," the official said.

He said COVID-19 safety protocols were strictly followed throughout the state.

"We have arranged for all forms of measures. We have asked everyone to wear masks and maintain physical distancing," the official said, adding that inoculation of all the officials involved with the election process in the state has been completed.

At least five COVID-19 fatalities were registered in West Bengal on Saturday pushing the toll to 10,340, while 1,736 fresh cases raised the tally in the state to 5,91,658, the state health department said.

Of the five deaths, two each were recorded in the city and its neighbouring North 24 Parganas district, and one was reported from Hooghly.

Meanwhile, nominations of 205 candidates were found valid for the third phase of polling scheduled to be held in 31 assembly constituencies in West Bengal on April 6. A total number of 78,52,425 voters will exercise their voting rights at 10,871 polling stations in the districts of Howrah, South 24 Parganas and Hooghly in the third phase of polling.

and overcome the virus is by vaccinating people of all ages, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader said.

Sisodia, who along with his spouse received the first dose of Covaxin, thanked doctors and scientists in a tweet.

"Got vaccinated with my family today @HospitalLok! Thankful to our brilliant scientists, medical teams & everyone who worked tirelessly for making vaccines for us. Centre Govt should provide vaccine for all without age restrictions. Let's fight #Covid together!" he said.

Presently, people aged 45 years and above are being administered the COVID-19 vaccines in the country.

"The only way to swiftly break the chain of the COVID-19 virus is to vaccinate people of all ages," Sisodia said.

SHORT TAKES

BUILDING IN BANGKOK FALLS, 5 DIE

Bangkok, April 3: A Bangkok residence building collapsed on Saturday, killing at least four rescue workers and a resident, according to an emergency worker.

The three-story house was engulfed in flames around 6 am and the fire raged for about an hour before it was put out.

At around 7 am, as firefighters and rescue workers were moving through the razed structure in the Thai capital, it abruptly collapsed, killing at least five, including a resident.

EXPLOSIONS AT 2 SOMALI ARMY BASES KILL 9

Mogadishu, April 3: Simultaneous large explosions were heard in and around two Somali army bases on Saturday, with the military confirming at least nine of its people killed but asserting "heavy losses" among the attackers.

The al-Shabab extremist group claimed responsibility. Residents said the attacks occurred in Barriire and Awdhegheh villages of Lower Shabelle region, 75 kilometres (46 miles) south of the capital, Mogadishu. Speaking to local media, General Odawa Yusuf Ragheh, the commander of the Somali National Army, confirmed the twin attacks but said al-Shabab had been repulsed with "heavy losses".

ROBOT ARTIST SELLS ART FOR \$688,888

Hong Kong, April 3: Sophia is a robot of many talents — she speaks, jokes, sings and even makes art.

In March, she caused a stir in the art world when a digital work she created as part of a collaboration was sold at an auction for \$688,888 in the form of a non-fungible token. The sale highlighted a growing frenzy in the NFT market, where people can buy ownership rights to digital content. NFTs each have a unique digital code saved on blockchain ledgers that allow anyone to verify the authenticity and ownership of items. David Hansson, CEO of Hong Kong-based Hanson Robotics and Sophia's creator, has been developing robots for the past two and a half decades. He believes realistic-looking robots can connect with people and assist in healthcare and education.

MALI ATTACK KILLS 4 UN PEACEKEEPERS

Bamako, April 3: Four United Nations peacekeepers from Chad were killed in an attack by jihadists on their camp in Aguelhok in northern Mali and 19 others were injured, UN officials said Friday.

The UN mission in Mali said helicopters were dispatched to the scene to evacuate the wounded from the camp, which houses mostly Chadian peacekeepers. The mission said that the attackers suffered heavy losses and had abandoned several of their dead at the site of the attack. UN Secretary-General Guterres condemned the attack by armed elements in the strongest terms and commended the courage and bravery of the peacekeepers who robustly repelled the attack, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

Guterres reiterated attacks targeting peacekeepers may constitute war crimes.

EGYPT, ETHIOPIA, SUDAN RESUME TALKS ON DAM

Cairo, April 3: A new round of talks between three African nations began Saturday, officials said, aimed at resolving a yearslong dispute over a giant dam Ethiopia is building on the Nile River's main tributary. The three-day talks are taking place in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the current chair of the African Union.

The AU is mediating the negotiations between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Egypt's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that Cairo wants the negotiations to eventually lead to a legally binding agreement over the operation and filling of the dam's massive reservoir.

Foreign and irrigation ministers of the three nations were attending the talks, along with experts from the African Union.

Protest in London



Demonstrators taking part in a Kill The Bill protest against the Government's Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill while holding placards in central London on Saturday. — AP

7 blood clot deaths after 18.1mn vax jabs

No evidence of a causal link, says UK medicine regulator

London, April 3: The UK's medicines regulator has confirmed seven cases of blood clot-related deaths in people who received the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine against Covid-19, but stressed on the safety of the jabs as there is no evidence of a causal link.

The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) said in its latest Yellow Card monitoring of the Coronavirus vaccine programme this week that of the 18.1 million people who had the Oxford vaccine in the UK, 30 people developed blood clots and seven had died as of March 24.

Its official advice continues to be that the benefits of the vaccine, which is also being produced as Covishield by the Serum Institute of India, far outweigh any risks.

Our rigorous review into the UK reports of rare and specific types of blood clots is ongoing. Up to and including 24 March, we have received 22 reports of cerebral venous sinus thrombosis (CVST) and 8 reports of other thrombosis events with low platelets, out of a total of 18.1 million doses of Covid-19 vaccine AstraZeneca given by that date, the MHRA report said.

On the basis of this ongoing review, the benefits of the vaccines against Covid-19 continue to outweigh any risks and you should continue to get your vaccine when invited to do so, it said.

The regulator said that investigations are under-

Dhaka, April 3: The Bangladesh government on Saturday decided to impose a week-long nationwide lockdown from Monday as Covid-19 cases and deaths surged across the country.

Road Transport Minister Obaidul Quader made the announcement at a media briefing in Dhaka on Saturday, the *Dhaka Tribune* newspaper reported.

Bangladesh on Friday logged 6,830 new cases, the

highest count in a day, taking the tally of infections to 624,594. The death toll climbed by 50 in 24 hours to 9,155, according to data released by the government.

In a bid to arrest the spread of the Coronavirus, the government has decided to enforce a seven-day lockdown from Monday as the Coronavirus cases and deaths are surging across the country, Quader, also the general

secretary of the ruling Awami League, said.

However, the order does not apply to utility and emergency services.

Factories will remain open and workers can work shifts by following hygiene rules, the report said. Every office and court will be closed during this lockdown but industries and mills will continue their operation on rotation. — PTI

OUR RIGOROUS review into the UK reports of rare and specific types of blood clots is ongoing. Up to and including 24 March, we have received 22 reports of cerebral venous sinus thrombosis (CVST) and 8 reports of other thrombosis events with low platelets

MEDICINES AND HEALTHCARE PRODUCTS REGULATORY AGENCY REPORT

way to determine if there is a link or if the cases are a coincidence and reiterated that increased adverse reaction or ADR reports reflect the increase in vaccine deployment. — PTI

way to determine if there is a link or if the cases are a coincidence and reiterated that increased adverse reaction or ADR reports reflect the increase in vaccine deployment. — PTI

Lanka tightens church security ahead of Easter

Colombo, April 3: Security at churches across Sri Lanka have been beefed up ahead of Easter, police said on Saturday, ahead of the second anniversary of the April 2019 coordinated attacks on tourists and minority Christian community in the country in which 270 people, including 11 Indians, were killed.

"We have tightened security of churches by deploying over 12,000 security personnel, Senior Deputy Inspector General and police spokesperson Ajith Rohana said.

The security personnel include 9,350 police officials and 2,542 troops from the tri forces (Army, Navy and Air Force), he said.

Rohana said some 111 churches in the western coastal town of Negombo would be provided security, along with 107 churches in the neighbouring coastal town of Chilaw and some 98 churches in the eastern town of Batticaloa. The St Sebastian's Church at Negombo's Katuwapitiya was the worst-hit in the Easter Sunday

blasts that rocked the island nation in 2019 with 114 people dying in the church attack.

As many as 270 people were killed and around 500 others injured when six near-simultaneous and coordinated explosions, carried out by local jihadist group National Thowtheeth Jamaath (NTJ) linked to the Islamic State (IS), rocked three churches and three luxury hotels frequented by tourists in Sri Lanka on April 21.

While describing the horror scene at the St Sebastian's Church, a top priest had said that pieces of flesh were thrown all over the walls, on the sanctuary and even outside the church.

The church, built in 1946, is one of the many churches in Sri Lanka dedicated to St Sebastian who is considered a martyr in the Catholic Church history. The head of the church, Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith, has recently expressed his disappointment over the probe in the blasts. — PTI

Argentina president tests +ve for Covid-19

Buenos Aires, April 3: Argentina's President Alberto Fernandez, who has been vaccinated against Covid-19, announced late Friday that he had tested positive for the deadly Coronavirus.

"At the end of today, after presenting a fever of 37.3 and a slight headache, I performed an antigen test, which was positive," he tweeted, adding he was waiting for the results of a PCR test to confirm the diagnosis.

The president, who turned 62 on Friday, was in isolation as a precaution but said he was "physically well."

"Although I would have liked to end my birthday without this news, I am also in good spirits," he said.

Fernandez was inoculated with the Russian Sputnik V vaccine and had his second shot on February 11, sources in the presidency said.

Argentina is facing a second wave of the Coronavirus with a sustained rise in cases.

The South American country of 44 million inhabitants has recorded more than 2.3 million infections and over 55,000 deaths from Covid-19. — AFP

Biden lifts curbs on ICC staff

Washington, April 3: President Joe Biden on Friday lifted sanctions that Donald Trump had imposed on two top officials of the International Criminal Court, undoing one of the past administration's more aggressive moves targeting international institutions and officials.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a statement stressed that the United States still strongly disagreed with some actions by the court, which is a standing body based at The Hague in the Netherlands charged with handling genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The United States is not one of the about 120 member countries of the court. "We believe, however, that our concerns about these cases would be better addressed" through diplomacy "rather than through the imposition of sanctions," Blinken wrote.

The removal of the sanctions was the latest signal that the Biden administration is intent on returning

Death toll in Myanmar mounts amid protests

Yangon, April 3: Security forces in central Myanmar opened fire on anti-coup protesters on Saturday, killing at least two people according to local media. A human rights group said mounting violence since the February 1 military takeover has killed at least 550 civilians.

Of those, 46 were children, according to Myanmar's Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. Some 2,751 people have been detained or sentenced, the group said.

Threats of lethal violence and arrests of protesters have failed to suppress daily demonstrations across Myanmar demanding the military step down and reinstate the democr-

atically elected government. The coup reversed years of slow progress toward democracy in the Southeast Asian country.

Government forces fired at demonstrators in central Myanmar on Saturday, killing at least two people, the *Myanmar Now* news service reported. One video posted on social media showed a group of protesters carrying away a young man with what appeared to be a serious head wound, as gunfire sounded. His condition wasn't immediately known. At least seven people were injured in the shooting, two of whom sustained severe wounds and were taken into custody by soldiers, *Myanmar*

Now said, citing a member of a local rescue team.

Late Friday, armed plainclothes police took five people into custody after they spoke with a CNN reporter in a market in Yangon, the country's largest city, local media reported citing witnesses. The arrests occurred in three separate incidents.

Two women reportedly shouted for help as they were being arrested, *Myanmar Now* reported. One police officer, who was carrying a gun, asked if "anyone dared to help them," a witness told the news service. "They pointed their pistols at everyone — at passersby and at people in the store," a witness said. — AP

H-1B wage levels: US Labour Dept seeks public input

Washington, April 3: The US Department of Labor has sought feedback from the public in the next 60 days on determining the wage levels for the employment of various immigrants and non-immigrants, including those on the H-1B visas, the most sought-after work visa among Indian professionals.

The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows the US companies to employ foreign workers in specialty occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise. The technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China. In a federal notification published on Friday, the US Department of Labor urged the public to respond to its request in the next 60 days.

The request by the department's Employment

and Training Administration follows a prior announcement by the department proposing an 18-month delay in the effective date of a final rule changing on calculating the prevailing wage levels for certain immigrants and non-immigrant workers.

Published in January 2021, the final rule affects employers seeking to employ foreign workers on a permanent or temporary basis through certain immigrant visas or through H-1B, H-1B1 and E-3 non-immigrant visas.

While the E-3 visa is one for which only citizens of Australia are eligible, the H-1B1 visa is for people from Singapore and Chile. The delay will give agency officials time to compute and validate prevailing wage data covering specific occupations and geographic areas, complete necessary system modifications and conduct public outreach. — PTI

Breach to delay Capitol fencing

Washington, April 3: The deadly breach of the Capitol's perimeter could delay the gradual reopening of the building's grounds to the public just as lawmakers were eyeing a return to more normal security measures following the Jan. 6 insurrection.

Capitol Police officer William Billy Evans, an 18-year veteran of the force, was killed Friday when a man rammed his car into a barrier outside the Senate side of the building. The driver, identified as 25-year-old Noah Green, was shot and killed after he got out of his car and lunged at police with a knife.

Their deaths came less than two weeks after the Capitol Police removed an outer fence that had cut off a wide swath of the area to cars and pedestrians to secure the complex after supporters of then-President Donald Trump had marched on the building Jan. 6. — AP

building. The driver, identified as 25-year-old Noah Green, was shot and killed after he got out of his car and lunged at police with a knife.

Their deaths came less than two weeks after the Capitol Police removed an outer fence that had cut off a wide swath of the area to cars and pedestrians to secure the complex after supporters of then-President Donald Trump had marched on the building Jan. 6. — AP

BLINKEN SPEAKS WITH FAMILY OF DANIEL PEARL

Washington, April 3: Secretary of State Antony Blinken has spoken with the family of slain American journalist Daniel Pearl, and assured them that the US government remains committed to pursuing justice and accountability for those involved in his kidnapping and murder in Pakistan.

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.

Blinken spoke with members of the family of Daniel Pearl and their representatives today to assure them that the US government remains committed to pursuing justice and accountability for those involved in Daniel's kidnapping and murder, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

Last week, Pakistan's Supreme Court criticised the prosecution for its failure to prove the guilt of British-born al-Qaeda terrorist Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, the main accused in the kidnapping and murder of Pearl in 2002. — PTI

TAIWAN SEEKS ARREST IN TRAIN CRASH

Hualien County (Taiwan), April 3: Prosecutors in Taiwan on Saturday sought an arrest warrant for the owner of an unmanned truck that rolled onto a rail track and caused the country's worst train disaster in decades that killed 50 people and injured 178.

The train was carrying 494 people at the start of a long holiday weekend on Friday when it smashed into the construction truck that slid down a hillside above the tracks, the Taiwan Railways Administration said.

Many passengers were crushed just before the train entered a tunnel, while some survivors were forced to climb out of windows and walk along the train's roof to safety. Authorities initially reported 51 deaths but revised the count down by one on Saturday.

The truck's emergency brake was not properly engaged. — AP

DATA | THEFT

Third-party vendor Accellion closed 'all known vulnerabilities'

University of Calif. victim of hack attack

Los Angeles, April 3: The University of California is warning its students and staff that a ransomware group might have stolen and published their personal data and that of hundreds of other schools, government agencies and companies nationwide.

A cybersecurity attack targeted a vulnerability in Accellion, a third-party vendor that is used to securely transfer files, the university said in a statement Wednesday. "We understand those behind this

attack have published online screenshots of personal information, and we will notify members of the UC community if we believe their data was leaked in this manner," the university said.

The hacker or hackers also have been sending threatening mass emails threatening to publish data "in an attempt to scare people into giving them money," the statement said. In an update Friday, the university system said the cyberattack affected

about 300 organisations, "including universities, government institutions and private companies." Other schools, including Stanford University's School of Medicine and Yeshiva University in New York City, have reported that student and employee Social Security numbers and financial information were stolen and that some were posted online.

The information was obtained in December and January when hackers exploited a vulnerability in a

20-year-old Accellion file transfer service, various reports have said. However, some organisations said they only recently became aware of the breach. The *Baltimore Sun* on Thursday reported that private information of staff members and students at the University of Maryland, Baltimore was posted online this week.

The school said a hacking group known as Clop gained access to Accellion in December, the *Sun* said. The University of Color-

ado and the University of Miami reported that files were accessed in January and included personal data and some health, study and research data. The Washington State Auditor's Office reported last month that information on nearly 1.5 million unemployment applicants had been stolen.

Accellion released a statement in March that said it had closed "all known" vulnerabilities and no new ones had been found. — AP

OUR CRITIC'S RATING Outstanding ★★★★★ | Great ★★★★ | Good ★★★ | Okay ★★ | Poor ★ | Truly Terrible TT

How to kill a dissident, Saudi style

The Dissident

DIRECTOR: Bryan Fogel

RATING: ★★★★★

Streaming on diff.co.in till April 8

SUPARNA SHARMA

Oscar winning director Bryan Fogel's documentary, *The Dissident*, is a scary film. An investigation into the planned assassination of 59-year-old journalist *Jamal Khashoggi* by Saudi Arabia's royal regime at their embassy in Istanbul, *The Dissident* is visually sombre, often flat, but stunning in the things it reveals.

Constructed like a thriller; the documentary begins by talking with Omar Abdulaziz, who seems like a paranoid young man in Canada, and ends by making us listen to a blood-curdling transcript of people laughing, talking as they are killing Khashoggi. Then there's the sound of a bone saw cutting a body into pieces.

In Istanbul, on October 2, 2018, Jamal Khashoggi walked into the Saudi Arabian embassy to get a document which would certify that he was unmarried. His young fiancé, Hatice Cengiz, a Turkish academic researcher, waited outside, on the other side of the cement barricades. They were looking forward to getting married. They had got a house and *Khashoggi* was especially thrilled with the Lazy Boy chair he had bought.

The Dissident, which begins with the disappearance of *Khashoggi*, moves to the Turkish authorities' investigation, Saudi cover up, revelation of the murder, en route putting us inside several rooms where we meet Khashoggi's fellow journalists, his friends, other activists critical of the Saudi regime. Mostly, the location of these rooms is not disclosed because many are in hiding.

We also visit the "meeting room" at the embassy where we see, under the glare of ultraviolet light, a freshly cleaned carpet and a trail of blood drops that form a large uneven circle.

Omar Abdulaziz Alzahrani, a 27-year-old Saudi vlogger, left his country

and took political asylum in Canada after his father received a phone call from the authorities asking that he bring in his son. Omar had barely 100 followers on Twitter, but he was critical of the regime.

Omar now has 5,79,000 Twitter followers and says that *Khashoggi* and he were working on several "project". He believes that *Khashoggi* was killed because of him. Omar, handsome and built like a boxer, moves cautiously through Montreal because, he says, whenever he begins to relax, a text or a phone call reminds him to be careful, to keep moving, change cities, change his Sim card. "They will try to kill you," he is told.

The Dissident spends a lot of time with *Khashoggi*, to tell us why the man who was once an insider of the Saudi royal family, became a threat and was eventually killed.

Khashoggi is often smiling but he also talks of the constant feeling of loneliness. We watch him go into the embassy. There is no footage of him leaving it.

Khashoggi was a part of the Saudi royals' inner circle for 30 years, working as a journalist and media consultant for the government. He left Saudi Arabia in 2017, at the age of 58, moved to the US where he joined *The Washington Post* and began writing articles critical of the Saudi government and MBS.

Khashoggi's friends talk about his visit to Tahrir Square, how much he was affected by the Arab Spring, became more vocal about citizen's rights and accused the Saudi royals of funding the counter-revolution that killed "hope" in the Arab world.

The Dissident chronicles the history of Saudi Arabia, which controls

about half of the world's oil reserves, the Saudi royal family and the power it wields, at home and abroad.

Most of this power now rests with Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the king of Saudia Arabia, and crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, or MBS.

Described as "ambitious, impatient and the king's favourite", MBS serves as the deputy Prime Minister and is the power behind the throne.

MBS has, what he calls, "Vision 2030" for Saudi Arabia. He is keen to give women some rights, like watching football, driving, allowing music and films, so that the regime's place at international forums is palatable. Criticism, dissent is not a part of Vision 2030.

Control, *The Dissident* claims, especially of social and other media is a major part of it.

If two out of 10 people in the US are on Twitter, in Saudi Arabia it's eight out of 10, the film claims and explains the Saudi Arabia regime's use of trolls and the spyware, Pegasus, to infect the phones of friends and foes, to quash dissent.

Omar talks about "flies" — Saudi trolls — and how they target and attack criticism, and shares his plans to create a voluntary online army of "bees" who would mount counter attacks on social media.

Khashoggi liked Omar's plan. It required investment to buy American SIM cards that would be distributed to the volunteers. The first lot of SIMs were bought by money that came from Khashoggi.

Omar recalls how, after several days and many failed attempts, finally the Bees' hashtag was trending, above Saudi Arabia's *J a m a l Khashoggi* had 2 million followers on Twitter. And a year

before *Khashoggi* was killed, MBS told one of his aides that he would go after *Khashoggi* with a "bullet".

In the transcript of chats and phone chats between Saudi officials who had flown in to Istanbul on private jets five days before Khashoggi's murder, one asks, "Has the sacrificial victim arrived?" "Yes," another replied.

Turkish officials — investigators and the prosecutor — provide evidence that Khashoggi was killed in a planned manner. They say that 10 minutes after he entered the embassy, he was gagged, perhaps with a plastic sheet on his head.

Khashoggi was asthmatic and according to the Turkish authorities he was held and suffocated by several men for seven-and-a-half minutes.

The film leaves out some crucial bits — like how did the Turkish authorities get these tapes (they had bugged the embassy) — but we see Turkish authorities searching the house of the Saudi consul general, wanting to drain out a well but are denied permission.

They film at a large tandoor with ash and a Turkish official says that 70 lbs of meat was ordered the night Khashoggi went missing.

The unbearable bits in *The Dissident* are towards the end, when Agnes Callamard, the UN's special rapporteur for extrajudicial killing, travels to Istanbul to review the evidence of Khashoggi's murder. She talks of listening to the most chilling parts of the audio recordings — when Khashoggi's body was being cut with a bone saw.

But perhaps the most stunning fact in *The Dissident* is how MBS, a friend of Jeff Bezos, who owns Washington Post, was upset that he was not shutting down the Post's campaign for justice for Khashoggi.

The film shares their WhatsApp messages. We see the silly video that MBS sent to Bezos — it unleashed Pegasus and turned Bezos' phone into a listening device.

The Dissident is scary because Bryan Fogel's 2017 documentary *Icarus*, on doping in competitive cycling, won the Oscar. But none of the streaming sites, including Jeff Bezos' Amazon Prime Video, have picked up *The Dissident*. They don't plan to, either.



Nomadland: A different kind of American odyssey

The great recession didn't just eliminate jobs, it also erased an entire town. Six months after U.S. Gypsum closed its doors in Empire, Nevada, a company town since 1948, its zip code was retired and its inhabitants forced to leave. It's this brief history that opens Chloé Zhao's extraordinary "*Nomadland*," which follows one of those residents, Frances McDormand's Fern, on a journey through the American West to nowhere in particular.

Fern is a wanderer, partially by choice and partially by circumstance — the shuttering of Empire, the costly and slow death of her husband and a deep-seated desire for solitude and exploration have left her with few connections and even fewer possessions, which she whittles down to the essentials and the most sentimental. Everything else is left in a storage unit off a desolate, snowy highway that looks like it is quite literally in the middle of nowhere. It might as well be on the moon.

We don't hear much from Fern at the beginning, or ever really. An Amazon factory floor manager speaks more words than she does in the first few scenes. It's one of the beauties of "*Nomadland*," which is based on Jessica Bruder's book about the invisible casualties of the modern economy. This is a quiet, somewhat romantic, but mostly realistic exploration of a fringe population of aging workers and recent retirees who are living out the rest of their days wandering, picking up odd jobs and paychecks as seasonal workers at National Parks, South Dakota's Wall Drug and in massive Amazon warehouses through something called the CamperForce program.

McDormand disappears into Fern, which is no small accomplishment for an actor as recognizable as she is. She doesn't have a show-stopping monologue railing against the system that's left her with so little, or a tear-filled admission about why she has taken to the road. You pick up things here and there about her in normal conversation which helps propel her journey along to its quiet conclusion. But otherwise Fern is there to listen and to learn. She is the vehicle through which we meet the Vietnam vet with PTSD, the woman who watched her parents die of cancer and the corporate America exile who saw a friend deteriorate in a desk job with a retirement boat in his driveway that he never got to use. Many are authentic nomads too, like Linda May, a main character in Bruder's book, and the wandering evangelist Bob Wells, a mini celebrity in his own right.

There is always a lingering tension that things might take a turn. But for this most part, this is a film full of kind souls. They're just not the ones we're used to seeing on film. Zhao has since her first film been drawn to non-actors, who she uses exceedingly well. But "*Nomadland*" is no doubt elevated thanks to the addition of seasoned performers, including David Strathairn in a great supporting role, who know how to inhabit the frame.

Zhao is a spiritual descendant of another cinematic poet, Terrence Malick, and there are a handful of shots that look straight out of "The New World." But she also goes beyond Malick in some ways. He keeps the interesting and real people on the fringes and the glamorous movie stars at the center of his films. She stays unapologetically on the fringe.

I'll admit, I had a bit of anxiety over revisiting "*Nomadland*" after naming it my top film of 2020 just over two months ago. You never know what will happen on a second watch, whether your appreciation will grow or diminish, whether you'll be as invigorated as the first time or, in a worst-case scenario, bored. It's not the kind of film you'll want to turn on every week, but two months was the perfect amount of distance to fall in love with "*Nomadland*" again.

Don't let words like Oscars frontrunner and awards darling get in the way of your openness, either. This film is a small miracle and a uniquely meditative experience.

"*Nomadland*," a Searchlight and Hulu release, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association of America for "some full nudity." Running time: 108 minutes. Four stars out of four.

—AP

Idris Elba drama enhanced by real-life urban cowboys

Concrete Cowboy

CAST: Idris Elba, Caleb McLaughlin, Jharrel Jerome

DIRECTOR: Ricky Staub

RATING: ★★★★★

Streaming on Netflix



It feels like a tale as old as time: Wayward teenage son meets up with estranged father, one needing some straightening out, the other some serious humanizing. Can they connect?

But if that's the familiar story at the heart of "Concrete Cowboy," starring the appealing duo of Idris Elba and terrific newcomer Caleb McLaughlin, there's much more here to contemplate. That's because of the fascinating, very real-life world in which this predictable yet warm-hearted story takes place: the community of Black equestrians in North Philadelphia.

Wait, what? Urban cowboys in the streets of Philly? That's exactly the reaction 15-year-old Cole (McLaughlin) has after being transported from Detroit and dumped in the streets by his desperate Mom, who hopes Dad will set him right. Harp (Elba) is over at the stables, Cole is told. He replies: "THE WHAT?"

"Concrete Cowboy," an impressive debut by writer-director Ricky Staub that overcomes formulaic dialogue and we-

saw-that-coming plot twists with its sheer heart, is based on a novel, "Ghetto Cowboy" by Gregory Neri. But if the story is fiction, the film finds its greatest strengths in the parts that are real. In an inspired choice, Staub casts some key supporting roles with actual members of the Fletcher Street Stables, a unique equestrian community more than a century old (hint: you can tell these regulars by who's a natural in the saddle.)

The most effective scenes are those that include these true-life figures, such as a joyful community celebration, or a campfire scene in which actors like McLaughlin and the always wonderful Lorraine Toussaint, as neighbor Nessie, mix with regulars telling their stories. While illuminating the long history of Fletcher Street, they also set us, and Cole, straight about the Hollywood-enabled myth that all cowboys looked like John Wayne. "You thought all cowboys were white?" one of them scoffs. Notes Nessie: "Hollywood has whitewashed us. They

just deleted us out of the history books."

The story begins with Cole facing expulsion from high school in Detroit. His mother, at the end of her tether, packs his belongings into a few garbage bags and drives him to his father's Philadelphia doorstep. He is not happy. "Mama, don't leave me here!" he yells.

It only gets worse when Cole sees the ramshackle apartment Harp an ex-con, lives in. There's nothing but beer in the fridge, and Harp's roommate is ... a horse. Cole bolts, and finds himself in the arms of Smush, a charismatic cousin who promises to show him "how Philly pops."

Smush (the excellent Jharrel Jerome) has dreams of owning a ranch out West; he's a cowboy, too. But he wants to make money quickly, and that means a risky sideline involving drugs. The story settles into worn territory here, with Smush representing the temptation of the streets, and Harp and his friends representing a tougher, more honest existence. Staub spent two years getting to know the

Fletcher Street Stables community, and it shows, especially in his welcome choice to feature several real urban cowboys. One is Jamil Prattis as Paris, who teaches Cole how to clean manure out of a stall (tip: use a wheelbarrow). Then there's Ivannah Mercedes as Esha, a young woman at the stables who advises Cole that horses aren't the only ones that need "breaking in" — he does, too. There's a sweet hint of romance, and when Esha teaches Cole how to stand up on a horse, it's a gesture rich in symbolism.

Not to give anything away, but it's pretty clear Harp and Cole will wind up appreciating each other. Elba, who unsurprisingly looks great on a horse (but in truth is somewhat allergic to them), has fewer lines than we might like, but gives off a steady, grizzled vibe that grounds the movie. He also pulls off a motivational speech that would sound way too corny coming from anyone else. As for McLaughlin, the film would falter without his fresh, honest and unaffected presence throughout.

The best comes last, though — and by that we mean the closing credits, where members of the Fletcher Street community (the city of Philadelphia is developing the vacant lots they use, we learn) discuss its importance, especially to youngsters who would otherwise be on the streets.

"I think if more people knew how important the stable was to so many young people who don't have anywhere else to go," Mercedes says — not finishing the sentence. She doesn't have to. —AP

Once more unto the breach in 'Godzilla vs Kong'

Godzilla Vs. Kong

CAST: Alexander Skarsgård, Millie Bobby Brown, Rebecca Hall, Brian Tyree Henry, Shun Oguri, Eliza González

DIRECTOR: Adam Wingard

RATING: ★★

Playing in theatres

Godzilla vs. Kong" begins, fittingly, with the big guy asleep. There is King Kong, colossus of the big screen, slowing waking on a mountainside. He rouses slowly in the morning sun from slumber before showering in a nearby waterfall. It's, maybe, a little bit the same for the kind of movies King Kong symbolizes and still holds some dominion over: big spectacles of mass destruction made to be seen on equally towering screens. That kind of moviegoing has been been in hibernation for much of the past pandemic year. "*Godzilla vs. Kong*," the only creature feature to dare wide release in some time, is a rock 'em-sock 'em monster-movie

revival with all the requisite explosions, inane plot twists and skyscraper smashing to satisfy most lovers of gigantic amphibians. Vive le cinéma!

"*Godzilla vs. Kong*," directed by Adam Wingard, follows in the very big but quickly forgotten footsteps of the 2014 reboot "*Godzilla*," 2017's Vietnam-set, "Apocalypse Now"-tinged sequel "Kong: Skull Island" and 2019's "*Godzilla: King of Monsters*." But, of course, the lineage is much longer than that. *Godzilla* and Kong first squared off in 1962's "King Kong vs Godzilla" (Kong got first billing back then), the Toho Studios film that mashed together monsters both East and West. (Before the Japanese studio got involved, the original template had Kong meet-

Frankenstein.)

This time, the ultra-heavyweight prize fight between the Coke and Pepsi of the MonsterVerse doesn't break any new ground. That might be its salvation. Wingard ("You're Next," "The Guest") gives us some solid supporting characters (Brian Tyree Henry as a podcasting conspiracy theorist on the right track is the best of the

humans) and some slick sound design. But mostly "*Godzilla vs. Kong*" supplies appropriately silly sci-fi escapades and a few good rounds of monster mayhem, including, in their first meeting, a ballet of battleships on the open ocean.

One difference this go around: You can see the film immediately on either a Godzilla-sized screen or a salamander-sized one. "*Godzilla vs. Kong*," debuting Wednesday, is playing in theaters and streaming

simultaneously on HBO Max. I saw it at home, with a five-year-old in the next room asking why the big monkey was so angry. For the mighty Empire State Building-climbing beast, it's a new, more humble home.

And it's home he seeks in "*Godzilla vs. Kong*." That sunny morning waterfall, it turns out, is an enclosed habitat for the locked-up ape, who's watched over tenderly by Dr. Ilene Andrews (Rebecca Hall) and her deaf adopted daughter Jia (Kaylee Hottle). When *Godzilla* makes a seemingly unprompted attack on Apex, a high-tech cybernetics company ruled by Walter Simmons (Demian Bichir), a plan is hatched to use Kong to lure *Godzilla* to the surface and then track *Godzilla* to his power source — an undiscovered center-of-the-world realm theorized to exist by "hollow Earth" proponent Nathan Lind (Alexander Skarsgård). It's a scheme so obviously des-

igned to run afoul and turn a metropolis into ruins that you can almost hear Hong Kong pleading, "Please, no."

With a debt owed to Jules Verne, "*Godzilla vs. Kong*" makes its way, via Antarctica, to the center of the Earth. It covers a lot of mileage only to ultimately fall back where so many action blockbusters do: at the hands of a melomaniac tech CEO. It's not just a predictable foe for the kaijus, who have cycled through countless metaphors over the decades. It's also a somewhat ironic one. "*Godzilla vs. Kong*" is so much a totem to the powers of advanced technical wizardry.

Shot with a lustrous glow by Ben Seresin, the movie is soaked in the glossy sheen of CGI. King Kong, born in stop-motion, and *Godzilla*, once a guy in a suit, have swelled so much in design and texture that they now appear like veteran movie stars who have moved on from their B-movie origins. By they end, they appear exhausted, and who can blame them? They're likely tired from emerging again and again from the depths to play out our fantasies of destruction. Next time, someone should let Kong hit the snooze. —AP



SHORT TAKES

Lanka stand firm to draw final Test

North Sound, Antigua and Barbuda: Sri Lanka's top-order batting held firm to ensure a draw and a drawn series against the West Indies on the last day of the second and final Test at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium in Antigua on Friday. Set the daunting target of 377 and resuming at 29 without loss, the tourists reached 193 for two with a tops score of 75 by captain Dimuth Karunaratne and an unbeaten 66 by Oshada Fernando leading the resistance. After managing just 16 runs in three previous innings, Karunaratne's 25th Test half-century spanned over four hours. He faced 176 deliveries and struck nine fours before being trapped lbw by seam bowling all-rounder Kyle Mayers just before the end of the post-lunch period. — *AFP*

Brief scores (Day 5, stumps): West Indies 354 & 280/4 dec draw with Sri Lanka 258 & 193/2 in 79 overs (D. Karunaratne 75, O. Fernando 66 n.o.)

Archers to get 2nd dose of vaccine

Pune: Olympic-bound Indian archers, who are based at the Army Sports Institute here, will get their second dose of Covid-19 vaccine next week before leaving for the upcoming World Cup Stage I in Guatemala City. The World Cup Stage I, to be held from April 19, will be the first tournament for the senior archers in Covid era. The archers will compete in three World Cups, with the third being a Olympic qualification before the Tokyo Games in July. As part of their vaccination drive, the ASI inoculated all the archers, which included the eight frontline Indians — Atanu Das, Tarundeep Rai, Pravin Jadhav and B Dhiraj (reserve) in men's and Deepika Kumari, Ankita Bhakat, Komolika Bari and Madhu Vedwan (reserve) in women's. — *PTI*

Olympic swim champ Clara dead

New York: Clara Lamore Walker, who swam for the US at the 1948 Olympic Games in London, won three national championships, and later in life set hundreds of national and world swimming records in several masters age groups, has died. Walker died on Friday of natural causes at an assisted living facility in North Smithfield, Rhode Island, according to her great-niece, Alyssa Kent. She was 94. She participated in the 200-metre breaststroke in the Olympics when she was 22 years old, but swore after her last heat that she was giving up competitive swimming for good, according to her biography on the International Swimming Hall of Fame website. In total, she set 184 world records and 468 national records as a masters swimmer, according to the website. — *AP*

Injured Tiger to miss Masters

Augusta, United States: Severe leg injuries in a February car crash ensured Tiger Woods won't be playing in this year's Masters on the 20th anniversary of his "Tiger Slam" victory at Augusta National. But the 45-year-old superstar, whose 15 major titles include five Masters green jackets, will have his legacy felt across the famed layout. Woods is recovering at home in Florida after suffering serious injuries when his car flew off the road and flipped several times during the Southern California accident. Hours of surgery were required to repair his shattered lower right leg and ankle, including a rod inserted into his tibia and the use of screws and pins to stabilize the joint. — *AFP*

Live on TV

CRICKET

South Africa vs Pakistan: Second ODI from 1.30 pm on Star Sports 1

FOOTBALL

English Premier League: Southampton vs Burnley from 4.30 pm; Newcastle vs Tottenham from 6.35 pm; Aston Villa vs Fulham from 9 pm; Manchester United vs Brighton from 12:01 am (Monday) on Star Sports Select 1, HD

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COVID SCARE

10 Wankhede ground staff test +ve; Hyd stand-by venue for IPL

Mumbai, April 3: The BCCI remains hopeful of conducting the scheduled IPL matches in Mumbai from April 10-25 despite a massive surge in Covid-19 cases in the city and 10 members of the Wankhede Stadium staff testing positive for the deadly virus.

Indore and Hyderabad have been kept as stand-by venues for the IPL in case the Covid situation spirals out of control. Mumbai is scheduled to host 10 games of the cash-rich league. With in excess of 47,000 cases on Friday, Maharashtra is looking at a potential situation of mini-lockdown. Of equal concern to the organisers is the number of groundstaff at the Wankhede going up from 8 to 10 between Friday evening and Saturday morning.

If that wasn't enough, around six members of the event management team have also tested positive for Covid-19 and have been sent to isolation.

"Yes, it was 8 positive cases yesterday as far as ground-staff are concerned. Today two more positive cases have emerged and all 10 have been sent back home and are isolated.

"We are bringing fresh ground-staff from the Mumbai CA ground in Kandivali for preparations. Also 6 to 7 event management staff hired by BCCI have also tested positive," a senior Mumbai CA official said.

When a senior BCCI office-bearer was asked about the situation, he admitted that BCCI is indeed concerned.

"Look, even if there is a lockdown, the teams are in bio-bubble and also it's a closed-door event. So we are still confident that IPL games in Mumbai will be held as per schedule with DC playing CSK on April 10 on the second day of the tournament.

"But Hyderabad and Indore are there on stand-by in case the situation goes out of hand," the office bearer said on Saturday.

"Delhi Capitals ad Punjab Kings for example are taking turns to train at the Brabourne Stadium and Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC) ground. KKR is training in Navi Mumbai at the DY Patil before they leave for Chennai," the official informed. — *PTI*

SMITH REACHES MUMBAI TO JOIN DELHI CAPITALS

Mumbai, April 3: Star Australian batsman Steve Smith on Saturday joined the Delhi Capitals squad and will undergo a mandatory seven-day hard quarantine.

The 31-year-old, who was released by Rajasthan Royals, was acquired by Delhi Capitals for ₹2.2 crore at the IPL auctions in February.

"2 monumental icons in one frame. Welcome to the DC family, @stevesmith49," the franchise tweeted a picture of the Australian with the Gateway of India in the frame.

The team has already started its training camp. Smith and compatriot Marcus Stoinis will hardly get time to train before DC's opening game against the Chennai Super Kings here on April 10 as the two will undergo a week of hard quarantine.

The prolific right-hand batsman, who joined the Rajasthan Royals franchise in 2019, captained the side in the 2020 edition in the UAE, where they finished last. — *PTI*



Daniel Christian of the Royal Challengers Bangalore plays a shot during a practice session in Chennai ahead of the upcoming edition of IPL.

— *RCB*

RCB look to end title drought

New Delhi, April 3: Armed with exciting new recruits, including Australia allrounder Glenn Maxwell and New Zealand pacer Kyle Jamieson, perennial under-achievers Royal Challengers Bangalore will hope to battle hard in their bid for the elusive IPL trophy.

Balance issues in the squad, injuries and over reliance on Virat Kohli and AB de Villiers marred RCB's chances to win the title last season. Here's is a SWOT analysis of the side that will take on MI in the tournament opener on April 9.

STRENGTHS

RCB have assembled a strong batting line up on paper. Run-machine Kohli

● **Balance issues in the squad, injuries and over reliance on Virat Kohli and AB de Villiers marred RCB's chances to win the title last season.**

has already confirmed that he will be opening the innings.

Partnering Kohli will be the highly-talented Devdutt Padikkal who impressed everyone last season and is in red-hot form. Young wicketkeeper-batsman Mohammad Azharuddeen, who had a staggering strike-rate of 194.54 in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, and New Zealand's Finn Allen are other attacking options at the top. De Villiers and Maxwell add the fire-power to the mid-

dle-order while Sachin Baby, Daniel Christian and Washington Sundar add to the depth.

WEAKNESSES

The RCB pace department does not inspire confidence. Navdeep Saini and Mohammed Siraj lack the experience of bowling with the white ball and have a propensity of leaking runs. Jamieson has struggled in T20s and has no experience of playing in India. Other options include medium pacer Harshal Patel, and the

AXAR PATEL OF DELHI CAPITALS TESTS POSITIVE

New Delhi, April 3: Delhi Capitals' and India allrounder Axar Patel has tested positive for Covid-19 and kept in isolation, the IPL franchise said on Saturday.

Patel is the second IPL player to have returned a positive report after Nitish Rana. Nitish had initially tested positive for Covid-19 but later returned a negative report.

"Delhi Capitals all-rounder Axar Patel has tested positive for Covid-19. He had checked into the team hotel in Mumbai on March 28, 2021, with a negative report. His report from the second Covid test, came positive," the franchise said in a statement.

"He is currently in isolation at a designated medical care facility. The Delhi Capitals medical team is in constant touch with Axar and ensuring his safety and well-being. We wish him a speedy recovery," it added.

Meanwhile, a positive case has also emerged from CSK's media content team. The member isn't a part of the bio-bubble. The team's training schedule remains unaffected. — *PTI*

Australian trio of Christian, Daniel Sams and Kane Richardson.

OPPORTUNITY

The presence of several big-hitters in the team could go in RCB's favour while chasing big totals. It is also the perfect opportunity for Maxwell to set the tournament ablaze. He has been a disappointment in the IPL.

THREATS

Maxwell is a vital cog in RCB's grand scheme of things this season. If he tanks with the bat, it could have disastrous consequences for the side. The over-reliance on Kohli and de Villiers continued last year despite big signings. — *PTI*

I'M OBSESSED WITH RISHABH, HE IS A MATCH-WINNER, SAYS GANGULY

New Delhi, April 3: BCCI president Sourav Ganguly says he is "obsessed" with Rishabh Pant's game and calls the swashbuckling India wicketkeeper-batsman "an absolute match-winner". The former India captain added that he loves watching the likes of Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma bat.

"There are some fantastic players and I think as President of the Board I should not say who is my favourite player. All are favourite to me but I enjoy

Kohli, I enjoy Rohit Sharma," Ganguly said. "I am obsessed with Rishabh Pant because I think he is just an absolute match-winner. Jasprit Bumrah is good, Mohammed Shami is good, I like Shardul Thakur a lot because he has got the courage and guts. There is immense cricketing talent in India. When (Sunil) Gavaskar was there people used to think what will happen after him, then came (Sachin) Tendulkar, (Rahul) Dravid, Anil

Kumble. When Tendulkar, Dravid left, Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma, Rishabh Pant took over," he said.

"There is so much talent for cricket in India that I think it will produce world beaters in every generation," he added.

Ganguly, who was picked for India's tour of Australia in 1992 but didn't get a single game, recalled how that experience Down Under and the hard work that followed in the subsequent years made him a better cricketer. — *PTI*

Jannik storms into Miami final

Miami, April 3: Italian teen Jannik Sinner rallied past Spanish seventh seed Roberto Bautista Agut at the Miami Open on Friday to book a meeting with Hubert Hurkacz in the biggest final of his young career.

Sinner, who reached last year's French Open quarterfinals, defeated Bautista 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 to become only the fourth teen to reach the men's final in the 36-year history of the ATP Miami Masters.

Poland's Hurkacz, seeded 26th, won his second straight match over a top 10 player, beating Russian fourth seed Andrey Rublev 6-3, 6-4.

Coming off a quarter-final win over second-seeded Stefanos Tsitsipas, Hurkacz became the first player to take a set off Rublev at the tournament. Sinner, 19 and playing only his third Masters 1000, joined 1990 champion Andre Agassi, 2005 runner-up Rafael Nadal and 2007 winner Novak Djokovic as Miami teen finalists.

Sinner took his eighth career triumph over a top-20 rival and ensured he will rise into the ATP's top 25 next week, although he nearly smashed a racquet in a tense second set.

Sinner seeks his third career ATP title after last year at Sofia and February

● **Italian teen Jannik Sinner stifled Roberto Bautista Agut 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 in the men's singles to set up the Miami final match against Hubert Hurkacz.**

in an Australian Open tuneup at Melbourne.

Bautista missed out on his second career ATP Masters 1000 final after 2016 at Shanghai, where he lost to Britain's Andy Murray.

Bautista broke Sinner to open then saved two break points and held for a 2-0 lead. But Sinner broke back at love in the sixth game to level at 3-3.

The Spaniard broke again for 6-5 when Sinner netted a backhand and he held to claim the set on his second ace after 51 minutes. In the second set, Sinner saved four break points in the seventh game to hold but sent a backhand wide on his first break chance in the eighth games as Bautista held for 4-4.

Sinner held and then broke when the Spaniard netted a backhand to force a third set. Bautista broke at love for a 2-1 lead in the deciding set, but Sinner roared back to claim the victory. — *AFP*



Jannik Sinner of Italy returns a shot to Roberto Bautista Agut of Spain in their men's singles semifinal match during the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida.

— *AFP*

West Brom leave Chelsea sulking

London, April 3: Chelsea manager Thomas Tuchel suffered the first defeat of his reign as struggling West Bromwich Albion took advantage of Thiago Silva's red card to earn a stunning 5-2 win on Saturday.

Tuchel had overseen a 14-match unbeaten run in all competitions since replacing the sacked Frank Lampard in January.

But that impressive start came to an embarrassing end as West Brom ran riot at Stamford Bridge.

Christian Pulisic put Chelsea ahead early in the first half, only for Brazil defender Thiago to get his marching orders moments later for a second booking.

That proved the turning point as Albion's Matheus Pereira struck twice in first half stoppage-time.

Mbaye Diagne grabbed West Brom's third goal and Callum Robinson netted twice to leave Tuchel shell-shocked.

Mason Mount's reply was no consolation as Chelsea's bid to qualify for next season's Champions League via a top four finish in the

Premier League suffered a significant blow.

The early signs were ominous when Jorginho's wayward pass was intercepted by Pereira on the edge of the Chelsea penalty area, forcing Thiago into a cynical foul that earned him a yellow card.

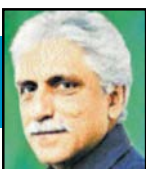
Despite their sloppy start, Tuchel's men took the lead in the 27th minute. Marcos Alonso's 25-yard free-kick cannoned back off the post and Pulisic was first to react as he alertly steered his shot past Sam Johnstone from close-range.

But Thiago gifted Albion a lifeline two minutes later when he jumped into a rash two-footed foul on Okay Yokuslu, earning his second booking.

Chelsea were punished for some dismal defending in first half stoppage-time.

A long punt forward by Johnstone should have been dealt with easily, but Kurt Zouma allowed Pereira to run behind him and guide a superb lob over the exposed Edouard Mendy. — *AFP*

Captain Pant will be under the microscope this IPL



Ayaz Memon Over The Top

The IPL starts in less than a week, with the usual brouhaha considerably diminished because of Covid fears, but with expectations high as always. There have been some last-minute drop outs because of the pandemic threat (Josh Hazlewood, Mitchell Marsh, Josh Philippe), but the vast majority of overseas players contracted by various franchises are playing. This highlights the

importance of the IPL within the cricketing fraternity and in the sport. After the IPL became an instant hit in its very first season in 2008, several leagues have come into existence, but none matches its appeal.

Money, of course, is a major factor — if not the biggest in this. The salary cap for IPL franchises is 7-8 times larger than the next best league, which means more moolah for players and other stake-

holders. But money apart, it's also the high adrenaline ambience, the manic following by fans which makes the IPL special.

Players, after all, are performing artists. While they want to optimise their earnings, they also crave for attention. The IPL bags the most number of eye-balls and is the most discussed and debated cricket tournament.

Defending champions Mumbai Indians start as favourites considering their track record and the fact that less than six months back they had won the title in the UAE. But all other teams are in serious contention.

One of the attributes that makes the IPL not just attractive for fans, but also extremely competitive, is

how even is the spread of talent. Yet, of the eight teams, Royal Challengers Bangalore, Punjab Kings and Delhi Capitals have never won the title, which also shows that only having talent is not good enough to win.

While every team looks equal on paper, what makes the difference between winning and losing is the mental toughness and attitude of players. In a tournament that is played at frenetic pace, mental toughness and attitude of players become even more critical.

Among teams, I am particularly interested in how Delhi Capitals and Rajasthan Royals shape up this season. Young Rishabh Pant, who has enjoyed a glorious interna-

tional season, has been appointed captain of DC after Shreyas Iyer injured himself.

Pant will be under the microscope on two counts: whether captaincy affects his batting form, and also how well he can carry the team, flush with many senior players.

If he succeeds on both counts, the swashbuckling youngster could soon rise a notch higher in Indian cricket hierarch.

In some ways, though not quite to the same extent, Sanju Samson will also be under scrutiny. He replaces Steve Smith as captain and will have players of the class and experience of Jos Butler and Ben Stokes playing under him.

How he gets the best out of these senior pros, as

well as a line-up of Indian players, is not the only examination Samson will be under. Also in the RR team is Chris Morris, the most expensive buy in the last auction.

While the onus is on Morris to justify the high price tag, so much will also depend on how the captain deploys him.

On the technical side, interestingly the BCCI has chosen to remove the umpire's 'soft signal' proviso, in likely deference to India captain Virat Kohli's objections during the recent series against England.

Kohli made no bones about his unhappiness, particularly after Surya Kumar Yadav was given out caught in the deep in one of the matches

because the umpire had given a soft signal against the batsman. Replays showed that the ball may have been grounded by the fielder.

The ICC Technical Committee in its meeting last week did not tackle the 'soft signal' matter directly, but upheld the 'umpire's call' (which would be tantamount to almost the same thing) in DRS with some improvisations.

In judging LBWs now, 50 per cent of the ball hitting the stumps will be measured from top of the ball and not bottom as earlier for a decision to go against the batsman.

This means bowlers have an extra 1.38 inches to get a decision in their favour. How this pans out remains to be seen.