





## SHORT TAKES

**3 illegal call centres busted, 37 held for duping foreigners**

**New Delhi:** The Delhi Police busted three illegal call centres and arrested 37 people for allegedly duping foreign nationals of amount equivalent to crores of rupees, officials said on Tuesday. One of the call centres was being operated from Bindapur while the other two were functioning at West Delhi's Janakpuri area. The accused ran multiple fake processes from their call centres — including Social Security Number scam, Apple Tech Support scam and Amazon Tech Support scam wherein they extorted money from people on various pretexts, they said. The police said the accused pretended to be officials of either US Drug Enforcement or they posed as officials of Apple Technical Support or Amazon Technical Support and sent voice recordings to extort money from their potential targets. Deputy Commissioner of Police (Cyber Cell) Anshay Roy said, "On the basis of secret information that large-scale cybercrime was being committed from Bindapur and Janakpuri, a raid was conducted on the premises and it was found that different accused were running illegal call centres in Bindapur and Janakpuri." Two separate cases were registered against the call centres and a total of 37 people, including managers, supervisors and operators, were arrested, out of which 9 were working at the Bindapur centre and 28 at the Janakpuri centres, he said. A total of 56 desktops and 41 phones have been seized from the three locations, he added. "As disclosed by the accused, they have conned thousands of foreigners of over Rs 10 crore through the Bindapur call centre. Money was extorted from them in the name of their Social Security Number wherein the accused contacted foreign nationals based in the US and other countries impersonating various law enforcement agencies and other government agencies," the officer said. They would tell them that their bank accounts and other assets were being frozen as their details were found at a crime scene and there were bank accounts running in their names using which illegal transactions were made to drug cartels in Mexico and Colombia. The world also threaten the targets with immediate arrest, he said.

— PTI

**DU teachers to continue strike**AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

The Delhi University Teachers' Association on Tuesday held a protest at the vice chancellor's office, demanding withdrawal of the 'Pattern of Assistance' document and revocation of the appointment of senior administrative officers to 12 Delhi government-funded colleges of the varsity. The teachers' union also announced to continue the university shut down, which began on March 11, until their demands are met. It had earlier alleged that through the 'Pattern of Assistance' document issued by the Directorate of Higher Education, the city government was attempting to "find ways of disaffiliating them from Delhi University". "The Pattern of Assistance document refers to these 12 colleges as '100 per cent funded Delhi government sponsored colleges affiliated to the University of Delhi'. This is absolutely wrong as these are constituent colleges of the university," the Delhi University Teachers' Association (DUTA) had said in a statement on March 18. DUTA also raised demands to revoke an order from the Finance Department that gives senior administrative officers additional charge of the 12 colleges fully funded by the Delhi government. "The University of Delhi has no such provisions and the Office of the Principal is more than adequate and capable of handling the administrative functioning in each of these 12 colleges," it said. The teachers' body alleged that the Delhi government is attempting to take the "12 colleges out of Delhi University and run them on self-financing mode to escape government funding". It also asked for assurance that there will be no delay in the release of grant-in-aid in the future.

**Let all Indians above 18 get Covid vaccine, Delhi govt tells Centre**

**New Delhi, March 23:** Delhi health minister Satyendar Jain on Tuesday said the Delhi government has urged the Centre to allow everyone aged above 18 to take the Covid-19 vaccine as such a step will set an example for the entire world.

"The Centre has allowed vaccination for everyone aged above 45 from April 1. We have demanded that vaccines be given to everyone aged above 18. It will set an example for the entire world to defeat coronavirus," he tweeted.

Jain on Tuesday also said that Covid-19 is a recurring infection and people need to learn to live with it. Delhi was witnessing around 200 cases daily some days ago. The number has again risen to 800-900, Jain said at an event on the Delhi Assembly premises where he felicitated 'corona warriors' from the Deen Dayal Upadhyay Hospital and GTB Hospital.

"Coronavirus is a recurring infection. The minute we feel the situation is getting better, there is a sudden surge. We need to be aware, but also need to learn to live with it," he



People wait for their turn to get inoculated with the Covid-19 vaccine at a vaccination centre in New Delhi on Tuesday. — AFP

said. "Just like the other diseases, we will have to learn how to protect ourselves. If we continue to take precautions like washing our hands, wearing a mask, a lot of other diseases too can be kept at bay," he said.

Delhi reported over 888 coronavirus cases on Monday, while seven people succumbed to the disease, the highest since February 4, the Health

Department said. There were 823 cases on Sunday, 813 on Saturday, 716 on Friday, 607 on Thursday, 536 on Wednesday and 425 on Tuesday, according to official data.

Jain thanked all doctors, nurses, paramedics and staff for their contribution in combating the COVID-19 pandemic. Reacting to the passage of the Government of National Capital Territory

of Delhi Amendment (GNCTD) Bill, 2021, he said, "The British rule is being implemented again." "In the British Era too, there was a parliament and elections were conducted. MPs were elected, but decision-making powers were not in their hands. It was the Viceroy who took all the decisions. The same thing is being brought today," he said.

— PTI

**Over 1,100 Covid cases in Delhi in 24 hrs, highest in over 3 months**

**New Delhi, March 23:** Delhi reported 1,101 Covid-19 cases on Tuesday, highest in over three months, while four people succumbed to the virus, the health department said.

It is the first time since December 24 that the city has recorded more than 1,000 cases.

The new 1,101 cases are the highest since December 19 when 1,139 cases were recorded, according to official data.

The active cases rose to 4,411 from 3,934 a day ago. The positivity remained over 1 per cent for the fourth consecutive day, the health bulletin said.

The new infections pushed the tally to 6,49,973, while 6.34 lakh

patients have recovered from the virus.

There were 888 cases on Monday, 823 on Sunday, 813 on Saturday, 716 on Friday, 607 on Thursday, and 536 on Wednesday, according to official data.

Four people died due to the disease, taking the number of fatalities to 10,967.

A total of 84,237 tests, including 52,099 RT-PCR tests, were conducted a day ago, as the positivity rate stood at 1.31 per cent, the bulletin said.

It was 1.32 per cent on Monday and 1.03 per cent on Sunday. The number of people under home isolation rose to 2,316 from 2,067 a day ago.

The containment zones rose to 871 from 805 on

Monday, it said.

The number of cases in Delhi on January 1 had stood at over 6.25 lakh and the total fatalities were 10,557.

The number of daily cases had started to come down in February.

On February 26, the month's highest daily count of 256 cases was recorded.

However, the daily cases have begun to rise again in March and it has been steadily increasing over the past few days.

Health experts and doctors have attributed this "sudden rise" in cases to people turning complacent, not following Covid-appropriate behaviour and "assuming all is well now".

— PTI

**Woman, brother-in-law found dead on rail track**AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

The bodies of a 45-year-old woman and her brother-in-law were found on a railway track in north Delhi's Narela area on Tuesday morning, police said, suspecting it to be a suicide case.

The deceased have been identified as Beena and Krishan (35), both residents of Panama Udhani Narela, they said.

The station master had informed police around 9 am on Tuesday that a man and a woman were lying dead on the railway track leading towards Sonapat, a senior police officer said.

The bodies were recovered and apparently it seems to be a case of suicide, the officer said. Police are inquiring the family members who could be contacted after mobile phones of the deceased were found at the spot. No suicide note was found, the officer said.

Beena was a mother of three. She worked as a maid at a private diagnostic lab in Narela. Her husband was an MCD employee who died around two years ago, police said.

Krishan is survived by his wife and three children. He worked as a housekeeper at TPDDL Rohini, they added.

**43-yr-old shot dead in west Delhi by 2 unidentified men**AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

A 43-year-old man was shot dead allegedly by two unidentified persons in west Delhi's Jaffarpur Kalan area.

The deceased has been identified as Mukesh alias Fauzi, a resident of JP Kalan.

According to Santosh Kumar Meena, the Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP), Dwarka district, on Monday around 5.30 pm, Mukesh was singing along with his friends in the field of one Rajender near Firni Road, Jaffarpur Kalan where two unknown persons came on a black motorcycle and asked them about one Rakesh.

"Rakesh was not with them. Meanwhile, the person, who was inquiring about Rakesh, opened fire from a country-made pistol on Mukesh. He shot Mukesh around three to four bullets and fled away on their bike," said the DCP.

► **THE DECEASED** has been identified as Mukesh alias Fauzi, a resident of JP Kalan. The police inspected the crime scene and recorded the statement of the eyewitness. The post-mortem of the body has been conducted and investigation is in underway to nab the accused persons, the DCP said.

"Later, Ishwar Singh (60), a resident of JP Kalan, made a PCR call. The nephew of Mukesh took him to the nearest hospital where he was declared dead," said the DCP.

"A case under relevant sections has been registered. Police have inspected the crime scene and recorded the statement of the eyewitness. The post-mortem of the body has been conducted and investigation is in underway to nab the accused persons, the DCP said.

**24-year-old arrested for robbing man at gunpoint**AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

Delhi Police has arrested a 24-year-old man for allegedly robbing a person at gunpoint in southwest Delhi's Kishangarh area. The accused has been identified as Mohit, a resident of Mehrauli.

According to Ingit Pratap Singh, the Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP), Southwest district, on Monday around 8 pm, police were patrolling and saw at Aruna Asaf Ali Road near Sanjay Van, gate number 1 that a person was chasing a man towards Sanjay Van.

"The patrolling team also started chasing him and apprehended the person who was later identified as Mohit. During investigation, it was revealed that Mohit, along with his two associates, robbed the victim, who works as manager in a private company in Kisangarh, of ₹1.75 lakh at gunpoint," said the DCP.

"The victim was on his way to his owner's house to deliver Rs 1,75,500. When he reached near Sanjay Van, gate number 1, the accused persons hit his bike by their motorcycle. When the victim fell on the road, they started beating him and looted the bag at gunpoint," said the DCP. "While they were trying to escape, police nabbed Mohit after a brief chase, while his other associates managed to flee on motorcycle. Police recovered the looted bag containing Rs 1,75,500 from his possession, the DCP said.

Further investigation is underway to nab the remaining accused persons, police said.

**Court upholds 2-yr jail for Somnath Bharti**

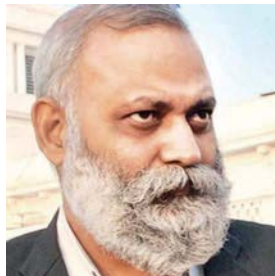
AAP MLA had assaulted a security staff in AIIMS in 2016

SANJAY KAW  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

A Delhi court on Tuesday upheld an order sentencing AAP MLA Somnath Bharti to two years in jail for assaulting the AIIMS security staff in a case registered in 2016. After the pronouncement of the order, he was immediately taken into custody.

A lawyer by profession, Bharati was also the law minister in the 49-day Kejriwal government in 2013. In a tweet, he said: "It was March 23 when people in power duly aided by Indian politicians hanged Shahid-e-azam Bhagat Singh Ji, Rajguru Ji and Sukhdev Ji, and today again, I failed to get justice from sessions court and being sent to Jail for my struggle for rights of people in a false case. Inquilab zindabad!"

A magisterial court had in January sentenced Bharati to two years in jail, Special Judge Vikas Dhull partly dismissed Bharti's appeal and convicted him for the offences



Somnath Bharti

under sections 147 (rioting) read with 149 (unlawful assembly) of IPC and under section 3 (mischievous causing damage to public property) of the Prevention of Damage to Public Property Act.

The special court, however, set aside his conviction under sections 323 (voluntarily causing hurt), 353 (assault or use of criminal force to deter public servant from discharge of his duty) read with section 149 of IPC. In January, Bharti was granted bail to enable him to file an appeal before the high court against his conviction in the case and jail term.

The prosecution case

was that on September 9, 2016, Bharti, along with nearly 300 others, brought down the fence of a boundary wall at the Delhi-AIIMS with a JCB operator. The case was lodged on the basis of a complaint from R S Rawat, Chief Security Officer, AIIMS. Bharti had told the court that police officials and other witnesses had deposed against him in order to falsely implicate him in the case.

Last week, a Delhi court had closed a defamation case against Bharti filed by a woman journalist in 2018. It was after he apologised to the complainant.

In 2019, the Delhi High Court had cleared Bharti of charges of domestic violence against him. Justice Chander Shekhar had allowed Bharti's plea to clear the criminal case after noting that he and his wife Lipika Mitra were living happily together. The court also said that the woman has no objection if Bharti was cleared of the charges.

**SDMC proposed 34% hike in property tax, claims AAP**

False allegation: BJP

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

The AAP claimed on Tuesday that the BJP-ruled South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) has brought a proposal to hike the property tax by 34 per cent, a claim denied by the saffron party.

Addressing a press conference, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) spokesperson Saurabh Bhardwaj said, "The BJP-ruled MCD waived six months' licence fee for outdoor advertisement contractors and it is now making up for the loss from residents".

"The BJP-ruled SDMC has brought a proposal to hike the property tax by 34 per cent. The Kejriwal government reduced circle rates by 20 per cent while the BJP-ruled MCD increases property taxes by 34 per cent," he said.

Mr Bhardwaj said the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has "massively" increased the prices of diesel, petrol and LPG in the last several days and claimed that the AAP govt has not hiked any tax in the last seven years.

Hitting back, Delhi BJP spokesperson Praveen Shankar Kapoor said it seems "in his malafide anxiety to level charges against MCDs, AAP leader Bhardwaj does not even cross-check facts before speaking".

"The allegation is totally false as the SDMC Standing Committee has already long back rejected the proposal of the Commissioner to raise House Tax," he said in a statement.



People purchase colour items ahead of Holi festival in New Delhi on Tuesday. Amid a rise in coronavirus cases, the Delhi Disaster Management Authority on Tuesday ordered that there will be no public celebrations in the national capital during upcoming festivals such as Holi and Navaratri. Chief secretary Vijay Dev directed authorities to ensure strict compliance of the order. — G.N. Jha

**Finalise national health policy for rare diseases before Mar. 31: HC**AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

The Delhi high court on Tuesday asked the Centre to finalise and notify the National Health Policy for Rare Diseases by March 31 and directed it to set up a National Consortium for Research, Development and Therapeutics (NCRDT) for such ailments.

It also asked the government to consider increasing the budget for rare diseases for the upcoming financial year 2021-22 and said the policy should deal with giving financial incentives for manufacturing drugs and contributing towards treatment of rare diseases.

Justice Prathiba M. Singh, in an interim order on a batch of petitions concerning children suffering from rare diseases, said that as part of the policy, besides the NCRDT, a committee at AIIMS as well as a fund be set up for such ailments.

It said the consortium should consist of the

department of biotechnology, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI), and other related ministries and departments and look after research, development of indigenous treatment, manufacturing of drugs, and inclusion of persons in clinical trials.

The National Health Policy for Rare Diseases, 2020, shall be finalised and notified by the government of India on or before March 31, the high court said the rare diseases committee shall be set up at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) for examination of applications and recommend the treatment and funding of rare illnesses.

The court said when the application will be received by AIIMS, a decision has to be taken by the committee within two weeks and in case an application is received

through other institutions notified under the policy, the decision on treatment and funding has to be taken by the panel within four weeks.

It directed that the entire unspent budget allocated for rare diseases for the past three years shall be immediately moved into the rare diseases fund, which shall be managed, supervised, and utilised by nodal agency AIIMS.

The digital platform created under the policy for receiving crowd funding shall be linked to the fund and those individuals and companies wishing to contribute shall make direct contributions into it.

The high court had earlier constituted an expert committee to assess and find solutions on various aspects, including how to immediately provide treatment and therapy options to patients suffering from rare diseases including Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD) and Hunter syndrome.



A vendor rests at a meat shop in Gurugram as Municipal Corporation of Gurugram (MCG) passed an order to close all meat shops on Tuesday. — PTI



## SHORT TAKES

## V-P, PM pay tributes to socialist icon Lohia

**New Delhi:** Vice-president M. Venkaiah Naidu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday paid tributes to freedom fighter and socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia on his birth anniversary, and hailed him for giving a new direction to the country with his progressive ideas. Lohia was born on this day in 1910. "My respectful tributes to the great socialist leader, distinguished freedom fighter and nationalist Shri Ram Manohar Lohia Ji on his birth anniversary today. He was a visionary thinker and a prolific writer," Mr Naidu said in a tweet. Mr Lohia will always be remembered for his progressive ideas, the vice president said. Paying homage to Lohia, PM Modi said in a tweet in Hindi, "Tributes to the great freedom fighter and socialist thinker Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia on his birth anniversary." — PTI

## 3 IPS officer retire prematurely in UP

**Lucknow:** Three IPS officers have been prematurely retired in Uttar Pradesh, including the one who has been at loggerheads with the state government. An officer of the 1992 batch, Inspector General Amitabh Thakur, on Tuesday disclosed his retirement on Twitter, attaching a copy of the orders issued by the Union government. He was currently posted as the Joint Director (Civil Defence). Two other officers — a 2002-batch DIG and an SP of the 2005 batch — have also been prematurely retired, UP Chief Secretary (Home) Awanish Kumar Awasthi said. Both were promoted to the IPS from the Provincial Police Service. — PTI

## Punjab's ex-mantri Khurana dies at 90

**Chandigarh:** Punjab's former Irrigation and Revenue Minister Gurnam Singh Abul Khurana died on Tuesday following a brief illness. He was 90. Chief minister Amarinder Singh expressed grief over Khurana's demise, describing him as a gentleman politician and leader of masses with the qualities of head and heart, who worked tirelessly for the welfare of downtrodden and overall development of Malwa region of Punjab. The chief minister, in a statement, said Khurana would be remembered by one and all in the Malwa belt for his strong connection with the local people at the grassroots level. — PTI

## IMD launches portal to aid climate change

**New Delhi:** The mean temperatures have shown a steep rise across all seasons since 1996 over India with the sharpest trend recorded in the pre-monsoon season, shows India meteorological department's latest offering—Climate Data Service Portal (CDSPP). The data highlights the impact of climate change on India's mean temperature trends. The portal, launched on Tuesday on World Meteorological Day, has real time visualisation of meteorological data from across the country; climatological tables; visualisation of historical meteorological data including of monsoon rainfall pattern; mean temperature rise; and frequency of cyclones etc. According to IMD, CDSPP will help researchers and the government in climate change studies; planning and mitigation strategies; and offer early warning to people.

## K'taka colleges to run offline classes

**Bengaluru:** Regular offline classes for college students would continue in Karnataka and semester examinations held as per the time table of universities, deputy chief minister C.N. Ashwath Narayan said on Tuesday. After chairing a meeting to assess the Covid situation in view of recent spurt in fresh cases in the state, Narayan, who holds the higher education portfolio, said it was decided offline classes will continue with strict implementation of Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for Covid. "We discussed the possible impact of the second wave of Covid on the academic activities. The same would be communicated to chief minister B.S. Yediyurappa," he said in a statement, without elaborating. — PTI

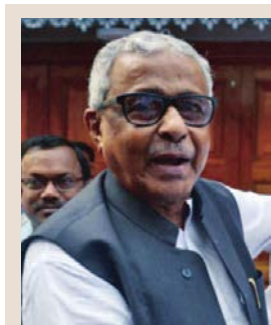
## TMC wants defected Sisir disqualified

Sources say Sudip Bandopadhyay is expected to submit petition to Speaker for Adhikari's disqualification

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
KOLKATA, MARCH 23

In a bid to stop further defection by its parliamentarians, West Bengal's ruling Trinamul Congress is going to seek Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla to disqualify its three-time MP of Contai Sisir Adhikari under the anti-defection law for his switchover to the BJP at Union home minister Amit Shah's rally at Egra in East Midnapore two days ago.

According to sources, TMC leader in Lok Sabha Sudip Bandopadhyay is expected to submit a petition to Speaker Om Birla for Mr Adhikari's disqualification from the Parliament on Wednesday when his son and another party MP, Dibyendu Adhikari, is also set to defect to the BJP following the footsteps of his father



Sisir Adhikari

■ West Bengal's ruling TMC is going to seek Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla to disqualify its three-time MP of Contai Sisir Adhikari under the anti-defection law for his switchover to the BJP at Union home minister Amit Shah's rally at Egra in East Midnapore two days ago

and two brothers, Suvendu and Soumendu. This is the second time that chief minister Mamata Banerjee's party is making the appeal for disqualification of its MP in the last three months. It earlier sought the removal of Burdwan (East) MP Sunil Mondal from the Parliament in January

after his defection to BJP in the presence of Mr Shah at his rally on December 19 last year. The TMC's fresh move also relates to Mr Dibyendu Adhikari, the remaining heavyweight of the influential political family in Midnapore, who is likely to join the BJP at Prime Minister Narendra

Modi's mega campaign rally, on Wednesday, at Contai in East Midnapore in support of his party's candidate Mr Suvendu Adhikari at Nandigram against the TMC supremo.

The first-time Tamruk MP who was a TMC MLA earlier, said, "I have received an invitation to attend the PM's rally. There is a possibility of me attending it."

He had met the top leadership of the BJP last week after he was present at the launch of three big-ticket Central industrial projects by Mr Modi at Haldia on February 7.

If Mr Dibyendu Adhikari makes the switch, he would also become the third Lok Sabha MP to leave the TMC for the saffron party ahead of the Assembly election in the state. Adhikari joined the saf-

ron camp in the presence of Union home minister Amit Shah by chanting slogans of 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' during an election rally in West Bengal on Sunday.

The MP has followed in the footsteps of his two sons Suvendu and Soumendu, who had joined the BJP earlier.

The patriarch of the Adhikari family — which wields considerable influence in Bengal's Purba Medinipur district — said that he was forced to switch camp, as the leaders of the ruling party left him with no other option.

Earlier, too, Sisir Adhikari had accused the ruling party of "humiliating" him and son Suvendu, who is locked in a fierce battle with Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in the district's Nandigram constituency.

## Cong pursuing politics that led to Partition: Yogi

'Netaji warned them of dangers of such policy'

**Udarbond/Silchar, March 23:** Senior BJP leader Yogi Adityanath Tuesday accused the opposition Congress of indulging in "divisive politics" that led to the Partition of the country in 1947 and "having the same mindset" now as evident from its alliance with the AIUDF to fight the coming state polls in Assam.

Addressing a series of election rallies in Barak valley of poll-bound Assam, Adityanath, also the Uttar Pradesh chief minister asserted, the country was "forced" to be divided in 1947 because of the Congress' pursuit of power.

"I can see a lot of Bengali-speaking people here in the rally. In their pursuit of power, the Congress, due to its divisive policy, made your ancestors experience Partition in 1947 when (present-day) Bangladesh and Pakistan were a part of India," claimed Mr Adityanath.

Noting that leaders like Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose had warned the Congress of the dangers of such a divisive policy before 1945, Adityanath said, "Congress is not a party to correct itself and so resolved to let India be partitioned."

"What the British could not achieve through the Partition of Bengal in 1905, Congress did in 1947 by joining hands with the English (British). How your ancestors suffered due to this divisive policy, you can see even today in Bangladesh, the way Hindus are persecuted, their homes set ablaze and their temples destroyed," he alluded.

Slamming the grand old party, the saffron party leader said, "The Congress still has the same mindset that divided the country in 1947, imposed article 370 in 1952, instigated Bodoland

## No Bangladeshi will enter Assam in BJP rule: Singh

Lumding/Hojai (Assam), March 23:

Appealing not to do politics over illegal immigration, defence minister

Rajnath Singh

on Tuesday said the BJP government, if voted to power, will not allow Bangladeshi infiltrators to enter Assam at any cost. Addressing an election rally here, he said the BJP government has started electronic surveillance across the Indo-Bangla border in Assam to stop infiltration from the neighbouring country.

"We will not allow Bangladeshi infiltrators to enter Assam at any cost... We will not allow politics to play over illegal immigration problem," Mr Singh said.

He said BJP has governments in Assam and Tripura, while it will come to power in West Bengal this time and then the infiltration problem from Bangladesh through these three states will be solved. — PTI

movement in Assam. With that mindset it made poll alliance with AIUDF to once again create instability in the state through illegal migration."

Mr Adityanath also took a swipe at Congress leader Rahul Gandhi accusing him of remembering Assam only during elections to seek votes.

"Did Rahul Gandhi or any Congress leader remember Assam during floods or the pandemic? Such leaders should be forgotten. Congress has no development agenda," he said. — PTI

## Tigress 'Sundari' returns to her home state, MP

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO  
BHUBANESWAR, MARCH 23

Finally, Sundari, the Royal Bengal tigress brought to Odisha's Satkosia forest from Kanha Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh was on Tuesday evening taken back in a special vehicle to the Ghorela forest.

This was informed by Angul Regional chief conservator of forest (RCCF) Pradeep Raj Karata. The senior forest official further said 'Sundari' could not be put in a cage from its enclosure in Raiguda forest under Satkosia sanctuary despite several attempts. Following this, the team decided to tranquillise the tigress. "After a tranquillising

shot was given to the tigress, she took 15 minutes to lose consciousness. The forest personnel then brought her into a cage. Adequate amounts of food have been kept in the cage as well. She is weighing 160 kg," informed Dr Kishore Sahu, a veterinarian who was part of a six-member team from Madhya Pradesh.

The six-member team from Kanha Tiger Reserve Forest along with a special vehicle reached Satkosia forest on March 21 to take back 'Sundari.' In June 2018, 'Sundari' was brought to Satkosia sanctuary from Madhya Pradesh under the country's first interstate first interstate relocation exercise for tigers.



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi during an election campaign rally ahead of Assembly polls in Kottayam district on Tuesday. — PTI

## C'garh: 5 jawans killed, 12 injured in Maoist strike

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY  
BHOPAL, MARCH 23

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

Narayanpur. Maoists triggered 3 command initiated improvised explosive device (IED) explosions targeting the bus carrying jawans of district reserve group (DRG) when it was pass-



5 jawans were killed, 12 others injured when the mini-bus was blown up by Maoists in Chhattisgarh's south Bastar district of Narayanpur on Tuesday.

ing through a bridge over a culvert in Kodanar region, leading to the tragedy, director-general

of police (DGP) (anti-Naxal operation) of Chhattisgarh Ashok Juneja said.

The mini-bus fell off the bridge under the impact of the explosions, he added. While 3 jawans including the driver of the police bus died on the spot, 2 others succumbed to their injuries in the hospital.

At least 12 jawans were injured, 3 of them grievously, in the incident.

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

biggest Maoist attack on security forces in Bastar in the current year so far. The bus was carrying around 44 DRG jawans, Narayanpur district superintendent of police Mohit Garg said.

The incident took place at around 4.15 in the afternoon.

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

## Odisha House seeks 'Ahimsa' in Preamble of India Constitution

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
BHUBANESWAR, MARCH 23

The Odisha Legislative Assembly of Odisha on Tuesday adopted unanimous resolution calling for incorporation of word "Ahimsa" (non-violence) in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution.

With the entire Odisha celebrating the centennial anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's first visit to the state on Tuesday, the Assembly passed the historic resolution as a "fitting tribute" to the Father of the Nation.

State tourism and culture minister Jyoti Prakash Panigrahi had introduced the resolution.

Odisha government and outfits crossing party lines have been urging for the inclusion of non-violence, which is the Mahatma's most propounded doctrine, in the constitution.

A special discussion was tabled in the Assembly on this occasion. Chief Minister

## Odisha House okays 15% edu quota

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
BHUBANESWAR, MARCH 23

The Odisha Assembly on Tuesday unanimously passed a resolution making provision of 15 per cent reservation for government school students in state-run engineering and medical colleges.

The proposal in this regard was moved by chief minister Naveen Patnaik when the House was holding a special discussion, commemorating 100 years of Mahatma Gandhi's visit to the state.

Naveen Patnaik while addressing the House during the discussion said Odisha was where Mahatma's heart was. Gandhiji had visited Odisha on eight different occasions and toured several places across the state.

**हिमाचल प्रदेश सरकार ने पूरा किया अपना वादा-घर द्वार पर दी सुविधाएं ज्यादा से ज्यादा**

**प्रदेश के लोगों को अधिक से अधिक सुविधाएं देने के लिए हिमाचल प्रदेश सरकार दे रही सबसिडी देकर विद्युत बिलों में राहत।**

हिमाचल प्रदेश सरकार द्वारा दी जा रही सबसिडी पाएँ • ऑनलाइन बिजली बिल भुगतान कर अपना समय बचाएँ।

ऑनलाइन बिजली बिल भुगतान के माध्यम		ऑनलाइन सुविधा के लाभ	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>हिमाचल प्रदेश स्टेट इलेक्ट्रीसिटी बोर्ड लिमिटेड की वेबसाइट <a href="http://www.hpseb.in">www.hpseb.in</a></li> <li>HPSEBL मोबाइल ऐप।</li> <li>भारत बिल भुगतान प्रणाली (BBPS) बैंक और नॉन-बैंक सुविधायें जैसे की पेटिएम, एमार्जोन पे और गुगल पे इत्यादि।</li> <li>ऑनलाइन एनईएफटी/आरटीजीएस</li> <li>लोक मित्र केंद्र</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>सुविधाजनक है।</li> <li>सुरक्षित है।</li> <li>आपका समय बचाता है।</li> <li>पर्यावरण को अनुकूल है।</li> <li>आपको व्यवस्थित रखता है।</li> <li>बेहतर धन प्रबंधक है।</li> <li>आधुनिक तकनीकी का उचित प्रयोग।</li> </ul>		

**बिजली बिल, विद्युत उप-मण्डलों के कैंस काउट रॉ पर भी दिए जा सकते हैं।**

**विद्युत दरे और हिमाचल प्रदेश सरकार द्वारा सबसिडी विद्युत युक्त दरे इस प्रकार से है:**

विवरण	यूनिट/महीना	स्वीकृत टैरिफ (₹./kWh)	प्रदेश सरकार द्वारा दी जा रही सबसिडी (₹./kWh)	सबसिडी के बाद प्रभावी टैरिफ (₹./kWh)
लाईफ लाईन उपभोक्ता (हर वर्ग के उपभोक्ता)	0-60	3.30	2.30	1.00
1 स्लैब	0-125	3.95	2.40	1.55
	0-125	3.95	2.10	1.85
2 स्लैब	126-300	4.85	0.90	3.95
	0-125	3.95	2.10	1.85
	126-300	4.85	0.90	3.95
3 स्लैब	300 से ऊपर	5.45	0.45	5.00
	प्रीपेड उपभोक्ता	4.85	0.90	3.95

**कृषि तथा सम्बद्ध गतिविधियाँ आपूर्ति वर्ग**

(क)	सिंगल फाट टैरिफ (< = 20 kVA)	3.70	3.20	0.50
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उपभोक्ता शिकायत निवारण फोरम (CGRF) विद्युत आपूर्ति संबंधी सेवाओं में शिकायतों के लिए आप सम्यक कर सकते हैं:- विद्युत लोकपाल (Electricity Ombudsman) खलीजी शिमला-2 दूरभाष : 0177-262483 दूरभाष : 0177-2624525

किसी भी जानकारी के लिए टॉल फ्री नं० 1800-180-8060 या 1912 पर संपर्क करें।

**हिमाचल प्रदेश स्टेट इलेक्ट्रीसिटी बोर्ड लिमिटेड**

..... पहुंच रहा है ऊर्जा जन जन तक। ..... विद्युत सम्यक .....



## SHORT TAKES

## MAHARASHTRA: ED SEIZES ASSETS OF RECRUITMENT FIRM

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has provisionally attached the properties, worth several crores, of a Mumbai-based global recruitment firm and its promoters in a money laundering case linked to the alleged cheating of 900 Kuwait-bound nurses. In a statement issued by the central probe agency here on Tuesday, the ED said, "A provisional order for attaching a duplex flat in Mumbai's JVPD scheme area, a plot of land in Kerala and a Mercedes Benz car apart from ₹4.55 crore in cash of P.J. Mathew and others, has been issued". The agency has attached assets worth ₹ 7.51 crore belonging to Mathew, the proprietor of the Mumbai-based global recruitment firm Mathew International, and some people linked to him, including Celine Mathew and Thomas Mathew, said the ED. The action has been taken under the provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). The PMLA case was filed after studying a CBI FIR registered against Mathew and Mohammed Naina Prabhu, the promoter of Mumbai-based firm Munavvara Associates. Mathew was also under the scanner of the Income Tax Department which had seized ₹4.55 crore cash from his premises in April-May 2015.

## MP: 13 KILLED IN AUTO-RICKSHAW &amp; BUS COLLISION

RABINDRA NATH  
CHOUDHURY  
BHOPAL, MARCH 23

Thirteen persons including 12 women were on Tuesday killed when the auto-rickshaw in which they were travelling had a head-on-collision with a speeding bus in Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh. The incident took place at Old Chawni in Gwalior at around 5.30 in the morning, police said. While 8 women and the driver of the auto-rickshaw died on the spot, 4 others succumbed to their injuries in the hospital, Gwalior district superintendent of police Amit Sanghi said. The 12 women who were cooks in an anganwadi Centre in Stone Park area under Old Chawni were returning home in Gwalior after work, police said. They were supposed to travel in 2 auto-rickshaws. But, they were forced to travel in one auto-rickshaw when the other one developed snag, police said. The bus was travelling from Gwalior to Morena.

## INTEL: BIKE RALLIES COULD USED TO INFLUENCE VOTERS

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

Central intelligence and security agencies had even specific inputs to Election Commission that "bike rallies" in Bengal could be used to "intimidate voters and residents" ahead of the polling day. Following these inputs only the poll panel have stopped such bike rallies 72 hour before polling. Intelligence sources said they had specific information that in some parts of West Bengal "some political parties" were using these bike rally to threaten the voters. This, officials added, had to be stopped at any cost due to which after detailed discussion it was decided that though bike rally can be held by political parties but these will have to be stopped three days before polling. Election Commission has been taking regular updates from intelligence and security agencies along with the home ministry on the law and order situation prevailing in Bengal. With barely three-days left for the first phase of polling in Bengal security deployment is now at an all time high.

## Shah...

■ Continued from Page 1  
get anything out of it? Where did it go? Bhatija & Company amassed it. You do not need to worry. The new BJP government will form a SIT and put all those who looted each and every pie of the funds sent by Modiji behind bars. All scams, be it on Cyclone Amphan or Bulbul or Aila, will be probed

## SC notice to govt for claim on wrong conviction

PARMOD KUMAR  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

The Supreme Court on Tuesday sought response from the Centre on plea seeking compensation to one Vishnu Tiwari for 20 years in jail on the wrong conviction on the charges of rape and under the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989.

A Bench headed by Justice Uday Umesh Lalit and also comprising Justice Indira Banerjee and Justice K.M. Joseph felt that the issue brought up before the court by two BJP leaders Kapil Mishra and Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay is serious.

Upadhyay gas sought framing of guidelines for compensation to the victims of the wrongful prosecution. Mishra also sought framing of guidelines, with a mechanism to take strict action and prosecution of the complainants making false allegations.

Both the petitioners sought guidelines to pay adequate compensation to the victims of the wrongful prosecution by implementing the recommendations of the 277th Law Commission report on the miscarriage of justice. Their petitions also wanted a mechanism for speedy disposal of the cases under the special Acts in a time-bound manner.

"The law is being misused and abused by filing fake and malicious complaints and no action is taken against the culprits in the absence of an effective statutory/legal scheme for providing mandatory compensatory relief," Mishra said in his petition.



Farmers take out a march to commemorate the martyrdom day of freedom fighters Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev during their ongoing agitation against new farm laws in Amritsar on Tuesday. — PTI

## ■ 'Wants to have friendly relations with all countries including India'

## Pak envoy seeks dialogue with India

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI  
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

With a sudden perceptible improvement in Indo-Pak ties in the past one month following implementation of the ceasefire on the LoC by both sides, Pakistan Charge d' Affairs (CdA) in New Delhi Aftab Hasan Khan said on Tuesday that his country "wants to have friendly relations with all countries including India" and that to achieve peace between the two south Asian neighbours both countries shall resolve all outstanding issues ... through dialogue" including the Kashmir issue. Speaking on the occasion of his country's National Day, the Pakistani CdA further stated that "for the larger inter-

est of the region, peace within South Asia is inevitable". The remarks in a statement issued by the Pakistan High Commission (PHC) which are being seen as soft and conciliatory in tone are being viewed by observers as significant and yet another sign of the new thaw in bilateral ties.

In another sign of the thaw between India and Pakistan at top levels, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had last week wished speedy recovery for his Pakistani counterpart Imran Khan who is down with Covid. This came about a month after India and Pakistan agreed to a "strict observance" of the ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC). Just recently, the visit of the Pakistani Equestrian National Tent

■ SPEAKING ON the occasion of his country's National Day, the Pakistani CdA further stated that 'for the larger interest of the region, peace within South Asia is inevitable'.

Pegging Team to India to "participate in the World Cup Qualifiers of Equestrian Tent Pegging Championship 2021 from March 16-18" took place and generated a lot of buzz.

The PHC statement issued on the occasion of Pakistan's National Day also said, "Pakistan's flag was raised by Charge d' Affairs Aftab Hasan Khan, at an elegant and impressive flag-hoisting ceremony held on the Chancery's lawns. ... Press

Attache, Khawaja Maaz Tariq, read out the messages of the President and the Prime Minister of Islamic Republic of Pakistan."

Ties between the two nuclear-armed neighbours had been extremely rocky for the past five years but events in the past one month indicate that the two nations have finally turned a corner in bilateral ties. The first indication of this had however come in early February this year when Pakistan's powerful Army chief Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa announced that "it is time" for his country to "extend the hand of peace in all directions" and had called on both countries to resolve the Kashmir issue in a "peaceful and dignified manner".

## Ruckus in Bihar House over police bill

Police and marshals called to evict the agitating MLAs from Assmebly

NAYEAR AZAD  
PATNA, MARCH 23

The Opposition RJD on Tuesday created a ruckus in the state Assembly over the Bihar special armed police bill, 2021.

The situation occurred when MLAs of the Opposition party RJD were trying to stop Assembly Speaker Vijay Kumar Sinha from stepping out of his chamber. This prompted the police as well as the marshals to forcibly evict the agitating MLAs and in this many were badly injured including women mem-

bers. The police bill 2021 that aims to give more power to the police force was introduced by the state government led by Nitish Kumar. After the bill was presented in the House the Opposition party MLAs created a ruckus and gathered in the well of the house.

The marshals later rushed to stop the agitating members from getting into a scuffle with the members of the treasury bench.

Later while talking to reporters the injured MLA Satyendra Kumar

■ THE POLICE bill 2021 that aims to give more power to the police force was introduced by the state government led by Nitish Kumar. After the bill was presented in the House the Opposition party MLAs created a ruckus and gathered in the well of the house.

said that "the police was called in to crush our voices. This is the murder of democracy. We are with the people of Bihar and the state government wants to bring the police bill which is draconian in nature. We will not allow

the state government to make Bihar a police state".

Earlier on Tuesday, the police resorted to lathi charge on agitating RJD workers while they were taking out a protest march on the streets of Patna against unemployment, rising crime graph, inflation and several other issues including the special armed police bill, 2021.

Leader of the opposition Tejashwi Yadav and his brother Tej Pratap along with several others were later detained by the police.

## All above 45 can get vaccine from April 1

■ Continued from Page 1

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

Ahead of the Holi festival, the Uttar Pradesh government has issued guidelines saying that no procession

can be carried out without prior permission and that people above the age of 60, children below 10 years and people with comorbidities should not be at large public gatherings. The Delhi government too has banned Holi celebrations in public places while random testing at bus and railway stations have been ordered.

Delhi health minister Satyendra Jain said the Delhi government had urged the Centre to allow everyone aged above 18 to take the Covid-19 vaccine. "The Centre has allowed vaccination for everyone aged above 45 from April 1.

We have demanded that vaccines be given to everyone aged above 18. It will set an example for the entire world to defeat Covid-19," Mr Jain said.

Punjab CM Amarinder Singh said 81 per cent of the 401 samples sent by the state government for genome sequencing have tested positive for the UK variant of Covid-19. He urged the Centre to widen the vaccination net to cover all those younger than 60, as the mutant virus has been found to be infecting younger people more, to break the chain of transmission. Punjab had 2,274

new detections of Covid-19 on Tuesday. However, minister of state for health Ashwini Choubey said in the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday that no new strain of Covid-19 has been detected in Maharashtra, Kerala and Punjab. In a written reply, the minister said after the detection of variants of Sars-CoV-2 in Britain, South Africa and Brazil, the Indian government has put in a surveillance mechanism for international travellers and in the community to detect these variants, and so far 795 cases of the mutant virus have been detected.

## Cong-CPM tieup with ISF is advantage BJP

■ Continued from Page 1

"dented" the "secular credentials" of the Marxists and Communists. Some die-hard Left supporters were also "embarrassed" over this controversial tie-up. Incidentally, the Left, led by CPI(M), had always steered clear of any hard-line outfit. In the mid-60s the CPI(M) had joined hands with the Muslim League. Years later the parties parted ways following the difference over Muslim Personal Law in general.

The "opportunistic" alliance with ISF could actually make things somewhat easier for the BJP in the battle for Bengal. A simple electoral arithmetic shows that TMC Mamata Banerjee always managed to get the lion's share of both Hindu and Muslim votes to stay at the top of

the pyramid. Of the nearly 30 per cent Muslims in the state, a little over 20 per cent of the vote share used to go into Mamata Banerjee's kitty. Similarly, she also bagged over 20 per cent of the Hindu votes. This combination of about 45 per cent vote share assured her seat at the top.

With ISF coming into the picture, the possibility of a dent in the Muslim vote share looms large. About 22 per cent of Muslims live in Kolkata and nearly 67 per cent are in Murshidabad district. The second-largest Muslim population is in North Dinajpur which is 52 per cent and 51 per cent in are in Malda.

In the 2016 Assembly polls, TMC was ahead in virtually all the Muslim-dominated constituencies.

But in the last couple of years, the Bengali Hindus including the OBCs have shown signs of gravitating towards the BJP.

From 16.8 per cent in 2014, the BJP's vote share during 2019 Lok Sabha polls had jumped to 40.3 per cent. Despite coming down by 12 seats, Ms Banerjee managed to get 43.3 of the vote share mainly because she got a majority of the Muslim votes. Therefore a minor swing of five per cent or less could make things tricky for Ms Banerjee.

What also damaged Ms Banerjee in the 2019 elections was the transfer of CPI(M) votes to the BJP. It was indicated that for the Left, particularly the CPI(M), "Mamata is a bigger enemy than the BJP." The CPI(M) has not been able to reconcile to the fact

that it was Ms Banerjee who single handedly ousted them from the state. "CPI(M) has not been able to get over that and it wants to see the end of Mamata at any cost," the Communist leader said.

CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury went on record saying that the "TMC has to be defeated to stop the communal bandwagon of the RSS-BJP in Bengal." The CPI(M) mouthpiece, Ganashakti, which continues to breathe fire against Mamata Banerjee had claimed that a tie-up with the 'TMC would have been "suicidal." There's also an apprehension that if the CPI(M) felt that Ms Banerjee could return to power yet again it "just might transfer its votes to the BJP."

## ATS: Waze key figure behind Hiran's murder

Agency is likely to seek Waze's custody for further interrogation

SHAHAB ANSARI  
MUMBAI, MARCH 23

Sachin Waze

The Maharashtra ATS has claimed that its investigation has revealed that suspended API Sachin Waze was prime conspirator in Mansukh Hiren murder and the agency is likely to seek his custody for interrogation in this case. Meanwhile the NIA has claimed that Waze used a fake AADHAR card to book a room in a 5-star hotel in South Mumbai a day before the Scorpio car, which was later parked near Mukesh Ambani's residence with explosives, was reported to be missing. He was seen carrying five bags in CCTV footage of the hotel.

ATS chief Jaijeet Singh on Tuesday revealed that very next day of registering the FIR in connection with the death of Mansukh Hiren, in which his wife Vimla has stated that she suspect involvement of API Sachin Waze in her husband's death, the probe officers had recorded Waze's statement in which he had refuted the claim that the Scorpio was in his use. He had also said that he didn't have any relation with Hiren and denied any role in Hiren's death, the ATS chief informed. However, the subsequent investigation revealed that Waze's statement was a lie.

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

Ramnrikal Gaur from Gujarat. The said SIM card was bought in the name of a Gujarat-based company. It has also come to light that Gaur had given this SIM card to Waze's aide, former police constable Vinayak Shinde. Shinde was sentenced to imprisonment for life in connection with the fake encounter of Ramnarayan Gupta alias Lakhhan Bhaiya. But in 2020, he was released on parole due to Covid pandemic. After coming out of jail, Shinde got in touch with Waze and started working for him.

The ATS has claimed that they have procured evidence showing their involvement in Hiren's murder. The ATS so far has recovered 14 SIM cards from the accused persons. But it has been revealed that the mobile phones that were used in the crime have been destroyed.

With the help of inputs received from interrogation of accused and suspected persons an ATS team on Tuesday returned from Union Territory Deu Daman with a seized Volvo car and suspect.

## PF threshold...

■ Continued from Page 1  
per cent digital services tax, which applies only to non-resident companies with annual revenues in excess of approximately ₹2 crore, and it covers online sales of goods and services to persons in India. The tax had come into effect on April 1, 2020. Ms Sitharaman said that the Centre favours digital transactions and is not trying to undermine it. Yet, she added that the aforementioned tax is something which has been imposed to give a level playing field to Indian businesses who pay tax in India and foreign e-commerce companies who do business in India but don't pay any income tax here.

## Lanka...

■ Continued from Page 1  
Rights (OHCHR), should be in conformity with mandate given by the relevant resolutions of the UN General Assembly". The 13th amendment in Sri Lanka stands for devolution of power to the provinces there. India has been a supporter of the "reconciliation process" in the island nation between the majority Sinhals and the minority Tamils. New Delhi's vote is being seen as an exercise of political balance and one key factor could be the upcoming Tamil Nadu Assembly polls since some political parties there had already made it an issue. The continuing proximity of the Rajapaksa brothers (President Gotabaya and Prime Minister Mahinda) to China could have also been another key factor in New Delhi's decision.

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



## THE ASIAN AGE

24 MARCH 2021

# Optics key, Uddhav must act fast to kill racket stink

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

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

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

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

NCP leader Sharad Pawar, widely thought to hold the whip hand in politically shepherding the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) coalition government, at a Delhi press conference on Monday, strongly

defended Mr Deshmukh, who is from the his party. Mr Pawar appeared to stoutly refute the factual basis of Mr Singh's allegation against Mr Deshmukh.

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

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

## Wins for merit, politics

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

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

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

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

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

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

### THE ASIAN AGE

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Maleeha Lodhi



## US peace plan for Afghanistan to face critical challenge ahead

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

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

The Biden team is vigorously engag-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

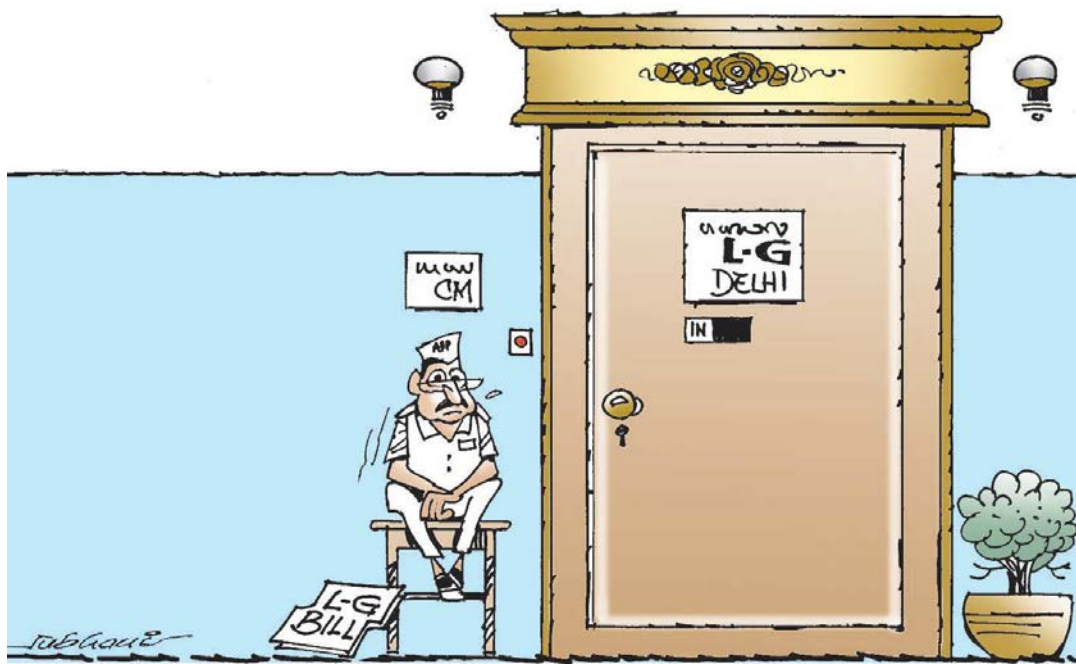
The idea of a transitional government, vehemently opposed by Ghani, makes sense before a more permanent government can be installed following

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

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

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

Subhani



# India should not fall for China's charm offensive



Abhijit Bhattacharyya

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### LETTERS

#### WILD KARNATAKA

It is heartening that south Indian cinema distinguished itself at the 67th National Film Awards, with over 15 films from the region bagging accolades. Malayalam cinema hogged the limelight grabbing seven prizes with Tamil (six), Telugu (three) and Kannada (one) finishing in that order. *Wild Karnataka*, a documentary, deservedly won the Best Exploration Film award in the non-feature category. Kangana Ranaut, Manoj Bajpayee and Dhanush crowned themselves with glory, winning the prize for best actress and actors. Kudos!

N.J. Ravi Chander  
Bengaluru

#### SUPERSPREADERS

**THERE IS NO** let-up in Covid 19 cases even after one year. The daily case count is increasing day by day with almost 47,000 cases reported on Monday. In view of this, the Kumbh Mela at Uttarakhand and Holi in Uttar Pradesh may turn out to be super-spreader events. It has been observed that during the past two months people have stopped wearing masks and are not observing the Covid-19 protocol. We need to sacrifice this year's celebrations for the sake of public safety.

D.B. Madan  
New Delhi

#### SAY YES TO NOTA

**A PIL HAS** recently been filed in the Supreme Court requesting it to issue instructions to the government to consider the relevance of the Nota option in EVMs. If the votes polled under this option is greater than those of the winning candidate, then the poll be cancelled and fresh election conducted. The court has sought the responses of the Centre and the Election Commission on the matter. We rest our hopes in their good sense. The voters' verdict should be honoured.

Yashpal Ralhan  
Jalandhar

Every Monday the best letter of the week wins ₹500. Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com.



## SHORT TAKES

## CONVERSION: U.S. MAN DETAINED IN YGANDA

**Kampala, March 23:** Ugandan police said an American man has been detained over alleged involvement in "subversive activities" against the government.

Police said the man identified as Guy Smith was arrested in a remote town and is being detained at a police facility in Kampala. The statement gave no more details, and it was not immediately possible to get a comment from the US Embassy. Ugandan authorities accuse foreigners of meddling in the country's affairs, charges that have raised tensions between President Yoweri Museveni and the country's development partners.

## VOLCANIC ASH: GUATEMALA CITY AIRPORT SHUT

**Guatemala City, March 23:** A shift in wind blew ash from an eruption at the Pacaya volcano over Guatemala City on Tuesday, and authorities closed the airport as ash coated planes and planes parked at the terminal. The 8,373-foot (2,552 metre) volcano, just 30 miles (50 km) south of Guatemala's capital, has been active since early February. Civil Aviation Director Francis Argueta did not say how long the closure would last.

Tourists frequently hike up to visit Pacaya's peak, but those trips have been temporarily cancelled.

Pacaya has a clear view of the nearby Volcano of Fire, which erupted in 2018, emitting a fast-moving avalanche of super-heated muck that killed at least 110 people and left about 200 missing.

## OZ EAST COAST RAIN TO EASE; FLOODING ON

**Sydney, March 23:** Heavy rainfall was forecast to ease across Australia's east coast but floodwaters will linger for days across New South Wales state where 15,000 people were nervously waiting on Tuesday for potential orders to evacuate. Some 18,000 residents of Australia's most populous state have fled their homes since last week, with warnings the cleanup could stretch into April. New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian on Tuesday said several weather fronts continued to effect large swaths of the state.

Some parts of the state had recorded two-thirds of their annual rainfall in less than a week. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the rain emergency was expected to ease by late Wednesday.

## FRANCE CALLS CHINESE ENVOY OVER COMMENTS

**Paris, March 23:** France's foreign ministry said it has summoned China's ambassador over "unacceptable" comments in recent days that included alleged insults and threats towards lawmakers and a researcher.

Foreign Affairs Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian tweeted on Monday that "comments of China's Embassy and actions against elected officials, researchers and European diplomats are unacceptable."

French authorities will "firmly reiterate the message" when meeting with Chinese Ambassador Lu Shaye, he added.

The Chinese Embassy in France called a Paris-based researcher, Antoine Bondaz, "a thug" on Twitter on Friday.

## NIGER VILLAGE ATTACKS: 137 GUNNED DOWN

**Niamey (Niger), March 23:** Gunmen aboard motorcycles have attacked a series of villages near Niger's troubled border with Mali, leaving at least 137 people dead in the deadliest violence to strike the African country in recent memory, the government has announced.

The latest village massacres come amid a dangerous escalation in attacks following the election of Niger's new president, Mohamed Bazoum, several weeks ago.

Government spokesman Abdourahmane Zakaria confirmed on Monday the latest killings took place on Sunday, the same day Niger's Constitutional Court officially declared Bazoum as the winner of February's election.

## Modi to Imran: 'India desires cordial relations'

**Islamabad, March 23:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi has told Prime Minister Imran Khan in a Pakistan Day message that his country desires cordial relations with the Pakistani people, it emerged on Tuesday, according to a report by PTI.

The message, dated March 22, was conveyed to Prime Minister Imran by the Indian High Commission in Islamabad through the Pakistan foreign office, the Dawn

reported.

In his letter, Mr Modi extended greetings to the people of Pakistan on occasion of Pakistan Day, which is being celebrated across the country today.

"As a neighbouring country, India desires cordial relations with the people of Pakistan," Mr Modi wrote. "For this, an environment of trust, devoid of terror and hostility, is imperative."

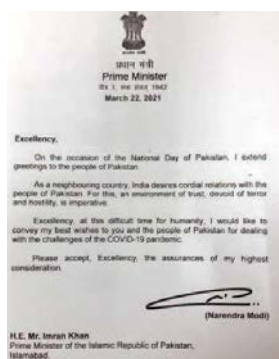
The Indian Premier also conveyed wishes to Imran and the Pakistani

people for dealing with the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, terming it a "difficult time for humanity".

"Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration," the message concluded.

The development comes days after Prime Minister Imran said India would have to make the first move to normalise ties with Pakistan.

"We are trying, but India would have to take the



first step and unless it does that we cannot move

ahead," the Premier said while inaugurating the first edition of the Islamabad Security Dialogue.

The perpetually tense relations between the two countries, which have fought three wars, besides engaging in several episodes of limited conflict, suffered a breakdown after India illegally annexed occupied Jammu and Kashmir on August 5, 2019.

However, the two countries sprung a surprise

## Israelis vote to seal Bibi fate

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

**Jerusalem, March 23:** Israelis returned to polling stations early Tuesday for an unprecedented fourth time in two years in what is being largely seen as a referendum on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's continuance at the helm of affairs amid his ongoing trial on corruption charges as well as his handling of the pandemic. The elections were called barely seven months after the last government was formed after the Likud and Blue and White party failed to agree on a budget by a December 23 deadline. The two parties had fought each other bitterly in the three ultimately inconclusive elections throughout 2019 and 2020 but agreed in May 2020 to form a power-sharing government with a rotating premiership between PM Netanyahu and Blue and White leader Benny Gantz. The unity government collapsed in December.

As per the election commission, 6,578,084 Israelis are eligible to vote for any of the 38 parties running in the elections in 13,685 polling stations across the country, including 750 special polling stations for the sick and quarantined due to COVID-19.

Exit polls will be broadcast by the leading channels Tuesday night but the final results will be out only on March 31 after the votes from special polling stations, of soldiers, emis-



Yesh Atid party leader Yair Lapid and his wife Lihi vote for Israel's parliamentary election at a polling station in Tel Aviv, Israel, on Tuesday.

saries and prisoners are also properly tallied by Thursday or Friday.

Buoyed by a successful vaccination drive, one of the fastest in the world per capita, Netanyahu, 71, has put it at the forefront of his campaign claiming that under his leadership Israel has become the first country in the world to beat the Covid-19 pandemic. He yet again faces a

tough challenge of putting together a coalition post-elections with some determined "friends turn foes" looking to end his long-run. The PM has made Israel's handling of the pandemic, especially its robust vaccine drive, personal by regular appearances in nationally televised addresses towards the beginning of the pandemic and later obsessively nego-

tiating vaccine deals with pharmaceutical companies. Israel has reported 828,764 Coronavirus cases so far with 6,109 deaths. Netanyahu's early recognition of the perils of the pandemic has been hailed by several international leaders, and also political analysts who appreciated his political acumen in identifying an opportunity in a crisis while most of

the world failed to grasp the intensity of the problem.

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

— PTI

## US: AstraZeneca 'used' dated info in vax trial

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

AstraZeneca said in a statement that the data it released Monday included cases up to Feb. 17, as the study rules specified, and that it was continuing to analyse cases that have occurred since then. The company said that a preliminary analysis of data that has continued to roll in was consistent with what it had already reported.

It promised an update within 48 hours. AstraZeneca reported Monday that its Covid-19 vaccine provided strong protection among adults of all ages in a long-anticipated US study, a finding that some experts hoped would help rebuild public confidence in the shot around the world and move it a step closer to clearance in the US.

In the study of more

than 30,000 people, the company reported that the vaccine was found to be 79 per cent effective at preventing symptomatic cases of Covid-19 — including in older adults.

There were no severe illnesses or hospitalisations among vaccinated volunteers, compared with five such cases in participants who received dummy shots — a small number, but consistent with findings from Britain and other countries that the vaccine protects against the worst of the disease.

— AP

## Xi, Kim reaffirm traditional alliance

**Seoul, March 23:** The leaders of China and North Korea are reaffirming their traditional alliance following contentious talks between top diplomats from Washington and Beijing and diplomatic isolation and economic problems in the North that have left it ever-more dependent on the Chinese.

The North's official *Korean Central News* Agency said Tuesday leader Kim Jong Un called for stronger "unity and cooperation" with China in the face of challenges posed by "hostile forces" while exchanging messages with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

According to *KCNA* and China's *Xinhua* news agency, Xi in his own message to Kim described bilateral relations as a "valuable asset" to both countries and vowed to make unspecified contributions to the peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. *KCNA* said Xi also expressed a commitment to "provide the peoples of the two countries with better life."

Some analysts saw this as an indication that China would soon provide North Korea with badly

needed food, fertiliser and other aid that had been significantly reduced amid the pandemic border closures. *Xinhua* said the leaders' messages were exchanged during a meeting between Chinese senior diplomat Song Tao and North Korean Ambassador to China Ri Ryong Nam during a meeting in Beijing on Monday.

— AP

## LANKA, CHINA INK \$1.5 BN CURRENCY EXCHANGE DEAL

**Colombo, March 23:** Sri Lanka will exchange currency with China under a 10 billion yuan (about \$1.5 billion) agreement aimed at promoting trade and investment between the two countries, the island nation's central bank said on Monday. So-called currency swaps allow central banks to ensure banks in their countries can borrow ready cash in any of the currencies involved.

China remains Sri Lanka's largest source of imports.

— AP

## Certify Rana extradition, US admin to court

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

Assistant US Attorney John J. Lulejian, in his submission before a federal US court in Los Angeles, said Rana, 59, meets all the criteria to be extradited to India for his trial in the Mumbai terror attack. On February 4, Rana's attorney had opposed his extradition. US District Court Judge in Los Angeles Jacqueline Chooljian has scheduled the extradition hearing for April 22.

"The United States respectfully requests that following the April 22, 2021, extradition hearing, the Court certify India's request for Rana's extradition for the Secretary of State's surrender decision," Lulejian said in his court submission on

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

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

As per the India-US Extradition Treaty, the Indian government has requested the formal extradition of Rana, and the United States has initiated this extradition proceeding. Lulejian said the criteria warranting certification of extradition are satisfied in this case. These are: the court has both personal and subject matter jurisdiction.

— PTI

## 10 shot dead in US supermarket

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

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

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

It follows a lull in mass

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

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

"He was by all accounts one of the outstanding officers of the Boulder Police Department, and his life was cut too short," Dougherty said of Talley. Identities of the other victims were not disclosed as police were still notifying family members. Matthew Kirsch, the acting US attorney for Colorado, pledged that "the full weight of federal law enforcement" will support the investigation. He said investigators from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were at the crime scene, along with FBI agents. Officers had escorted a shirtless man with blood running down his leg out of the store in handcuffs but authorities would not say if he was the suspect. They did say the suspect was receiving medical care and was the only person injured who did not die.

— AP

## WAGE WISE

US Labour Department invites comments from public on migrant workers

## 18-month delay in H-1B visa pay calculation

**Washington, March 23:** The Biden Administration has proposed an 18-month delay in the effective date of a final rule on calculating the prevailing wages of certain immigrants and non-immigrant workers, including those on the popular H-1B visas.

The proposed delay will provide the Department of Labour with sufficient time to consider the rule's legal and policy issues thoroughly and issue an

upcoming Request for Information and gather public comments on the sources and methods for determining prevailing wage levels, an official release said following the announcement on Monday. This proposed rule follows an initial 60-day delay announced earlier this month.

The department based that action on a January 20, 2021, White House memo, the media release

said. The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows US companies to employ foreign workers in specialty occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise. The technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China.

The Department of Labour in its federal notification published earlier this month said that it is

considering whether to propose a further delay of the final rule's effective date and accompanying implementation periods.

The Department proposed to delay in accordance with the Presidential directive as expressed in the memorandum of January 20, 2021, from the Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff, entitled Regulatory Freeze Pending Review.

The Department invited

written comments from the public for 15 days on the proposed delay of effective date. All comments had to be received by February 16, 2021.

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, the Department of Labour

said. While the E3 visa is one for which only citizens of Australia are eligible, the H-1B1 visa is for the people from Singapore and Chile.

The proposed delay will also give agency officials sufficient time to compute and validate prevailing wage data covering specific occupations and geographic areas, complete necessary system modifications and conduct public outreach.

— PTI



quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	50,051.44	0.56
Nifty 50	14,814.80	0.53
S&P 500*	3,944.91	0.11
Dollar (₹)	72.42	-0.05
Pound Sterling (₹)	99.78	0.49
Euro (₹)	86.15	0.001
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	44,374▲116	0.26
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	62.14	-3.84
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.144	0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.654	-0.028

\* As of 8:30 PM IST

NCLAT closes proceedings against Jyoti

The National Company Law Appellate Tribunal has shut the insolvency proceedings initiated against motor and generator manufacturing company Jyoti Ltd after settlement of claims raised by financial creditors. A two-member bench, including acting chairperson Justice B. Lal Bhat, allowed the company's plea after observing that it has already paid Rs 16.5 crore as per the compromise proposal.

Cipla board okays another 5-year term for Vohra



Pharma major Cipla said its board has approved the re-appointment of Umang Vohra as the managing director and global CEO of the company for a further period of five years, with effect from April 1, 2021. Vohra had joined Cipla in 2015 and has been its MD & global CEO since Sept. 1, 2016. After gaining degrees in engineering, marketing and finance, Vohra worked with Eicher Motors, PepsiCo and Dr Reddy's Lab.

Hero MotoCorp to increase prices from April

Hero MotoCorp said it will make an upward revision in the ex-showroom prices of its motorcycles and scooters, with effect from April 1 to partially offset the impact of higher commodity costs. "The price hike has been necessitated to partially offset the impact of increased commodity costs," Hero MotoCorp said in a BSE filing. The price increase across the range of two-wheelers will be up to Rs 2,500, it added.

Glenmark gets \$40 mn as IFC Covid credit-line

International Finance Corporation said Glenmark Pharmaceuticals has become the first Indian drugmaker to get a \$40-million (about Rs 290 crore) credit-line from its \$8-billion fast-track Covid-19 facility. The loan to Glenmark will help the drug firm increase the availability of affordable, quality medicines in the country as well in other countries, including treatment for the pandemic.

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■ Waiver of 'interest on interest' applicable to all SC refuses to extend loan moratorium beyond Aug.

FALAKNAAZ SYED MUMBAI, MARCH 23

The Supreme Court on Tuesday refused to extend the six months' loan moratorium period offered by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) beyond August 31. The apex court also said that the waiver of complete interest is not possible as it affects depositors interest.

However, the apex court ruled that all borrowers will be eligible for waiver of 'interest on interest' (compound interest) with respect to EMIs which were not paid by them after availing of the loan moratorium scheme extended by the RBI during March 1 to August 31 in view of the pandemic. And whatever the amount is recovered by lenders by way of interest on interest/compound interest/penal interest for the period during the moratorium, the same shall be refunded and to be adjusted in the next instalment of the loan account.

The court effectively set aside the direction of the central government and the RBI to restrict waiver of interest on interest to certain categories of borrowers who had taken loans of less than Rs 2 crore.

"There is no justification shown to restrict the relief of not charging interest on interest with respect to the loans up to Rs 2 crore only and that too restricted to the aforesaid categories. What are the basis to restrict it to Rs 2 crore are

PRAYERS THAT WERE REJECTED

- ▶ Total waiver of interest during the moratorium period
- ▶ To extend the period of moratorium
- ▶ To extend the period for invocation of resolution mechanism
- ▶ Sector-wise reliefs provided by RBI
- ▶ Further reliefs over and above the packages already offered

NPA's FELL TO ₹5.7 L CR: MINISTER

New Delhi, March 23: Non-performing assets of banks declined to Rs 5.70 lakh crore in December 2020 and the recovered amount stood at Rs 2.74 lakh crore following a slew of measures taken by the government, minister of state for finance Anurag Singh Thakur told the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday.

During question hour, he also said the IBC has helped in the recovery of NPA. "There has been a reduction in gross NPAs. The NPAs—which stood at Rs 8.96 lakh crore in 2018—have reduced to Rs 5.70 lakh crore in December 2020. Recovery of Rs 2.74 lakh crore was also made," he said.

—PTI

not forthcoming. Therefore, as such, there is no rational to restrict such relief with respect to loans up to Rs 2 crore only," the court said.

The court, therefore, partly allowed the petitions which had challenged the decision of the Centre and RBI to restrict waiver of interest on interest to those borrowers who had availed of loans of less than Rs 2 crore.

The SC also lifted the temporary freeze on letting banks classify accounts as non-perform-

ing assets (NPAs) after the moratorium has ended. This according to rating agency Icrs Ltd would result in bad loans rising by Rs 1.3 lakh crore for banks and an outgo of Rs 7,000-Rs 7,500 crore as reimbursement of interest on interest to those with loans outstanding during the moratorium period.

Also noteworthy was that the SC said no direction could be issued to the government or the RBI to announce any particular financial package or relief, and held that it will, there-

fore, ordinarily not engage in exercising judicial review over matters of economic and fiscal policies.

The judgment was delivered by a bench of Justices Ashok Bhushan, R. Subhash Reddy and M.R. Shah in a batch of petitions filed by companies, individuals and business associations challenging the decision of the Centre and RBI to charge interest during the moratorium period and restrict waiver of interest on interest to eight categories of borrowers who had taken loans of less than Rs 2 crore.

Anil Gupta, vice president-financial sector ratings, Icrs said, "As per Icrs's estimates, on a pro-forma basis, the GNPA of the banks stood at Rs. 8.7 lakh crore or 8.3 per cent of advances as against the reported GNPA of Rs 7.4 lakh crore (7.1 per cent) as on December 31, 2020. Also, on a pro-forma basis, the Net NPA for the banks stood at Rs. 2.7 lakh crore or 2.7 per cent of advances as against the reported NNPA for all banks of Rs 1.7 lakh crore (1.7 per cent) as on December 31, 2020.

Hence in absence of standstill by Hon'ble supreme court, the Gross NPAs for the banks would have been higher by Rs 1.3 lakh crore (1.2 per cent) and Net NPAs would have been higher by Rs one lakh crore (1 per cent). "As per our estimates, the compounded interest for six month of moratorium across all lenders is estimated at Rs 13,500-14,000 crore."

DIGITAL MAPPING OF INDIA TO BE OVER BY 2024

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, MARCH 23

The digital mapping initiative by the Survey of India is expected to cover the entire country by 2024. The departmental budget for this in FY21 is Rs 449 crore.

The project by the Survey of India, with support from the Department of Science and Technology (DST) had started in 2019. The entire country will be covered mostly with high resolution satellite imagery and some areas with UAV/drones as per the request of state governments for large-scale mapping. Sol will be covering 31.67 lakh sq km of area, minister of science of technology Harsh Vardhan told the Rajya Sabha.

The high resolution satellite imagery work involves five stages. The fifth round of Final National Topography Data Base has been completed in around 2,324 sq km.

The departmental budget for FY21 is Rs 449 crore. Further, funds have been received from some extra departmental projects.

JLR starts electric journey with ₹1.06 cr I-Pace SUV

With the launch of the Jaguar I-Pace SUV on Tuesday, Jaguar Land Rover, Tata Motors-owned British luxury carmaker, has now entered the electric vehicle, or EV, market in India. With a price tag of Rs 1.06 crore for the base S trim, going up to Rs 1.12 crore at pan-India showroom for the top-end HSE trim, the Jaguar I-Pace will compete against the likes of Mercedes-Benz EQC and the upcoming Porsche Taycan and Audi e-tron in India. Rohit Suri, president & managing director at Jaguar Land Rover India spoke with Michael Gonsalves on the company's electric plans and challenges in the Indian market.

How significant is the launch of Jaguar I-Pace in India?

Jaguar I-Pace is the first all-electric SUV that we've launched in India and it marks the beginning of our electrification journey. With our electrified products we look forward to playing a significant role in India's electrification drive into the future.

Is the Indian market is ready for electric vehicles?

The Indian market is surely warming up to the prospects of electric vehicles. Amongst our customers, there is a growing concern around pollution in cities and overall environment sustainability, which is triggering the demand for EVs. Government policy push is acting as a catalyst to drive this demand even further. The 21st century luxury customer is also keen to adopt the latest in technology and EVs are absolutely at the top of the pyramid in this aspect.

What charging solutions have you provided with the Jaguar I-Pace?

To charge the I-Pace, cus-

Govt raises PF tax floor to ₹5 lakh

New Delhi, March 23: Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Tuesday raised the limit for tax exemption on interest earned on provident fund contribution by employees to Rs 5 lakh per annum in specified cases against Rs 2.5 lakh proposed in the Budget.

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

The Finance Bill was later passed by the Lower House with 127 amendments by voice vote.

With the passage of the Finance Bill, which contains tax proposals for the next fiscal, the Lok Sabha has completed the budgetary exercise for 2021-22. The Bill is to be taken up by the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday.

Replying to the debate, she said the proposal for taxing interest income on contributions of more than Rs 2.5 lakh would affect less than 1 per cent of the total number of EPF subscribers.

"I intend to raise this limit to Rs 5 lakh only in those cases, where there is no contribution by the employer in that fund.

"So, most often, it is employee contribution and employer's contribution, but there are contributions which are only employee and no employer contribution is made, in such cases that amount is raised to Rs 5 lakh," she said. —PTI

Petrol issue can be taken up at GST Council meet: FM

New Delhi, March 23: Amidst an outcry over the high taxes on motor fuel, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Tuesday said she would be "glad" to discuss the suggestion of bringing petrol and diesel under the ambit of the Goods and Services Tax at the next meeting of the GST Council.

State levies and central excise duty account for more than half of the retail selling prices of petrol and diesel.

For instance, taxes make up for 60 per cent of the present retail price of petrol of Rs 91.17 a litre in Delhi. Excise duty constitutes 36 per cent of the retail price.

Over 53 per cent of the retail selling price of Rs 81.47 a litre for diesel in Delhi is made up of taxes. As much as 39 per cent of the retail price comprises central excise.

Replying to the debate on Finance Bill 2021 in the Lok Sabha, Sitharaman said both the centre as well as state governments levy taxes on petrol and diesel. However, the Centre shares its collection on the fuel with states.

"I would honestly think based on today's discussion, many of the states would be watching this. In the next GST Council (meeting), if that discussion comes up, I'll be glad to have it on the agenda and discuss it. I have no issues. Let the states come and discuss it. The call has to be taken there (at the Council)," the minister said. The GST Council, headed



Nirmala Sitharaman

by the union finance minister and comprising state finance ministers, is the highest decision making body regarding GST.

Earlier in the day, members from the Opposition benches said high prices of diesel, petrol and LPG were hurting the common man across the country and asked the government to reduce their rates.

Petrol and diesel prices are hovering at historic highs following a relentless increase in rates over the past nine months. There have been calls by Opposition parties as well as sections of society to reduce excise duty to ease consumer pain.

Supriya Sule (NCP) said excise component in the prices of petrol is close to Rs 38 per litre while state value-added tax (VAT) is about Rs 19 per litre in Delhi. The government should consider slashing this high excise duty, she said. She urged the government to bring down prices of petrol, diesel and LPG cylinder.

Ritesh Pandey (BSP) and Nama Nageswara Rao (TRS) too raised the issue of high prices of petrol and diesel. —PTI

GOVT CHALLENGES CAIRN ARBITRATION AWARD IN HAGUE



New Delhi, March 23: India is believed to have challenged in a court in The Hague an arbitration tribunal verdict that overturned its demand for Rs 10,247 crore in back taxes from Cairn Energy Plc—the second time in three months that it has refused to accept an international award against retrospective tax.

The appeal was filed on Monday, a source with knowledge of the matter said.

The finance ministry spokesperson did not respond to an e-mail sent for comments.

The appeal against a three-member tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague invalidating India's Rs 10,247-crore tax claim on Cairn Energy and ordering the government to return the value of shares it had sold, dividends seized and tax refunds withheld, comes weeks before UK prime minister Boris Johnson's visit to India.

The British prime minister is widely expected to broach the topic of India honouring international arbitration awards during his April 26 visit, another source said.

In December, the government had challenged in a Singapore court an international arbitration tribunal verdict that overturned its demand for Rs 22,100 crore in back taxes from Vodafone Group Plc. Since the seat of Vodafone arbitration was Singapore, an appeal was filed in a court in that country. In the case of Cairn, the seat was The Hague and so an appeal has been filed in a court in the Netherlands, the first source said.

The tribunal's 582-page detailed verdict asked India to return \$1.2 billion-plus interest and cost to Cairn. —PTI

Olectra deploys 50 e-buses in Goa

FC BUREAU HYDERABAD, MARCH 23

Olectra Greentech, a leading electric bus manufacturer, has deployed 50 electric buses for public transport in Goa.

Goa chief minister Pramod Sawant on Tuesday flagged off the "Make in India" buses in Tiswadi. The zero-emission, noiseless buses will be operated by the state road transport undertaking, Kadamba Transport Corporation.

According to a release, the company has deployed more than 320 electric buses in various states and has got orders for making another 1,225 electric buses.

The electric buses have features like Monocoque chassis and 48-seat capacity. It has electronically controlled air suspension



at front and rear, disc brakes with ABS at the front and back to ensure a comfortable and safe ride for the passengers.

The buses are equipped with CCTV cameras, emergency button, USB sockets for mobile charging, GPS tracking, among other features.

Olectra electric buses have covered more than four crore kilometres on Indian roads and have reduced CO2 emissions of around 37,000 tonnes and

saved burning of 13.5 million litres of diesel.

Announcing the deployment of the buses, K.V. Pradeep, group director, MEIL (Olectra Greentech), said, "Olectra is proud and thankful to Kadamba for giving the opportunity to operate its world-class electric buses in Goa. Our buses would now contribute to preserving the rich ecology of Goa. Olectra is committed to its efforts to reduce pollution levels through an efficient electric public transport system. We are sure that, like other states, our 50 electric buses will be successful in the Goa state. Our electric buses have already proved their reliability and efficiency as they have been successfully deployed in Mumbai, Pune, Nagpur, Hyderabad, Surat, Silvassa, Dehradun and Kerala."

States, UTs borrow ₹7.78 L cr from mkt

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, MARCH 23

With 15 states raising a total of Rs 17,783 crore through auction of government securities on Tuesday, the market borrowings of all states and union territories have touched Rs 7.78 lakh crore this fiscal, 28 per cent higher than last year. Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand and West Bengal were the main states that participated in the auction of government securities on Tuesday. The borrowing cost witnessed a sharp decline and fell to the lowest level since the end of

August 2020. The weighted average cost of borrowing for the states was 6.21 per cent.

With this, 28 states and two union territories have so far cumulatively raised Rs 7.78 lakh crore via market borrowings in the current fiscal and this is 28 per cent more than the borrowings in the corresponding period of 2019-20 at Rs. 6.07 lakh crore, as per the data from Care Ratings.

The states have collectively utilised 94 per cent of the scheduled market borrowings of Rs 8.24 lakh crore as per the indicative calendar for 2020-21. In 2019-20, the states had raised Rs 6.35 lakh crore.



