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HYDERABAD | SATURDAY | 26 DECEMBER 2020

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TRS N'Sagar seat for Nomula son?

S.A. ISHAQUI | DC
HYDERABAD, DEC. 25

The ruling Telangana Rashtra Samiti might field Nomula Bhagath Kumar, son of the late TRS MLA Nomula Narasimhaiah, from the Nagarjunasagar Assembly segment in the upcoming byelection.

This is in view of reports that the Congress might field senior leaders K. Jana Reddy or his elder son Raghveer Reddy for the bypoll and considering the setback the TRS got in the Dubbak byelection.

Sources in the TRS said that pressure was being exerted on the leadership to field a candidate from the Reddy community so as to give a tough fight to the Congress. The family of Jana Reddy has considerable influence in the constituency though he had lost the 2018 elections by a margin of 7,000 votes. The

names of Telangana Legislative Council chairman Gutha Sukhender Reddy, MLC Tera Chinappa Reddy, M.C. Koti Reddy and Vijayender Reddy are making the rounds of TRS circles as likely candidates for the byelection.

In the Dubbak byelection, the TRS had fielded the wife of late Solipeta Ramalinga Reddy. If a bereaved family member of an MLA from the backward community is not fielded in the bypoll, it will give scope for criticism the party is discriminating against the BCs.

Sources in the party say that in the event of Bharath not willing to contest the bypoll, the party will likely consider fielding Rajya Sabha member Badugula Lingaiah Yadav.

■ Page 5: BJP has little presence in Nagarjunasagar

Rajini admitted to hosp with high BP

DC CORRESPONDENTS
with agency inputs
HYDERABAD/CHENNAI DEC. 25

Actor-politician Rajinikanth was on Friday admitted to Apollo Hospitals in Hyderabad for severe blood pressure fluctuations and he was "stable", the hospital said. Stating that he is "stable and resting", the hospital said the actor will stay here and undergo further investigations on Saturday.

Rajinikanth was shoot-

ing for the film *Annaatthe* in the Film City in Hyderabad for 10 days but had isolated himself after at least four people on the sets tested Covid-19 positive. The 70-year-old actor had tested negative. It is too early to say when he would move to Chennai where he was to announce the name of his political party any day after *Sani Peyarchi* on December 27.

■ Page 5: Rajini was to announce party formation

PM: Rivals behind farmers' protests

Centre willing to resume dialogue, says Modi

DC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 25

Modi's address to farmers followed the release of over ₹18,000 crore to more than nine crore farmer families

the talks are based on issues, facts and logic.

His address to farmers followed the release of over ₹18,000 crore to more than nine crore farmer families under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan), an effort being seen to placate the agitating farmers.

The Prime Minister

asserted that an overwhelming number of farmers across the country have welcomed the new laws and are already reaping the benefits, and listed out the BJP's victory in panchayat elections across states, in which farmers were the main voters, including in areas surrounding protest sites.

He said the parties rejected by the electorate are pushing their political agenda by misleading farmers.

Referring to the protests, the Prime Minister said farmers had some genuine apprehensions about new laws, including on MSP guarantee, when the agitation started, but soon people with political affiliations came in between and started firing from the peasants' shoulders to push their own and unrelated demands.

PERFECT | PITCH Big day for Hyderabad speedster

Siraj to make Test debut

DC CORRESPONDENT
MELBOURNE, DEC. 25

they were shot out for 36 in their second innings after taking a lead in the Test. Siraj, the son of an autorickshaw driver in Hyderabad, has come in as replacement for an injured Mohammed Shami.

Siraj has already played an ODI and three T20s for India, but making his Test debut in a Boxing Day match would be a dream

come true for him. Siraj had to make a difficult choice earlier this month when BCCI offered him the chance to travel back to India to attend his father's last rites.

However, the 26-year-old decided to stay put in Australia and work hard.

■ Page 5: Dad's dream to see me play Test: Siraj

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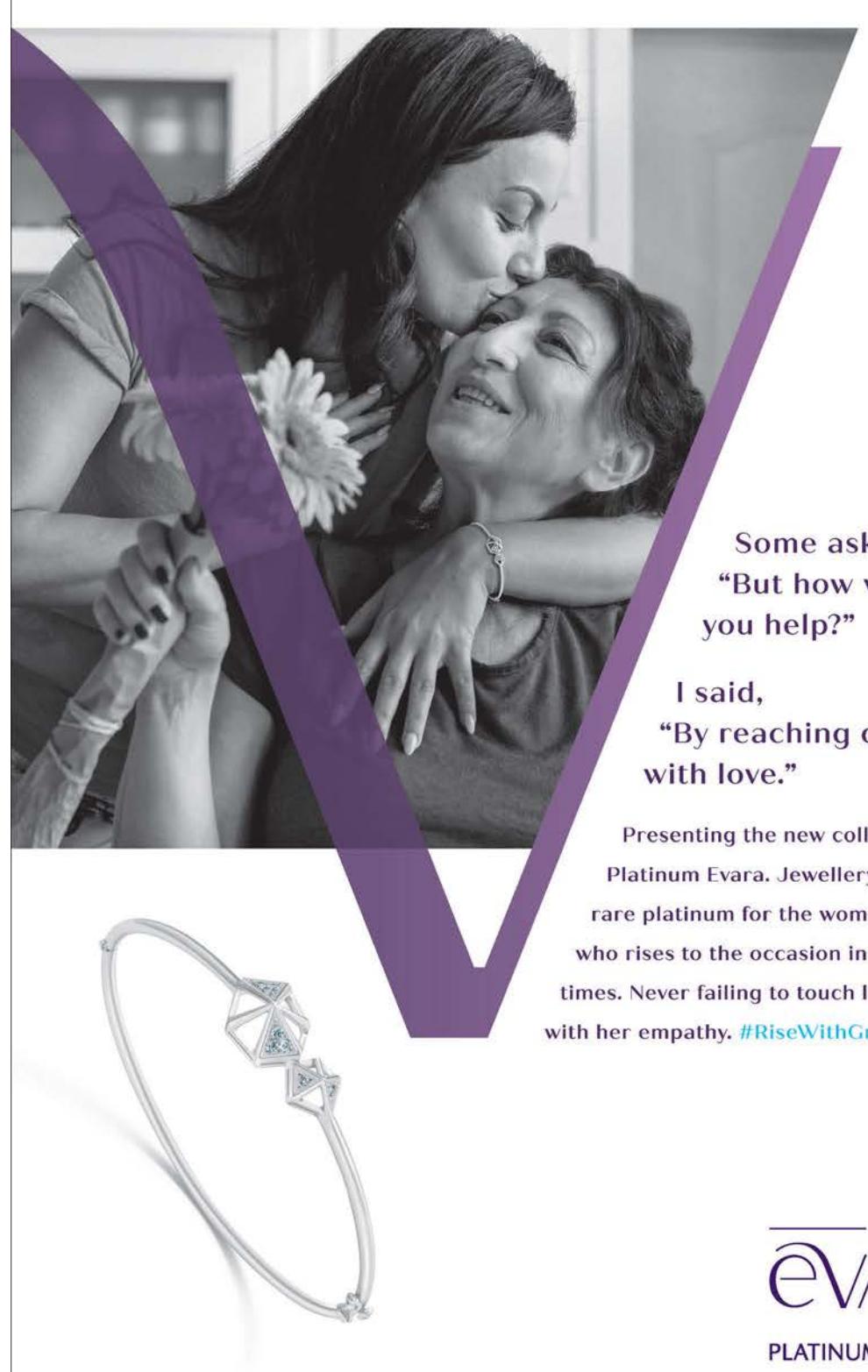
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9
STORES
IN HYDERABAD

ATTAPUR | BANJARAHILLS | CHANDANAGAR | HIMAYATNAGAR | KONDAPUR | KUKATPALLY | MANIKONDA
COMING SOON - DILSUKHNAGAR | PRAGATHI NAGAR



WEATHER

Max: 27.3°C
Min: 14.3°C
RH: 56%
Rainfall: Nil
Forecast: Cloudy sky. Misty or haze likely. Max/Min temp. 27/14 °C

COVID-19 COUNT

CASES	DEATHS
(+24,798)	(+282)
1,01,69,804	1,47,379
covid19india.org	
STATE GOVERNMENT BULLETINS	
(+518)	(+3)
2,84,074	1,527
(+355)	(+2)
8,80,430	7,091

CASES AROUND THE WORLD

8,00,21,233
DEATHS
17,54,191

COUNTRIES, AREAS WITH CASES 218
worldometers.info/coronavirus

ASTROGUIDE

Sarvari: Dakshinayana Tithi: Margasira Shuddha Dwadasi till 4.17 am (Sunday) Star: Bharani till 10.33 am Varjyam: 11.54 pm to 1.41 am (Sunday) Durmuhurtam: 6.47 am to 8.15 am Rahukalam: 9 am to 10.30 am HIJRI CALENDAR Jamadi-ul-Awwal 10, 1442 AH

PRAYERS

Fajr: 5.39 am Zohar: 12.27 pm Asar: 4.14 pm Maghrab: 5.56 pm Isha: 7.09 pm SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.43 AM SUNSET TODAY 5.49 PM MOONRISE TODAY 2.21 AM MOONSET TOMORROW 2.28 PM

COUNTER POINT



Not personal, it's political... the wife and husband are from different parties!



DC IMPACT

Civic authorities pay attention to the road from Sikh road to Trimulgherry and repair it after bad condition of road was published in these columns. (Inset) The picture published on December 21, shows motorists facing danger due to the damage, which the civic authorities have not repaired for a long time.

— GANDHI

TS-bPASS yields good response

It has received over 1,700 applications

MADDY DEEKSHITH I DC HYDERABAD, DEC. 25

Removal of the human interface in relation to grant of building permissions in the city has been yielding good results. After launch of the state building permission approval and self-certification system (TS-bPASS) last month, the GHMC has received over 1,700 applications.

The TS-bPASS is conceived on the lines of TS-iPASS — a single-window clearance facility for industrial permits — and this too has a penalty clause. "We will bring changes and additions in the TSBbPass based on the feedback," a GHMC official said.

It is not clear whether any official has been taken to task for delay after the introduction of the new rule.

"The civic staff was on

GHMC poll duty when the change was effected. Despite such odds, we have been successful in implementing the self-certification of properties on plots of 75 to 600 square yards. Realtors are adapting themselves to the system and this would benefit the middle class in specific," the official said.

As part of the TS-

bPASS, approved by the state cabinet in November, a state-level chasing cell was set up.

This cell would ensure that all the proposals

under the single-window system are disposed of within 21 days. The cell also does coordination with various departments vis-a-vis their adherence to the timeline.

For plots up to 75 square yards, no building permission is required for individuals for construction of house.

The applicant shall register online for the construction and pay a token one rupee as fee or pay this along with the first property tax of ₹100.

As for plots of 75

square yards to 500 square meters or 600 square yards, there will be instant online building approval based on self-certification for all individual residential buildings.

For plots above 500 sqm and buildings above 10-metre height, the applicant can file a common application and need not approach other (line) departments for clearances.

Building permissions shall be issued

within 21 days.

The removal of the human interface helped

the civic staff to work more efficiently and effectively.

As for plots of 75

square yards to 500 square meters or 600 square yards, there will be instant online building approval based on self-certification for all individual residential buildings.

For plots above 500 sqm and buildings above 10-metre height, the applicant can file a common application and need not approach other (line) departments for clearances.

Building permissions shall be issued

within 21 days.

The TS-bPASS is designed to reduce the time taken for processing building permissions and to make the process more transparent and efficient.

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IN BRIEF

Plight of Muslims concerns Owaisi

Hyderabad: AIMIM chief Asaduddin Owaisi on Friday claimed that he had always raised the issue of social and educational backwardness of the Muslim community. At the same time he had also tried to show how the Muslim community was politically marginalised and made expendable, Owaisi said. The AIMIM chief complained that instead of joining hands with him on issues related to Muslims, opponents were trying to scare the people by likening him with Jinnah, Owaisi said in a post on Twitter.

TELANGANA SIRI COMPOST LAUNCHED

DC CORRESPONDENT

HYDERABAD, DEC. 25

Telangana State Agro Industries Development Corporation (ARGOS) has launched 'Telangana Siri' city compost organic fertiliser as part of government's efforts to encourage organic farming. ARGOS officials said city compost is a unique bio-organic soil enricher manufactured from bio-degradable organic substances, mainly of plant origin, through controlled accelerated microbial composting process.

The official explained: "The compost is free from unwanted bacteria or insect eggs, weed seeds and unwanted plant pathogens. It increases crop yield, improves soil health, fertility, structure, creates favourable conditions for healthier plant growth and development, and reduces usage of chemical fertilisers and water."

AGROS MD and vice chairman K. Ramulu said the department of fertilisers will provide market development assistance on city compost. It will ensure co-marketing of compost with chemical fertilisers through fertiliser companies.

The MD said city compost will become more affordable for farmers in case waste is received unmixed with other materials. This will require less sieving energy to remove plastics at the compost plant.

COPS FOCUS ON COUNSELLING ROWDY-SHEETERS

DC CORRESPONDENT

HYDERABAD, DEC. 25

South Zone police are focusing on counselling of rowdy-sheeters instead of conducting frequent cordon and search operations to curb crime.

The police started the drive from Kalapathar, followed by Rein Bazaar on Thursday. South Zone DCP Gajara Bhupal, speaking to *Deccan Chronicle*, said that during the lockdown the activities of the rowdy-sheeters had reduced.

"To keep vigil on their activities, we have started counselling them. We are involving the family members to motivate them to live a respectable life," the DCP said.

P. Anjaneyulu, Rein Bazaar station house officer, said there were 77 rowdy-sheeters in his area of whom 20 were active. "We counselled 11 rowdy-sheeters. When we reached their houses, almost all were there," he said.

S. Sudarshan, station house officer of Kalapathar, said, "We are involving religious personalities in counselling of rowdy-sheeters." Of the 63 rowdy-sheeters in his area, 10 are active, he said.

Blood donation camp

Union minister of state for home G. Kishan Reddy at a blood donation camp that was organised at the BJP office in Hyderabad on Friday. The party observed the birth anniversary of former prime minister A.B. Vajpayee.

— DEEPAK DESHPANDE

Don't stop leaders, Bandi warns TRS

Sanjay says BJP will confine ministers to their homes

DC CORRESPONDENT

JAGTIAL, DEC. 25

BJP state chief Bandi Sanjay Kumar, the Karimnagar MP, came down heavily on the TRS, saying that if the ruling party tries to stop BJP leaders, a single minister would not be able to leave their house. He was speaking at a function after TRS leaders briefly blocked his convoy earlier in the day.

He said that if the TRS leaders have the courage, they must try to stop those who are working for the Popular Front of India (PFI) in Jagtial town. If they try to attack BJP leaders and partymen, then BJP will attack Pragathi Bhavan.

Sanjay alleged that Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao had encouraged farmers to cultivate the fine variety of rice. Innocent farmers who followed his orders are now facing a huge loss. The TRS government and the CM were not in a mood to listen to their problems, he said and asked: "Is this the support the TRS government is giving to farmers?"

"KCR has betrayed the farming community," Sanjay alleges and claimed that the CM had diverted ₹120 crore sanctioned by the BJP government for conducting soil testing. He said that the Chief Minister should explain to the public where he sold his agriculture produce: in the government procurement centre or to corporate companies.

The Chief Minister should pay unemployment dole of ₹2,000 each per unemployed youth till now but he will not speak about it, Sanjay alleged. The Centre had sanctioned money for the construction of double bedroom houses but the CM will not admit it in public. "But he is trying to create problems for

Bid to disrupt Bandi's meet sparks tension

DC CORRESPONDENT

JAGTIAL, DEC. 25

Tension prevailed in Jigtial town for some time on Friday when TRS activists and leaders blocked the road during the visit of BJP state chief Bandi Sanjay Kumar to press their demand for the Centre to release funds under the Employment Guarantee Scheme ₹1,024 crore for the village panchayats which are pending.

Having learnt about Sanjay's tour, Zilla Parishad chairperson Dava Vasantha and Jigtial MLA Dr Sanjay Kumar along with the

sarpanches of various villages of Jigtial constituency and partymen holding the placards staged a rasta roko on the Jagtial-Tharoor bridge and raised slogans against the BJP state chief.

BJP leaders requested the police to arrest the TRS leaders and clear the way for Sanjay, who was to attend a meeting in the town. A heated argument took place between the leaders of the BJP and TRS over

the Bjp and TRS over the issue of the blockade.

The police tried to convince the leaders of the both parties to step back. When the situa-

tion appeared to be slipping out of hand, the police informed superintendent of police Sindhu Sharma of the situation.

Sindhu Sharma rushed to the spot along with a police force and arrested legislator Dr Sanjay Kumar and TRS leaders including village sarpanches and cleared the way for Sanjay.

The BJP state chief reached the private function hall where the Kisan Samman programme was organised and briefed the farmers about the new agriculture laws and Rythu Samman Nidhi.



State BJP president Bandi Sanjay, along with BJP leaders, listens to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address on Friday.

— DC PHOTO

landowners, realtors and builders in the name of LRS. BJP will fight against TRS government until it suspends LRS," Sanjay said.

Speaking about the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Yojana, Sanjay said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had launched the scheme on the birth anniversary of Atal Behari Vajpayee and sanctioned ₹18,000

crore to around nine crore farmers.

"The previous governments had ignored the farmers and never bothered about them. It is the BJP government under the leadership of Narendra Modi who took revolutionary steps and brought several reforms in the agri sector keeping in view of the welfare of the farming community," Sanjay said.

"Some foolish parties

who are unaware of the benefits the farmer is going to derive with the new agriculture laws are trying to divert them and playing politics," Sanjay said. "The farmers of Telangana state are fully aware of the cheap policies that the TRS and the Congress are playing with them. That is why no farmer in the Telangana state is participating in the agitation," Sanjay claimed.

BURGLAR WITH 41-YR RECORD, 3 AIDES NABBED

DC CORRESPONDENT

HYDERABAD, DEC. 25

The North Zone Task Force police arrested Mantri Shankar, a burglar with a 40-year-old criminal history, along with three associates for burglary. Police commissioner Anjani Kumar said ₹12.09 lakh, 1 kg silver and two motorcycles had been seized from them. The commissioner said, Shankar, 60, had started burgling houses from 1979 and was named in 250 cases.

He was convicted in 209 cases and has been detained under the Preventive Detention Act four times.

Shankar was first involved in an attempt to murder a case at Chikalguda where he attacked a person who was quarrelling with his mother frequently. Arrested for the attack, he came out of jail after a month and too to stealing bicycles, wrist watches and other articles.

The others arrested with Shankar were identified as Abdul Latif Khan, Mohd Majid and Mohd Imtiyaz Ahmed. The gang was said to be involved in six cases in Hyderabad and Rachkonda commissions.

Anjani Kumar said Abdul Latif Khan of Falaknuma is involved in 10 cases of theft; Mohd Majid of Bhavanagar is a rowdy-sheeter facing seven cases of bodily offences. Mohd Imtiyaz Ahmed of Vidyanagar, Nallakunta, was arrested in 13 automobile theft cases. Majid and Ajmed have been detained under the PD Act.

● **SHANKAR WAS** first involved in an attempt to murder case at Chikalguda where he attacked a person who was quarrelling with his mother frequently. Arrested for the attack, he came out of jail after a month and too to stealing bicycles, wrist watches and other articles.

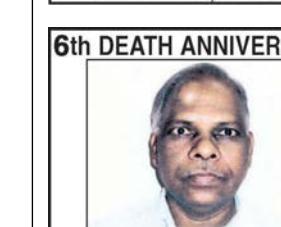
3rd DEATH ANNIVERSARY

As per Thidhi



Late. Meduri Krishnaveni
DOD: 30-11-2017 W/o, Late M.A Naidu
You will always be in our hearts
may your soul rest in peace
Inserted by:
Meduri Family Members
Ph: 8179112398, 9618449622

6th DEATH ANNIVERSARY



C. VENKAT SWAMY
DOB: 14.01.1946 DOD: 26.12.2014
Inserted by:
Smt. Sarojini (Wife)
C. Naveen & C. Sushma
(Son & Daughter-in-law)
D. Venkateswara & D. Sushila Kumar
J. Madhavi & J. Viveka Kumar
(Daughters & Sons-in-law)
& Grand Children

(S/2021/D00992)

14th Death Anniversary



Late P. Bala Mallesh Goud
DOB: 26-12-2006
Your memories will always
remain in our hearts ever grateful
Inserted by:
Wife: P. Renuka Goud
Son: P. Vinay Kumar Goud
Daughter-in-law: P. Swetha Goud
Daughter-Son in law & Grand Children

(S/2021/D00993)

12th ANNIVERSARY



P. PRAKASH REDDY
D.O.B.: 06-06-1949
D.O.B.: 26-12-2008
Inserted By:-
Family Members
Ph: 9652206969

Corporator Aruna seeks re-election

DC CORRESPONDENT

HYDERABAD, DEC. 25

Outgoing TRS corporator A. Aruna from Ramgopalpet division has moved the High Court with a plea that the GHMC election to the division be declared null and void.

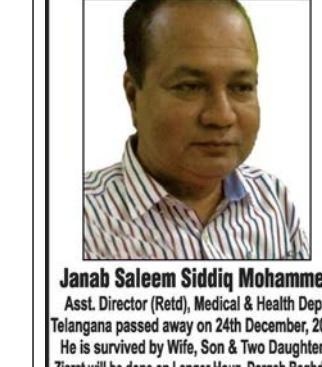
The petitioner alleged that the State Election Commission (SEC) has overridden the amendments made to the GHMC Act vis-a-vis bifurcation of wards for the civic polls.

Aruna had contested as a TRS nominee in the recent elections and lost to Cheera Suchitra by 310 votes. Aruna alleged that the SEC added 217 voters of Begumpet division to Ramgopalpet dur-

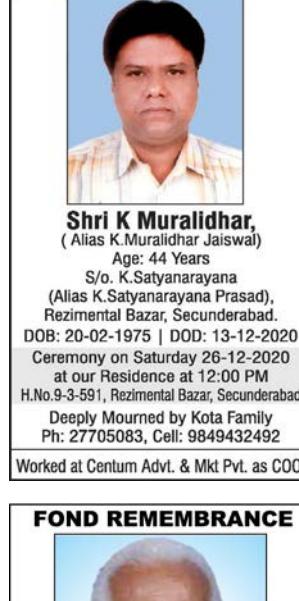
ing the bifurcation and delimitation of wards. The amendments made to GHMC Act for the polls do not allow such a delimitation, she said.

Aruna said the amendment of October 16, 2020, stated that the wards and reservations to the SCs, STs and BCs should remain the same as per the elections held in 2016. But, the SEC went through with the bifurcation.

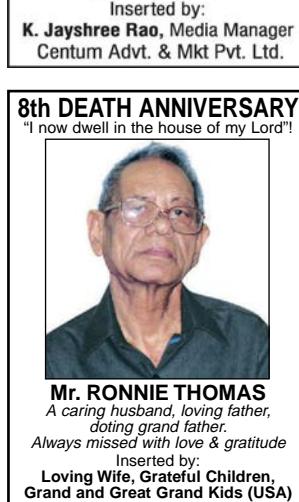
"Not only were these 217 voters shifted to Ramgopalpet, but about 3,000 voters of booth 11, 12 and 13 of Begumpet were added to Cheera Suchitra by 310 votes. Aruna alleged that the SEC added 217 voters of Begumpet division to Ramgopalpet on November 12," Aruna said.

SAD DEMISE

Shri K. Muralidhar,
(Alias K. Muralidhar Jaiswal)
Age: 44 Years
S/o. K. Satyanarayana Prasad,
Rezimental Bazar, Secunderabad.
DOB: 20-02-1975 | DOD: 13-12-2020
Ceremony on Saturday 26-12-2020
at our Residence at 12:00 PM
H.No.9-3-591, Rezimental Bazar
Deeply Mourned by Kota Family
Ph: 27705083, Cell: 9849432492
Worked at Centum Advt. & Mkt Pvt. as COO

13th DAY CEREMONY

Late Sri. M. VEERABHADRA RAO
Advocate
20-11-1934 to 26-12-2013
As years pass on, this day,
your loving memories
brighten our hearts
M. Syamala, M.V.M. Rao,
M.S.V. Lakshmi, M. Srinivasa Murthy
& Family Members

IN MEMORY OF

Shri K. Muralidhar,
(Worked at Centum COO)
DOB: 20-02-1975 | DOD: 13-12-2020
"We miss you every moment of life"
Inserted by:
K. Jayashree Rao, Media Manager
Centum Advt. & Mkt Pvt. Ltd.

1st ANNIVERSARY

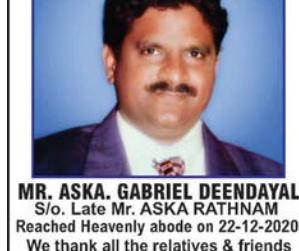
CHITRANGADA R LAL
W/o. Late Dr. RUPENDRA LAL,
Left for heavenly abode on 26 Dec. 2019
It is now one year but your
memories will be with us forever
Inserted by - Son Rammendra Lal,
Daughter Shajala and Family Members
Ph: 9912214893, 9030099979

(S/2021/D00994)

8th DEATH ANNIVERSARY

Mr. RONNIE THOMAS
A caring husband, loving father,
doting grand father.
Always missed by love & gratitude
Inserted by:
Loving Wife, Grateful Children,
Grand and Great Grand Kids (USA)
Mrs. Studio Wall Paradise
Banjara Hills furnishing store.

(S/2021/D00995)

BIRTHDAY REMEMBRANCE

Mr. LINGAM CHARLES CHRISTOPHER
S/o Late Lingam Elias Simon &
Late Saati Lysamma
DOB: 26-1-1941 DOD: 08-03-2011
Beautiful soul never to forget.
Inserted by: Wife, P.G. KAMALA &
LOVING FAMILY

(S/2021/D00993)

IN FOND MEMORY

MR. ASKA. GABRIEL DEENDAYAL
S/o. Late Mr. ASKA RATHNAM
Reached Heavenly abode on

SHORT TAKES

**DAD'S DREAM TO SEE ME PLAY TEST CRICKET: SIRAJ**

From Page 1
In a BCCI TV interview, Siraj had revealed that it was his father's dream to see him play Test cricket.

"In this situation, every team member has supported me and it really felt nice. Virat Bhai also told me not to worry and he asked me to stay strong. I talked to my mother and she told me to stay back in Australia and fulfill my father's dream," Siraj had said.

Siraj pipped another quick Navdeep Saini for a spot in the XI after showing glimpses of his talent during India's practice games on the tour.

RAJINI WAS TO ANNOUNCE PARTY FORMATION

From Page 1

While his party may be inaugurated in January, possibly on January 17, he was to make his party formation official before the end of the year in the state capital.

What happens now to his much-awaited political entry can only be speculation. Earlier, he had once hinted that his doctors had advised him not to get into the rough and tumble of full-time politics due to concerns over his health as he had undergone transplantation of a kidney a few years ago.

Later, he had come out and announced in a media conference held from his home that he had decided to take the plunge after meeting his party functionaries at the Raghavendra Kalyana Mandapam. The Tamil Nadu political scene, agog with his keenly awaited entry, is left guessing over his formal entry now with a party name, flag, office-bearers, etc.

Doctors said his blood pressure was fluctuating from 160 to 170 mmHg and he was kept under observation since afternoon. "The reason for this could be over-exertion, lack of proper sleep, anxiety or not taking prescribed medicines on time. He's being treated for blood pressure for a long time. The kidney functioning is also being evaluated." The hospital release said the actor's condition was being closely monitored and the blood pressure being carefully titrated. He will undergo further tests on Saturday. Rajinikanth's daughter is attending to him at the hospital. Family and the doctors have requested his fans to desist from visiting the hospital. No visitors are allowed.

Governor Tamilisai Soundararajan and TD supreme N. Chandrababu Naidu wished the actor a speedy recovery.

Festive mood

Greetings are exchanged after the Christmas service at the St Joseph's Cathedral at Gunfoundry Abids on Friday.

— R. PAVAN

8 more UK returnees test +ve

1,200 have returned to TS from the UK recently, 926 tested so far

KANIZA GARARI | DC HYDERABAD, DEC. 25

Eight more returnees from the United Kingdom have tested positive for Covid-19 and over 75 persons whom they contacted after arrival were sent into quarantine. The returnees were mostly students and professionals.

Altogether 16 persons who tested positive for Covid-19 so far are at isolation wards in different hospitals in the state. Their samples have been collected and sent for tests to check for the new strain. Health officials expect the results will be known in two days as the genome sequencing is being carried out at the

Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology here.

Health officials stressed there's no need for panic. If the variant virus is found in any returnee, proper treatment is at hand. The health infrastructure is ready to deal with the emerging Covid-19 situation, they said.

A total of 1,200 people have returned to Telangana state from the United Kingdom in recent times. So far, 926 have been tested.

Dr G. Srinivas Rao, director of public health, urged those who have come directly to the state from the United Kingdom after December 9 to report to the local authorities.

Carrying out medical

tests for them is important. Those who are testing negative are also being quarantined and they must report immediately in case of any symptoms.

Health officials state that more than 300 people have returned to Hyderabad from the UK since December 9. Officials are tracing and tracking them.

The district-wise break-up of the infected flyers: four each from Hyderabad and Medchal Malkajgiri districts; two from Jagtial district and one each from Mancherlai, Nalgonda, Ranga Reddy, Sangareddy, Siddipet and Warangal Urban districts.

TELANGANA RECORDS 518 NEW COVID INFECTIONS, REPORTS 3 MORE DEATHS

DC CORRESPONDENT HYDERABAD, DEC. 25

Three deaths were recorded due to Covid-19 in the state on Thursday, taking the toll to 1,527.

The health bulletin issued on Friday also said the state recorded 518 new cases, taking the caseload to 2,84,074. There are 6,839 active cases.

The Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation limits recorded 91 cases,

the first time in many weeks that the number has gone below the three-figure mark.

Ranga Reddy

district recorded 41 new cases, Warangal Urban 35, Karimnagar 25 and Bhadrakali Kothagudem 16 cases. Health officials state that there is a slight rise in districts due to the intensifying cold.

Government has asked people to not panic and that they must report to hospitals early in case of Covid-19 symptoms.

Safety protocols of masks, social distancing and hand hygiene must be followed by all and lapses are the reason for the spread of infection stated officials.

BJP HAD SMALL PRESENCE IN N'SAGAR IN 2018

From Page 1

The fight will be between the Congress and the TRS as Nagarjunasagar had little of BJP presence. The BJP did not contest in 2014. In 2018, its candidate K. Nivedita Reddy got just 2,682 votes and finished fourth though Union ministers had pitched in for the campaign.

While there were reports that Jana Reddy may join the BJP, he was quick to scotch such rumours.

NAAC axes Malla Reddy BE college

HARLEEN MINOCHA | DC HYDERABAD, DEC. 25

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) on Friday announced the blacklisting of the Malla Reddy College of Engineering (MRCE) from the process of accreditation for a period of five years.

Following discrepancies in the documents submitted by the college for reassessment, after a show-cause notice issued to the college in November 2019, the NAAC decided to black-

list the institution.

"The certificates purported to have been given by BHTEL, Yash Technologies, and Airtel (to the college) appear to be fabricated in layer especially with the seal, signature and letterhead aspects. The digital expertise opinion obtained by us on the same also confirmed the possibility of digital fabrications," NAAC explained in a notice.

Dr A. Santhosh Kumar, president of the Telangana Schools Technical Colleges Employees Association, said that this is not the

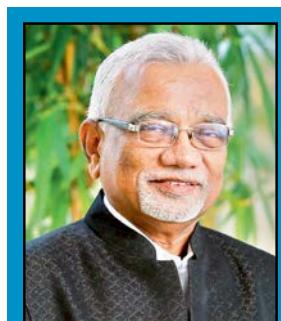
● FOLLOWING DISCREPANCIES in the documents submitted by the college for reassessment, after a show-cause notice issued to the college in November 2019, the NAAC decided to blacklist the institution.

● The college, however, has a different story to tell.

only college to have been forging documents and committing fraud and fabrications. "Most colleges and especially that of the Malla Reddy group,

are running on fake documents. The government should look into this," he said. Sources told *Deccan Chronicle* that another college in the state, that with an A++ certificate is scheduled to be blacklisted soon due to similar reasons.

The college, however, has a different story to tell. MRCE Principal Prof. John Paul told *Deccan Chronicle* that the college had requested the NAAC to cancel their reassessment last month in view of the pandemic. He denied that the college was blacklisted from the accreditation process.

New education policy can revive India's pride

Dr S. Pratap Reddy

Centuries ago, Lord Macaulay, in his address to the British Parliament, said, "I propose we replace her (India's) old and ancient education system, her culture; for if Indians think all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self-esteem, their national culture. They will become what we want, a truly dominated nation. Indians will develop disdain towards their own culture, language, heritage and practices, and would all too easily accept the British as their overlords, and turn out to be cheap-clerk labour for us."

Macaulay's policy ate into the vitals of India. Post-Independence, Macaulayputras have done irreparable damage to our faith, philosophies, cultural ethos, principles and thought. We have been made to ignore our roots and forced to feel shameful of our forefathers. It is high time to revisit our past.

The New National Education Policy (NEP), as passed by the Narendra Modi government, aims at bringing transformational reforms in our education systems to reclaim our past glory.

Stages of education

The early childhood care and education (ECCE), the foundational stage, will consist entirely of play or activity-based learning. The second level will introduce light textbooks, as part of the preparatory stage. The third stage would comprise introduction of specific subjects for learning. The fourth stage learning will be for four years at high school with a multidisciplinary study.

Holistic development

The new curricula will promote critical thinking, discovery-based analysis

and discussion-oriented learning. The secondary school of education will have a holistic and wide choice of courses and offer flexibility. The NCERT, SCERT, schools and educators shall make concerted efforts through novel pedagogy and curriculum.

Transforming assessment for student development

NEP proposes to promote learning and development skills like analysis, critical thinking and conceptual clarity, a big shift from summative to competency-based and formative assessment. A new standards-setting body will be established as the National Assessment Centre, or PARAKH (performance, assessment review and analyses of knowledge for holistic development) to assess core competencies of students.

Inclusive education

Socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) get a special focus in the new policy. In the current scenario, minorities are relatively under-represented in schools and colleges.

This policy acknowledges and recognises the need for intervention to promote education for minorities and children with special needs.

School accreditation

NEP aims to continually improve educational outcomes and empower teachers and schools with trust, so that they can strive for excellence. The state council of educational research and training (SCERT) will be reinvigorated to handle all academic standards and curriculum.

Teacher empowerment

A wonderful highlight of NEP is empowering teachers and investing in them to determine participation in setting school goals and policies to exercise professional judgement on what and how to teach. By reforming pedagogy, learning outcomes can be improved, recognised, documented and shared across the country.

Ensuring universal access to education

NEP will be expanded to play a key role in increasing gross enrolment ratio (GER). There are other measures to be undertaken such as online courses, funding for research, digital repositories and credit-

based recognition of MOOCs to ensure highest level of quality.

Conclusion

Students are forcefully and compulsorily taught in schools today. Students are controlled and forced to be taught as opposed to being self-educated. The Indian education system has not been able to change with time.

A lot of awareness has to be created to bring in a change to remain relevant to modern times.

Schools, known as temples of learning, have actually become prisons of fears, inferiority, regret, pressures and bullies. Fear drives most students, not love for learning in the current system.

New National Education Policy aims to transform our education with a multi-disciplinary, flexible, holistic approach, aligned with requirements of 21st century and anchored to Indian culture and heritage.

— Dr S. Pratap Reddy is the founder chairman of the Dhruva College of Management, a pre-eminent educationist, and social entrepreneur with over four decades of standing.

Devotees throng to churches after a long lockdown

HARLEEN MINOCHA AND SANJAY SAMUEL PAUL | DC HYDERABAD, DEC. 25

Even though the pandemic seemed to have dampened the festival spirit through the month, Christians poured out on Christmas eve and on Christmas Day on Friday to celebrate the festival.

Big churches saw a large number of the devout attending services and exchanging greetings. Fellowships with about 100-150 people focused on virtual celebrations.

M.A. Daniel, Bishop Of Hyderabad Regional Conference, Methodist Churches, who delivered three services at the Century Methodist Church, in Telugu, English, and Kannada, said, "The attendance was full all of my services. I did expect such a huge turn-out."

Several families gathered for the Hindustani service and witnessed Christmas bhajans.

The Wesley Church, Ramkote, where the new building was inaugurated, also saw a full house.

Solomon Prem Kumar, property secretary of the church, said, "We had arranged lunch for 5,000 attendees, of whom 4,500 joined after the service."

Most of the city churches had visitors from other communities as well, who joined in the prayers. The St Joseph's Cathedral Gunfoundry witnessed a constant stream of people throughout the day.

At Manna Church, Saifalghuda, arrangements were made for virtual service.

Older attendees, children were advised not to visit the church premises as per Covid-19 safety protocols.

The footfall of visitors at the church was 40 per cent less than usual, said Rufus Augustine, a senior member at the church.

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Many families from the community decided to stay indoors on Christmas night, while others arranged small private dinners with friends and families in several parts of the city.



Children celebrate Christmas on Friday.

— DC PHOTO

Some MBBS students get option to exit free

DC CORRESPONDENT HYDERABAD, DEC. 25

The Kaloji Narayana Rao University of Health Sciences (KRUHS) announced on Friday that MBBS candidates admitted under the competent authority quota (CAQ) for 2020-21 can take a free exit by 4 pm on December 26 without paying any penalty.

The University informed principals of medical colleges to relieve any CAQ candidate who wishes to

discontinue the course within the deadline, return original certificates, bonds and tuition fee without any penalty, and upload the details to the OU centre online by 4.30 pm on December 26.

If any candidate discontinues after the stipulated time, he or she will have to pay ₹3 lakh of the bond amount and tuition fee for the full course.

The candidate will be debarred for admission into the KRUHS for three years, the university said.

SL.No	Name of the Post	No. of Posts	CTC (Approx.) Rs. In Lakhs	Reservation	Upper age
1)	Deputy Manager (IT - ERP Technical)	01	10.5-33.8	1-OBC	35
2)	Asst Manager (IT-ERP Technical)	01	8.4-29.6	1-UR	30
3)	Junior Manager (Legal)	01	6.3-25.4	1-UR	28

- CTC (Cost to Company) includes Basic Pay, DA, HRA, Perks & allowances (as applicable).
- Performance Related Pay, EPF, Gratuity and Superannuation benefits not included in CTC.
- For details regarding qualifications, experience, relaxations & concessions, mode of applying, application fee etc, please visit MIDHANI website: <http://midhani-india.in/>
- Last date for submission of online application is 09.01.2021

SHORT TAKES
NORMALCY RETURNS TO AP AFTER 9 MONTHS

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 25

For the first time after nine months, religious places and cine theatres experienced mass frenzy on Friday, marking the season of festivals in the backdrop of a sharp drop in Covid-19 cases in Andhra Pradesh.

Theatres reopened by screening new Telugu movie 'Solo Brathuke So Better' starring Sai Dharam Tej and Nabha Natesh as also other films. They followed Covid regulations while screening the movies while most have hung Housell boards in the front much before the start of the show.

Christians wearing masks attended prayers at churches while Hindus thronged temples for the Uttara Dwara Darshan and pujas marking the Vaikuntha Ekadasi. All churches in AP had remained close since late March, suspending all prayer services including the weekly congregations on Sunday. A few weeks ago, some churches started online weekly prayer services.

Notably, the state's Coronavirus positive cases dropped to below 2,000 a day two months ago. It further dropped to 500-600 per day three weeks ago, and the fall in infection rates is steady. The recovery rate rose to 98 per cent, adding to the optimism and confidence of the people.

Christians were enthused to come out and celebrate Christmas this time too. G. Samuel and D. Anand said the Covid fears were thankfully subsiding by the time Christmas arrived. A majority of the faithful attended church prayers, and they did so by wearing masks.

COVID VACCINE DRY RUN IN AP ON DEC. 28

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 25

For the first time in AP, a dry run will be conducted on Monday, December 28, with regard to distribution and administration of corona vaccine at five places in Krishna district. This is consequent on the Union government's decision to conduct Covid-19 vaccine dry run in Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat and Punjab states on December 28 and 29.

The dry run is aimed at providing hands-on experience to programme managers at various levels. This will also test cold storage and transport arrangements made for distribution of Covid-19 vaccine, apart from other issues like management of crowds. Results of the dry run will be reviewed to fine-tune distribution of the vaccine.

Krishna district Medical and Health officer Dr. Suhasini said the dry run will be conducted at Government General Hospital (GGH), Prakashnagar Urban Primary Healthcare Centre, Poorna Hospital at Vijayawada, government school at Tadigadapa and the Primary Health Centre at Uppulur.

She maintained that the dry run will be in accordance with norms issued by central government. Three rooms will be made available at each centre, where 25 health workers each will go through processes of registration, vaccination and observation respectively.

Dr. Suhasini said persons from various categories, such as differently-abled, co-morbid, above 50 years and women, have been selected for the dry run.

Vaikunta Ekadasi



Chief Justice of India Sharad Arvind Bobde at the Dwajastambham of the Lord Venkateswara temple at Tirumala on Friday on the occasion of Vaikunta Ekadasi.

— By arrangement



Top: TRS MLC Kalvakuntla Kavitha along her mother Shobha (left), wife of Chief Minister K. Chandrashekhar Rao, with education minister Sabitha Indra Reddy (right) pray at the Venkateshwara temple in Jilelaguda.



Right: A large number of devotees participate in a procession organised on Vaikunta Ekadasi by the Balaji Seva Samiti near Charminar.

— R. PAVAN, P. SURENDRA

Government will go to Supreme Court on house sites, says Jagan

Handover of 30L sites starts

DC CORRESPONDENT
KADAPA, DEC. 25

Chief Minister Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has said that the state government will go to Supreme Court for getting vacated the stay in courts on distribution of house sites.

Speaking after participating in prayers at the CSI church in Pulivendula on occasion of Christmas, he said he is saddened that he is not able to distribute house sites in his own constituency Pulivendula. He said the land allotted for the houses belonged to AP Industrial Infrastructure Corporation. But someone has gone to court and got a stay on distribution of the land.

"We will go to Supreme Court to get this stay vacated. We believe that good work will surely be blessed by God and the verdict will come in favour of the government," Jagan Mohan Reddy said, pointing out that every poor family needs a house site for building a house.

"Today is a good day. On one hand, it is Christmas. On the other, it is also Mukkoti Ekadashi. Yesterday, someone from Pulivendula went to court and got a stay on distribution of house sites. We will not back down anywhere in this matter and will not compromise," the CM maintained.

Jagan Mohan Reddy launched distribution of house sites to homeless poor in the state from Komaragiri village of U. Kotchapalli mandal in

East Godavari district on Friday. He observed that when the government wanted to give house sites to poor, "the faces of yellow turned red with anger" and they went to courts to stop distribution of house sites. He charged that the opposition party is unable to bear the fact that the ruling party is giving house sites to all the poor.

The Chief Minister said despite hurdles, 30.75 lakh houses and 2.62 lakh flats constructed by TIDCO are being distributed on this day. He said the government is spending ₹50,940 crore on 28.30 lakh houses. All such YSR Colonies will have YSR Janata Bazaar, park, primary and high schools, community hall, anganwadi and YSR clinic, among others.

The CM pointed out that houses will be constructed by government and beneficiaries can opt for three choices.

He said that the government will construct the houses collecting Re. 1 from each beneficiary. Each house will contain a bed room, living room, kitchen, hall, two fans, two tube lights, two LEDs and other facilities. Or, if the beneficiary wants to construct the house, the government will give all material as also labour charges. He also said the beneficiary can build the house and the government will give the amount in three phases.

Jagan Mohan Reddy said the area of each house has been increased to 340 s ft. If the beneficiary wants to have a house more than 430 feet, the government will bear 50 percent of the house cost. He said that the market value of house sites, including houses, will be increased to ₹13 lakhs soon. In Komaragiri layout, 16,000 beneficiaries are to be given house sites.

Bharathi and other family members. Later he went to the Kadapa airport and took a special flight for Rajahmundry.

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, DEC. 25

Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy on Friday asserted that his government is quite firm on providing house sites as well as houses to homeless in urban and rural areas to all eligible families without considering caste, religion or political affiliations.

The CM said that if there are eligible people who do not have a house site, they can still apply.

House sites will be given to them within 90 days.

He maintained that due to evil designs of the "yellow brigade" (Telugu Desam Party), the government is facing several legal hurdles. However, the government is trying to clear all such legal hurdles, he maintained.

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REVIEW

Unemotional fare: 'Solo Brathuke So Better' misses the vital emotional connect

1st Telugu film hits theatres after pandemic

SOLO BRATHUKE SO BETTER
CAST: Sai Dharam Tej, Nabha Natesh, Rajendra Prasad, Rao Ramesh
DIRECTOR: Subbu
RATING: ★★

SASHIDHAR ADIVI
DECCAN CHRONICLE

With Solo Brathuke So Better being the first Telugu film to be released in theatres after the pandemic, the film industry is curiously looking to see how it fares. So, the film's team could have tried just a little harder.

What happens when Virat (Sai Dharam Tej), a college-

goer, who turns his nose up at anything that remotely resembles love, relationship and marriage as it goes against his philosophy in life? What would he go through when he finds his lady love in Amrutha (Nabha Natesh)?

The film's title, Solo Brathuke So Better, conveys the philosophy of its protagonist, and director Subbu does not waste any time in coming to the point. Throughout the first half, he pens scenes that reflect the hero's attitude, which is fine.

But, thematically, the film is extremely simplistic, linear and predictable. Also, while there aren't subplots, the idea that blends romance and lies is not novel either.



Sai Dharam Tej and Nabha Natesh in Solo Brathuke...

What's laudable though is how the director makes Virat realise the significance of having a partner — scenes where his friends desert him as they get mar-

ried. The first half of the movie is passable though it does ignite the curiosity of the audience. The novelty soon wears off and the

ploddingly predictable story fails to sustain interest. While the narrative has a lot of potential, what's important in a love story is the emotional connect, and that's where the film is lacking.

Certain scenes, especially the episode when Amrutha escapes her marriage, are funny written; however, the lack of attention paid to the emotional connect lays the film waste. Vennela Kishore brings some laughter with his witty gestures and punchlines. But that's only briefly.

The film is far too plain and relies heavily on humour for the most part. And it's too late by the time the director realises that he has run out of steam for any further twists.

Sai Dharam Tej and Nabha Natesh make an interesting pair. Tej looks uber cool as an aspiring youngster with his focus on his career. Credit where it's due, Sai Dharam shows a lot of maturity during the emotional scenes to the extent that it looks like a tailor-made film for him. He excels with a convincing performance. Nabha is just adequate.

The director comes with the honest intention of showcasing the transformation of a guy from not believing in marriage to someone who realises the importance of having a partner. Had the director managed to weave some emotional connect to the plot, the film would have been better off.

Parking not free at Dargah Yousufian

Caretaker allows groups to collect unauthorised fee

ATHER MOIN | DC
HYDERABAD, DEC. 25

Devotees of Dargah Yousufian at Nampally have complained that they were being fleeced by unsocial elements who are posing as parking lot contractor, whenever they visited the place.

The state government has been implementing a free parking policy for about two-and-a-half years now. Collection of fee for parking on the roadside has been banned. The government has also regulated parking fee charged by commercial establishments.

Despite this, devotees are forced to pay ₹10 for parking two-wheelers near the dargah. The police, traffic police and the GHMC staff simply ignore the instruction given by the municipal administration and urban development department against illegal collection of parking fee by unauthorised persons around the dargah.

The Wakf Board is prohibited from collecting parking fee at any Wakf Institution. Likewise, he is collecting ₹400 per month for parking on the western side.

Meer Sumair Ali, a businessman from Ghansi Bazaar, said he visits the shrine mostly on Fridays and Sundays. He said though the Wakf Board has clearly announced that no parking fee should be collected in and around the premises of Wakf institutions, but the caretaker without intimating the authorities allowed

the collection of parking fee.

A cameraman from a local channel, Fazal Akram, said when he tried to park his vehicle on the western side of the shrine on Friday, a man came over and asked him to pay advance parking fee. When he refused, a few people gathered there and tried to threaten him. One of them told his associate to call the police. Akram said that after coming to know that he was from the media, they fled.

Asked about the parking fee, caretaker Mastan Wali has allotted the spot in front of the main gate for 20 days to a person and 10 days to another by collecting ₹6,000 and ₹3,000 respectively.

It is learnt that dargah caretaker Mastan Wali has learnt that dargah caretaker Mastan Wali has allotted the spot in front of the main gate for 20 days to a person and 10 days to another by collecting ₹6,000 and ₹3,000 respectively. Likewise, he is collecting ₹400 per month for parking on the western side.

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MINISTERS' XMAS GREETING WHILE AT TIRUMALA STIRS UP A ROW

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, DEC. 25

AVINASH P.
SUBRAMANYAM | DC
TIRUPATI, DEC. 25

Bvelections for Tirupati (SC) Lok Sabha constituency, likely early next year, will be a matter of prestige for the 19-month-old YSR Congress government led by Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, as the incumbent MP Balli Durgaprasad, who passed away recently, belonged to the ruling party.

At the same time, it will be a litmus test for the main Opposition party Telugu Desam, which failed to make any significant impact in 2019 elections.

BJP is hoping to repeat its Dubbakk bopoll win in Telangana. It had won the Tirupati seat in 1998 election, when N. Venkatasamy won the seat in alliance with the TD. BJP sources say a retired bureaucrat with RSS background is likely to be named for the contest.

Congress is yet to make an announcement, but former MP Chinta Mohan appears to be the natural choice.

The contest for Tirupati LS seat will be an occasion to know political mood in the state after 2019 general elections. It's not only important for the ruling and opposition parties in the state, but also for BJP, which is trying to make inroads into AP politics. The by-poll result will be a

critical indication of the saffron party's success or failure in Andhra Pradesh.

Usually, political parties avoid a keeping when an incumbent dies. His or her family member gets elected unanimously. TD chief Chandrababu Naidu has, however, decided to put up a candidate to contest the by-poll. Even YSRC has chosen a candidate outside the family of late sitting MP.

Political pundits say the by-poll result could be seen as a referendum on performance of YSRC government. It will also set the stage for the next local body elections, if the by-poll comes earlier. Experts say that the political landscape in the state could drastically change in case TD or BJP win the MP seat.

The YSRC recently finalised the name of Guru Murthy, a physiotherapist who accompanied the CM during his paduavu. When it comes to the YSRC's strategy, it is clear the ruling party is banking on weaker sections, which have benefited from Navaratnam.

TDP has named former Union minister Panabaka Lakshmi, who contested in vain the 2019 elections, as its candidate. The party is busy in putting up a five-phased strategy to win the contest. In the first phase, it has identified nearly 8,000 party workers to render services at the polling stations.

GOVERNMENT OF TELANGANA Irrigation and Agriculture Development Department Office of the Superintending Engineer, Eliminii Madhavareddy Srisailam Left Canal, Project Circle, Gandhamangalam, Nalgonda			
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CLASSIFIEDS

DECCAN CHRONICLE | HYDERABAD | SATURDAY | 26 DECEMBER 2020

pg 7

FOR SALE PROPERTY

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DECCAN Chronicle

26 DECEMBER 2020

A thorough policy debate is Cong's need of the hour

After the December 19 meeting between the Congress leadership, in effect the Gandhis, and a clutch of so-called dissenters (the G-23), neither side appears to have come away with satisfaction. It is necessary to maintain form and not be carried away by noise, especially in the media whose fundamental purpose these days appears to be to discomfit the opponents of the ruling dispensation. And yet, what have the Gandhis done?

As usual, they do not speak to the people. They have eagerly embraced the vice of non-communication, which in politics is like popping the cyanide pill. They do not take the country into confidence about what they think of the current state of the Congress, the goings-on in the party, possible plans for its rejuvenation, and plans for the country.

It is said the process is on to elect the party president after about 20 years. But what's happening on that front? No one seems to know. Isn't the matter of interest to India? Angry tweets or two-line criticisms of the Prime Minister or the BJP government made by some of the Gandhis, even when valid, have failed to enthuse because these lack gravitas. These are not efforts in a wider ecosystem of consciously working toward building a political and an ideological momentum by the Opposition to take on the ruling dispensation.

The Congress may well be the only all-India challenger to the ruling dispensation, if that is by now not a hyperbole, considering how few the elected representatives of the party are in the country. But does the party deserve that tag

when it does not let on how it proposes to go about the task of challenging?

And what of the G-23? In the main, these appear to be a bunch of time-servers who whine because, when the party is in the Opposition, they cannot get to high-sounding posts. They have been out of power six years and fear the worst in the next election. So, they seem to be angling to throw Rahul and Priyanka out of the equation and get to be in positions of decision-making themselves. Barring Kapil Sibal, none amongst them raised the question of party elections and inner-party democracy when the Congress was in power and the gravy train chugged along. Most of them are a liberal, educated lot. But not many amongst them, barring Shashi Tharoor and possibly Manish Tewari, can hope to clear the field in any election where there would be lakhs of voters.

The G-23 grumble about leadership. Everyone does, or should, when there have been no elections for two decades. But few among them are likely to make the cut when proper polls are held because most lack mass appeal and do not have much appeal within the party either. In any case, will better electoral results flow just because the Gandhis step away?

But harping on leadership alone begs the real question: What does the Congress stand for today? If anyone has the answer, let them come to the debate with those propositions. Let them demand a party conclave of the AICC variety where party policies regarding the poor and the middle classes, about industry and agriculture, and above all about secularism, castelism and communalism, are debated threadbare. The mere creation of a parliamentary board or election authority, as the G-23 demand, is of little value.

Brexit deal: Relief for UK

The United Kingdom may be exulting over its post-Brexit trade deal with the 27-nation EU as negotiators pulled out a "get out of jail" card in the nick of time. It will, however, be entering a world that is far different from the day the referendum delivered its narrow verdict for the Brexiteers in June 2016. The trade barriers in place today are real even as globalisation has been forced to take a back seat with supply chains having to be closer home ideally for all countries thanks to the restricted movement of people and goods in the new normal of Covid-ridden reality. Also, the highly charged post-pandemic political environment is unlikely to be conducive for anyone to cut trade deals with China, still a very important economic powerhouse.

Notwithstanding all the uncertainties, Boris Johnson must seem a heroic figure once again for having achieved what seemed impossible during 11 months of tortuous negotiations for a non-tariff, non-quota free trade agreement with UK's biggest trading partner. The devil may lie in the details, even so this is nothing but a messy divorce that the more insular parts sought while leaving at least Scotland quite sore about the "sweet sorrow" of separation. How a Joe Biden-led USA views the finality of Brexit will determine the larger economic outcome and analysts are already forecasting a contraction of one per cent in the immediate term and as much as four per cent in the 2020s.

Johnson's gamble in picking the side of the "Leavers" has paid off handsomely. He might see liberation from the shackles of Brussels' bureaucracy bringing greater gains than sovereignty, which may not achieve much in terms of trade even if it was an emotive issue he exploited at the hustings. India should sense an opportunity in dealing afresh with the UK as it can expect to collaborate on AI and other futuristic tech that the UK is eyeing to build upon in its new innings as a wholly sovereign nation with free trade agreements on its mind.

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Farrukh
Dhondy



"Sing a song of six pice
A sauce pan full of Dhanya
Your mother was an Estonian
Your father was a Banya."

When the curry was sizzling
The mirth began to bite
Wasn't that a dainty dish
To serve on Holi night?"

— From *Song Of The Sindhi Sopranos* (Duet Aria by Thanni Ravani and Getthy Minoani)
Translated from the Canadian by Bachchoo

Of creativity in a plague year... gadget fixing & dosa repair!

No surprise that this has been the year of plague reportage, of hospital admissions, fatality statistics, government bulletins restricting this and that and dissenters who want this unrestricted or that enforced. This Christmas periodicals have taken to offering us Covid-era stories and columns with annals of this plague year.

I have myself been exploring the idea that enforced idleness may be the chief begetter of creative genius. A recent TV satire had Shakespeare, stuck in an Elizabethan dwelling

during London's plague year, writing *Macbeth*. I thought it was *King Lear*, but perhaps it was both.

A writer friend in Mumbai boasts of writing two books over the period with a couple more to complete. You see? It could become a Latin proverb — "Idlo Ergo Creato" — or some such.

In support of which, gentle reader, I can add my own experiences.

Fed up of the repeated American video jokes and musical clips endlessly, tediously posted on WhatsApp groups I have happily become part of, I have taken to switching on my phone only when I wish to call out. It is nobler to call than to receive (hah! another proverb gestating! — *Jd*). Get the f— on with it. We don't pay you to fill space! — *Ed*.)

Well, in the main, I have perfected my Parsi-fusion recipes, leading with *Cleopatra ni machchi*, an Egypto-Parsi concoction, and then *Lagan noo Last Stand Custer*, an invention for Zoroastrian Thanksgiving.

Apart from these inventions, I have been attending to eternally recurring emergencies. As everyone

knows, fate has decreed that you wake up with the most excruciating toothache on the night before a bank holiday shuts down every dentist's *dookaan*. Just so, domestic appliances break down just when the Christmas or Diwali holidays are being observed by plumbers, electricians, washing-machine repair-wallahs and the experts we rely on when fate deals us these irritating hands.

In this Covid period every emergency seems to occur on that bank holiday or Christmas, which it now is. Let's say, as did happen, that the box that directs signals from the cable to your TV set is suddenly no longer operative. You call, just for example, Virgin Media, who has supplied your cable network after searching for the right number through your very haphazard filing system. The Internet has, in tandem, stopped working with your smart-TV box so you can't ask it for the connection. You use your mobile to call.

After attempting to remember the password you gave them three years ago and failing, the voice tells you that you can fill in a new password in a link they will send you on your

phone. All done and back on the call, you are told to go to the website because the call centre is flooded and it will take upto an hour or more to get an operator. You've already tried the website and got nowhere, so you try the phone line again. You resolve to hang on and they play you music while you hold which has the single purpose of making you terminate the call.

In one of my books, a character says that if he is on death row and is given a last wish, he would want to be played *Ravi Shankar* for six hours — at the end of which he would have lost the will to live. For me, substitute poor genius *Ravi Shankar* with *Robindro Shongeeth* or call centre musak. You may have guessed by now that the call was never answered, and the problem left for yours truly to solve.

Reinforced call centres should be provided in these trying times to deal with such technicalities. But what about other little problems?

In attempting to cook dosas from a packet mix the other day, I diligently followed the instructions. Yet the first dosa — and the next and the next one — cracked in the pan,

resembling the old W.H. Auden's canalled features. I poured more mixture on the cracks and the dosas, refusing to obey, as the perfect pancakes I cook do, began developing large holes. I gave up.

It occurred to me that the international India-packet-food company may have a helpline. I could call it. But could the masala potatoes I had separately cooked wait? And anyway. I'd probably get some Australian call centre with the respondent Barry pretending his name was Vardarajan or something and telling me to use moose fat instead of ghee.

I know, I know, he would know all about dosa repair. I was once researching a film on Indian call centres when the instructor was telling a class of trainee operators about British culture and chit chat. He asked the class if they knew what a pie was. A lad answered saying it was 22 over 7, or 3.142. No, no, protested the instructor, he meant the comestible. A young lady put her hand up and said: "Pie is meat concealed under biskoat". Yes, the Australian would possibly know how to repair dosas!

Subhani



Little cheer at Xmas time, hope for a healthier 2021



Shobhaa De

The whole world loves Xmas and celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ without necessarily belonging to the Christian faith. What matters is an almost universal spirit of good cheer and bonhomie as people gear themselves for a brand new year and say goodbye to the one that is ending. Well... 2020 has changed everything! It is as if it never happened! Most of us will look back at a blur and wonder — where did the months go? Into one big black hole of sorrow — that's where. For the first time in memory, this is going to be a Blank Xmas, as opposed to the more traditional White Xmas. It feels so eerie and weird here in Mumbai, where Xmas Eve was one of the biggest, most looked forward to parties nights on the calendar. Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray has imposed a night curfew, which effectively means that nobody can ring in Christmas at midnight, except in the privacy of their homes. All public festivities (even those which strictly observe the Covid protocols) stand cancelled. The streets are dark, depressing and deserted, and I feel really bad for the cheerful urchins who used to make quick money accosting motorists and pedestrians with Santa caps, masks and other paraphernalia. I passed a few last night and their glum expressions broke my heart — there they were, the familiar cheeky little kids, standing in clumps, clutching unbold bright red felt caps and reindeer hair bands. I wondered what they'd do with the dozens of red tops once

this gloomy day/year is over. There has been a great deal of debate over the Maharashtra government's bold decision to impose a night curfew at a time when the city is reeling under a crippling economic slowdown. Health over all else is the right way forward and all that, but at this point we know very little about the behaviour of the latest mutant strain. By all means take every precaution, but why a night curfew? It feels like surrender — a sense of defeat — at a time when everything was looking up and our collective hopes were pinned on the vaccine being made available within a month or so. This fresh development (the mutant strain) has raised a number of new questions and taken us totally off guard. A young man who came over for some work, mentioned the plight of his cousin, who is indefinitely stuck in London and has no idea when he can get back home. He has been informed that as a tourist he will only be able to leave London after he takes the vaccine. Again, as a tourist, he is at the bottom of the vaccine ladder — he will have to wait till all the other groups (frontline workers, doctors, senior citizens) get vaccinated first. This means he could be stuck

inside his obliging relative's home till March 2021! What a dismal prospect! There he is, this young fellow from Mumbai, staring out of his window at a grey sky outside. Food deliveries are erratic, most grocery stores shut shop at 5 pm. Oxford Street is dead, as are all the other streets, parks and restaurants. His business schedule has gone for a toss, and soon his relative will want him out! What then? Closer to home, we are trying not to let the pall of gloom and doom affect us by distracting ourselves the best we can. People who had planned elaborate Xmas and New Year's Eve parties have hastily switched over to other programmes. Dinners have become sundowners, while others are quickly rejigging their eggnog-turkey-Xmas pudding-mulled wine dinner menus and hosting long brunches instead

dering which of the three huge weddings they'd been invited to! Every posh five-star hotel in Pune is fully booked up with lavish shaadis taking place at all available venues. A young jeweller proudly showed me a dazzling diamond set he had created for a local bride — it was priced at more than one crore rupees! Chatting with the family of one of the beautiful brides, her father told me how he had reallocating funds meant for a five-day international extravaganza for his beloved *beti* and invested the funds in a fancy penthouse for the couple. As he put it: "Instead of feeding one thousand guests over five days and hosting multiple functions, we thought this was a better option. It is one way to secure our daughter, plus, it's a solid investment which will appreciate down the line." If there is something like a "silver lining" to the pandemic, maybe it is this — that people are being more sensible about money matters and looking at the future more realistically.

Dear readers... yup... the times have been bad... in fact, terrible. But you are alive... and so am I! As the lucky survivors of this deadly scourge, let us raise a glass to a better, healthier, saner future! See you on the other side! Here's to a Covid-free 2021!

Readers can send feedback to www.shobhaade.blogspot.com

If there is something like a 'silver lining' to the pandemic, maybe it is this — that people are being more sensible about money matters and looking at the future more realistically

LETTERS DIVORCE POLITICS

A BJP MP divorcing his wife because she joined the Trinamul is justifiable and cannot be faulted. Lord Rama, too, when he learnt that some of his subjects did not approve of his taking back Sita into the royal household promptly exiled her. Gouri Thomas of the CPM stayed separated from her husband, a CPI man. When a person and his/her spouse are in different political parties that are inimical to each other, the co-habitation between them cannot be smooth and peaceful and people of either side of the divide will view them with suspicion.

K. Srinivasa Charyulu
Hyderabad

FARMERS' DAY

Mr Karan Thapar appears to be overreacting to the plan of the BJP to dedicate December 25 to farmers (*Christmas, like Diwali, is a special day in India, DC, Dec. 25*) and unnecessarily kicking up a controversy. The date is very important to the party as it is the birth anniversary of Atal Behari Vajpayee. Just as Children's Day is observed on November 14, National Integration Day on Nov. 19, and so on, what is wrong in treating Vajpayee's birthday as farmers' day?

S. Nageswara Rao
Hyderabad

50 YEARS AGO IN DECCAN Chronicle

Prospects of finding oil in Andhra bright

MASULIPATNAM, DEC. 25.

Oil would definitely be found in Andhra because of the presence of sedimentary rocks over the coastal belt from Tuni to Ongole which were originally under the sea. Mr. E. V. Ramana, Senior Geophysicist and Chief of the Seismic Survey Union of the Oil and Natural Gas Commission, said here last night at a meeting of the Rotary Club,

He said, "all other favourable conditions are also present here and if they are found, we have to make a deep drilling."

Oil was likely to be located in Andhra at depths varying from 6,000 to 10,000 feet.

He said oil was found a 10,000 feet at Gujarat and at 20,000 feet in Punjab.



IN BRIEFS

Thiruvananthapuram gets 21-yr-old mayor

Thiruvananthapuram: The CPI(M), which weathered anti-incumbency factor in the local body elections by roping in the youth in large numbers, has picked the youngest member in the Thiruvananthapuram municipal corporation council to be the mayor of the capital city, and perhaps the youngest mayor in the country. Arya Rajendran, the 21-year-old B.Sc mathematics student of All Saints College here, representing Mudavanmugal ward, will be elected formally when the corporation council meets next. The party's district secretariat took the decision on Friday.

The CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front won 53 seats in the 100-member Thiruvananthapuram corporation council in the recent election. Arya Rajendran, a CPI(M) branch member, at present heads Balasangham, the children's organisation affiliated to the party. Daughter of an electrician and an LIC agent, Arya told media that her priority would be women's issues.

Shivraj threatens to bury mafia alive

Bhopal: Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Friday threatened to bury mafia alive if they did not mend their ways. Opposition Congress, however, dared him to 'walk the talk'. Addressing a farmers' meet at Hosangabad, nearly 120 km from here, Chouhan roared that "Mama (as he identifies him) is in full form now. Mafias have no place in Madhya Pradesh. They have to leave the state, or I will bury them (alive)". The Chief Minister recounted the anti-mafia drive being undertaken by his government in which the encroachments of government lands by musclemen have been freed and buildings constructed illegally were razed to ground. "The anti-mafia drive will continue till the state is free of goon culture. I am in a dangerous mood now-a-days. The mafias have to pack up now or they will get buried alive", he said.

Odisha: 64-year-old clears NEET

Bhubaneswar: Age can never be an impediment to achieve a dream. This is what a 64-year-old man hailing from Odisha's Bargarh district has proved. Jay Kishore Pradhan of Attabira has qualified National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test to get enrolled into the Veer Surendra Sai Institute of Medical Science and Research, popularly known as VIMSAR Medical College and Hospital, at Burla in Odisha's Sambalpur district for MBBS courses. A banker by profession, Pradhan worked with the SBI for a major chunk of his life.

As per his own admission, when he first appeared for the medical entrance test in 1974, he could not make the cut. Disheartened, Pradhan decided to abandon his dream and join a bank instead. However, once his father was bedridden owing to urinal ulcer, his buried desire to don the stethoscope and serve humanity started germinating again.

"In 1974, I made my first attempt to make it to an MBBS course. However, after meeting with failure, I joined B.Sc courses in Physics (honours). Following graduation, I worked in the telecom sector for four years. Then, I worked in the Indian Bank for a year, before finally joining the SBI in 1983," he said.

Season of joy

A man dressed as Santa Claus distributes candies among children on the occasion of Christmas in Howrah on Friday. The pandemic cast a shadow on the celebrations this year as people followed strict protocols and celebrated the holiday in a low-key manner across the country. — PTI

Farmers intensify stir, insist on repeal of laws for parleys

Unions allege that govt's latest offer is nothing but propaganda against farmers

SANJAY KAW | DC
NEW DELHI, DEC. 25

A day after the Centre extended a fresh invite to farmer unions for talks, protesting farmers' on Friday intensified their ongoing agitation against the three agriculture laws not just around the protest sites but in various other parts of the country.

While three Union ministers appealed to the protesting farmers to resume negotiations with the government, the farmers unions insisted that the scrapping of the three recent farm laws be put on the agenda to resume parleys.

In Haryana, protesting farmers took over several toll plazas to allow free movement of vehicles.

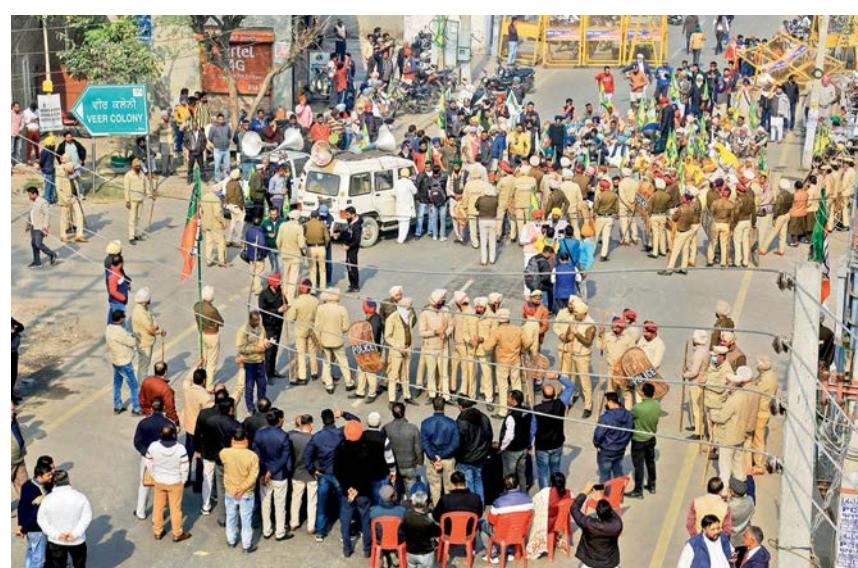
In Uttarakhand's Udham Singh Nagar district, farmers clashed with the police with the demonstrators running a tractor over a barricade as dozens of policemen tried to hold them back.

The police was finally forced to get out of the way of the protesters.

In Phagwara, Punjab, some BJP leaders had to slip out from the backdoor under police protection after farmers picketed the hotel where they were observing the birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The farmers' unions have not yet responded to the Centre's fresh letter urging them to decide a date and time for holding the next round of talks. In its new letter, the Centre on Thursday reiterated that it is ready to find a "logical solution" to the issues raised by protesting farmer unions.

A section of the farmer unions have alleged that the government's latest letter for talks is nothing but propaganda against



Police intervene after a mild altercation between BJP supporters and a section of protesters, who were agitating against the new farm laws, in Bathinda on Friday. — PTI

No corporate can snatch farmers' land, says Shah

New Delhi, Dec. 25: No corporate can snatch away a farmer's land as long as Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister of the country, Union home minister Amit Shah said on Friday and asserted that the provision of MSP will continue and mandis will not be shut down.

The opposition is crying hoarse over the farm laws, he said assuring farmers that the three agricultural reform laws were in their interest and do not cause any harm to them.

"Neither MSP will end, nor anyone can snatch your land. I want to tell farmers that as long as Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister, no corporate can snatch away your

interests, the Modi government was ready to discuss and consider it with an open mind.

The opposition is crying hoarse over the farm laws, he said assuring farmers that the three agricultural reform laws were in their interest and do not cause any harm to them.

"Opposition is telling brazen lies. I again reiterate that the MSP will continue and the mandis will not be closed. Farmers' welfare is the top-most priority of the Modi government," Shah said.

— PTI

the peasants to create the impression that they are not interested in dialogue and asked that the scrapping of the three recent farm laws be put on the agenda to resume parleys. Terming the letter a "delaying tactic", farmer leader Shiv Kumar Kakka said, "the government should bring the repeal of the three farm laws in the agenda for a fresh round of dialogue."

Bhartiya Kisan Union

RAHUL LYING, MISLEADING FARMERS: IRANI

Amethi (UP), Dec. 25: Union minister Smriti Irani launched a scathing attack on Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Friday, accusing him of "lying and misleading" farmers over the Centre's recent farm laws.

Addressing a farmers' rally in her parliamentary constituency Amethi, Irani said, "Rahul Gandhi is telling lies and misleading farmers. He is shedding crocodile tears for farmers and misleading them, his own jiya (brother-in-law) has encroached upon the land of farmers." Irani's attack on Gandhi comes amid protests by farmers on various border points of India against the Centre's recent farm laws.

Throwing a challenge at Gandhi for a debate on farmer issues, Irani asked him to come in the midst of farmers here and claimed that she would expose him for every single sin committed by him.

The Union minister addressed the rally in Singhpur block in Tilo as part of a mega exercise undertaken by the BJP to reach out to farmers as Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday released over ₹18,000 crore under the 'Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi' (PM-KISAN).

Irani said Gandhi, whom she defeated in the last parliamentary election, is showing sympathy for farmers now, but he himself has "grabbed" the land of farmers. Irani alleged that the Gandhi family did not think about the development of Amethi after winning elections.

— PTI

(Charuni) chief Gurnam Singh Charuni rejected the offer of Haryana deputy chief minister Dushyant Chautala to mediate between the Centre and the protesting farmers.

— PTI

VINEETA PANDEY | DC

NEW DELHI, DEC. 25

With all eyes now on Covid-19 vaccine, the Central government will carry out a dry run of Covid-19 vaccination on December 28 and 29 in Assam, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab as a step to prepare for the administration of the vaccine and assess the readiness of the supply chain and officials.

A detailed checklist has been prepared by the Union health ministry and shared with the four states to guide them in the dry run. "To strengthen the capacity of our human resource for

Centre prepares detailed outline for vaccine dry run

Covid-19 vaccine introduction and roll-out, detailed training modules have been developed for different categories of vaccine handlers and administrators including medical officers, vaccinators, alternate vaccinators, cold chain handlers, supervisors, data managers, ASHA coordinators and all others involved in the implementation process at different levels,"

the government release said.

The Union government, in coordination with states and Union Territories, has been training health workers. According to the Union health and family welfare ministry, 2,360 people, includ-

ing state immunisation officers, cold chain officers, IEC officials and development partners have been trained during a national-level 'Training of Trainers', apart from more than 7,000 at the district level.

The training includes all operational aspects like organisation of vaccination sessions, use of Co-WIN IT platform for management of the entire vaccination process, deployment of HR cold chain preparedness, management of adverse events, communications and inter-sectoral coordination, biomedical waste management, infection prevention protocols etc.

BILATERAL | ISSUES

BGB raises concern over cross-border illegal smuggling**Bangla refutes illegal immigration claim**

MANOJ ANAND | DC
GUWAHATI, DEC. 25

After five days long deliberations on bilateral issues, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) director-general Rakesh Asthana, BGB director-general Maj Gen Md Shafeenul Islam told reporters that at least 86 Bangladeshi nationals were killed on the Indian side in the last three years for their alleged criminal activities.

However, Border Security Forces pointed out that they have apprehended 3,204 persons this year for illegally entering India from Bangladesh and 60 of them, whose

nationalities were established, were handed over to BGB.

Addressing a joint press conference with Border Security Force (BSF) director-general Rakesh Asthana, BGB director-general Maj Gen Md Shafeenul Islam told reporters that at least 86 Bangladeshi nationals were killed on the Indian side in the last three years for their alleged criminal activities.

Discussing various issues concerning the border during the ongoing five-day 51st DG-level talks between the BSF and BGB that started on December

22, the two forces also signed a Joint Accord of Discussion and decided to increase coordinated night patrolling to prevent illegal activities across the international border.

The BGB chief while justifying the reason that has stopped immigration to India from Bangladesh said, "The GDP of Bangladesh is on a steady upward trend. There is no reason for any citizen to come to India for jobs or any other reason. People have come with valid documents only for medical purposes."

He, however, admitted that many families in bor-

Didi: PM spoke 'distorted facts'

RAJIB CHOWDHURI & ANIMESH SINGH | DC
NEW DELHI/KOLKATA, DEC. 25

Amid escalating tensions between the BJP and the Trinamul Congress in West Bengal, which goes to polls in just four months, the Prime Minister on Friday directly targeted Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, saying her ideology had "destroyed" the state and added that her government had blocked funds under a Central scheme meant for 70 lakh farmers in the state. Banerjee responded to the attack by accusing Modi of attempting to "mislead people with half-truths and distorted facts", adding that the Modi government had "done nothing" to help West Bengal.

Speaking at an event in which PM Narendra Modi distributed ₹18,000 crore to over nine crore farmers, he accused the West Bengal Chief Minister of "doing politics" by blocking the scheme to provide farmers ₹6,000 every year under "Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi" (PM-Kisan). "If you listen to a 15-year-old speech of Mamata Ji, then you will know how much her ideology has ruined Bengal," he said.

"The public is watching those doing selfish politics very closely. The parties that do not speak on the benefit of farmers in West Bengal are engaged in harassing the citizens of Delhi here in the name of the farmers and are ruining the economy of the country," Modi added, his statement comes against the backdrop of unrelenting protests over three new farm laws.

Stung by the Prime Minister's attack, Banerjee said, "While he publicly claimed his intention to help farmers of West Bengal through his PM-Kisan Yojana and alleges non-cooperation

Pokhran Vajpayee's 'best call,' says EAM

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI | DC
NEW DELHI, DEC. 25

India's decision to carry out the Pokhran nuclear explosions in 1998 will remain then prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's "most enduring contribution". External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar said on Friday, even as President of the US-India Business Council and former US State Department official Nisha Biswal said Vajpayee foresaw the "potential dangers posed by a rising and unchecked China".

The words of prime minister Vajpayee, some 20 years ago, foreshadowed the challenges that we are seeing play out across the Indo-Pacific. And in the face of these destabilising actions, the United States and India have forged a closer partnership and cooperation."

Biswal added, "With the incoming Biden-Harris administration, there will be a renewed focus on restoring our global alliances and strengthening our global institutions."

Both of them also accepted that criminal activities, mostly smuggling of various items, are on the rise. "We are concerned about cross-border illegal trade. These syndicates are mainly dealing with narcotics and cattle smuggling. We are constantly monitoring them and have increased our vigil along the border," said Asthana.

On rising incidents of cattle smuggling, Mr Islam said it is affecting the local cattle farms in Bangladesh as the country is self-sufficient in cattle production.

SHORT TAKES

BUS CRASH IN WESTERN RUSSIA KILLS 4, 11 HURT

Moscow, Dec. 25: An intercity bus veered off a road in western Russia, killing four people and injuring another 11, authorities said on Friday.

The bus driving from Moscow to Volgograd veered into a ditch and overturned in the Ryazan region, about 250 kilometers (155 miles) south of Moscow.

At least four people, including the bus driver, died and at least 11, including several children, were hospitalized with injuries after the overnight crash, authorities said. Police said the driver may have lost control of the bus after falling asleep.

HK 'SPEEDBOAT FUGITIVES' TO FACE TRIAL IN CHINA

Beijing, Dec. 25: Ten of 12 Hong Kong pro-democracy activists arrested as they tried to flee the territory by speedboat to Taiwan will face trial in mainland China on December 28, campaigners and family members said on Friday.

Relatives of the detainees have been told by Chinese government-appointed lawyers that a video hearing will take place Monday afternoon at Yantian District People's Court in the southern city of Shenzhen, according to the "Save 12 HK Youths" campaign.

China has a history of putting on trial dissidents around the Christmas and New Year period to avoid Western scrutiny.

In a video hearing, defendants appear from the detention centre instead of going to court, explained Lu Siwei, a mainland Chinese human rights lawyer working on the case despite a ban and threats from the authorities.

INDIAN HELD IN CANADA OVER TELEPHONE SCAMS

Toronto, Dec. 25: A 25-year-old Indian-origin man in Canada has been arrested for his alleged involvement in a series of transnational telephone scams, wherein he was recruited by overseas scammers to process and launder locally-received money, police said.

Abhinav Bector, who lives in Brampton, Ontario, has been charged with fraud of over \$5,000, possession of the proceeds of crime and money laundering, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) said in a press statement on Wednesday. The arrest came following an investigation, named Project OCTAVIA, initiated by the RCMP in October 2018 to combat telephone scams and other interrelated frauds. "To date, 10 individuals have been charged with respect to this investigation," the statement said.

"These telephone fraudsters, operating from overseas, have been targeting the Canadian public since 2014. Despite a number of police raids on illegal call centres in India, and arrests in Canada, these fraudsters continue to modify their deceitful pitch and target Canadians," it said.

RUSSIAN PROF. SENT TO JAIL FOR KILLING STUDENT

St Petersburg, Dec. 25: A court in St Petersburg on Friday convicted a prominent history professor on charges of murdering and dismembering a female student and sentenced him to 12 1/2 years in prison.

The court found 64-year-old Oleg Sokolov, who taught at St. Petersburg State University, guilty of shooting and killing 24-year-old doctoral student Anastasia Yeshchenko at his apartment in November 2019. Sokolov was detained after being pulled from the Moika River outside his St. Petersburg apartment with a backpack with two severed arms inside.

The limbs were identified as Yeshchenko's, and investigators found other body parts in the river and in Sokolov's apartment in the historic part of St. Petersburg, less than a mile from the Hermitage Museum.

During the trial, Sokolov testified that he and Yeshchenko had a romantic relationship and that he shot her during a quarrel. Prosecutors have requested a 15-year sentence. Sokolov was known for his books about the Napoleonic era and his enthusiastic participation in reenactments of historic battles, and his case attracted broad attention in Russia.



Participants sporting Santa Claus costumes jump into the water during the 11th edition of the Copa Nadal (Christmas Cup) swimming race in Barcelona's Port Vell on Friday. The traditional 200-meter Christmas swimming race gathered around 300 participants on Barcelona's Port Vell (old harbour). — AFP

Covid shadows Christmas joy

Mass, traditionally held at midnight, was moved forward to meet Italy's curfew

Boko Haram kills 11 on Christmas eve attack

Vatican City, Dec. 25: Christmas festivities began on Friday, with hundreds of millions across the world under Coronavirus restrictions celebrating a pared-down version of a holiday typically marked by travel and large gatherings.

The battle to halt the pandemic, which has claimed more than 1.7 million lives, is far from over despite the launching of mass vaccine campaigns that offer the promise of an eventual return to normalcy.

Security agencies had in recent days warned of an increased risk of attack during the holiday season.

Fighters in trucks and motorcycles stormed Pemi, a predominantly Christian village in Bornu state on Thursday, shooting "indiscriminately" and setting buildings on fire, said Abwaku Kabu, a

militia leader. In many parts of Nigeria, communities have resorted to armed vigilantes or militias, who work alongside the army, for self-defence.

"The terrorists killed seven people, burnt 10 homes and looted food supplies that were meant to be distributed to residents to celebrate Christmas," Kabu said.

"Four more dead bodies have been found in the nearby bushes by search and rescue volunteers," local community leader Ayuba Alanson said Friday. "This has moved

the death toll to 11." The number of dead could rise as villagers fled to the bush and some people are still unaccounted for.

The assailants, who drove from the group's nearby Sambisa forest enclave, looted medical supplies from a hospital before setting it ablaze, the militia leader said, adding they also burnt a church and abducted a priest.

The village is located only 20 kilometres (12 miles) from Chibok, where Boko Haram kidnapped more than 200 schoolgirls six years ago. — AFP

attending her local church for fear of catching the virus.

"It's Christmas time and people are supposed to be shaking hands, kissing or hugging," she said after missing Christmas mass at the tiny Vatican state.

The mass, traditionally held at midnight, had been moved forward to meet Italy's curfew rules.

Before the pandemic hit, several thousand believers and tourists had obtained precious tickets to attend the papal mass.

St Peter's Square, usually thronged with people on Christmas Eve, was deserted on Thursday evening, illuminated by the glow of its towering Christmas tree and the lights of a police car. — AFP

ed Christmas Eve mass in St Peter's Basilica before fewer than 200 masked faithful, mostly employees of the tiny Vatican state.

The mass, traditionally held at midnight, had been moved forward to meet Italy's curfew rules.

Despite warm weather, the usual picnicking crowds also avoided the sands of Sydney's Bondi Beach, while the waves were empty of surfing Santas and patrolling police officers enforced social distancing rules.

Pope Francis, spiritual leader of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics, celebrated

The Christmas Eve mass commemorates the birth of Jesus of Nazareth in Bethlehem.

In his homily, the Argentine pope stressed that the birth of a child reminds us not to spend our days "lamenting our lots, but sooth the tears of those who suffer", serving "the poor".

Francis, who just celebrated his 84th birthday, will give his eighth Christmas message "Urbi et Orbi" ("to the city and the world") Friday by video from the apostolic palace, to prevent a crowd from gathering in St Peter's Square. — AFP

Explosives were also on the scene.

Black smoke and flames were seen early Friday billowing from the area, which is packed with bars, restaurants and other retail establishments and is known as the heart of downtown Nashville's tourist scene.

Buildings shook in the immediate area and beyond after a loud boom

was heard. Buck McCoy, who lives near the area, posted videos on Facebook that show water pouring down the ceiling of his home. Alarms blare in the background and cries of people in great distress ring in the background. A fire is visible in the street outside.

McCoy said the windows of his home were entirely blown out. — AP

Explosion rocks downtown Nashville

Nashville (US), Dec. 25: An explosion shook the largely deserted streets of downtown Nashville early Christmas morning, shattering windows, damaging buildings and wounding three people.

Aaron said three people were taken to area hospitals for treatment, although none were in critical condition. The blast was intentional.

The FBI is leading the investigation. Police spokesman Don Aaron

said the 6:30 am explosion was believed to be "an intentional act." Police earlier said they believe a vehicle was involved in the explosion.

Aaron said three people were taken to area hospitals for treatment, although none were in critical condition. The blast was intentional.

The FBI will be taking the lead in the investigation, said spokesman Joel Siskovic.

Federal investigators from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were also on the scene.

The FBI is the primary law enforcement agency responsible for investigating federal crimes, such as explosives violations and acts of terrorism. Investigators from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and

Explosives were also on the scene.

Black smoke and flames were seen early Friday billowing from the area, which is packed with bars, restaurants and other retail establishments and is known as the heart of downtown Nashville's tourist scene.

Buildings shook in the immediate area and beyond after a loud boom

was heard. Buck McCoy, who lives near the area, posted videos on Facebook that show water pouring down the ceiling of his home. Alarms blare in the background and cries of people in great distress ring in the background. A fire is visible in the street outside.

McCoy said the windows of his home were entirely blown out. — AP

Property sold for \$22 million to Ron Burkle, King of Pop had paid \$19.5 million in 1980s

Jackson's Neverland ranch sold to billionaire

Los Angeles, Dec. 25: Michael Jackson's former Neverland Ranch in California has sold to US billionaire Ron Burkle, his spokesman said on Thursday, reportedly at a steeply discounted price of around \$22 million.

The late "King of Pop" famously converted his sprawling, gated home into a fairytale-themed retreat — complete with toy railroad, Ferris wheel and orangutans — and penned some of his top hits on the ranch.

But Neverland was also the infamous location

where Jackson invited children to visit and sleep over, and where he was accused of molesting young boys. It was rebranded after Jackson's 2009 death as Sycamore Valley Ranch.

Burke, a Montana-based businessman with investments ranging from supermarkets to the entertainment industry, purchased the ranch "as a land banking opportunity," his spokesman said.

The \$22 million price tag reported by the Wall Street Journal — and confirmed to AFP as roughly

accurate, by a source familiar with the deal — would mark a dramatic decline from the ranch's \$100 million asking price in 2015.

That lofty fee, dubbed "optimistic" by realtors even at the time, was

Britain faces major Brexit challenges

London, Dec. 25: Britain is set for a new chapter on Friday after securing a hard-fought post-Brexit trade deal with the European Union as EU envoys gathered to discuss an accord reached only after months of tortuous negotiations.

The country will now not tumble off a trade "cliff-edge" come January 1, avoiding a mountain of harmful tariffs and quotas. But major changes are inevitable as Britain definitively quits the EU's single market and free movement with the bloc comes to an end after nearly half a century of integration.

"We shouldn't underestimate the economic shock Britain will experience," one European diplomat said. Britain had been in a standstill transition period still subject to the bloc's rules since formally leaving the EU on January 31.

Standing in front of a Downing Street Christmas tree in a video message late Thursday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson vaunted the hundreds of pages of text as "a good deal for the whole of Europe" and a "present" for Britain.

The address was "a victory speech," Anand Menon, director of the UK in a Changing Europe think-tank, said.

Boris Johnson was elected Prime minister to get Brexit done, he has now definitively got Brexit done," Menon said.

Johnson has come under fierce criticism for his management of the country's Coronavirus outbreak, which has so far left almost 70,000 dead, the heaviest toll in Europe.

In recent days, thousands of trucks have been backed up at Channel ports, after France and other European partners blocked crossings over rising cases of a new virus variant believed to spread faster.

With ferry and tunnel crossings unusually staying open on Christmas Day and British soldiers carrying out virus tests, there were signs of the logjam clearing on Friday. Some had pointed out that the transport chaos, which raised fears of shortages of fresh produce, could be a glimpse of what awaited the country if it crashed out of the EU single market without a deal.

— AFP

US: Fresh outrage over POC's death

'BALLOON BOY' HOAX PARENTS RECEIVE PARDON

Los Angeles, Dec. 25: Two Colorado parents jailed for falsely claiming their six-year-old son Falcon had floated away in a homemade balloon shaped like a flying saucer have been granted pardons by the western US state's governor.

Richard and Mayumi Heene pleaded guilty in 2009 to the "balloon boy" hoax, which became a worldwide media sensation with millions watching live as the silver helium balloon drifted through the skies for 70 miles (110 kilometers). — AFP

for a gun.

Several dozen protesters gathered on Thursday, waving Black Lives Matter signs and calling for justice for people killed in police shootings.

The killings in Columbus come after a summer in which the US was rocked by historic protests against racial injustice and police brutality, sparked by the May killing of African-American man George Floyd.

Floyd, also unarmed, suffocated beneath the knee of a white police officer in Minneapolis. Horrified passers-by filmed his death, with the footage swiftly going viral.

"Once again officers see a person of colour and conclude that he's criminal and dangerous," said lawyer Ben Crump, who defends several families of police brutality victims including Floyd's on Wednesday.

Casey Goodson Jr., 23, was shot several times on December 4 while returning home. His family has said he was holding a sandwich which law enforcement mistook

for a gun.

Several dozen protesters gathered on Thursday, waving Black Lives Matter signs and calling for justice for people killed in police shootings.

The killings in Columbus come after a summer in which the US was rocked by historic protests against racial injustice and police brutality, sparked by the May killing of African-American man George Floyd.

Burke was flying in the region recently to scout a neighboring property as a possible new branch of his Soho House private club network when he spotted the ranch and called its owner, according to the spokesman.

Burke reportedly paid \$19.5 million for the property in the 1980s.

Thomas Barrack Jr.'s Colony Capital investment firm purchased the ranch from the heavily indebted

singer for \$22.5 million the year before his death.

Burke previously worked as an adviser for the singer on business matters, including resolving debts incurred by his lavish lifestyle in the years before his death.

The 2,700-acre (1,100-hectare) estate located 40 miles (65 kilometers) from Santa Barbara features a main house with six bedrooms along with three guest houses, a four-acre lake with a waterfall, tennis courts, several barns and animal shelter facilities.

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

EXPLOSION HITS GAS PIPELINE IN EGYPT

Cairo, Dec. 25: A blast hit a gas pipeline in Egypt's restive North Sinai region on Thursday, a security source said.

"An explosion occurred (Thursday) evening along the main gas pipeline supplying the city of El-Arish," the source said, referring to the provincial capital.

The blast took place in the Sabika area to the city's west, the source added.

Witnesses said that smoke and flames from the fire were visible some 30 kilometres (almost 20 miles) away.

The cause of the blast was not immediately clear.

Egypt has for years been fighting an Islamist insurgency in North Sinai, which escalated following the military's 2013 ouster of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi.

Provincial governor Mohammed Abdelfadil Shousha said in a statement that the blast did not cause any casualties and "will not impact the gas supply" to the city.

Security forces were searching the area and authorities have opened an investigation, the statement added.

In February 2018, authorities launched a nationwide operation against militants, focusing on North Sinai.

Earlier this year, the Islamic State group said it blew up a gas pipeline around 80 kilometres west of El-Arish, claiming it was connected to Israel.

WINDS, ICY RAIN KNOCK OF POWER IN U.S.

Washington, Dec. 25: A soggy, wet and dark Christmas morning greeted more than 250,000 US power customers on Friday in New York, Pennsylvania and the Northeast who had their electricity knocked out by clobbering winds and drenching, icy rain.

Flooding was also possible, with snow from earlier storms melting or morphing into globs of icy slush and up to 5 inches (13 cm) of rain forecast for some upstate New York areas, said Rich Otto, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service Weather Prediction Center in College Park, Maryland.

"I'm afraid the kids are waking up to a wet and soggy Christmas morning," Otto said.

In New England, wind gusts of up to 65 mph (100 kph) could down tree limbs and power lines. With temperatures falling at night from the 40s, 50s and 60s F (5-15 C) to the 20s F (around -5 C), icy roads will be a concern, Otto said.

The American Automobile Association (AAA) has said that at least 34 million fewer Americans were expected to travel over the holidays, an estimated drop of 29% from 2019, largely over concerns about the spread of Covid-19.

BIDEN'S TEAM HOLDS TALKS WITH BIOFUEL GROUPS

New York, Dec. 25: U.S. President-elect Joe Biden's transition team has held calls with biofuel groups on topics including compliance with US biofuel blending laws and Biden's low-carbon climate vision, according to two sources familiar with the conversations.

The discussions with biofuel trade groups as well as POET, a top company in the cellulosic bioethanol space, come as the industry positions itself as part of Biden's fight against climate change. Michael Regan, tapped to head the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, has also reached out to agricultural and biofuel trade groups, according to two other sources.

The conversations also focused on increasing access to fuels with higher blends of ethanol.

The biofuels industry had a contentious relationship with the Trump Administration. Its handling of the U.S. Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS) fueled anger among farm groups who saw the current White House as giving concessions to larger refiners.

Under the RFS, refiners must blend billions of gallons of biofuels into the nation's fuel mix, or buy credits from those that do.

If refiners can prove the requirements will cause financial harm, they can apply for exemptions to the rules.

The Trump administration about quadrupled the number of exemptions it gave out, stoking anger from biofuel groups that claim the waivers hurt ethanol demand.

Japan adopts green growth plan

Country has been seen as reluctant to reduce its reliance on fossil fuel and to go carbon free

Tokyo, Dec. 25: Japan on Friday unveiled plans to boost renewable energy, phase out gasoline-powered cars and reduce battery costs as part of a bid to reach an ambitious 2050 carbon-neutral goal.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga announced the new 2050 goal in November, significantly moving up Japan's timeline for carbon-neutrality.

On Friday, his government laid out for the first time what meeting that target will involve, including setting a provisional goal of generating more than half of the country's electricity from renewable sources by 2050.

"The government's actions on the environment reflect our belief that a significant change of mindset is required and that these are not constraints for growth, rather they are drivers of growth," top government spokesman Katsunobu Kato told a regular briefing.

Japan, which is a signatory to the Paris climate deal, has been seen as reluctant to reduce its reliance on fossil fuel, despite its self-professed pride as a nation of energy-saving technologies.

The country was the sixth-biggest contributor to global greenhouse emissions in 2017, according to the International Energy Agency.



Japan has pledged to reach carbon-neutrality by 2050, an ambitious target for a country still heavily-dependent on fossile fuels. — AFP

up to 45 gigawatts within the coming decades.

Japan also wants to use nuclear and thermal power plants with carbon capture technology to cover 30-40 percent of the nation's electricity demand.

Ammonia and hydrogen technologies are expected to fulfill about 10 percent of the nation's power needs.

By the mid-2030s, the government also wants to end the sale of new passenger vehicles that are solely powered by gasoline.

Japan plans to replace them with hybrids, electric cars and cars fitted with fuel-cell engines, while bringing down the cost of batteries for those vehicles.

But while officials say the new plan is ambitious, some critics believe it falls short.

Mika Ohbayashi, director of the Renewable Energy Institute, said the figures were "a poor starting point for discussions and (showed) a lack of ambition."

Japan should aim for renewable energy to cover 50-60 percent of national electricity needs by 2030, rather than wait until 2050, the think tank said. — AFP

CHINA: NO 'LINK' BETWEEN INDIAN SHIP CREW AND STRAINED TIES

Beijing, Dec. 25: China said on Friday that there was no "link" between the situation of Indian crew on two stranded ships at Chinese ports and its strained relations with India and Australia.

The External Affairs Ministry on Thursday said in New Delhi that two cargo vessels with a total of 39 Indians on board have been on anchorage in Chinese waters as they were not allowed to unload their cargo though some other ships have managed to do so.

"There is a considerable amount of stress on the crew members on account of this unprecedented situation," External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Anurag Srivastava said.

Srivastava said bulk cargo vessel M.V. Jag Anand is on anchorage near Jingtang port in Hebei province of China since June 13 and it has 23 Indian sailors. Another vessel, MV Anastasia with 16 Indian nationals as its crew, is on anchorage near Caofeidian port in China since September 20, waiting for discharge of its cargo, he said at a media briefing.

"Our Embassy in Beijing has been in constant touch with provincial and central government authorities in China, requesting that the ships be allowed to dock and/or the crew be allowed to be changed," he said.

Asked about India's concern relating to the Indian crew members of the ships and whether China's decision on this issue has related to the current situation between India, China and Australia, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told a media briefing on Friday "we stated repeatedly that China has clear stipulations on quarantine measures". "Concerning this, China has stayed in close communication with the Indian side and responding to their requests as well as providing necessary assistance for them," he said. — PTI

Creek fire forces evacuation of 7K

CREEK FIRE erupted on Wednesday night along a roadside on the eastern flank of Camp Pendleton, north of San Diego, and charred some 3,000 acres by noon on Thursday.

As of midday, firefighters had yet to establish firm control lines around the blaze, with containment at zero, although fierce Santa Ana winds that initially fanned the flames through drought-parched grass and brush had subsided by early afternoon. Shoots said.

The cause of the blaze was under investigation.

No property damage or injuries were reported, but the blaze prompted mandatory evacuations early Thursday of base housing facilities, as well as homes in the adjacent civilian community of Fallbrook, displacing 7,000 people there, CalFire Captain Thomas Shoots said.

The incident capped the heaviest wildfire season on record in California in terms of total acreage burned, with more than 4 million acres and over 10,000 homes and other structures up in flames. Thirty-three lives were lost.

Magnitude 6.2 quake rocks Philippines

Manila, Dec. 25: A 6.3-magnitude quake rocked the Philippines on Friday, the US Geological Survey said, with residents in the capital Manila reporting buildings shaking and Christmas Day masses interrupted but there were no reports of damage.

The quake struck in Batangas province on the main island of Luzon at a depth of 114 kilometres (70 miles) at 7:43 am local time (2343 GMT), according to USGS.

The agency initially said the quake's strength was 6.2 and 108 kilometres deep.

In the coastal city of Calatagan, about 90 kilo-

metres south of Manila and near the epicentre, people attending mass remained calm as the earthquake hit, police chief Major Carlo Caceres said.

"There was a pause in the church service, but the people did not panic," Caceres said.

"This area is quake-prone and people are more or less used to them." There were no reports of damage or casualties in the area, he added.

"The office furniture and equipment swayed, but nothing was broken," said policeman Allan Megano in the nearby town of Balayan. — AFP

Bangkok, Dec. 25: Visitors to an aquarium in Thailand got a big surprise this week when Santa Claus swam by, carrying a sack full of food and surrounded by shoals of curious fish.

The basement aquarium in the Bangkok shopping mall was the last place families were expecting to see Father Christmas, equipped with fins, oxygen tank and a dive mask.

Children hopped up and down and pointed excitedly, mesmerised by a Santa in a floppy red hat waving while floating above the coral and circled by angelfish.

"She been running all the way down here to see the diving Santa," Frenchman Jean Baptise Richard said of his 4-year-old daughter, Maya, a frequent visitor to the aquarium.

"Normally, she never stays here more than 30

seconds, so today it's already five minutes," he said.

The fish eat from the hand of Santa, who interacts with visitors and poses for pictures from the other side of the glass.

A diver wears a Santa Claus outfit as part of Christmas celebrations while feeding fish at the Sea Life Bangkok Ocean World aquarium in Bangkok. — AFP

old daughter, Maya, a frequent visitor to the aquarium.

"Normally, she never stays here more than 30

seconds, so today it's already five minutes," he said.

The fish eat from the hand of Santa, who interacts

Frozen fall



This aerial photo shows people looking at a frozen waterfall in Handan, in northern Hebei province on Friday. — AFP

500-year-old brick walls are threatened by neglect, decaying and urban sprawl

Artists lead efforts to restore Gaza's old houses

Gaza City, Dec. 25: The grand, 500-year-old brick walls of the al-Kamala School slowly emerged from years of accumulated garbage as grassroots preservers began the long process of restoring it to its former glory.

Located in the heart of the old quarter of Gaza City, the Mamluk-era building is one of an ever-dwindling number of historic structures at risk of demolition. "It was in a very difficult state. It was a dump," said Abdullah al-Razzi, an artist and leading volunteer.

Al-Razzi and other

artists launched the Mobaderoon, or Initiators, program, seeking to save abandoned houses and buildings from two periods of Gaza's history: the Mamluk Sultanate and the subsequent Ottoman Empire.

"These houses are our identity, but ignorance leads to their destruction." Because the Gaza Strip is small, with 2 million people living in just 300 square kilometers (115 square miles), the experts and volunteers fear that structures of past centuries will disappear, like those from far more ancient civilisations.

Population growth, con-

flict with Israel and mismanagement by Hamas, the militant group that has run Gaza since 2007, have contributed to the erasure of many signs of Gaza's five millennia of history. The territory has been enriched by its prime location along the route connecting ancient Egypt, the Levant and Mesopotamia.

For example, Hamas bulldozers destroyed large parts of a rare 4,500-year-old Bronze Age settlement to make way for a housing project. Mobaderoon is one of a handful of organisations seeking to preserve ancient sites in Gaza.

City. But their efforts are typically limited in scope and lack systematic plans. It took the team two weeks to remove the trash from the al-Kamala school, which is named after a Mamluk sultan. Each day, young men and women gather there, sweeping the dusty floor, brushing the bricks and supporting windows with wood frames.

Once the renovation is completed, al-Razzi says the goal is to convert the building into a venue for cultural and artistic activities because such facilities are few in Gaza. "This is the only school

that still maintains its architectural standing, and it still has classrooms. It's clear that this school was used until a recent time in education and memorising the Quran, because it's in the old city," said Jamal Abu Rida, director of the archaeology department in Gaza's Tourism Ministry.

Residents of Gaza are preoccupied with financial woes, struggling with a 13-year-old Israeli-Egyptian blockade, and combatting a raging Coronavirus outbreak that has overwhelmed the health system. — AP

OYSTER SHELLS GIVEN NEW LIFE AT REEFS OFF TEXAS COAST

Houston, Dec. 25: On the terrace of a seafood restaurant in Houston, Texas's largest city, a few ladies are enjoying a local oyster dish: the breaded mollusks are slathered in mayonnaise and served in a sandwich.

Sitting in the shade of a palm tree on a warm winter's day, the diners have no idea that behind the restaurant a woman is busy giving the shells a second life.

Thanks to Shannon Battie, they will soon form part of a reef in Galveston Bay, six miles (10 kilometers) away. Out of sight, the Galveston Bay Foundation employee loads seven trash cans each weighing 175 pounds (80 kilograms) onto her trailer.

The cans are full of not just oyster shells but also water, discarded oyster forks and squeezed lemons. All year round, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, she makes the rounds of the foundation's partner restaurants.

"Most people like to enjoy their oysters in any month that has an 'r' in it," said Battie. "So currently, right now, it's December, so the oyster shell collection is a little more. But due to Covid there's not quite as much shell as we've normally had in the past." "Our customers really want to know where do our oysters come from and what do you do with those shells," said Tom Tollett, owner of Tommy's Seafood Restaurant & Oyster Bar, quoted by the foundation. — AFP

quick BITES

INDICATORS	%
Sensex	46,973.54
Nifty 50	13,749.25
S&P 500*	3,700.86
Dollar (₹)	73.54
Pound Sterling (₹)	100.01
Euro (₹)	89.66
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	50,030 ▼119
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	51.10
IN 10-Yr bond yield	5.929 -0.003
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	0.936 -0.019

*As of 9:30 PM IST

3.97cr ITRs filed for 2019-20 fiscal till December 24

As many as 3.97 crore tax payers have already filed their income tax returns for assessment year (AY) 2020-21 (fiscal year 2019-20) till December 24, the Income Tax Department said on Friday. "Over 3.97 crore Income Tax Returns have already been filed till 24th of December, 2020. Have you filed yours as yet? If not, please do it TODAY! File your Return of Income Tax & ...Relax," the department tweeted.

Experts want Centre to pursue FTA with UK, EU



With European Union and the United Kingdom clinching a post-Brexit trade pact, India should now aggressively pursue free trade agreements (FTAs) separately with both the regions, according to experts. Although it is premature to assess the gains for India from the agreement between EU and the UK, Indian goods would not get much benefit from this pact, the experts said.

SJVN gets 3 hydel power projects in Himachal Pradesh

State-owned power producer SJVN Ltd has been awarded three hydroelectric power projects totaling 501 megawatts (MW) by the Himachal Pradesh government. The three projects are to be developed in the Chenab river basin in Himachal Pradesh, SJVN said in a statement. With the latest allocation, the company said it now has six projects with a total capacity of 1,279 MW in the basin.

Aavas Financiers to raise ₹100 cr through bonds

Aavas Financiers on Friday said its board of directors has approved raising ₹100 crore by issuing bonds on a private placement basis. The executive Committee of the board at its meeting held on Friday approved the issuance of rated, listed, senior, secured, redeemable, non-convertible debentures aggregating to ₹100 crore, the company said. The bonds will be issued on a private placement basis, it said.

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Job scenario inches closer to pre-Covid levels in Q3

SANGEETHA G
CHENNAI, DEC. 25

Building on an impressive recovery in the second quarter, employment at the end of the December quarter has almost reached pre-Covid levels.

Before the world's toughest lockdown was announced in India to control the spread of coronavirus, India had jobs of 406 million or 40.6 crore. The employment plummeted after the lockdown had brought the economic activity across the country to a standstill.

In the September quarter, employment had recovered to 39.49 crore from the low of 32.06 crore in the June quarter.

According to data from private think tank CMIE,



the third quarter of fiscal 2019-20 would end with employment of 39.5 crore, which is shy of just one crore jobs to reach the pre-Covid level.

The initial gains were large as self-employed persons got back to their trade when the economy

opened up and desperation drove daily wage labourers to accept any form of employment even at lower wage rates. Soon these options were exhausted and the pace of recovery slowed down during the second quarter. However, employment in

each month of the second quarter was higher than it was in its preceding month.

The recovery was progressing fairly well, as per the data from private think tank CMIE.

At 393.6 million in November, employment was still about 10 million short of what it was in the March 2020 quarter, finds CMIE.

Weekly estimates for the first three weeks of December indicate an improvement in aggregate employment compared to November.

"It is likely that employment could close at 394 million in December. The third quarter of fiscal 2019-20 would end with employment of 395 million," estimates CMIE.

Manufacturing sector is in recovery mode: RBI

Mumbai, Dec. 25:

Demand conditions in the manufacturing sector returned to the recovery mode with a softer contraction of 4.3 per cent on year-on-year basis in the second quarter of this fiscal in terms of nominal sales after shrinking 41.1 per cent in the previous quarter that was hit by countrywide lockdowns due to Covid-19, according to CMIE.

The recovery was led by iron and steel, food products, cement, automobile and pharmaceuticals companies, showed the data on the performance of the private corporate sector during the second quarter of 2020-21.

Manufacturing companies reported sales of ₹5,99,479 crore in the second quarter, compared to ₹3,97,233 crore in April-June of FY 2020-21.

The data has been drawn from abridged quarterly financial results of 2,637 listed non-government non-financial (NGNF) companies, the RBI said.

Nominal sales of non-IT services sector also registered lower contraction of 14.5 per cent (Y-o-Y) led by expansion in sales of telecommunication and real estate companies.

Sales growth of IT sector companies remained steady at 3.6 per cent (Y-o-Y) in Q2 FY 2020-21.

As per the data, sales of non-IT firms and IT firms during the second quarter stood at ₹80,842 crore and ₹1,01,353 crore, respectively. "Operating profits of manufacturing companies increased on the back of savings in expenditure; operating profits of services (both IT and non-IT) companies also increased

Bank deposits register double-digit growth

FC BANKING BUREAU
MUMBAI, DEC. 25

Banks have witnessed a 11.3 per cent growth during the last two fortnights as compared to 10.3 per cent in the year ago period.

Additionally, the banking system liquidity is expected to remain in a surplus position aided by sustained growth in bank deposits as against slower growth in the bank credit.

Time deposits accounted for 89 per cent of aggregate deposits compared to 89.5 per cent share as on December 06, 2019, grew at a slower pace compared to demand deposits which account for the balance 11 per cent (10.5 per cent share as on December 06,

2019). The credit investments of schedule commercial banks rose by 9.9 per cent in September, 2020 compared with the year-ago period aided by LTRO, TLTRO, partial credit guarantee schemes of RBI/government of India.

Within bonds and debentures, private corporate bonds and debentures accounted for 52.8 per cent share of bonds/debentures; the public sector accounted for 21.5 per cent and the balance 25.7 per cent is made up by others.

In the first half of the financial year 2020-21, total corporate bond issuances amounted to ₹4.43 lakh crores, 33 per cent higher than ₹3.33 lakh crores in the year-ago period.

SIAC appoints panel on Future row

SANGEETHA G.
CHENNAI, DEC. 25

In the Amazon-Future Retail case, Singapore International Arbitration Centre will be setting up a tribunal of arbitrators before January 23 as the 90-day period to set up a tribunal ends by then.

In the last week of October, Amazon had received an interim award that put on hold the Future Group's sale of its retail business to Reliance Industries. SIAC usually gives a 90-day period to respond to the interim award and suggest the names of their arbitrators.

Once the panel is finalised, the proceedings are likely to start at the earliest. "Usually, the proceedings are likely to get completed in five to six months," sources said.

COMMERCE MIN PUSHES FOR LEVY ON CARBON BLACK IMPORTS

New Delhi, Dec. 25: The commerce ministry has recommended for extension of anti-dumping duty for five years on carbon black used in the rubber and tyre industry from China and Russia, with a view to guard domestic players from cheap imports from these two countries.

In a notification, the ministry's investigation arm Directorate General of Trade Remedies (DGTR) has said there is a "positive" evidence of likelihood of dumping of "carbon black used in rubber applications" and injury to the domestic industry if the existing anti-dumping duty would be removed. "The authority considers it necessary to recommend continuation of definitive anti-dumping duty" on all imports from China and Russia for a "further period of five years", it has said. The directorate has recommended two duties, ₹494 per tonne for imports coming from China and ₹36.17 per tonne from Russia.

The finance ministry takes the final decision to impose this duty. — PTI

Reliance to buy out IMG Global



shares held by IMG Singapore Pte Ltd in IMGR, for a cash consideration not exceeding ₹52.08 crore.

The nation's biggest company by market value, in a stock exchange filing, said it will buy IMG Worldwide LLC's 50 per cent stake in IMGR for no more than ₹52.08 crore in cash. RIL will rebrand the company after the closure of the deal.

RIL had formed an equal joint venture with IMG Worldwide, an international sports marketing and management company, in 2010 to develop, market and manage sports and entertainment in India.

IMR had a turnover of ₹181.70 crore (including GST of ₹25.79 crore) and a net profit of ₹16.35 crore in FY20. "No governmental or regulatory approvals are required for the aforesaid acquisition and the acquisition is expected to be completed during this calendar year," said Reliance Industries in the statement.

The company has entered into definitive agreements to acquire the

In this context, it was very unlikely that the High Court would not validate it. If it had not validated the EA, the order would set a very bad precedent and send a wrong signal to foreign investors about the sanctity of contracts as well as the ease of doing business in India," said Gopal Jain, senior advocate, Supreme Court lawyer added.

"This case will become a landmark case wherein it will be established once and for all that contract enforcement is of paramount importance in the Indian business ecosystem," the Supreme Court lawyer added.

Meanwhile, staff cost growth (Y-o-Y) decelerated for IT companies in the second quarter, whereas it remained in contraction zone for the manufacturing and non-IT services sectors.

As per the data, with rise in profits, interest coverage ratio (ICR) of manufacturing companies

improved to 4.6 in the second quarter of 2020-21 from 2.4 in the previous three-month period. The ICR of non-IT services companies remained below one.

Also, profit margins improved across manufacturing and services companies on account of rise in profit from cost saving. The coverage of companies in different quarters varies, depending on the date of declaration of results. This is, however, not expected to significantly alter the aggregate position, the Reserve Bank said.

In Q2:2020-21," the RBI said in a statement.

On expenditure, it said input cost pressure from raw materials remained subdued for manufacturing sector in the July-September quarter of the fiscal.

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As per the data, with rise in profits, interest coverage ratio (ICR) of manufacturing companies

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