


DECCAN Chronicle

THE LARGEST CIRCULATED ENGLISH DAILY IN SOUTH INDIA

ANANTAPUR | TUESDAY | 22 DECEMBER 2020

WEATHER


Max: 27.0°C
Min: 14°C
RH: 68%
Rainfall: Nil
Forecast: Cloudy sky.
Misty morning. Max/Min temp. 27/14 °C

NATION | 4

Russia not to side with China in row



WORLD | 5

Don spiritual adviser tests Covid positive

SPORTS | 8

India bank on Jadeja fitness for 2nd Test



CM launches land survey to help property owners

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 21

Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy launched 'YSR Jagananna Shaswata Bhu Hakku mariyu Bhu Raksha Pathakam' by laying the boundary stone as a pilot project in Thakkellapadu village of Jaggayyapeta mandal in Krishna district on Monday.

Later, addressing a public meeting at SGS College grounds in Jaggayyapeta, the Chief Minister said that till now no state had dared to launch a programme of this magnitude. He stated that in order to benefit the people, they had recruited 16,000 surveyors at ward/village levels and trained them on using ultra-modern technology and drone technology, under the auspices of Survey of India.

Recalling his padayatra, he said that he had seen how the people rued when their plot, house, farm, and other lands fell into litigation after they had purchased them with their hard-earned money.

He said that the new scheme would help them find their property with proper boundaries, measurements, shape, appropriate records and documents and assured them that such a facility would ensure that they do not fall



Tirupati temple priests bless Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy on his birthday at Tadepalli in Guntur.

Record blood donated on Jagan's birthday

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 21

YSR Congress party has set a world record on Monday by collecting 34,723 units of blood on Monday to mark Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy's birthday. Blood donation camps were organised in all 175

assembly segments in the state, apart from the neighbouring states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

As a result, the blood donation found a place in the Wonder Book of Records International.

■ Page 2: AP blood banks running short of blood

prey to land grabbers.

■ Page 2: No coordination among 4 departments: CM

Phase-II MBBS counselling in AP, TS cancelled

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, DEC. 21

The phase-2 counselling for admission into first-year MBBS has run into rough weather in both Telangana state and Andhra Pradesh.

The NTR University of Health Sciences cancelled the phase-2 citing technical glitches. The Telangana High Court on Monday directed the Kaloji Narayana Rao University of Health Sciences (KNR-UHS) to allow a candidate for the second phase of counselling notwithstanding its completion on December 19 and 20.

The Kaloji University also sent messages to students that phase-2 allotments that were released are cancelled.

Deccan Chronicle had published a report titled *State students given a raw deal in MBBS admissions* in these columns on Sunday highlighting the Kaloji University debaring students who joined Siddhartha Medical College, Vijaywada, from taking part in the phase-2 counselling in Telangana. A student approached

the TS High Court seeking a direction to the university to consider her name for phase-2 counselling.

A division bench comprising Justices M.S. Ramachandra Rao and T. Amarnath Goud granted "interim order as prayed for". Student's counsel Vedula Srinivas argued that the decision of the university declaring that the student did not join the college and debaring her from counselling as illegal as she already took admission in a city medical college. He also brought to the notice of the court that Siddhartha Medical College, which is a state-wide institute has quota for Telangana state and students who took admission under it should be treated on par with any other students from the state. Sources told this correspondent that the NTR University cancelled the phase-2 after it was noticed that the Supreme Court directions were flouted in implementing the rule of reservation at the time of sliding of candidates in the phase-2.

■ Page 2: VC takes serious note, cancels counselling

TELANGANA IN GRIP OF WINTER, HYDERABAD 11.1 °C

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, DEC. 21

After giving the city a miss last year, winter has finally chilled Telangana on Monday. A minimum temperature of 11.1 degrees Celsius was recorded in Hyderabad, which is a good three degrees below normal.

Consequently, the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) office here has issued a cold wave warning for the next 24 hours.

"Cold wave conditions may prevail at isolated places in Telangana," the IMD stated.

WEATHER | WARNING

Lambasingi mercury drops to 5 degrees C

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, DEC. 21

Minimum temperatures have dropped across Andhra Pradesh on Monday. According to Regional Agriculture Research Station (RARS), a minimum temperature of 5 degrees Celsius has been recorded at Lambasingi. Chintapalle, where RARS is located, witnessed a low temperature of 6.5°C.

Since there is no weather station of India

Normal life hit in agency areas

Meteorological Department (IMD) at Chintapalle, the Automatic Weather Station at RARS makes available temperatures in the area. RARS associate director G. Rama Rao said 6.5 degrees Celsius recorded at Chintapalle is the lowest this season.

"The chill is being caused by north-easterly winds," pointed out IMD director of AP, Stella S. Normal life has been severely affected in the agency areas of

baffled over this sudden mobilisation while additional Indian reinforcements were rushed to the border.

Top security sources said the major movement of Pakistani troops was seen close to the border over the past two weeks. Specific intelligence gathered by the security forces

deployed along the LoC revealed that the Pakistan Army had substantially increased its presence, having deployed more men and heavy artillery close to the Indian border. It was clear, the senior security officials claimed, that the Pakistanis had pulled out their troops from some other sectors to

Hyderabad man shot at in US, critical

ATHER MOIN | DC
HYDERABAD, DEC. 21

A 43-year-old man from the city, Mohammed Mujeebuddin, is battling for life after being shot by unidentified assailants at Michigan Avenue in Chicago at around 4.30 pm on Sunday. He was shifted to the University of Chicago Hospital, where his condition is described as 'serious'.

According to his family members, Mujeeb was returning home at around 4.30 pm when his car was stopped by two gun-wielding black assailants. One of them fired a shot striking him in the head and left with the vehicle. He

specifically position them close to the border and the LoC.

While the Indian security agencies took immediate corrective steps, having rushed in additional reinforcements, what has baffled New Delhi's security establishment is the timing for this sudden buildup by Pakistan. was critically injured and shifted to the nearby University of Chicago Hospital. Mujeebuddin, a native of Santosh Nagar in Hyderabad is a private employee there. He left India five years ago.

Afroze Kausar, the wife of Mujeebuddin, said his condition is very serious and there was no one from the family to look after him. Kausar said she and her mother-in-law are ready to fly and attend to him.

Majlis Bachao Tahreek spokesperson Amjad-ullah Khan met the family and consoled them. He appealed to the US Consulate to arrange visas for the family.

COVID-19 COUNT

CASES (+21,247)
DEATHS (+330)
1,00,75,079
1,46,134

covid19india.org

STATE GOVERNMENT BULLETINS

(+316) (+2)
TS: 2,81,730 1,515
(+214) (+2)
AP: 8,78,937 7,078

CASES AROUND THE WORLD

7,74,38,173

DEATHS 17,03,852

COUNTRIES, AREAS WITH CASES 218

worldometers.info/coronavirus

ASTROGUIDE

Sarvari; Dakshinayana

Tithi: Margasira Shuddha Ashtami till 6.17 pm

Star: Uttarabhadra till 1.38 am (Wednesday)

Variyam: 9.42 am to 11.28 am

Durmuhurtam: 8.57 am to 9.41 am; 10.56 pm to 11.48 pm

Rahukalam: 3 pm to 4.30 pm

HJRI CALENDAR

Jamadi-ul-Awwal 6, 1442 AH

PRAYERS

Fajar: 5.08 am

Zohar: 12.05 pm

Asar: 4.11 pm

Maghrib: 5.47 pm

Isha: 7.02 pm

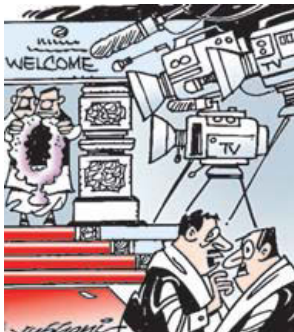
SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.17 AM

SUNSET TODAY 5.49 PM

MOONSET 11.41 PM

MOONRISE 01.22 PM

COUNTER POINT



Everything is ready for our minister's surprise and unexpected visit!

SHORT TAKES

Cong leader Vora dies due to Covid

New Delhi: Veteran Congress leader Motilal Vora, a staunch Gandhi family loyalist who had a political career spanning almost five decades, died at a hospital here on Monday following post-COVID-19 complications, his family said. He was 93. Vora was admitted to the Escorts Hospital in Okhla here a few days ago with a urinary infection. He developed a severe lung infection and was put on ventilator support, his family said. He completed 93 years on Sunday. He will be cremated in Chhattisgarh where he stayed most of his life. Vora, a two-time former chief minister of undivided Madhya Pradesh and also a former governor of Uttar Pradesh, had served as a Rajya Sabha member four times and as a Lok Sabha member once. He started his political innings as an MLA in 1972 and remained a member of the Madhya Pradesh Legislative Assembly till 1992.



Motilal Vora

■ Page 2: No abnormal findings at Eluru: APPCB

SHORT TAKES

MAOIST BANDH
PARTIAL IN
VIZAG AGENCYDC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, DEC. 21

The bandh called by the banned CPI (Maoist) in Visakha Agency, especially in the Andhra Odisha Border region was partial as most of the areas opened business and shops. There was no untoward incident reported till late in the evening.

The bandh was called by the Maoist in protest against the death of two Maoists at Singavaram forest area in an alleged fake encounter on December 12.

The Maoists claimed that the encounters were staged and as a protest called for the bandh. Except in Maoist strongholds in some interior parts of Pedabayalu, Munchingput, GK Veedhi and Chintapalli, business was as usual in almost all parts of AOB. Shops and establishments remained open and even APSRTC buses were also seen plying.

Except for some night halt buses that go to the interior parts, all buses of APSRTC plied as usual, said ASP of Chintapalli Vidya Sagar Naidu.

MAOISTS KIDNAP
14-YEAR-OLD
TRIBAL BOYDC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, DEC. 21

Maoists kidnapped a 14-year-old tribal boy from Gollaguppa village of Vissapuram panchayat of Yetapaka mandal of East Godavari. Though the incident took place in November when the parents of the boy lodged a complaint with the Yetapaka police on Monday. According to the District Superintendent of Police Adnan Nayeem Asmi, the boy was studying Class IX in Bheemavaram High School near Nellipaka of Yetapaka mandal. They took him by threatening his parents and villagers as well. After being threatened, they were scared to report the matter to police. He said that special teams are searching for the boy, and combing operations are being expedited in the area. Mr Asmi said that the local people stated that providing food, essential commodities.

NO ABNORMAL
FINDINGS AT
ELURU: APPCB

FROM PAGE 1

The APPCB could have served as a deterrent to those discharging untreated effluents into water bodies.

It ruled out any abnormal findings in the air and water in and around Eluru during the outbreaks of a mystery illness. Board sources say that although National Green Tribunal (NGT) issued directions to fill up all vacant posts in it and ordered the State government not to impose any ban on filling up of vacant posts, the government has not taken up any recruitment drive so far.

A top Board official said, "As have staff shortage, we have hired several chemists and analysts on an outsourcing basis to keep the show running. We will take up recruitment shortly. We approached AP Public Service Commission and they have accepted to take it up."

ORBIT RAISING
COMPLETED
FOR CMS-01DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, DEC. 21

All the orbit raising manoeuvres have been completed successfully for Communication Satellite CMS-01 on Monday. It may be recalled that the satellite was launched through PSLV-C50 from Satish Dhawan Space Centre, Shriharikota on December 17.

After the injection of CMS-01 communication satellite into an elliptical sub-Geosynchronous Transfer Orbit, Isro scientists have carried out orbit raising manoeuvres during the last four days and placed the satellite in the designated orbit.

The satellite reflector has been deployed. All the intended launch and early phase operations are completed successfully.

The satellite will be handed over to the users for communication services after completion of the payload in-orbit testing in the first week of January 2021, Isro said in a release on Monday.

Mechanisation saved
farmers from cyclone

Farmers who opted for machine transplantation saved

DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, DEC. 21

While paddy nurseries raised in thousands of acres got damaged during the recent cyclones in the SPSR Nellore district, a new method of growing saplings in trays for machine transplantation by few progressive farmers saved them from the nature's fury.

According to a report submitted to the government, paddy crop got damaged in 17,648 hectares in the district resulting in a loss of ₹4.12 crore to the farming community.

Two innovative farmers Dodla Bharat Kumar Reddy and Atthivarapu Venkatram Reddy of Nellore who opted for machine plantation strongly recommended the system to overcome severe shortage of labour and better yields.

"Our families have agriculture background for the last 10 decades. But days of less pollution, fewer pest and labour problems and regular rains are now. The unseasonal rains are playing hide and seek and causing nightmares to farmers now," they said.

The grim situation made us look for better farming options.

"One of the new methods we adopted is growing saplings in trays in a limited area and planting them all over through a device hooked on to a tractor. On an average 80-90 trays are required per acre.

According to him, trays



Paddy nurseries raised in trays at farmers fields



Machine transplantation in progress at a farm in Muthukuru mandal of Nellore district.

are filled with fertile soil and seeds are planted on top through a feeder to get saplings in the right order. They are covered with plastic sheets to escape pest menace and maintain certain temperature levels.

After three days the covers are removed and saplings are sprinkled with water on a daily basis. This goes on for 15-20 days and then the trays are shifted to a farming land and planted through a device hooked on to a tractor. On an average 80-90 trays are required per acre.

The cost of the process is cheaper than the traditional method of flinging seeds in a limited area and replanting them all over manually.

The accuracy of planting and growth makes a huge difference in the new method. But the process is quick and labour issues come down to a large extent.

One should see the beauty of this as the saplings grow.

The process has been there for quite a few years, but to our area, it's new and found to be very effective.

NEW SYSTEM
OFFERS MORE
YIELDS AND LESS
DISEASESDC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, DEC. 21

Dr U. Vineetha, Sr Scientist in the Rice Research Station said they have been advising farmers to go in for machine transplantation since traditional methods are labour intensive and they are very scarce now.

She said pests and diseases will be very minimal if this system is taken up because of the gap between rows unlike in manual planting.

Venkatram Reddy said that the new method has helped them to go ahead with machine transplantation in their lands at Muthukuru mandal of SPSR Nellore district without depending on the labour during the current crop season and also during early kharif season this year.

He said the quality of the grain is good and output is 10 per cent more than traditional method because of space between rows allowing good air circulation.

Another advantage in raising nurseries in trays is that they can be shifted to safer places during cyclones or floods, he added.



Poets, writers and intellectuals conducting a signature campaign in support farmers against farm laws at Dharna Chowk in Vijayawada on Monday. — C. NARAYANA RAO

Vizag cops bust hawala
racket, seize ₹1 croreDC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, DEC. 21

In a joint operation with city taskforce personnel, the Special Enforcement Bureau officials raided a lodge near Vizag Railway Station and busted a hawala racket and seized ₹1 crore from two persons hailing from Hyderabad on Monday. They were identified as Raj Purohit Bharat Kumar, 30, a resident of Abids in Hyderabad and Chota Ram of the same area in Hyderabad.

Giving details of the case, ACP Prem Kajal said Bharat Kumar and Chota Ram were doing electrical works for a builder Pralabh Bhai, a construc-

tion contractor in Hyderabad. On instructions from Pralabh, both came to Visakhapatnam to collect money and accordingly they came to Visakhapatnam and met one Raju in Duvvada. They collected the amount of ₹1 crore. After collecting the money Bharat Kumar and Chota Ram came to a lodge near the railway station and waiting to board a train to Hyderabad. On tip-off the city taskforce personnel and the Two Town police raided the lodge and after they failed to provide sufficient proof for the source of the money they were taken into custody for further investigation. Two mobile phones were

also seized from them.

In another incident in the same area, both the police and SEB staff raided a lodge and caught two persons who had the silver ornaments weighing about 29.5 kg. They were taken into custody and produced before mandal executive magistrate for further investigation. They were identified as Suhan Singh and Himmat Singh of Rajasthan and working as delivery boys for one C.S. Rathod, a jeweller in Vijayawada.

The SEB and CTF combine also arrested one J. Gaurav and seized 100 kg of ganja under Duvvada police station. The car in which the contraband was hidden was also seized.



Marking AP CM Jagan Mohan Reddy's birthday, a huge rally was organised by MLA Bhumana Karunakar Reddy in Tirupati on Monday.

VC takes serious note,
cancels counselling

FROM PAGE 1

Vice-Chancellor P. Syama Prasad said to have taken a serious note about the lapse and ordered an immediate cancellation of the counselling.

Several BC organisations and Congress MP Komatireddy Venkata Reddy raised objections over similar violation of rules by Kaloji University as a result of which they said more than 300 BC students would get a raw deal.

As the university authorities bungled the admission process in

● Several BC organisations and Congress MP Komatireddy Venkata Reddy raised objections over similar violation of rules by Kaloji University as a result of which they said more than 300 BC students would get a raw deal.

Telangana state, several students approached the High Court. In one case the court gave a clear direction that the candidate's case should be considered for the second phase despite the completion of the phase-2.

Washed ashore



People walk past a porcupine fish which washed ashore at Ramakrishna beach in Visakhapatnam on Monday. — K. MURALIKRISHNA

MISSION | CLEAN-UP

Jagan reiterated that the new scheme would serve as a role-model in land records

No coordination among 4 departments: CM

FROM PAGE 1

Referring to Thakkellapadu, Mr Reddy said in the intervening years from 1927-28, when a survey was last undertaken, to the present times, a lot has happened like the country got independence, new rulers came in, a Constitution was adopted and new laws gave rights to the people.

He opined that it could be anyone's guess as to how many irregularities had occurred because of inordinate delay in the

conduct of land survey and slammed a section of politicians and rowdies, who were managing the system and changing records to someone else's name and in the process make a killing by ill-gotten means.

Criticising the existing system of property registrations that had no coordination among the four departments of revenue, survey settlement, registration and local bodies, the Chief Minister reiterated that the new scheme would serve as a role-



model in the maintenance of land records without any scope for irregularities.

Detailing the new scheme, he said that it would help the property owner to get a document comprising all details of

● The survey would be completed and title deeds handed over to the property owners by the end of 2023. Mr Reddy asserted that they were taking it up at a cost of ₹1,000 cr

the property with a government assurance and a unique identification number on the lines of Aadhaar number.

This will help find out the exact location of the property with all requisite details. He said that the

details of the properties would be subject to social audit. Only when objections are not raised from any quarters, would the landowners be issued title deeds.

On the three-phased land survey, Mr Reddy asserted that they were taking it up at a cost of ₹1,000 crore. They have set up 4,500 survey teams.

The survey would be completed and title deeds handed over to the property owners by the end of 2023.

Mr Reddy advised people

to share the benefits of the land survey with their neighbours and assured that the whole exercise would be taken up in a transparent manner and all records of property having irregularities would be streamlined.

He said that boundary stones with government seal were being laid to demarcate properties free of cost. He assured that the new scheme will ensure that all the owners would get security and protection for their property.

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SHORT TAKES

ARJUN RAMPAL APPEARS BEFORE NCB FOR 2nd TIME

SAURABH JOSHI | DC
MUMBAI, DEC. 21

The Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) questioned actor Arjun Rampal second time in connection with the ongoing drugs probe involving Bollywood, which began following the suicide of actor Sushant Singh Rajput. Rampal (47) was grilled earlier in November along with his girlfriend Gabriella, a South African national, whose brother Agisilaos has been arrested by NCB over his links with international drug cartels.

The officials said that Rampal arrived at the NCB office before noon after having sought time to appear till December 22. He was issued summons last week. The agency grilled Rampal in the backdrop of the data retrieved from the electronics that were seized from his residence following a raid in November.

The NCB officials had seized 11 gadgets, including laptop, mobile phones and pen drives from Rampals following which he was grilled by the officials days later.

"The questioning went all through the day and if needed he or his partner may be summoned for questioning again," said an officer.

CRPF CONSTABLE RENEGES ON RAPE CLAIM

New Delhi, Dec. 21: The 30-year-old CRPF constable, who had accused the paramilitary's Chief Sports Officer and Arjuna Awardee Khajan Singh and coach Surjit Singh of sexual harassment, rape and intimidation, has retracted her allegations, official sources said on Monday.

Police said Khajan Singh was questioned and his statement has also been recorded by the investigation team but refused to divulge further details, saying the investigation is still underway.

Earlier this week, the victim recorded her statement before the magistrate under CrPC section 164 where she retracted her allegations mentioned in her complaint filed before the Delhi Police earlier this month, they said.

"She retracted her allegations levelled against both the accused and is reluctant to pursue the case further," sources said. Khajan Singh has also recorded his statement before the investigation team and refuted all allegations levelled against him.

This came after the victim registered her statement before the magistrate, a police officer said.

A senior police officer said after the FIR was registered, the case was transferred from a sub-inspector level officer to an inspector attached with the Crime Against Women Cell of Dwarka district, which is investigating the case presently.

J&K'S DDC POLLS VOTE COUNTING BEGINS TODAY

YUSUF JAMEEL | DC
SRINAGAR, DEC. 21

The counting of votes across all 280 District Development Council (DDC) constituencies in Jammu and Kashmir will begin at 9 am on Tuesday. The ballots will decide the fate of nearly 4,200 candidates who joined the fray in the first-ever such elections in the Union Territory.

State election commissioner (SEC), K.K. Sharma, said, "We've made elaborate arrangements for counting of ballots polled for DDC elections and Panchayat by-polls. Necessary Covid-19 protocols have been put in place and directions have already been issued to concerned deputy commissioners to adhere to coronavirus standard operating procedures (SOPs) during the counting process".

He said that the entire counting exercise will be monitored and recorded "to achieve full transparency." Elaborating on the counting guidelines, the SEC said that the counting of ballot papers will be taken on a round-wise basis after proper mixing of the ballot papers of different polling stations as per prescribed procedure and counting guidelines.

He said that his office has issued detailed guidelines under the Panchayati Raj Rules 1996 and prescribed elaborate procedure on the counting of ballot papers. "The handbook of returning officers also contains the relevant instructions on counting of votes," he added.

Didi asks Shah to check facts on Bengal growth

Shah lying to gain political mileage in WB, says Mamata

RAJIB CHOWDHURI | DC
KOLKATA, DEC. 21

Calling the BJP a "party of cheats", West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Monday squarely accused Union home minister Amit Shah of spreading "lies" about her government's performance during his two-day visit to the state.

Asking Shah to "cross check" his statements, the CM also cautioned him against lying as a home minister for his political mileage and urged him to tell the "truth" about the state.

Inaugurating the Kolkata Christmas Festival at Allen Park in Park Street, Banerjee, in an oblique reference to Shah, said, "Bengal is No. 1 in so many sectors. Some people, I am sorry to say, are coming here from Delhi. If I do anything wrong, I will apologise to them. But please tell me why you are telling a garbage of lies to the people. Tell the truth."

Meanwhile, election strategist Prashant Kishor, who has been in the eye of the storm of the rebel brigade within the ruling TMC over his role in party affairs, leading many to defect to the BJP, on Monday made a startling prediction that the saffron party would "struggle to cross double digits" in the next year's Assembly elections. He also promised he would quit Twitter if proved wrong.

CONG LEADERS HAND OVER SONIA'S LETTER TO UDDHAV

BHAGWAN PARAB | DC
MUMBAI, DEC. 21

Indicating that the Congress is not happy with the Shiv Sena-led Maharashtra government, senior party leader Prithviraj Chavan on Monday said the state government must implement the common minimum programme.

He said the CMP is not a manifesto of any particular party.

A Maharashtra Congress delegation led by state party chief Balasaheb Thorat met CM Uddhav Thackeray and gave him a letter written by Congress president Sonia Gandhi seeking implementation of common minimum programme (CMP) and welfare measures for Dalits and tribals.

"The objective of the CMP was that there should not be anything done that is contrary to Congress's fundamental principles. Common minimum programme was not any party's manifesto. If any decision is taken is not in accordance with our fundamental principles, then we will have our objections to it," Chavan said.

However, the Congress leader also reiterated that there are no serious references among the MVA partners.

"Sonia Gandhi's letter is only a communication in the form of a letter. The MVA government is strong and working together," he said.

In the letter, dated December 14, Sonia Gandhi reminded Thackeray of the CMP of the Shiv Sena-NCP-Congress government and sought implementation of certain measures for the welfare of Dalits and tribals.

She demanded reservation in government contracts for SC/ST professionals to promote entrepreneurship among them, among other things.

● **CONGRESS LEADERS** reiterate that there are no serious references among the MVA partners and Sonia Gandhi's letter is only a communication in the form of a letter. The MVA government is strong and working together.

BJP MP gets ready to divorce his wife for joining the TMC

RAJIB CHOWDHURI | DC
KOLKATA, DEC. 21

The ongoing race between the ruling Trinamul Congress and the BJP in breaking each other's "home" through the politics of defection ahead of next year's Assembly election escalated to marital discord on Monday as Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's party virtually struck Bishnupur BJP MP Saumitra Khan's heart and roped his wife Sujata Mondal Khan into its fold to avenge the switchover of Shubendu Adhikari to the BJP two days ago.

Heartbroken to see his wife in the rival party, Khan, who was earlier in the TMC, served her a

divorce notice. In the afternoon Sujata, who was found working actively for the BJP to ensure her husband's victory in the last Lok Sabha polls, walked into the TMC office.

Senior TMC MP Sougata Roy handed over the party flag to her. Hailing Banerjee and her MP nephew Abhishek Banerjee, Khan said, "I want honour. I wish to work in my favourite party and its leader. I worked tirelessly for my husband's victory. But the BJP did not value my contribution. It gives place to some incompetent by poaching them from other parties. When good sense will prevail upon Khan, he will return to TMC also."

With tearful eyes Khan,

also the state BJYM chief, said, "Our relations were of 10 years. But I did not know that politics could end it. I am not stopping her. Love is above politics. I quit the TMC for the development of Bengal. I knew the TMC steals cattle and coal. But I never thought the TMC would steal someone's wife."

Getting the legal notice from her husband, Sujata Khan broke down and said, "Ours was a love marriage. I loved my husband a lot and braved many odds for him. If joining a different party (leads to) divorce, then it's purely his personal decision because I know politics and family issues should remain separate."

The evidence against whatever you claimed."

Reaffirming her fierce opposition to the CAA, the NRC and the NPR, she added: "When the CAA was passed, I started opposing it. They (BJP) cannot decide the fate of citizens. Let them decide their own fate. We are against the CAA, NRC and NPR. Nothing has been withdrawn. They exist. We will fight a battle against them. We will not allow anyone to go out of the country."

All for a glimpse



People gather to watch the shooting of upcoming film *Atrangi Re* starring actors Akshay Kumar and Sara Ali Khan, at the historic Taj Mahal in Agra on Monday. — PTI

SPECIAL SESSION

Cabinet to recommend Governor Khan convene session on December 23

Kerala to pass resolution against farm laws

DC CORRESPONDENT
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM,
DEC. 21

Kerala Cabinet on Monday decided to convene a special session of Assembly on December 23 to discuss Centre's farm bills in detail.

The Cabinet meeting here decided to recommend to Governor Arif Mohammad Khan to convene the special session of the Assembly on December 23. Various political parties both from the ruling LDF and the opposition UDF will express their views on the

farm bills against which farmers across the country are currently agitating.

Barring BJP which has a lone member in the 140 member Assembly, the remaining parties are expected to register their strong opposition to the farm laws which the CPM and Congress led coalitions in the state have dubbed as "anti" farmers.

The Assembly is likely to pass a resolution against the bills. Barring BJP, all principal opposition parties in the state have expressed solidarity with the agitating farmers in Delhi.



Farmers block a road at Ghazipur border during their ongoing agitation in New Delhi on Monday. — PTI

Earlier the Kerala government had shot off a letter to the Union agriculture minister Narendra

Russia will not take sides in India, China tiff: Envoy

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI | DC
NEW DELHI, DEC. 21

Russia will "not take sides" in the Sino-Indian border dispute but wants an atmosphere of cooperation and enhanced dialogue between the two Asian giants, top Russian diplomats said on Monday, adding that "non-inclusive" Indo-Pacific concepts like the four-nation Quad can be "detrimental" to regional stability and inclusive cooperation in the region.

However, in what is being seen as a balancing act, Russia said it supports both the "growing Indian profile" globally as well as "Indian sentiments" and that it also "supports the Indian vision for the Indo-Pacific". Moscow also said the sale of the S-400 missile systems to India is "advancing well".

At an annual year-end media briefing in the national capital on Monday in the Virtual format, Russian Ambassador to India Nikolay R. Kudashev — while commenting on the recent Sino-Indian military tensions in the Ladakh sector, said, "It is vital to ensure an atmosphere of cooperation between the two Asian giants. As a friend to both India and China, we would encourage enhanced dialogue between both the governments. Between New Delhi and Beijing, we believe this is the key for the future progress in ties and to the regional security and stability." Pointing out that the sale of the S-400 missile systems to India is "advancing well", the Russian Ambassador also said that if the K-226

Boeing pitches its jet for Indian Navy

PAWAN BALI | DC
NEW DELHI, DEC. 21

American aerospace giant Boeing said Monday its fighter aircraft F/A-18 Super Hornet has shown compatibility with India's aircraft carriers, pitching its jet for the Indian Navy.

Takeoff and landing on an aircraft carrier is a complex process as ships have limited space. The system which Indian aircraft carriers use for aircraft operation is "Short Takeoff but Arrested Recovery" (STOBAR), which is different from the system used by the US Navy.

Boeing said the company and the US Navy recently concluded "ski jump" trials for F/A-18 Super Hornets, even though it was designed for catapult launched systems used by the US.

"The first successful and safe launch of the F/A-18 Super Hornet from a ski jump begins the validation process to operate effectively from Indian Navy aircraft carriers," said Ankur Kanagalekar, Head India Fighters Sales of Boeing Defence, Space and Security.

The Indian Navy, which is now operating MiG-

helicopter and AK-47 203 rifle deal processes are expedited, "we will see good progress".

On the Sino-Indian border dispute, Russian deputy chief of mission (DCM) Roman N.

● **BOEING SAYS** its fighter aircraft F/A-18 Super Hornet has shown compatibility with India's aircraft carriers.

● **IT RECENTLY** concluded 'ski jump' trials for F/A-18 Super Hornets.

29Ks, is seeking jets for its aircraft carrier Vikramaditya and for the coming Vikrant. France's Rafale, that was purchased by the Indian Air Force, will offer tough competition for any order given by Indian Navy.

"The Super Hornet can act as a lynchpin of naval aviation collaboration between the US Navy and Indian Navy. This will improve inter-operability and commonality between the two navies and boost opportunities for collaboration in variety of areas related to naval aviation," said Mr Kanagalekar.

Boeing said the F/A-18 Super Hornet can interface with F-8I aircraft and other assets of US origin to act as a force multiplier for the Indian Navy.

It said the Super Hornet will offer the Indian Navy value in the form of advanced technologies at low acquisition cost.

Babushkin said, "Russia is not taking sides. It maintains close ties with both nations."

But it was on the Indo-Pacific issue, that Russia clearly expressed its discomf once again.

NIGHT CURFEW IN MUMBAI TILL JANUARY 5

BHAGWAN PARAB | DC
MUMBAI, DEC. 21

Amidst the reports of new Coronavirus variant spreading rapidly in Britain, the Maharashtra government, as a precautionary measure, announced a night curfew in metropolitan areas of the state from December 22 to January 5. We need to remain more alert during the fortnight, said Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray.

According to the measures announced by the state government, a night curfew will be imposed in municipal corporation areas between 11 and 6 am from December 22 to January 5 as a precautionary measure. In addition to this, all passengers arriving at the state airports from European and Middle-East Asian countries will be put under institutional quarantine. Those coming from other countries will be home quarantines.

The decision to impose night curfew was taken in a meeting held by Thackeray on the backdrop of alarming situation in the UK. "The new Coronavirus variant is spreading rapidly in Britain and its lethality will be known in coming days. Hence, we need to exercise restraint," the Chief Minister said.



SHORT TAKES

ARMY TO RUN MAYA TRAIN: MEXICAN PREZ

Mexico City, Dec. 21: Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said Sunday the army will run the Maya train project and several airports, and use any profits to finance military pensions.

The army is already overseeing construction on some parts of the controversial project, while private firms build the rest. Obrador said Sunday that "so there won't be the temptation to privatize" the \$6.8 billion project, the army will operate it once built.

The proceeds from that — and several airports, some of which the army is constructing — will be used to provide pensions for soldiers and sailors.

López Obrador has already given the army more tasks than any other recent Mexican president.

RARE SALES OF CHRISTMAS ITEMS IN SAUDI ARABIA

Riyadh, Dec. 20: Christmas trees and glittery ornaments are for sale at a Saudi gift shop, a once unthinkable sight in the cradle of Islam where all public non-Muslim worship is banned.

In recent years, festive sales have gradually crept into the capital Riyadh, a sign of loosening social restrictions after Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman pledged to steer the conservative Gulf kingdom towards an "open, moderate Islam". "I didn't ever imagine I'd see this" in Saudi Arabia, a Riyadh resident said at the shop selling trees, Santa Claus outfits as well as tinsel, baubles and other ornaments. "I am surprised," said the resident, declining to be identified. Until barely three years ago, it was almost impossible to sell such items openly in Saudi Arabia, but authorities have been clipping the powers of the clerical establishment long notorious for enforcing Islamic traditions.

ISRAELI PARL TO VOTE ON BILL TO DELAY POLL CALL

Jerusalem, Dec. 21: Israel's parliament was set to vote Monday on a proposal from its fringed coalition that would temporarily put off the call for a fourth election in less than two years in the country.

Israel's coalition government — a broken marriage between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his political rival, Defence Minister Benny Gantz — has been inching towards collapse for weeks.

Under the current arrangement between Netanyahu's right-wing Likud and Gantz's centre-left Blue and White, the coalition has until one minute past midnight on Wednesday to agree a budget for the current year.

If a 2020 budget is not passed, Israel's parliament, the Knesset, would dissolve, with new elections held as early as March.

The three-year coalition deal stipulates that Netanyahu serves as premier for 18 months, with Gantz, currently the alternate prime minister, taking over in November 2021.

RWANDAN TROOPS DEPLOYED IN C. AFRICAN REP.

Kigali, Dec. 21: Rwanda has deployed troops to the Central African Republic, where its soldiers serving in the UN peacekeeping force have been targeted by rebels, the defence ministry in Kigali said.

"The Government of Rwanda has deployed force protection troops to the Central African Republic, under an existing bilateral agreement on defence," said a statement issued late Sunday.

"The deployment is in response to the targeting of the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) contingent under the UN Peacekeeping force by rebels supported by (former president) Francois Bozize." On Saturday, the Central African Republic's government accused Bozize of leading an attempted coup as tensions mount ahead of key presidential and legislative elections on Sunday.

A spokesman for the UN's MINUSCA peacekeeping force in CAR said Sunday that armed rebels that had been advancing on the capital Bangui had been pushed back.

No details were given but the defence ministry said they would "also ensure a peaceful and secure general elections scheduled on Sunday".

Countries begin to seal off UK

Growing concerns of an 'out of control' new Coronavirus variant force nations to suspend flights

London, Dec. 21: France became the latest European country to close all its borders with the UK after Germany, Italy, Belgium, Denmark, Bulgaria, the Irish Republic, Turkey and Canada suspended flights amid growing concerns of an "out of control" new variant of Coronavirus spreading at a much faster pace in parts of England. India, so far, remains in the travel bubble with the UK, with strict testing and self-isolation rules in place. But with most of Britain now in the strictest Tier 4 lockdown, all non-essential travel remains banned for the majority.

Other countries and territories to announce restrictions on UK travel include Hong Kong, Israel, Iran, Croatia, Argentina, Chile, Morocco and Kuwait. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson will chair a meeting of the government's emergency committee on Monday to take stock of the situation as a huge backlog build up on the border with France after even trucks and ferries were blocked entry at the ports.

European Union (EU) member states are also due for a meeting in Brussels to discuss a more coordinated response as the number of Coronavirus infections in the UK jumped to 35,928 on Sunday, down to the much faster spreading new mutation of the novel Coronavirus, with the country's death toll rising by 326 to hit 67,401. "Everybody, particularly people in Tier 4 areas, needs to behave as if they might well have the virus — that is the only way we are going to get it under control," UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock said, adding that the situation is "deadly serious" as the government tries to contain the rapid strain of an "out of control" virus.

"This is a deadly disease, we need to keep it under control, and it has been made more difficult by this new variant," he said. The new variant is said to be 70 per cent more transmissible, though health experts say there is no evidence that it is more deadly or would react differently to vaccines. "It is really too early to tell... but from what we see so far it is growing very quickly, it is growing faster than [a previous variant] ever grew, but it is important to keep an eye on this," said Dr Erik Volz from Imperial College London. "The amount of evidence in the public domain is woefully inadequate to draw strong or firm opinions on whether the virus has truly increased transmission," added Professor Jonathan Ball, a virologist at the University of Nottingham. It is thought the variant either emerged in a patient in the UK or has been imported from a country with a lower ability to monitor Coronavirus mutations. The variant can be found across the UK, except Northern Ireland, but it is heavily concentrated in London, the South East and eastern England. Cases elsewhere in the country do not seem to have shot up in a similar way so far.

The government's New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (Nervtag) estimates the variant could increase the R number — or rate of



A sign on the M56 motorway informs drivers that all routes into France are closed at the junction with the M6 at Lower Stretton near Warrington, northwest England, on Monday. Crucial transit country France moved to block people and goods crossing the Channel, while the Netherlands said passengers arriving by ferry would be denied entry.

EU regulator approves vaccine

Amsterdam, Dec. 21: The European Medicines Agency recommended conditional approval for a Coronavirus vaccine developed by BioNTech and Pfizer to be used across the European Union, weeks after the shot was first granted permission under emergency provisions in Britain and the United States.

Following a closed-doors expert meeting Monday, the EU drug regulator said it was recommending the

● **FOLLOWING A closed-doors expert meeting Monday, the EU drug regulator said it was recommending the shot be licensed for use in people over 16 years of age, with some exceptions.**

shot be licensed for use in people over 16 years of age, with some exceptions. The pharmaceutical companies will need to submit follow-up data on their

vaccine for the next year. "This is really a historic scientific achievement," said Emer Cooke, the head of the agency. "It is a significant step forward in our fight against the pandemic." The approval needs to be rubber-stamped by the EU's executive branch on Monday evening. A move its chief said is likely to happen Monday evening. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen tweeted that the EMA's approval was "a

decisive moment in our efforts to deliver safe & effective vaccines to Europeans!" "Now we will act fast. I expect a @EU Commission decision by this evening," she said.

The EU's executive arm had been expected to require two or three days to approve the EMA's decision. Authorities in Germany and several other European countries have said they hope to begin vaccinating people on Dec. 27. — AP

PUBLIC MEETINGS BEING CURBED IN S. KOREAN CAPITAL

Seoul, Dec. 21: Gatherings of more than five people will be banned in South Korea's capital region as an elevated step to suppress what authorities call an "explosive" surge in Coronavirus infections.

The Seoul region is home to half of South Korea's 51 million people and has been at the centre of a recent viral resurgence. The country averaged about 960 new virus cases each day in the past week, more than 70 per cent of them in the Seoul metropolitan area. Acting Seoul mayor Seo Jung-hyup said Monday the ban will apply to any type of meetings, including year-end parties, office dinners, birthday parties and picnics. Only weddings and funerals can follow the current rule of not more than 50 people. — AP

gise for his handling of the pandemic. He said the British people were paying the price for Johnson's "incompetence", "indecision" and "weak leadership" that was "costing lives and costing jobs". — PTI

Oz detects new UK strain; HK cancels Britain flights

Singapore, Dec. 21: Australia said on Monday it had detected cases of the new fast-spreading coronavirus strain identified in the United Kingdom, while Hong Kong and India said they would suspend flights from Britain.

Two travellers from the United Kingdom to Australia's New South Wales state were found carrying the mutated variant of the virus that Britain has said could be up to 70% more infectious. Both are in hotel quarantine, and the recent spike in infections in Sydney is not linked to this, authorities said.

The new strain has prompted Britain's European neighbours and several others including Canada and Iran to close their doors to travellers from the country.

Much is unknown about

the strain, but experts said current vaccines should still be effective against it.

Asian nations, including Japan and South Korea, said they were monitoring the new strain even as they battle a rise in infections at home.

Hong Kong banned flights from Britain in a bid to curb already rising case numbers in the dense financial hub. The Chinese special administrative region said on Monday that people arriving from Britain before Dec. 22 would have to quarantine for three weeks instead of two.

India announced a suspension of all flights from the UK until the end of the year and said all passengers arriving from the UK before then will be tested on arrival at airports.

Taiwan, which also has a 14-day quarantine, said on

Sunday there were no plans at present to stop flights from Britain.

Britain is one of 23 countries that India shares an "air bubble" with. India's health minister said the country was prepared to deal with the new strain and that there was no need to panic.

Japan, where entry from Britain is already banned in principle, said it would keep in close touch with other countries as well as the World Health Organisation to see how the new type of virus was spreading. The new strain in Britain comes as cases have surged recently in several Asian countries that successfully contained the pandemic earlier. The spikes have prompted localised lockdowns in some countries. — Reuters

with other households indoors at Christmas, unless they are part of their existing support bubble.

Opposition Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer accused Prime Minister Johnson of "gross negligence" and said he should apolo-

Biden to receive Coronavirus shot

Washington, Dec. 21: President-elect Joe Biden will receive his first dose of the Coronavirus vaccine on live television as part of a growing effort to convince the American public the inoculations are safe. Monday's event will come the same day that a second vaccine, produced by Moderna, will start arriving in states, joining Pfizer's in the nation's arsenal against the Covid-19 pandemic, which has now killed more than 317,000 people in the United States and upended life around the globe. "I don't want to get ahead of the line, but I want to make sure we demonstrate to the American people that it is safe to take," Biden has said of his decision.

Biden and his wife, Jill, will also thank health care workers at the facility where they receive the shots, his incoming press secretary has said. Top government officials last week joined the first Americans to be inoculated against Covid-19 as part of the largest largest vaccination campaign in the nation's history. Vice President Mike Pence, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky, and other lawmakers were given doses Friday.

They chose to publicise their injections as part of a campaign to convince Americans that the vaccines are safe and effective amid skepticism, especially among Republicans. — AP

Congress deal on Covid-19 reprieve

Washington, Dec. 21: Top Capitol Hill negotiators sealed a deal Sunday on an almost \$1 trillion Covid-19 economic relief package, finally delivering long-overdue help to businesses and individuals and providing money to deliver vaccines to a nation eager for them. The agreement, announced by Senate leaders, would establish a temporary \$300 per week supplemental jobless benefits and \$600 direct stimulus payments to most Americans, along with a new round of subsidies for hard-hit businesses and money for schools, health care providers and renters facing eviction.

The House was expected to vote on the legislation very late Sunday or Monday and Senate action would follow. Lawmakers are

● **THE AGREEMENT, announced by Senate leaders, would establish a temporary \$300 per week supplemental jobless benefits and \$600 direct stimulus payments to most Americans, along with a new round of subsidies for hard-hit businesses and money for schools, health care providers and renters facing eviction.**

eager to leave Washington and close out a tumultuous year. A breakthrough came late Saturday in a fight over Federal Reserve emergency powers that was resolved by the Senate's top Democrat, Chuck Schumer of New York, and conservative Republican Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania. — AP

MAJOR | OUTBREAK

More than 1,100 prisoners were infected while seven have died

Virus spikes after jail inmate transfers

Detroit, Dec. 21: Families of men incarcerated at Michigan's Kinross Correctional Facility believed its remote location would spare it from a deadly Covid-19 outbreak. For a while, they seemed to be right.

Kinross, built on the grounds of a former Air Force base in the Upper Peninsula, is closer to Canada than it is to Detroit. Unlike most prisons in Michigan, Kinross had remained almost unscathed by the novel coronavirus with only one case between March and October. But on Oct. 28, corrections officials transferred nine prisoners to Kinross from Marquette Branch Prison, several

hours west, where Covid-19 was running rampant. There were 837 confirmed cases by late October; 350 of which were still active when the men were transferred. Roughly three weeks later, Kinross had its first major outbreak, corrections department data showed.

Though agency officials say it's not because of the transfers, more than 1,100 prisoners have now been infected, at least seven have died and more than 100 guards have fallen ill. The prisoners who came to Kinross had been transferred twice, sent first to Marquette after a riot where they were held, and then had tested positive for Covid-19 there before

● **KINROSS, BUILT on the grounds of a former Air Force base in the Upper Peninsula, is closer to Canada than it is to Detroit.**

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● **BUT ON** Oct. 28, corrections officials transferred nine prisoners to Kinross from Marquette Branch Prison, several hours west, where Covid-19 was running rampant.

leaving for Kinross, officials said. In prisons around the country, Covid-19 outbreaks have followed transfers of prisoners or prison workers.

Nearly all of the 25 state prison systems and the federal Bureau of Prisons that responded to a survey conducted by The Marsha-

il Project and *The Associated Press* said they had reduced or limited the number of prisoners they moved due to the pandemic. Eight states halted the practice except in special circumstances.

The reductions were keeping in line with medical guidelines. But most of

those states lifted their restrictions by September and few prison systems heeded the earlier lessons as the pandemic worsened this winter, worrying families of prisoners and correctional officers who work in the prisons.

Meanwhile, Interpol chief Juergen Stock predicted Monday a sharp rise in crimes with robbers seeking to get their hands on precious vaccines aimed at stopping the Coronavirus pandemic. "With vaccines rolling out, crime will increase dramatically," Stock told business weekly WirtschaftsWoche. "We will see thefts and warehouse break-ins and attacks on vaccine shipments." — AFP

DECCAN Chronicle

22 DECEMBER 2020

Battleground Bengal: Didi faces a huge test

Mamata Banerjee and her Trinamul Congress are facing an epic battle for political survival as Union home minister Amit Shah virtually launched the BJP's campaign for the April-May elections during his two-day visit that ended Sunday. While it can't be denied that the departure of Suvendu Adhikari, a key aide and onetime Nandigram pointperson, who joined the saffron party along with several MLAs on Saturday, is a major blow to the TMC supremo, if she takes it as a wake-up call and tries rectification measures, changing the way her government and party function, all may still not be lost.

The BJP as a challenger has many advantages — the virtually limitless funds it has access to, which neither the TMC nor any other party in India can match. Add to this is the dominance due to its control of the Central government and of several states, most of which made possible by the election machine Mr Shah and his boss Narendra Modi have devised since 2014.

However, West Bengal isn't quite the fertile ground the Modi-Shah duo are familiar with in northern India. Mr Shah had to acknowledge, during his just-completed visit, that here the Bengali identity transcends all the different ways the BJP slices and splices Hindutva-related issues elsewhere to produce electoral victories with remarkable regularity. The cries of "Jai Shri Ram" at Mr Shah's impressive roadshow at Bolpur did elicit roars of approval, but it later transpired the crowd was brought in from a neighbouring Hindi-speaking state. If the BJP is wise, it won't repeat that exercise in a hurry.

The BJP's posters in Bolpur and Santiniketan, home to Rabindranath Tagore's Visvabharati, in which the home minister's photo was placed above Gurudev's, which set off widespread

protests, was yet another ill-advised move by a party whose local leadership seems singularly clueless about how it would hurt Bengali sentiments. Likewise, to speak of the homogenisation and standardisation of Indian culture, there couldn't be a more inappropriate spot than Gurudev's campus celebrating diversity, where "narrow domestic walls" have no place.

The "outsider" tag Ms Banerjee sought to paint Mr Shah with seems to have rankled, with the minister declaring no one could be an "outsider" as everyone was an Indian, with references to Indira Gandhi and others, but contradicted himself by virtually anointing Mr Adhikari as a "bhoomi putra" and possible CM face. It remains to be seen, though, if Bengalis are ready to accept the somewhat rustic and rough-spoken Mr Adhikari in that role, once filled by the likes of Bidhan Chandra Roy, Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. Even Ms Banerjee, before becoming CM, had served multiple terms as a Union minister. It is undeniable that there is widespread disenchantment with Mamata Banerjee and her government on several counts. Her mismanagement on several fronts, the rising corruption and extortion that her partymen are accused of and the minority appeasement that has cost her significant support. Bringing in Prashant Kishor to firefight isn't enough — in fact he is blamed for some of the recent exodus from the party. But what does the BJP promise? How will it end corruption by inducting TMC leaders accused of multiple offences into its fold? Given the Centre's mismanagement of the nation's economy, how will it end Bengal's mess? And with what magic wand will Mr Shah create the "Sonar Bangla" that he has promised?

Is China behind Oli's move?

Nepalese President Bidya Devi Bhandari's consent to Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's recommendation, after a Cabinet meeting, to dissolve Parliament on Sunday and call elections in April, two years ahead of time, came after 91 ruling party MPs in a House of 275 moved a no-confidence motion against the PM. This has raised a Constitutional question in Kathmandu, and the matter is before the Supreme Court.

Whatever the court's verdict, it is evident the Himalayan nation is in the throes of a political crisis. The dissonance within the ruling establishment had been brewing for eight months. Mr Oli was PM and co-chairman of the Nepal Communist Party along with Pushpa Kumar Dahal Prachanda, a former PM.

He was not willing to let go of either post. The tussle at the top has riven the ruling NCP down the middle. Seven Cabinet ministers resigned when the PM recommended dissolution prior to fresh polls. It's not clear if the turbulence will spill over on to the streets. There can be no guarantee of orderly elections in April-May next.

This is a situation that is tailor-made for sub-rosa intervention by Beijing, which had invested considerable political capital in Mr Oli, shoring up his government with financial support and political guidance at a time when India-China relations have plummeted with the Chinese Army pushing inside India's frontier region in Ladakh. New Delhi needs to be watchful.

Nepal is of strategic value to India. From New Delhi's perspective, it is important that Kathmandu at least remain neutral even as Beijing has been on a heavy wooing spree, with Chinese President Xi Jinping paying a high-profile visit to Kathmandu not long ago. The Oli government had even begun the "study" of Xi Jinping "thought" in Nepal. The best that India can do is to attempt to play a stabilising role. This had been started with the recent visit to Kathmandu of the foreign secretary and the Army Chief. The process can be sought to be bolstered.

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KAUSHIK MITTER
Editor

K. SUDHAKAR
Printer & Publisher

DECCAN CHRONICLE offices are located at:

Hyderabad: 36, Sarojini Devi Road, Secunderabad - 500 003, Ph: 040-27803930-4; Fax : 040-27805256
Vijayawada: No.C-3 & 4 Patamata, Industrial Estate, Auto Nagar, Vijayawada (A.P.), Ph: 0866-2555284/2555287; Telefax: 0866-2555234

Visakhapatnam: Survey No.1/3A Beach Road, Near Kailasagiri Ropeway, Sector-9 MVP Colony, Visakhapatnam - 530 017 (A.P), Ph: 0891-2552333/2552334; Fax: 0891-2755285
Rajahmundry: Vemagiri, Dhawaleswaram Rd, Rajahmundry, Ph: 0883-2417618/2417208; Telefax: 0883-2417208

Anantapur: Thapovan colony, Bangalore By-Pass Road, Anantapur - 515004, Ph: 08554-276903; Fax: 08554-276904

Karimnagar: Survey No.1341, Vavilalpalay Colony, Jagityala Road, Karimnagar - 505 001, Ph: 0878-2228908; Telefax: 0878-2220433

Nellore: Survey No.527/2, Burrampur Village, Venkatachalam (M), Chennudugunta Panchayat, Nellore, Ph: 0861-2348581/82; Telefax: 0861-2348580

Chennai: SP-3 Developed Plot, Industrial Estate, Guindy, Chennai - 600 032, Ph: 044-22254747/ 48/50/51; Advt Fax: 22254765/22254766/42305325

Coimbatore: 77, Vivekananda Road, Ramnagar, Coimbatore - 641 009, Ph: 0422 2231255
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Subhani



Congress drifts as real issues are left ignored



Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

It looks like procrastination is the chosen path of the Congress even now. It might have been the secret of the party's success in the past, but it does not look like it is effective any longer.

The faction-ridden, intrigue-infested Congress Party, even in its decrepit state, remains more interesting for political observer than the regimanted Bharatiya Janata Party, with the monotonous hectoring of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the few chosen leaders who are licensed to speak. There are more voices inside the Congress despite the dominance of the Nehru-Gandhis, with its camp followers in tow. The meeting convened by party president Sonia Gandhi, which included Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and the 23 "dissenters" who dared to raise doubts about the party's leadership held on Saturday seems to have been a cloak and dagger affair.

The Gandhis seem to have said that the party was "like a family" and that they should all work together, and the family loyalists intoned that Rahul Gandhi was the right man to become party president once again because he enjoys enormous support in the organisation.

The dissidents wanted a decision on the issue of who will lead the party and how, and Rahul Gandhi deflected the question, saying that the meeting was not convened to discuss who will be president but to strengthen the party. He had also clarified that he had nothing against the seniors in the party as it was made out. Priyanka Gandhi Vadra said there was a real need to take to the streets and that just submitting memorandums would not suffice. There was an assurance from the Gandhis that the process of organisational elections was on.

The dissidents said that there would be another

meeting soon like the one on Saturday — for brainstorming on the lines of the meetings at Pachmarhi (held in 1998) and Shimla (2003) in the first decade of Sonia Gandhi as president. But there was no official announcement that there would be such a meeting. At the end of the day, there was no clarity on whether peace was made with the dissidents who wrote the letter or whether they have been left high and dry with vague assurances that the Gandhis recognise their importance.

This has always been the way of the Congress, in the party as well as in the days when it was in power, not to face up to problems or to solve them. The issues are left unaddressed. At the most, consultations without outcomes are held. It looks like procrastination is the chosen path of the Congress even now. It might have been the secret of the party's success in the past, but it does not look like it is effective any longer. An aggressive BJP is not marginalising the Congress as much as the Congress is busy making itself irrelevant.

Interestingly, neither the Gandhis' camp nor the dissidents have any clear idea of how to oppose the BJP, either on the issue of Hindu communalism or that of managing the economy. Rahul Gandhi has instinctively

embraced old-fashioned and discredited secularism, and socialism, which was what was abandoned by Rajiv Gandhi in the 1988 Congress session at the Kamaraj Nagar venue in Chennai. Rahul Gandhi may have his own logic behind his socialist stance. He might say that it was necessary in 1988 to abandon Nehru's socialism of the 1950s, but it is necessary to go back to some kind of socialism in 2020, with globalisation at the end of its tether. And in a certain sense, Rahul Gandhi might be right — that the only way to fight the BJP's Hindu majoritarianism is to stick to one's secularism stance with conviction. But the critics of Congress, including religious minorities, are not convinced that the Congress is standing up for secularism with enough conviction.

The challenge before the Congress is to sense the political winds as well, which is what it tries to do half-heartedly, and becomes an easy target of both the majority communalists as well as the minority communalists. There is no one in the Congress and in the liberal intelligentsia outside to forge a plank which will win over ordinary Hindus who are religious, and tell them that Hindutva is anti-Hindu, which it is.

The new rationale of secularism should be formulated as defending the rights of religious minorities along with the majority's religious rights. The party is indeed moving in this direction, but there is no one really of any standing to articulate this calibrated stance.

The real crisis in the

Interestingly, neither the Gandhis' camp nor the dissidents have any clear idea of how to oppose the BJP, either on the issue of Hindu communalism or that of managing the economy.

Congress is that of the party's second- and third-rung leaders depending on the Gandhis to win elections for them in the way they used to, and to sing praises of the Gandhis as their saviours.

The Gandhis are now unable to deliver electoral victories, and this is no fault of Rahul Gandhi. The country has changed, and people are not looking up to charismatic leaders.

Of course, the BJP leaders are acting like the Congress when they praise Narendra Modi as the talisman of their party, and that Mr Modi is winning the elections for them. It is of course an illusion, not much different from the Congress' that the Gandhis are the mascots.

The dissidents are critical of the monopoly of the Gandhis' followers in the party, who are blocking everyone's way. But the dissidents also do not have any bright ideas to fashion a political vision for the party and the country. But there is something common that unites the Congress establishment (the Gandhis' camp holding party positions) and the dissidents. They are not perturbed by electoral defeats. They have played the game of power much longer than anyone else, and they believe that electoral setbacks are seasonal and that it is not necessary to lose sleep over it.

The many people who do not like Congress and its wily ways but who feel that it is a necessary evil to fight the BJP, which is more dangerous because of its authoritarian and totalitarian regime, are agonising over the present dilapidated state of the grand old party.

They are forever suggesting solutions to the Congress' problems, which are given short shrift by the party itself. The Congress isn't going to mend its ways anytime soon, and its leaders also feel that they do not have to do so.

The writer is a Delhi-based commentator and analyst

LETTERS

STOP DEFECTIONS

There has been a mass defection from the TMC to the ruling BJP in the run-up to elections in Bengal (*Shah to extend stay from Jan. after defections, DC, Dec. 21*). It is a mockery of democracy. Parliament needs to enact a law to prevent elected members from switching parties before their tenure is over.

Dr C. Ghanshyam Visakhapatnam

MONOPOLY LOST

In AP, private English medium schools have built empires with spacious buildings and fleet of buses. Now, with the introduction of English in government schools and Amma Vodi enrolment scheme, students are migrating to government schools in droves, leaving behind almost empty private schools and the managements are in for a shock of their lives.

Parthasarathy Mandadi Tirupati

VIRUS STRAIN IN UK

It is unfortunate that London is reeling under enhanced threat from new variant of Coronavirus. The mutated version is said to be a superspreader. The UK government has alerted its citizen about it and tier 4 restrictions are put in place to restrict the disease. It should be a wake-up call for the entire world, especially India. A bit of laxity is seen in the public.

Dr D.V.G. Sankararao Vizianagaram

50 YEARS AGO IN

DECCAN Chronicle

Sex deviations in Britain

LONDON, Dec. 21. Sex change operations at 300 sterling (Rs. 5,400) at a time, paid for by the tax-payer, are on the increase in Britain, according to an expert in the treatment of sexual deviants.

The expert's statement followed a disclosure in a Sunday newspaper here that already this year in Britain seven men had been changed into women.

The reason, according to a special list in the field of trans-sexualism was the mental distress caused by trans-sexual problems.

A senior official of the Alabama Trust — a charity organisation helping deviants said: "There are a growing number of people with trans-sexual problems seeking medical advice." At least 45 men and a number of women had already had treatment in Britain.

Aakar Patel



'Time bombs' ticking in the Constitution are a worry

There are some time bombs ticking in our Constitution that worry me. These are in Part 4 of the document, about which we are assured by the Constitution's writers that "the provisions contained in this Part shall not be enforceable by any court, but the principles therein laid down are nevertheless fundamental in the governance of the country and it shall be the duty of the State to apply these principles in making laws".

So, these are only principles then. But our experience has been that these are akin to gospel. How many literate Indians will assume that the government is obliged to constitutionally bring about the prohibition of cow slaughter (Part 4's Article 48)? I would say the vast majority would think that.

The insistence with which the ban is pushed might lead one to forget that there is a distinction between a principle not meant to be enforceable and an obligation which must be legislated forthwith ("it's in the Constitution!").

Fewer Indians are likely know about Article 47, which nudges the

State towards making its citizens teetotallers ("the State shall endeavour to bring about prohibition of the consumption except for medicinal purposes of intoxicating drinks and of drugs which are injurious to health").

The insistence, seen most recently in Bihar, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, on creating better, more moral Indians through sobriety is also underpinned by what is seen as the same constitutional obligation on legislators.

The time bombs that worry me are a little further down, in Article 51A, which specifies fundamental duties. It is instructive to read them in full because, and I fear this is already happening, we are moving in the direction of turning these things into laws. The list reads:

"Fundamental duties. It shall be the duty of every citizen of India:

(a) to abide by the Constitution and respect its ideals and institutions, the National Flag and the National Anthem;

(b) to cherish and follow the noble ideals which inspired our national struggle for freedom;

(c) to uphold and protect the sover-

eignty, unity and integrity of India; (d) to defend the country and render national service when called upon to do so;

(e) to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India, transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities; to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women;

(f) to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture;

(g) to protect and improve the natural environment, including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife, and to have compassion for living creatures;

(h) to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform;

(i) to safeguard public property and to abjure violence;

(j) to strive towards excellence in all spheres of individual and collective activity so that the nation constantly rises to higher levels of endeavour and achievement."

Almost everything here fills me with a sense of dread. Example: the bit in (c) saying it is our duty to uphold and protect India's sovereign-

ty, unity and integrity. Are those who raise their voice against, say, the use of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act in Kashmir and the Northeast violating this duty? If so, should they be punished? One might say, no, it is only a general principle offset by other rights. But then, so is a ban on cow slaughter and a ban on alcohol.

What about (a), which requires us to respect the national flag and anthem? Violation of this has already been criminalised, and it happened long before Narendra Modi. We are, however, living in times when the flag and nationalism have been conflated. Are you worried something coercive is around the corner that might equate even inaction with insult? I am. There is talk of a ₹100 crore fine for mistakes in maps.

The inability of our courts to often weed out majoritarian sentiment (as witnessed in the matter of cow slaughter) leads me to think that there is no proper safeguard available there either. The Constitution is a terrific document, but it is also one that has suppressed the Hindu majoritarian sentiment. We are living through times when this suppres-

sion is being popularly rejected. The path to getting everyone to fall in line is open and it lies through such provisions as we have seen. It is no good to say these are only directive principles or whatever else because our experience shows that this is no defence. If something is "in the Constitution", that is the end of it.

Going through the list, some of the clauses are quite chilling, such as 38(1): "The State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life."

Chilling, I accept, given the current mood more than anything else, but chilling nonetheless.

There are several (equal pay for women — Article 39d) that I suspect will not be taken up with any degree of seriousness. It is the ones that touch our current high-intensity nationalism that worry me, and these are the ones I call time bombs.

The writer is a columnist and a senior journalist

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	45,553.96	-3.00
Nifty 50	13,328.40	-3.14
S&P 500*	3,669.42	-1.08
Dollar (₹)	73.79	-0.29
Pound Sterling (₹)	97.54	1.75
Euro (₹)	89.84	0.30
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	50,421,117	0.23
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	50.11	-2.15
IN 10-Yr bond yield	5.957	-0.003
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	0.930	-0.018

* As of 9:30 PM IST

FinMin releases ₹6K cr to states for GST shortfall

The finance ministry on Monday released the eighth weekly instalment of ₹6,000 crore to the states to meet the GST compensation shortfall, taking the total amount released so far under this window to ₹48,000 crore. The Centre had set up a special borrowing window in October, 2020 to meet the estimated shortfall of ₹1.10 lakh crore in revenue arising on account of implementation of GST.

Booking for new Audi A4 sedan begins in India



German luxury carmaker Audi on Monday announced opening of bookings for its upcoming new version of A4 sedan in India. The fifth-generation Audi A4 powered by a 2.0-litre four-cylinder petrol engine can be booked with a booking amount of ₹2 lakh, either through online mode or at the company's dealerships. "This will be our first product launch for 2021," Audi India head Balbir Singh Dhillon said.

AstraZeneca gets nod to market asthma drug

Drug firm AstraZeneca Pharma on Monday said that it has received marketing authorisation from Drug Controller General of India (DGCI) for Benralizumab solution, indicated as an add-on maintenance treatment for severe asthma. Benralizumab (Fasenra) is indicated as an add-on maintenance treatment for severe asthma with an eosinophilic phenotype in adult patients, the company said.

Vineet Agarwal takes over as Assocham chief



Logistics major Transport Corporation of India Limited managing director Vineet Agarwal has taken over as the new president of The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (Assocham). He replaces Niranjan Hiranandani, Co-Founder and Managing Director, Hiranandani Group of Companies. Sumant Sinha, CMD of ReNew Power, is the new senior vice-president of Assocham.

Corporate profits hit an all-time high in Q2

Margins widen on lower input costs, better utilisation

Mumbai, Dec. 21: Corporate profits rose 15 per cent to touch an all-time high in the September quarter as margins widened on softer input costs and better utilisation levels, the research arm of leading rating agency Crisil said on Monday.

From an absolute perspective, the earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation (Ebitda) touched an all-time high ₹1.60 lakh crore in the September quarter, as against ₹1.02 lakh crore in the preceding June quarter, it said.

It can be noted that the trend of companies' profits growing even as the economy contracts as a result of the pandemic has led some watchers to express concern claiming this is illustrative of widening inequalities.

Crisil, which analysed a sample of 800 listed entities comprising 85 per cent of NSE's market cap

FPI inflows touch 12-yr high in Nov.

Mumbai, Dec. 21: Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs), which own more than 24 per cent of the domestic market, pumped in a record \$8.1 billion last month, highest in 12 years, and at \$5 billion to date, December also looks to get record inflows, says a foreign brokerage report.

At \$8.1 billion, India has received the highest FPI inflows among the emerging markets in

November, as Brazil got only \$6.2 billion, South Korea (\$5.2 billion), Taiwan (\$4.5 billion) and Thailand at \$1.1 billion.

This inflow had the valuation premium of India to other emerging markets in the MSCI Index shooting up by 5 percentage point to 46 per cent and is five per cent above the long-term average, says Bank of America Securities in a report.

— PTI

in sectors excluding banking and finance and oil and gas, said improving utilisation levels, along with better management of power, fuel and raw material cost by large

companies contributed to the handsome profit growth.

Aggregate operating profit margins improved by over one per cent despite a rise in raw mate-

Group and RIL. However, the court found that the board resolution approving the Future-RIL deal was not prima facie void.

"...the present application is disposed off, declining the grant of interim injunction as prayed for by Future Retail, however, the statutory authorities/regulators are directed to take the decision on

the applications/objections in accordance with the law," the court said.

After Future Group announced the sale of its retail and wholesale business to Reliance Retail in August, Amazon had filed an arbitration petition with Emergency Arbitrator at Singapore International Arbitration Centre (SIAC) in October, claim-

rial cost during the quarter, it said.

From an employee costs perspective, which is leading to the concerns, it said 370 manufacturing firms in its sample showed a contraction of four per cent while the same for the service sector reported a moderate growth.

The growth in profits came even as the revenues did not go up, the report said, pointing out that the topline was "stable" in Q2 as compared to the year-ago period after falling 29 per cent in the April-June quarter.

The small enterprises have taken a brunt of the hit in revenue impact as compared to the large ones, it said. "Large players saw muted revenue growth. However, small players, which are typically low on bargaining power and cash crunch remained in the red. The smaller the company, the more excruciating the pain," it said.

— PTI

Delhi High Court refuses to restrain Amazon

SANGEETHA G. CHENNAI, DEC. 21

In a relief to Amazon Inc, the Delhi High Court on Monday declined to grant an interim injunction to Future Group which had sought an order to restrain the global e-commerce company from interfering in the \$3.4-billion deal between Future

Group and RIL. However, the court found that the board resolution approving the Future-RIL deal was not prima facie void. "....the present application is disposed off, declining the grant of interim injunction as prayed for by Future Retail, however, the statutory authorities/regulators are directed to take the decision on the applications/objections in accordance with the law," the court said.

ing that Future breached the contract which was entered while taking an indirect stake in their retail business by buying shares in Future Coupons.

The High Court also observed that the parties have expressly chosen the SIAC rules as the curial law governing the conduct of arbitration proceeding.

SUCSEED VC FUND INKS DEALS WITH 3 STARTUP FIRMS

DC CORRESPONDENT HYDERABAD, DEC. 21

Hyderabad-based SUCSEED Indovation, a Sebi registered Alternative Investment Fund (AIF-I) venture capital fund, on Monday said that it has raised ₹40 crore for its maiden fund. Through this fund, the venture fund plans to support over 50 startups till they become large enterprises.

Making the announcement, Vikrant Varshney, co-founder and managing partner of the venture capital fund, said, "We are excited to state an overwhelming response and oversubscription to our first closing of the maiden ₹100 crore fund. Angel Investors, CXOs in large Domestic and global enterprises, family offices, and few family trusts have participated in the first successful closing of ₹40 crore."

Announcing the details of new early-stage investments, Vikrant said "Indovation Fund has identified three startups — Stargate, Auris, and Freestand — for investment and has signed term sheets."

GMR gets nod for demerger plan

New Delhi, Dec. 21: GMR Infrastructure on Monday said that it has received consent from stock exchanges, with no adverse observations, on its proposed restructuring involving demerger of its non-airport vertical business.

The company said it will file the scheme with the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) within six months.

The company said it had filed an application to "the BSE and National Stock Exchange of India towards the composite scheme of amalgamation and arrangement amongst GMR Power Infra (GPIL), GMR Infrastructure, GMR Power and Urban Infra and their respective shareholders (scheme)".

In August this year, GMR Infrastructure unveiled a strategic group restructuring plan involving demerger of non-airport vertical business as part of efforts to simplify the corporate holding structure.

The restructuring is a

step in the right direction towards creating pure plays in different businesses of the group thereby attracting sector-specific global investors and unlocking value for the current shareholders of GMR Infrastructure, the company had then said in a statement.

Separate listing of both the airport and non-airport businesses will also help in simplifying the corporate holding structure, the statement said.

The vertical split demerger will go a long way in facilitating deeper understanding of the airport business independently as compared to other business verticals within the group, the statement added.

Currently, GMR group operates the country's busiest aerodrome, Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi, and Hyderabad's Rajiv Gandhi International Airport. Also, it operates Cebu airport in the Philippines.

— PTI

Global pharma may look at India for APIs

SANGEETHA G. CHENNAI, DEC. 21

Global pharma companies are actively looking at de-risking their supply chain from China by adding new suppliers of active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) and India, which is increasing its production, is in a sweet spot.

Global companies, especially those based in the US and Europe, are actively looking at de-risking their supply chain from China. "They have three options: They can either produce APIs in-house or outsource manufacturing to other US or Europe-based companies. The third option is to choose a supplier from a developing country ex-China. However, the first two options are not viable for their entire portfolio, leaving the third option," finds Emkay Global Financial Services.

Indian companies have an edge, given their long history of supplying formulations and APIs globally, better quality and regulatory compliance and better supply reliability.

However, the financial

Mahesh Bank election ends up in controversy

DC CORRESPONDENT HYDERABAD, DEC. 21

In a dramatic turn of events, results of elections of a new board of directors for AP Mahesh Co-operative Bank have been withheld by the returning officer, following allegations of malpractice.

As many as 32,000 shareholders cast their votes in the elections conducted at LB Stadium on Sunday to elect 15 directors of the bank. The counting commenced on Monday at Nizam College.

After the completion of six rounds of counting, Bhagwati Devi Baldewa, the challenger to the incumbent chairman Ramesh Bung, objected to

After rival candidate Bhagwati Devi alleged bogus votes, returning officer S. Tharani abruptly stopped the counting and withheld the results. This resulted in a mild tension between supporters of both the panels.

the counting of votes in the seventh round alleging that they are bogus votes.

Returning officer S. Tharani abruptly stopped the counting and left the counting centre. The withholding of results triggered a mild tension between supporters of both the panels.

Bung alleged that the

returning officer had stopped the counting and withheld the results without citing any reason. "As their victory of our panel became imminent, the rival panel hurled baseless allegations against us," said Bung.

According to sources, the panel led by the incumbent chairman had secured 12 posts, while the Baldewa panel got three seats.

The counting got disrupted for two hours due to power outage. After the power supply resumed, Baldewa raised objections against the votes. During the polling day also the Bhagwati panel alleged that bogus votes were cast, which led to tension at LB Stadium surroundings.

89% Indians are keen to resume travel, says survey

New Delhi, Dec. 21: Travel services firm Thomas Cook India and its Group Firm SOTC Travel on Monday said that 89 per cent of respondents in a survey conducted by them across tier-1 and 2 cities in India displayed keen interest to resume travel, revealing resurgence of consumer confidence.

Thomas Cook India and its group company surveyed over 2,700 customers to identify emerging consumer behaviours and trends that will drive travel preferences during the COVID-19 era, a joint survey report, enclosed with a regulatory filing,

said. "A combination of lockdown fatigue and strong pent-up demand, coupled with positive sentiment due to announcements on the vaccine saw 89 per cent respondents displaying keen interest to resume travel," the survey added.

About 67 per cent respondents are willing to travel in the next 6 months while 33 per cent indicated that they would wait for the launch of the vaccine, according to the survey.

"Respondents continue to display an increasing focus on hygiene and safety — with 93 per cent respondents highlighting

this as the most important factor while deciding a holiday," Thomas Cook India said.

Out of the 2,700 respondents across the tier I and tier II cities, 52 per cent stated that they are likely to take a domestic holiday, while 48 per cent of respondents likely to take an international holiday, it added.

With health and safety topping the priority list in travel decisions, 73 per cent respondents said that they are willing to increase spends to ensure higher levels of health and safety on their holiday, the company said in the filing.

— PTI

MOST INDIANS SEEK TO BUY 5G READY SMARTPHONES

New Delhi, Dec. 21: Around 83 per cent people in a survey in India shared that 5G is one of the factors that they consider while buying a new phone and nearly three in every five existing premium smartphone users are looking to upgrade their device to the next generation technology, according to a report released by Cybermedia Research.

According to the survey, 81 per cent respondents prefer Oppo for 5G smartphone and 79 per cent opted for Samsung.

The global survey conducted in India, China and West Europe found that 5G users, where the service is available, have experienced better video calls, faster downloads and ability to stream ultra high definition videos and satisfaction level from 5G is around 80 per cent. The technology is pushing growth of video content creation in markets where it is available and the same is expected to follow in India as well, the report said.

— PTI

US CONGRESS SEALS NEARLY \$1-TRILLION COVID-19 RELIEF

Washington, Dec. 21: Top Capitol Hill negotiators sealed a deal on Sunday on an almost \$1 trillion Covid-19 economic relief package, finally delivering long-overdue help to businesses and individuals and providing money to deliver vaccines to a nation eager for them.

The agreement, announced by Senate leaders, would establish a temporary \$300 per week supplemental jobless benefits and \$600 direct stimulus payments to most Americans, along with a new round of subsidies for hard-hit businesses and money for schools, health care providers and renters facing eviction.

The House was expected to vote on the legislation on very late Sunday or Monday and Senate action would follow. Lawmakers are eager to leave Washington and close out a tumultuous year.

— AP

GOVERNMENT IS KEEN ON INCREASING PROFITABILITY TO REALISE MORE VALUE DURING STAKE SALE

Centre plans tough annual targets for PSUs

New Delhi, Dec. 21: India plans to set tough financial targets for state-run firms to try to improve their valuations ahead of a push by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to privatise some companies, according to a draft government document and sources.

The government, which is trying to rein in its fiscal deficit, wants state-run firms to focus on improving market capitalisation and dividend payouts from the 2021-22 fiscal year, starting April, as well as ramping up the sale of non-core assets, the sources said.

State-run companies have traditionally largely targeted raising output

and increasing revenues, rather than improving efficiency and valuations, contributing to years of share price underperformance versus the broader market.

"The companies need to raise their valuation and profitability in a changing business environment. Then only we will be able to get a better price (from stake sales). Shareholders and investors should be rewarded," said a government source with knowledge of the plan.

After regaining power in 2019, Modi's government prepared a plan to raise as much as ₹3.25 lakh crore over five years by selling down its stakes

● The government wants state-run firms to focus on improving market capitalisation and dividend payouts from the 2021-22 fiscal year, starting April, as well as ramping up the sale of non-core assets, the sources said.

● For unlisted companies an improvement in earnings per share will be a key parameter instead of market capitalisation, the document showed.

in companies including Oil and Natural Gas Corp, Indian Oil Corp, NMDC Ltd, Coal India, Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd and BEML Ltd.

It announced moves to privatise companies in non-strategic parts of the economy and reduce the number of firms in key sectors. The government

has already initiated steps to privatise Bharat Petroleum, Container Corp and Shipping Corp.

However, weak investor sentiment and limited demand have led to delays. So far this fiscal year to end-March 2021, the government has raised only a tenth of its targeted ₹1.2 lakh crore

stake sales.

The planned changes in annual targets could be announced in next year's federal budget, due in February, a second government source said.

"The state run companies will need to deploy funds raised through asset monetisation for issues like debt repayment. They should have return on capital employed and return on equity quite high on the margin," the source said.

For the first time, India will include annual targets for state-run companies on metrics such as earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation (EBITDA), according to the sources

and a document on the draft guidelines, which is currently before a government committee.

Other targets will include increasing market capitalisation or share price, as well as measures such as return on net worth and capital employed, they said.

For unlisted companies an improvement in earnings per share will be a key parameter instead of market capitalisation, the document showed.

Managers at state-run companies will have their bonuses and incentives linked to meeting the annual targets. The finance ministry did not respond to emails seeking comments.

— Reuters

SHORT TAKES

Man Utd revel in 6-2 win vs Leeds

Manchester: Manchester United waited 16 years to play old rivals Leeds in the English Premier League, and then made it look distinctly second-class. United charged to a 6-2 victory on Sunday, though both teams could easily have scored more, as they roared back into the EPL title race in third. The easy win put United ahead of Tottenham, which swept United aside 6-1 in October. Scott McTominay looked like one of the Premier League's top scorers as Man United swept into an early lead over Leeds.

Defensive midfielder McTominay who hadn't scored in the EPL since March netted in the second and third minutes after he was left plenty of space to run through the Leeds defense. Bruno Fernandes and Victor Lindelof extended United's lead amid more static defending from Leeds, with more goals from Daniel James and Fernandes in the second half. — AP

Mariners give BFC the blues

Goa: David Williams' 33rd-minute strike proved the difference as ATK Mohun Bagan got the better of Bengaluru FC in the Indian Super League at the Fatorda Stadium on Monday. The Australian scored his first goal of the campaign with a stunner which was enough to inflict on Bengaluru, their first defeat of the season. The win took the Kolkata side level to 16 points from seven matches, the same as Mumbai City FC. Bengaluru stayed third with 12 points. ATKMB looked threatening from the start and had good opportunities to convert their dominance into goals. But Manvir Singh saw both his efforts easily saved by the keeper during the first quarter. ATKMB deservingly took the lead at the half-hour mark.

Benzema leads Madrid to win

Barcelona: Karim Benzema scored one goal and set up another to lead Real Madrid to a 3-1 win at Elbar, keeping the defending champions level on points with Atletico Madrid at the top of the Spanish league. Zinedine Zidane's side is behind Atletico on goal difference. The city rivals are three points ahead of Real Sociedad and eight points ahead of Barcelona, who are in fifth place behind Villarreal. Benzema opened the scoring in the sixth minute on Sunday when he controlled an expert pass from Rodrigo before knocking the ball past goalkeeper Marko Dmitrovic. The French striker assisted Luka Modric in the 12th after he found the Croatia midfielder arriving unmarked at the edge of the area. Modric fired a right-footed strike into the net to score what proved to be the winning goal. — AP

AC Milan's Leao scores in 6 secs!

Milan: AC Milan forward Rafael Leao scored the fastest-ever goal in Serie A history on Sunday, netting after just six seconds in a 2-1 win at Sassuolo which kept his side top of the table ahead of city rivals Inter Milan. Milan, chasing a first Serie A title since 2011, launched straight into attack from kick-off, with Turkish midfielder Hakan Calhanoglu setting up Leao to slot home the rapid opener. The previous fastest goal in the Italian top flight had been Paolo Poggi's for Piacenza against Fiorentina in December 2001 after eight seconds. Milan have a one-point advantage on Antonio Conte's Inter who beat Spezia 2-1, with champions Juventus four points behind the leaders in third after a 4-0 win over Parma on Saturday. — AFP

Live on TV

CRICKET

Big Bash League: Sydney Thunder vs Perth Scorchers from 1.45 pm on Sony Six, HD

FOOTBALL

Italian League: Crotone vs Parma from 11 pm, Juventus vs Fiorentina from 1.45 am (Wednesday) on Sony Ten 2, HD

Indian Super League: Odisha vs North East United from 7.20 pm on Star Sports 2, 3

WWE

WWE Raw: Bouts from 6.30 am on Sony Ten 1, HD

All eyes on Jadeja

Ravindra likely to replace Vihari in playing XI for second Test

Adelaide, Dec. 21: The Indian team management will be keenly monitoring Ravindra Jadeja's progress leading up to the Boxing Day Test against Australia this weekend as, if fit, the all-rounder could walk into the playing XI in place of Hanuma Vihari.

Jadeja, who suffered a concussion during the first T20 international, also sustained a hamstring injury which ruled him out of the first Test.

However, over the past few days when India were playing the Test match, Jadeja has slowly returned to the nets.

It has been learnt that the senior all-rounder is recovering well but it can't be said with certainty that he will be 100 per cent fit for the second Test in Melbourne starting on December 26.

But if fit, the axe will fall on Andhra Pradesh batsman Vihari, not because of his low scores in the Adelaide Test but purely based on the best combination that Ajinkya Rahane and Ravi Shastri can put on the field.

"If Jadeja gets fit to bowl long spells, then there is no debate at all. Jadeja replaces Vihari on the basis of his all-round skills. Also it gives us an option to play five bowlers at the MCG," a senior BCCI source told PTI on conditions of anonymity.

With Mohammed Shami already ruled out of the series because of a wrist fracture, India might just be tempted to go in with five specialist bowlers instead of the usual four, which has been their template for years.

INDIA'S PRACTICE CANCELLED

The Indian team had a scheduled practice session at the Adelaide Oval on Monday but due to steady rain, it had to be cancelled.

With skipper Virat



India's Ravindra Jadeja stretches during a practice session in Adelaide on December 16, ahead of the first Test against Australia. — AFP

Kohli set to leave for India on Tuesday and the squad travelling to Melbourne, the skipper apparently had a chat with his team on the way forward after the 36 all-out debacle here.

ROHIT QUARANTINE IN SYDNEY

Senior batsman Rohit Sharma can start training from January 3 ahead of the Sydney Test. He is currently locked in a hard quarantine in a two-room apartment in Sydney.

The BCCI, at the moment, can't shift Rohit in the middle of quarantine.

— PTI

BOXING DAY TEST IS CRUCIAL, SAYS BURNS

Adelaide, Dec. 21: If opener Joe Burns' views are any indication, another onerous task awaits an embattled Indian team, as Australia are entering the second Test believing that a favourable result for them in Melbourne could "decide the fate" of the four-match series.

"We have got some scars as well, we just have to prepare well, start well and carry on the momentum from the last game," Burns said during a virtual press conference on Monday.

"We know that Indians are going to bounce back in

We know that Indians are going to bounce back in the next Test, which is going to play a crucial role in (deciding the) fate of the series.

— JOE BURNS
Australia opener

the next Test, which is going to play a crucial role in (deciding the) fate of the series."

The absence of Kohli and Mohammed Shami will be "big losses" but Burns is expecting a strong comeback by the visitors.

"I think Shami and Virat

are obviously big losses for India. In saying that the Indian team does have very good depth as well. So, they are still going to be very challenging," Burns said. "It is always hard to replace world class players like that, but when we look (at the guys) that they got to come in, we are going to prepare well for the next game. We know that Indians are going to bounce back strongly."

Shami was ruled out of the remainder of the Test series after a nasty blow on his hand led to a wrist fracture. — PTI

KALLIS NAMED ENG BATTING CONSULTANT

London, Dec. 21: South African legend Jacques Kallis was on Monday appointed as the batting consultant of the England team for next month's two-match Test tour of Sri Lanka.

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) said in a statement that the team will depart for Sri Lanka on January 2.

"Seven coaches will join the squad for the two-Test tour," the ECB said.

"Former South Africa all-rounder Jacques Kallis joins the England setup for the first time as batting coaching consultant," it added.

The 45-year-old Kallis worked in a similar role with the Proteas last year in the Test series against England. — PTI

I don't think India will recover from loss: Brad

Melbourne, Dec. 21: Former Australia wicketkeeper Brad Haddin reckons the opening day/night Test was India's best shot at winning in the ongoing series as it will be very difficult for the visitors to script a turnaround after demoralizing eight-wicket loss in Adelaide.

India were bundled out for their lowest-ever Test score of 36 in their second innings as Australia claimed an eight-wicket win in the pink-ball Test to take a 1-0 lead in the Border-Gavaskar trophy.

"I don't think they will (recover from the loss)," Haddin told *SEN Radio*.

The 43-year-old feels the conditions at the Adelaide Oval were conducive to the Indian



Brad Haddin

bowling attack.

"I thought their only opportunity to win a Test match was the first Test at Adelaide.

"I thought the conditions suited their bowling and I thought they'd get enough runs. But I don't think they'll be able to turn it around.

"You've got one Test up at Brisbane where no

one beats Australia. These next two wickets will be suited to Indian cricket, but I don't think they'll be able to turn it around," Haddin added.

India created history by registering their maiden series win Down Under in 2018-19 on the back of a lethal pace-bowling attack.

"They had a great bowling attack the last time they come out here, and now with Shami out with a broken arm they don't have enough depth to cover that," Haddin said.

"Yes India were driving the game and we were talking at the start of day three about how Australia would get back into it, but the collapse they had has to leave some marks." — PTI

Ian bats for on-field safety rules

Adelaide, Dec. 21: Former Australia captain Ian Chappell has advocated a review of on-field safety measures in cricket, saying it would be a good idea to "strengthen any law" that can protect tailenders when they face short-pitched bowling.

The run-up to the Test series between India and Australia was marked by a series of blows to head and concussion-related substitutes, reviving the debate around the use of bouncers by fast bowlers. Chappell rejected the idea

of banning the delivery altogether.

"Any talk of completely banning the bouncer should be dismissed as quickly as bowlers removed New Zealand batting bunny Chris Martin," Chappell wrote in *ESPNcricinfo*.

Instead, the batting great added, "The time is ripe for a worldwide review into on-field safety, including batsmen, bowlers and umpires, with batting technique a top priority.

"In conducting this

review it would be appropriate to strengthen any law regarding the protection of tailenders in facing short-pitched bowling."

Being one of the finest experts of the game, Chappell is very much mindful of the fact that it is meant for the protection of players, especially the tailenders.

He said complaining about a player not being a like-for-like replacement "seems pointless".

A concussed Ravindra Jadeja being replaced by

leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal in the T20 series is a case in point.

"The heat rose in this argument when Chahal claimed three wickets and the player-of-the-match award in India's narrow victory. Complaining about a player not being a like-for-like replacement seems pointless; it's always going to be difficult to please all parties."

Chappell also stressed on improving the batsmen's technique to face the bouncer. — PTI

Sindhu, Saina ready for action

New Delhi, Dec. 21: India's top shuttlers P.V. Sindhu and Saina Nehwal will be seen in action for the first time since the coronavirus-forced break when they compete in three upcoming tournaments in Bangkok, including the prestigious BWF World Tour Finals.

With Olympic qualifications in mind, the Badminton Association of India (BAI) on Monday announced a strong eight-member squad to participate in the three upcoming tournaments, scheduled in January.

The team, consisting of Sindhu, Saina, B. Sai Praneeeth, Kidambi Srikanth, Satwiksairaj Rankireddy, Chirag Shetty, Ashwini Ponappa and N. Sikki Reddy, will begin their campaign with Yonex Thailand Open from January 12-17.

That will be followed by Toyota Thailand Open (January 19-24) and the prestigious HSBC BWF World Tour Finals which is rescheduled for January 27-31.

After the Coronavirus outbreak in March disrupted the sporting world, this will be the first time that top Indian players, apart from Srikanth, will feature in any international tournament.

The former World No. 1, Srikanth had made a comeback when he played the Denmark Open in October.

● **With Olympic qualifications in mind, the Badminton Association of India (BAI) on Monday announced a strong eight-member squad to participate in the three upcoming tournaments, scheduled in January.**

"We are very happy to see badminton finally getting back on the court. It gives us hope that tournaments can eventually make a steady comeback in near future. Most of our players haven't played tournaments in the last 7-8 months," BAI general secretary Ajay Singhania said.

"However, they have been training to the best of their abilities at the camp. The purpose of sending a full-strength team in these tournaments so that players can get the much-needed tournament practice ahead of the Olympic qualifiers," he added.

The team will also be accompanied by singles foreign coaches Agus Dwi Santoso and Park Tae Sang and doubles coach Dwi Kristiawan alongside support staff consisting of Kiran Challagundla, Johnson, Evangelina Baddam and M. Srikanth. — PTI

GOLFER KO CAPS YEAR WITH CME GROUP TITLE

Naples, Dec. 21: Jin Young Ko missed most of the LPGA Tour season and still won the yearlong money title.

That's what a \$1.1 million check does.

Ko, the No. 1 player in the world, put an emphatic capper on her truncated year on Sunday by shooting a final-round 6-under 66 and winning the CME Group Tour Championship by five strokes over Hannah Green and Sei Young Kim.

"I still can't believe it, that I'm here, that I won this tournament," Ko said.

With a birdie on the final hole, the LPGA's final putt of the season, Ko finished at 18 under for her seventh career LPGA win. Green's final-round 67 — on her 24th birthday — helped push her into the second-place tie.

Kim, who took a one-shot lead into the final round, shot 72 and that was good enough for her to clinch Rolex Player of the Year honours. Danielle Kang won the Vare Trophy for the lowest scoring average.

The win wrapped up a wire-to-wire year in the number one spot for Ko, who has held the ranking since July 29, 2019. — AP

