

THE ASIAN AGE

NEW DELHI THURSDAY 24 DECEMBER 2020



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Mamata gets invite from farmers to join stir, sends five TMC MPs to Singhu



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Prez Trump refuses to sign Covid-19 relief bill, seeks \$2,000 stimulus payment

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Dimple leaves everyone awestruck with performance in Christopher Nolan's *Tenet*



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Actress Adah Sharma dressed as Santa Claus at an event in Mumbai on Wednesday. — PTI

Trump pardons 15, including Russia probe figure, allies

Washington: President Donald Trump has pardoned 15 people, including a pair of Congressional Republicans who were strong and early supporters, a 2016 campaign official ensnared in the Russia probe and former government contractors convicted in a 2007 massacre in Baghdad. Mr Trump's actions in his final weeks in office show a president who is wielding his executive power to reward loyalists and others who he believes have been wronged by a legal system he sees as biased against him and his allies. — AP

Full report on Page 6

Tribunal asks India to pay Cairn \$14bn

New Delhi: India has been ordered to return up to \$1.4 billion to Cairn Energy Plc of UK after an international arbitration overturned tax demanded retrospectively — an award the government indicated it may challenge. The government was asked to compensate Cairn “for the total harm suffered” together with interest and cost of arbitration. — PTI

Full report on Page 7

Mumbai Rajdhani to start from Dec. 30

Mumbai: A Rajdhani special train will run on four days of the week between Mumbai and Hazrat Nizamuddin (Delhi), the central railway said in a release on Wednesday. The central railway had suspended its Mumbai-Delhi Rajdhani train after the outbreak of coronavirus in March. — PTI

COUNTERPOINT



That line is for those with MLA's letters? This is for those with MP's!

WEATHER

Max: 22°C
Min: 6°C
RH: 58%
Rain: Nil

Forecast: Fog

ASTROGUIDE

Sarvari: Dakshinayana
Tithi: Margasira Shuddha Dasami till 11.17 pm
Star: Ashwini full day
Varjyam: 3.04 am to 4.53 am
Durmuhurtam: 10.26 am to 11.10 am; 2.49 pm to 3.33 pm
Rahukalam: 1.30 pm to 3 pm
SUNSET TODAY 5.30 PM
SUNRISE TOMORROW 7.11 AM
MOONRISE TOMORROW 1.45 PM
MOONSET TODAY 1.50 AM

■ Independents, with 50 seats, emerge key players; Cong gets 26

Gupkar wins big in J&K DDC polls, BJP single largest party

YUSUF JAMEEL
SRINAGAR, DEC. 23

The “People’s Alliance for Gupkar Declaration” (PAGD), a combine of Jammu and Kashmir’s half-dozen mainstream regional Opposition parties and their allies from the national Left parties, made it big in the Union territory’s first District Development Council (DDC) elections. Its tally stands at 110, out of 278 results officially declared on Wednesday evening.

However, the PAGD’s arch-rival, the BJP, has not only emerged as the single largest party by winning 75 seats, it has done better in the overall voteshare. On the other hand, Independents, many of them reportedly the BJP’s proxies, have emerged as key players with a tally of 50 seats.

The Congress bagged 26 seats, the newly-formed J&K Apni Party (JKAP) 12, J&K National Panthers Party (JKNPP) and People’s Democratic Front (PDF) two seats each, and the Bahujan Samaj Party one seat.

The PAGD’s tally includes 67 seats won by



NC vice-president Omar Abdullah addresses party workers in Srinagar on Wednesday. — PTI

the National Conference (NC), 27 by the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), eight by the J&K People’s Conference (JKPC), five by CPI(M) and three by J&K Peoples’ Movement (JKPM).

J&K’s state election commissioner K.K. Sharma said that at the end of “peaceful” counting for 278 of the 280 constituencies, while the BJP has emerged as the single largest party, winning 75 seats, the Independents “turned out to be the major reflection during these elections, winning

18 per cent of the total seats while registering their win in 50 seats”.

The counting remained suspended in two constituencies — Drugmulla in Kupwara district and Hajin-A in neighbouring Bandipore district — over the citizenship issue of two women candidates. The SEC said counting was “deferred” in these two segments “in view of a question that has arisen on eligibility of one each contesting candidates from the seats”. He added: “A final decision in this

■ Turn to Page 4



Army Chief Gen. M.M. Naravane with the local commanders and troops at a forward base in Ladakh on Wednesday. — PTI

Centre alerts states/UTs on tests for new mutated virus

VINEETA PANDEY
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

The samples of 22 passengers who have tested positive at various Indian airports while arriving from Britain were sent for genome sequencing in government laboratories to see if they are infected with the new, mutated Covid-19 virus that is circulating in the United Kingdom. Passengers from the UK were found positive to the Sars-CoV-2 (novel coronavirus) in

Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Goa, Punjab, Gujarat and Kerala over the past two days, since the Centre had increased vigilance against the new mutated virus that has 70 per more transmissibility. The mutated virus has, however, not shown any sign of any severity in infection or higher mortality.

As the genome sequencing reports are awaited, Union health secretary Rajesh Bhushan held a

meeting Wednesday with various states to review the status of passengers coming from the UK to India and those found positive. Officials said at the meeting the Standard Operating Procedure issued by the health ministry Tuesday for Epidemiological Surveillance and Response in the context of new virus variant detected in the UK was discussed and states/UTs were advised to access details of passengers from

■ Turn to Page 4

Farmers ready for talks if Centre has an ‘open mind’

On Christmas, PM to meet 9cr farmers, give ₹18Kcr aid

SANJAY KAW
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

Uncertainty over the resumption of talks between the protesting farmers and the Centre lingered Wednesday as the farmers’ leaders made it clear they will join the next round of negotiations only after getting a concrete written proposal from the government on the three contentious laws. The leaders urged the Centre to “abandon its stubbornness” and create a conducive atmosphere with an “open mind and neat intention” for a fruitful dialogue.

As his government is locked in a standoff with farmers, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will hold a virtual meeting with nine crore farmers on Friday, Christmas Day — which is also former PM Atal Behari Vajpayee’s birth anniversary — during which he will clarify the Centre’s position on the farm laws and release the next batch of financial aid of ₹18,000 crores from the PM-Kisan scheme.

The meet will include a conversation with select farmers from six states “who will share their experiences on the government’s initiatives for their welfare”. This is part of the Centre’s efforts to combat the nearly



Farmers at the Singhu border in New Delhi on Wednesday during their “Delhi Chalo” protest march against the Centre’s new farm laws. — PTI

■ **SO FAR,** there has not been any headway after five rounds of talks between the Centre and farmers’ unions, who have said their demand for repeal of the 3 laws was ‘non-negotiable’

month-long protests against the agriculture laws by thousands of irate farmers. The BJP will also distribute an open letter to farmers written by agriculture minister Narendra Singh Tomar.

The PM’s outreach holds immense significance as it comes while the farmers have hardened their stand to continue with their agitation

over the new agriculture laws. So far, there has not been any headway after five rounds of talks between the Centre and farmers’ unions, who have said their demand for repeal of the three laws was “non-negotiable”.

In his “Kisan Diwas” address on Wednesday, Mr Tomar reiterated that the government was ready for a discussion at the time and date chosen by the farmers’ unions. He also urged them to tell him about what they want to “add and subtract” from the government’s proposal.

The minister said: “I am hopeful the farmers’

■ Turn to Page 4

Most ‘rejects’ in NRC to vote in 2021 Assam poll

MANOJ ANAND
GUWAHATI, DEC. 23

In a significant move, the Assam election authorities have made it clear that the 19 lakh people whose names were excluded from the National Register of Citizens but not facing any trial in the foreigners’ tribunal prior to publication of the final citizenship register on August 31, 2019 will be able to exercise their franchise in the 2021 Assembly polls.

“The Election Commission is clear that unless they (NRC rejects) are declared as “foreigners” and the electoral registration officer deletes such names from the voters’ list, they will have the right to vote,” Assam joint chief electoral officer Lakhinandan Saharia told reporters.

The state election authorities clarified if an NRC excludée has not been able to move the foreigners’ tribunal or

his/her case is not sub judice before the tribunal, the election authority won’t intervene. The draft electoral rolls for the 126 Assembly seats in Assam were published in November 2020, with 2.24 crore voters. Corrections are being made to finalise the list by mid-January, the state election authorities said.

“The principle is simple. The competent authority to decide whether a person is an Indian or foreigner lies with the foreigners’ tribunal. The EC has no role in this. Unless the tribunal declares a person as a foreigner, his/her name will be there in the voters’ list even after exclusion from the NRC,” the election authorities said.

According to NRC officials, 1,032 ineligible persons identified by it in last year’s updated NRC are either “declared foreigners”, marked “D voters” or having cases pending at the tribunals.

Kerala nun, priest given life term for 1992 killing

AGE CORRESPONDENT
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, DEC. 23

A special CBI court here Wednesday sentenced a Catholic priest Thomas M. Kottoor and nun Sr Sephy to life imprisonment for the murder of Sr Abhaya 28 years ago.

The 21-year-old nun was found dead in the well of St Pius convent in Kottayam on March 27, 1992.

The court imposed a fine of Rs 5 lakhs each on the duo. They will also undergo seven years in jail for destroying evidence.

The court had found the Knanaya Catholic priest and the nun, who were first and third accused respectively, guilty of murder on Tuesday. The second accused, Fr Jose Poothrikkayil, was discharged earlier. However, the CBI has decided to file an appeal against his discharge.

The CBI contended that Abhaya, a second-year pre-degree student of Kottayam BCM College, was killed after she witnessed the illicit relationship of the accused.

The Kerala police, that investigated the case soon after the tragic killing in 1992, had determined it was a case of death by suicide.

The CBI, however, found that on the day she was found dead, Abhaya had gone to the kitchen to fetch drinking water. At that time, she saw the priest and the nun in a compromising position. The accused attacked her with an axe.



Truck drivers scuffle with police personnel trying to hold them back at the entrance to the Port of Dover in Kent, England, on Wednesday. Freight from Britain and passengers with a negative virus test began

arriving on French shores on Wednesday, after France relaxed a two-day blockade over a new virus variant that had isolated Britain, stranded thousands of drivers and raised fears of shortages. — AP

SHORT TAKES

Gambhir's 'Jan Rasoi' to serve lunch at ₹1

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

With an objective to help poor people in his East Delhi constituency have a "nutritious, hygienic" food, cricketer-turned-politician and BJP MP Gautam Gambhir will inaugurate a "Jan Rasoi" canteen at Gandhi Nagar that will serve lunch at one rupee per person. The first "Jan Rasoi" canteen at Gandhi Nagar will be inaugurated by Mr Gambhir on Thursday. The second such canteen will be launched in Ashok Nagar on January 26. Mr Gambhir has planned to open at least one "Jan Rasoi" canteen in each of the 10 Assembly constituencies in East Delhi. "I have always felt that everybody has the right to healthy and hygienic food irrespective of caste, creed, religion or financial condition. It is sad-denying to see the homeless and destitutes not being able to get even two square meals a day," said Mr Gambhir. "The 'Jan Rasoi' at Gandhi Nagar, one of the biggest wholesale garment markets in the country, will be a full modern canteen which will provide lunch to those in need for just one rupee. It will have a capacity to seat 100 people at a time although due to the COVID 19 pandemic only 50 persons will be presently allowed in to maintain social distancing," Mr Gambhir added. The lunch will comprise rice, daal, vegetable curries and dishes on special occasions. Second helpings will be allowed but people will be required to eat the food at the canteen. The canteen project is being funded by Gautam Gambhir Foundation and personal resources of the MP and has no government support. "Some state governments run canteens which provide subsidised food to the needy people but the national capital has no such facility where low priced good food is made available to people," said the BJP MP. The BJP MP further said it was his vision that each and every person in Delhi gets healthy food and clean water, and asserted to work till the goal was realised.

Start distributing e-health cards: Kejriwal to officials

New Delhi: Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal on Wednesday directed officials to start the distribution of e-health cards at the earliest and implement the health information management system (HIMS) by mid 2021. Under HIMS, various features such as a web portal and a mobile app will be launched to store database of health details of the residents of Delhi. In a meeting to review the ambitious HIMS project, Kejriwal asked officials to finalise the tender for issuing of the e-health cards and select a vendor by February 2021, said a Delhi government statement. The Delhi government has planned to issue QR code based e-health cards to the people of the city to identify and track demographic and basic clinical details of individuals. The residents of Delhi will be mapped for all eligible schemes and programmes through the card that will be integrated with HIMS, said the statement. Physical cards with QR codes will be distributed to each person after physical verification. Also, a provision will be made for issuing modified or duplicate cards at the request of the people, it said. — PTI

DDA approves new housing scheme with 1,210 flats

New Delhi: The highest decision-making body of the DDA on Wednesday gave its nod to the new online housing scheme of the urban body that is planned to be launched next year, officials said. About 1,210 flats will be on offer under the scheme for various category of flats at locations such as Dwarka, Jasola, Manglapuri and Vasant Kunj, they said. The scheme will be completely online through newly-developed AWAAS software of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) from processing of application to possession of flats, a senior official said. The decision was taken during an online meeting of the authority, chaired by Delhi L-G and DDA chairman Anil Bajjal on Tuesday. — PTI

■ No punitive action for next 3 years against Delhi's JJ clusters

Cabinet approves ordinance to protect unauthorised colonies

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

The Union Cabinet on Wednesday approved an ordinance extending protection from punitive action to unauthorised colonies, JJ clusters and constructions in Delhi's rural areas built on agriculture land for another three years, Union minister Prakash Javadekar said.

The move will extend the legal protection for scores of illegal constructions and unauthorised colonies in the national capital from demolition or sealing till December 2023.

There are around 1,700 unauthorised colonies in Delhi. The NCT of Delhi (Special Provisions)

Amendment Ordinance, 2020 is an extension of a similar law first passed in 2011. When the 2011 law had expired, the government had in 2014 enacted the law again to grant a fresh extension.

Since the law re-enacted in 2017 was ending soon and there was no winter session of Parliament, an ordinance was approved to extend the protection for another three years (till December 2023), Javadekar told reporters after the Cabinet meeting.

He said Delhi's unauthorised colonies, JJ (Jhuggi Jhopri) clusters and structures in rural areas built on agriculture land would get protection. The ordinance has to be signed by the President

■ **SINCE THE law re-enacted in 2017 was ending soon and there was no winter session of Parliament, an ordinance was approved to extend the protection for another three years**

before it comes into force, the minister pointed out.

In December 2017, Parliament had passed a bill to protect slums and unauthorised colonies in the national capital region from punitive action till a framework for orderly arrangements was in place.

Last year, the Union Cabinet had approved a proposal to grant ownership rights to people living in unauthorised colonies

in Delhi and said it would benefit 40 lakh people.

On December 19 this year, Union Housing and Urban Affairs Minister Hardeep Singh had said that 3,62,712 people have so far registered themselves on the Pradhan Mantri - Unauthorised Colony in Delhi Awas Adhikar Yojna (PM-UDAY) portal.

"Fulfilling our promise of providing ownership rights to residents of unauthorised colonies of Delhi, 3,62,712 people have registered on PM-UDAY Portal so far. 2,27,063 Geo Surveys done. 2,821 Authorization Slips & Conveyance Deeds handed over" Puri had tweeted along with data under (PM-UDAY).

Landlady alleges rape by tenant, FIR filed

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

The Delhi Police has registered an FIR in southeast Delhi's Sarita Vihar police station after a lady lodged a complaint against a man who was her tenant, that he allegedly pressurised her for marriage without revealing his actual identity and later ended up raping her.

The woman, in her complaint, alleged that a man named Sahib Ali (20), who was staying as a tenant in her house made physical relation with her against her wishes. She stated that the accused did not reveal his real identity and introduced himself as Rahul and proposed her for marriage after the duo became friends.

According to the complaint, the accused married her and later forced her to convert into his religion. She further alleged that Hazisunnala, the father of Sahib Ali alias Rahul also touched her inappropriately and attempted sexual assault on her.

On December 21, one complainant, a resident of Sangam Vihar came to the police station and handed over one complaint to Sarita Vihar police station. It is alleged that one person namely Sahib Ali alias Rahul, aged 20, was staying as a tenant in her house. Both developed friendship. One day, he took her to Ali Vihar where she met his father, mother, brother, sister and brother-in-law. A few days later, she was taken to his parents' house and made physical relation with her against her wishes," police said.

Moderate fog in Delhi, minimum temp dips to 4°C

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

Some parts of Delhi were shrouded in fog on Wednesday as the minimum temperature in the city dropped to 4° Celsius, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said. Moderate fog lowered visibility to 201 metres at Safdarjung and to 350 metres at Palam, an IMD official said.

According to the weather department, "very dense" fog is when visibility is between 0 and 50 metres, 51 and 200 is "dense," 201 and 500 "moderate," and 501 and 1,000 "shallow."

The Safdarjung Observatory, which provides representative data for the city, recorded a minimum of 4° Celsius, which was four notches below normal.

Occultist held from Meerut for duping woman of ₹85K

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

A 55-year-old occultist was arrested from Meerut for allegedly cheating a woman in the name of performing rituals for domestic peace, officials said on Wednesday.

The police received a complaint, where the complainant alleged that she came in contact with one Pandit Rahul Shashtri on November 19 over phone. He advised her to perform a puja for domestic peace for ₹3,500 and also suggested some rituals over the phone.

During the conversation, the complainant was lured and she deposited the

money in his bank account. The accused managed to get credited ₹85,000 to his account, a senior police officer said.

When the woman found herself being cheated, she lodged a complaint. She also alleged that he was pressurising her to deposit ₹55,000 more in his account, the officer said.

"During investigation, the police established the identity of the accused as Harun alias Miyaa Shah Ji Bangali, a resident of Zakir Colony at Meerut in UP, and nabbed him from there on Monday," DCP (Northwest) Vijayanta Arya said.

During interrogation, he said that he works as a

tantrik and has a portal by the name of Miyaa Shah Ji Bangali and taught his son Aarif, the co-accused, to conduct rituals, the police said.

The accused credited the cheated amount to the account of another person known to them. The police found that the accused was registered on Google as Miyaa Shah Ji Bangali as an occultist, who claims to sort out issues other than scientific means, it said.

Harun was found previously involved in a criminal case of murder in a riot in Meerut. Efforts are being made to nab the co-accused persons, the police said.



Aam Aadmi Party leaders and volunteers protest outside the residence of BJP MP Ramesh Bidhuri against his remarks on farmers' protests in New Delhi on Wednesday. The Delhi Traffic Police shut down Lodhi Road from Safdarjung Madarsa to Lodhi Road flyover due to the demonstration by AAP. — G.N. Jha

PNB ex-chief manager, 2 others held for fund misappropriation

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

Three men, including a former chief manager of the Punjab National Bank (PNB), were arrested by the Economic Offences Wing (EOW) of the Delhi police for misappropriation of funds at the Najafgarh branch through a loan fraud.

The accused have been identified as Shailendra Kumar (63), a resident of Dwarka; Ankit Sangwan (29), a resident of Vikaspuri; and Sunil Sarki (31), a resident of Vikas Nagar area.

According to Dr O.P. Mishra, the joint commissioner of police, a complaint was received by the

officials of PNB alleging that a company, Sarki Trading, through its proprietor Sunil Sarki, obtained the CC limit of ₹2.50 crore on the basis of false credentials and documents in the year 2013.

"The addresses of the borrower and the guarantor were not traceable. The said CC account turned NPA (non-performing asset) in 2014. The case was registered at the Najafgarh police station and the investigation was subsequently transferred to EOW in November 2018," said Dr Mishra.

"During investigation, it was revealed that accused Shailendra, being chief manager of PNB, was well acquainted with

the system of the bank. He, in connivance with accused Ankit, Sunil Sarki, and other associates, got a CC account opened in the name of the accused company," said the Joint CP, adding that the trio accused was arrested by the police team on December 22.

Explaining their modus operandi, the Joint CP said that Ankit got prepared all the required documents and applied for loan while Shailendra, being acquainted with the banking process as well as the loopholes of the system, sanctioned and allowed the disbursement of the loan without proper verification of credentials and documents.

Resolve HSRP complaints in 3-4 days: Gahlot

New Delhi, Dec. 23: Delhi transport minister Kailash Gahlot asked stakeholders on Wednesday to provide unique reference numbers to complaints related to the affixation of HSRP and colour-coded stickers on vehicles and resolve the grievances in three-four working days.

At a meeting with officials of the transport department, the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM), HSRP manufacturers and suppliers, the Federation of Automobile Dealers Associations (FADA) and major original equipment

manufacturers (OEMs), the minister also directed for streamlining the overall grievance mechanism.

"The minister directed the officials to streamline the overall grievance mechanism. He said each grievance must be assigned a unique reference number and its receipt should be acknowledged within the next 24 hours. It should also be ensured that the grievance is resolved within the next three-four working days," a statement issued by the transport department said.

Gahlot also asked the transport department offi-



Kailash Gahlot

cials and the SIAM to come up with a solution "as soon as possible" about vehicles registered in other states.

The transport department has been running a "limited" drive to challan



Tents installed for farmers at Ghazipur border during their protest against the new farm laws in New Delhi on Wednesday. — PTI

■ Family from PM's constituency writes to MoS, defence

Varanasi family moves MoD over land grab attempts

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

A prominent family from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's parliamentary constituency Varanasi has written to the defence ministry over attempts being made by local defence estate officers in collusion with land mafia to capture their properties in cantonment area in Varanasi.

The family, which owns family bungalow number 11 along with some other properties in the Varanasi cantonment, has written to MoS defence Shripad Naik giving details how under a systematic plan there is an attempt to take away their properties and give it to the mafia. They alleged that local defence estate officers had many times demanded a bribe of ₹25 lakh from the family or otherwise "they will

face the music."

The family has pointed out that the bungalow has been in their possession since 1969. "If a prominent family from Varanasi constituency, represented by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself, is being harassed in this way by the officials what will they be doing with the common people," said Arun Kumar Gupta, one of the owners.

Mr Gupta alleged that the mafia in connivance with defence estate officers is also trying to encroach on their other properties in Varanasi cantonment, including Bungalow number 2, 15 and 15B, (Hotel DeParis) and 59 (Tourist Dak Bungalow). Mr Gupta said that they have approached various competent authorities regarding this.

On Bungalow 11, Mr

Gupta said that there was an order sent to DM Varanasi by the defence estate officers to evict some six persons who had illegally encroached on some portion of the property. The defence estate officers, in another order to Commander 39 GTC Varanasi cantonment, asked him to seal the bungalow after the eviction of the six unauthorised occupants. The order is illegal, the family said, alleging that they never received any notice for inspection of the property and after the eviction of six illegal occupants the whole property is under their control.

"Neither we received any notice nor we replied. It is all hoax," said the family. Mr Gupta asked for a vigilance enquiry in all their family properties in the cantonment in Varanasi.

Ensure test & quarantine facilities for UK returnees, high court tells AAP govt

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

The Delhi High Court on Wednesday directed the AAP government to frame standard operating procedures (SOPs) to deal with post Covid-19 complications and to ensure that facilities are available to test and quarantine travellers from the UK where a new strain of coronavirus has been discovered. The directions were issued by a bench of Justices Hima Kohli and Subramonium Prasad while hearing a PIL by advocate Rakesh Malhotra seeking increase in the Covid-19 testing numbers in the national capital and getting speedy results.

Mr Malhotra, during the hearing, told the court that there should be some SOPs for managing post Covid-19 complications in those who have recovered from the infection. Subsequently, the bench asked the Delhi government, represented by additional standing counsel Satyakam, to frame the SOPs. The court also took note of the district-wise data of Covid-19 infections in the national capital and the submission by Delhi government that it was "enhancing contact tracings and creating more containment zones" in areas where the positive rate is more. The Delhi government also told the court that in a meeting held on December 21 by the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA), it was decided that the "representative testing" shall be followed and the focus would be more on pockets where the positivity rate is more. According to the status report filed by the Delhi government, as of December 19 the positivity rate was below 2 per cent in all districts except north-west where it was 2.12 per cent. The court on December 3 had directed the Delhi government to "focus on testing and tracing" to deal with the Covid-19 infection numbers in the national capital, as the "fear factor" regarding the virus was "huge" in the minds of people.

▶ The court also took note of the district-wise data of Covid-19 infections in the national capital and the submission by Delhi government that it was "enhancing contact tracings and creating more containment zones" in areas where the positive rate is more.

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Delhi records 871 Covid-19 cases, 18 deaths in last 24 hours

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

Delhi recorded as many as 871 fresh coronavirus cases on Wednesday. With this, the tally of Covid-19 cases in the state has reached over 6.19 lakh while the death toll mounted to 10,347. Eighteen fatalities have been recorded in the last 24 hours, according to the latest bulletin issued by the Delhi health department.

According to a health bulletin issued by the Delhi government, 87,861 Covid-19 tests were conducted in the last 24 hours. The case tally stands at 6,19,618 in the national capital, including 6,01,268 patients who have either been discharged or recovered. The number of active cases is 8,003, of which 4,155 are in home isolation.

From installing freezers to cold chain equipment setup, arrangements are being made at a Delhi government hospital for storage of Covid-19 vaccine, anticipating its arrival, sources said on Tuesday. Delhi health minister Satyendra Jain had recently said that work was underway to build storage and transportation logistics so that once the vaccine arrives the next process can begin soon.

The sources at Rajiv Gandhi Super Speciality Hospital (RGSSH), a dedicated Covid-19 facility with 650 beds, said a total of 90 freezers are to arrive, many of which have already arrived and being installed.

"Besides, there will be two cold chain equipment for storage. The ground and first floors of the utility block, measuring about 4,700 sq ft, will be used for the storage facility," a source said.

When asked about the time of arrival of the vaccine, the sources said, "It is not yet known which vaccine will be coming, let alone the date of arrival."



IN BRIEF

PROBE ORDERED INTO
EVENT IN U.P. PRISON
'GLORIFYING' ASARAM

Shahjahanpur (UP), Dec. 23: Prison authorities in Uttar Pradesh have ordered a probe into allegations that an event at the district jail here glorified godman Asaram, who is serving a sentence for rape.

The rape victim's father made the demand following reports that the self-styled godman's two followers had come from Lucknow, distributed blankets and held a prayer meeting in which Asaram's photograph was placed.

Uttar Pradesh's additional inspector-general (jail) Sharad Kulshrestha has ordered a probe. It will be conducted by the deputy inspector general for Bareilly zone, he told PTI on Wednesday.

Shahjahanpur district magistrate Indra Vikram Singh said a notice has been issued to the jail administration, taking note of news reports.

Action will be taken after its reply is received, he said.

Asaram was convicted in April 2018 of raping a Shahjahanpur girl at his ashram near Jodhpur in 2013. He was arrested by the Jodhpur Police on August 31 that year and has been in jail since then.

The girl's father alleged on Tuesday that Asaram was glorified at a satsang (prayer meeting) held in the prison.

Asaram's followers are doing this to refurbish the image of a rape convict, he had said, demanding a probe.

Earlier, Shahjahanpur Jail superintendent Rakesh Kumar confirmed the distribution of 75 blankets in the jail, but said they were sent there.

According to the other version, the blankets were distributed by Arjun and Narain Pandey, who were earlier lodged in Shahjahanpur jail after being arrested for allegedly killing a witness in a rape case.

The jail superintendent said Pandey had fallen ill and got well after being treated at the prison hospital. When he was released on bail, he pledged to distribute blankets in the jail.

— PTI

ORGANISER OF '17
ELGAR PARISHAD
DENIED EVENT NOD

Pune, Dec. 23: Pune police has denied permission for an event that retired judge B.G. Kolse-Patil, one of the organisers of the December 2017 Elgar Parishad, had planned to hold in the city, a senior official said on Wednesday.

Kolse-Patil had sought to organize a cultural event at Ganesh Kala Krida Manch on December 31.

"We have denied permission in view of the COVID-19 restrictions and law and order situation," said city police commissioner Amitabh Gupta.

Kolse-Patil in his letter seeking permission had stated that the event would be about keeping democracy, freedom and Constitution "unrestrained".

When contacted, he said the organizers would move the High Court against the denial of permission.

The Elgar Parishad conclave, held here on December 31, 2017, became controversial as the Pune police alleged that the speeches made there incited caste violence near the Bhima Koregaon war memorial the next day.

It was also alleged that the event had been backed by Maoists, and several Left-leaning activists including Varavara Rao and Sudha Bharadwaj were arrested in the subsequent probe.

— PTI

'Vaccines may
not be foolproof
against new strain'BHAGWAN PARAB
MUMBAI, DEC. 23

In the wake of a new coronavirus strain detected in the UK, experts have expressed doubts about the potency of vaccines currently being used to treat Covid-19. Dr Sanjay Oak, the head of Maharashtra Covid-19 task force, has said vaccines presently available in some countries may not be 100 per cent effective against the new variant. To deal with the virus, he has emphasised on the need to avoid mass gatherings and wear masks for next one year.

"The vaccines which are in approval stage or have been approved in some countries were developed on the earlier strains of coronavirus. Even a minor change in the mutated Covid-19 strain could challenge the efficacy of the vaccines which are recently developed," Mr Oak said.

The outer layer of the virus has spikes which look like a corona. Even a change in one spike could increase or decrease its severity. Because of the new strain, the currently available vaccines may not have 100 per cent impact on the virus, he added.

According to Mr Oak, a person who has recovered from Covid-19 may get fresh infection from the new strain, but its impact on the body depends on the number of antibodies developed during the first infection. If there are sufficient number antibodies, then the new strain may not be very harmful, he said.

To avoid the risk of

Haryana mantri Vij
brought out of ICU

Chandigarh: Haryana home minister Anil Vij, who is undergoing treatment for Covid-19 at a private Gurgaon hospital, is showing steady improvement, the facility said in a statement on Wednesday.

In a media bulletin issued by the Medanta hospital, medical superintendent Dr A.K. Dubey said Vij was shifted from the ICU to a ward during the day. The minister will continue to be kept under observation, and doctors are hopeful that he will remain stable on oxygen through the nasal cannula, the doctor said, as per a state government statement here.

Dr Dubey said that Vij is admitted to the Covid ward, and doctors have not permitted any visitors to see him.

— PTI

infection of the new variant, Mr Oak has advised to stay away from mass gatherings. Mass gatherings, like weddings or other functions attended by hundreds of people, are acting as super spreaders and should be avoided, he said.

"A virus can mutate once its travels from one continent to another. Hence, we need to be more careful in the coming months. There are chances of many people catching infection by coming close to each other, not wearing masks and gathering in large numbers in a small place. Hence, we need to wear mask for next one year," Dr Oak said.

■ Rahul takes jibe at PM, says 23L globally have received vaccine
'When is India's turn, Modi Ji?'AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday hit out at the Central government for being lax in rolling out the Covid 19 vaccine, claiming that 23 lakh people in the world had already received the Covid-19 vaccine. He also asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi when India's turn will come.

In a tweet, he said, "23 lakh people in the world have already received Covid vaccinations. China, US, UK, Russia have started. India ka number kab ayeega, Modi ji? (When will India get its turn)."

Earlier this month, Prime Minister Modi had assured that vaccines for Covid are "likely to be ready within a few weeks" and the government is "fully prepared for the rollout".

India is yet to approve a vaccine for Covid-19. Pfizer, Bharat Biotech and Serum Institute of India have applied to the Drugs Controller General of India for a licence for emergency use authorisation of vaccines in India.

The Central government aims to inoculate a critical mass of the population so as to break the chain of transmission of the virus. Since the outbreak of the new mutation of the virus in the United Kingdom, the government has banned flights from the UK till December 31.

Since the beginning of the pandemic earlier this year, the Congress has lashed out at the government of not handling the situation correctly and imposing a nationwide lockdown "without proper thinking" that led to massive "disruptions and loss of livelihood" for many.



A volunteer dressed as Santa Claus distributes face masks during a Covid-19 awareness drive in New Delhi Wednesday.

— PTI

K'taka imposes night curfew till Jan. 1

Bengaluru/New Delhi, Dec. 23: Karnataka on Wednesday joined Maharashtra in imposing restrictions amid concerns over a new Covid-19 variant spreading in the UK as authorities in many states focussed on tracing passengers returning from Britain.

The state government said night curfew will be in force between 11 pm and 5 am from December 24 till January 1 but midnight mass will be allowed.

In the national capital, 11

passengers on four flights from the UK were found positive for Covid-19 when tested on arrival at the Delhi airport, said Gauri Agarwal, founder of the Genestrings Diagnostic Centre which is handling coronavirus testing of all passengers at the airport.

She said 50 passengers of these four flights have been put under institutional quarantine.

The government on Monday had directed testing of all passengers coming from the UK on arrival

at Indian airports. It issued a stringent set of SOPs mandating RT-PCR tests at airports for each traveller from the country and isolation in a separate unit of an institutional facility for positive cases.

India suspended all passenger flights connecting the UK from Wednesday till December 31 or till further orders.

Amid concerns over the new coronavirus strain, Union health secretary Rajesh Bhushan reviewed in a meeting held through

video conferencing the status of passengers coming from the UK and found positive in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Goa, Punjab, Gujarat and Kerala.

Mr Yediyurappa said all those travelling to the state and arriving at Bengaluru or Mangaluru airports from abroad must have an RT-PCR Covid-19 negative certificate which should have been obtained 72 hours before their departure time.

— PTI

2 die after ammonia gas leak in Iffco plant

16 others fall sick; UP CM Yogi, fertiliser company order separate probes into incident

New Delhi/Lucknow, Dec. 23: Two people died and 16 others were injured in a major ammonia gas leak at Iffco's Phulpur fertiliser plant in Uttar Pradesh's Allahabad, the firm said on Wednesday.

The gas leakage that took place on Tuesday night around 10.30 pm, however, was restricted and stopped in a short time, the fertiliser cooperative major said in a statement. The two persons who died in the accident were identified as

Iffco deputy manager Abhay Nandan and assistant manager V.P. Singh.

Out of the 16 injured Iffco employees, including three contract labourers, two have been discharged while 14 others are undergoing treatment in different hospitals, the firm said.

Iffco said the accident took place as tie rods of an ammonia plunger pump suddenly broke and got detached leading to heavy ammonia leakage.

Following the leakage, Iffco ordered a technical

probe into the cause of the gas leakage while Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath also ordered an administrative probe into the accident.

"We deeply regret the sad and unfortunate accident happened yesterday night around 10.30 pm due to mechanical failure at #Iffco #Phulpur Ammonia Urea unit in #Prayagraj. Our employees at the site fought bravely to handle the situation," Iffco CEO and Managing Director U S Awasthi tweeted on

Wednesday.

"Our emergency response group, fire and safety team and plant operating staff bravely fought with the emergency situation and restricted the leakage to small area within the plant and normalized it in a short time," the Iffco later said in its statement.

Out of the 16 injured, six were shifted to a hospital in Allahabad, while remaining 10 were admitted to Iffco township hospital, the Iffco said. "Two of them have been dis-

charged. The condition of the remaining 14 is stable," it added.

A technical enquiry committee, headed by an executive director rank officer, has been set up to find out the cause of the incident which took place on Tuesday night, the statement said.

Taking note of the accident, CM Adityanath also ordered a probe into the incident while announcing a financial help of ₹4 lakh each for the family members of those who died in the incident.

— PTI

Ally BTP
withdraws
support to
Raj govt

Jaipur, Dec. 23: The Bharatiya Tribal Party on Wednesday withdrew support to the Ashok Gehlot-led Congress government in Rajasthan.

The BTP, a Congress ally which supported chief minister Ashok Gehlot during the revolt in his party earlier this year, was upset that the ruling party candidates chose BJP over it zila pramukh elections in tribal Dungarpur district, where the outfit is trying to expand its influence.

The BTP had supported the Ashok Gehlot government at the time of crisis but the Congress betrayed the party in the zila pramukh elections. The Congress joined hands with the BJP to prevent the BTP from forming the board in the Dungarpur zila parishad, therefore, we have decided to withdraw the support, party state president Velaram Ghoghra told PTI.

Mr Ghoghra said the intimation about the withdrawal of support has been forwarded to the Rajasthan governor, chief minister and the assembly speaker.

The party has two MLAs in the state and the withdrawal of support will have no impact on the stability of the Congress government, which enjoys the support of 105 MLAs in the assembly of 200.

— PTI

Be more attentive
towards justice,
CJ tells judges

Agartala, Dec. 23: Chief Justice of India Sharad Arvind Bobde said it is the hallmark of every great institution and judges that they are "keener on justice and not merely on law".

Justice Bobde, who inaugurated an e-Sewa Kendra at the high court of Tripura, appealed to judges to be more attentive towards justice.

"It's the hallmark of every great institution and judges that they are keener on justice and not merely on law. I can't say I know much about the law, having been far more invested in justice," he added.

— PTI



Hermits stage a protest over the delay in land allotment for setting up their temporary tents on the bank of Ganga river, ahead of the Magh Mela, amid coronavirus pandemic in Prayagraj on Wednesday.

— PTI

BOTTOM LINE | Discovery may establish missing historical links of Mahakaleswar temple

Remains of 11th century shrine found in Ujjain temple

RABINDRA NATH
CHOUDHURY
BHOPAL, DEC. 23

In a significant discovery, remains of the 11th-century shrine have been found inside the complex of famous Mahakaleswar temple in Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh.

The archaeological remains were discovered when works on extension of the Mahakaleswar temple complex were in progress, Subham Kewaliya, a research scholar in Vikram University in Ujjain, told this newspaper on Wednesday.

A part of the plinth of a shrine was found 20 feet

below the surface inside the Mahakaleswar temple complex, he said.

The local administration has stopped construction works inside the temple complex following the discovery.

A team of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) on Wednesday visited the temple to inspect the site.

"A 15-foot-plinth of a shrine which is in ruinous state lie exposed inside the complex of the Mahakaleswar temple. The style and characteristics of the archaeological remains suggest that the shrine may date back to 10th-11th century AD. But, excavation of



● A PART of the plinth of a shrine was found 20ft below the surface inside the Mahakaleswar temple complex, he said. The local administration has stopped construction works inside the complex following the development.

● THE STYLE and characteristics of the archaeological remains suggest that the shrine may date back to 10th-11th century AD

the site will alone throw light on the shrine," Bhopal ASI superintendent Piyush Bhatt who was part of the team told this newspaper.

The discovery of the shrine may establish the missing historical links of Mahakaleswar temple, Mr Kewaliya said.

History of Mahakaleswar temple, which houses one of the 12 Jyotirlingams, still shrouded in mystery,

although the present structure of the temple is established to date back to 18th century AD.

The presiding deity of the temple, Lord Shiva in lingam form, is believed to be Swayambhu deriving currents of power (shakti) from within itself as against other images and lingams that are ritually established in other Shiva temples.



SHORT TAKES

Jagannath temple reopens for public

Bhubaneswar: Srimandir, the abode of Lord Jaganath at Puri, which remained shut for over nine months following the Covid-19 induced lockdown and protocols of social distancing, reopened on Wednesday morning amid cheers and chanting of devotees and servitors. Besides, Srimandir, several other important shrines in Puri district also reopened. "It was a momentous occasion for us as we were allowed along with our family members to have a darshan of Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra and Devi Subhdra at Srimandir," the temple priests said. According to the local administration, the priests of Srimandir and their families will be allowed to offer prayers at Srimandir on December 23, 24 and 25 while the denizens of Puri city will have the privilege of entering the temple on December 26 and 27.

Govt alerts UTs, states on tests

■ **Continued from Page 1**
The Bureau of Immigration. The states/UTs were also told to send samples of those found positive to the laboratories identified for genome sequencing. The list of six labs along with the contact details of their nodal officers was also shared with the states. The health secretary said the number of such designated labs would increase over the time. Officials said at the meeting the states raised concerns related to logistics and they were advised to coordinate with the respective Airport Health Offices and surveillance officials to ensure adherence to the SOPs. Flights between India and the UK have been stopped from December 22 midnight till December 31 in view of the mutated virus. The daily cases of Covid-19 in India continue to be a decline, with Delhi now showing remarkable improvement. The national capital on Wednesday recorded 871 fresh cases and 18 new deaths, while 23,950 fresh cases were seen across the country, as per health ministry data. The total Covid-19 cases in India reached 1,01,11,256 Wednesday evening, Covid-19India.Org said. Several states have imposed restrictions, prohibitions and night curfews to prevent a surge in cases in the coming festive days.

Gupkar wins big in DDC elections

■ **Continued from Page 1**
regard will be taken after taking all aspects into consideration." Mr Sharma said that BJP has got 24.82 per cent votes in these elections, followed by NC with 16.46 per cent, Congress 13.82 per cent, PDP 3.96 per cent, JKAP 5.3 per cent, JKPC 1.98 per cent votes, while 28,55,509 polled votes went to other candidates, including Independents. Union home minister Amit Shah thanked the people of J&K for voting the BJP as the single largest party in the DDC polls and said that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP "will continue to work relentlessly towards the prosperity and development of the J&K region". In a tweet, he also said: "Congratulations to the people of J&K for such great turnout in DDC polls. I applaud the efforts of our security forces & local administration for successfully conducting these multi-phased elections. This will further boost the morale and trust of people of J&K in democracy." He assured that the Modi government "is doing everything possible to restore grassroots democracy in J&K" and that the maiden DDC polls were the testimony of the same. This was the first democratic exercise in J&K after the Centre's stripping the erstwhile state (including Ladakh) of its special status, abrogating Article 370 of the Constitution and splitting it into two Union territories — J&K and Ladakh — on August 5 last year.

PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti claimed the DDC results "have made it clear that people of J&K voted en masse for PAGD thus rejecting the unconstitutional decision to abrogate Article 370". She added: "They have overwhelmingly supported the PAGD which stands for restoration of J&K's special status". NC vice-president Omar Abdullah had earlier said the BJP had made this election a prestige issue about Article 370 and J&K's special status "but the people have now spoken and it's for those who believe in democracy to pay heed to these voices".

ISI desperate to revive Punjab militancy: Intel

Pak agency shifts its focus from Kashmir Valley to northern state

RAJNISH SHARMA
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

With the recovery of sophisticated weapons, including Chinese made grenades and AK-47 rifles, in a quick succession of 48 hours in border areas of Punjab, Central intelligence agencies have cautioned both Union home ministry and the Punjab government that Pakistan's ISI was now focusing more on the revival of militancy in Punjab rather than Kashmir Valley. "The move is possibly linked to the fluid situation prevailing in Punjab in view of ongoing farmers' agitation," the intelligence alert states. Since Monday joint operations launched by the BSF and Punjab Police have led

to the recovery of at least 11 Chinese made grenades, two AK-47 rifles and several rounds of live ammunition from border areas of Wazirpur Chak village in Gurdaspur district. Initial investigations have revealed that these weapons were dropped using "heavy load Drones" in border areas of Gurdaspur. Interestingly, the Intelligence Bureau had cautioned both the BSF and Punjab Police that Pak ISI could attempt to drop weapons using drones for subversive elements in Punjab. Thus, the weapons were recovered by security forces even before terror operatives could pick them from the drop points. Intelligence sources said it was clear now that there is a clear "tactical shift in ISI's strategy" now as it is

● **SENIOR HOME** ministry officials too are closely monitoring the situation and are in constant touch with their counterparts in Punjab

shifting its focus from Kashmir Valley to revive militancy in Punjab. Following inputs from Central intelligence agencies, both BSF and Punjab police, have put four districts long Pakistan border — Amritsar, Pathankot, Gurdaspur and Taran Taran — on high alert. "There are specific inputs which reveal that Pak agencies like ISI are keeping a very close watch on how the farmers' agitation pans out in Punjab since agriculture is sensitive issues there. With Punjab farmers leading

this agitation, Pak based subversive elements are trying to take advantage of the situation to once again revive militancy in this border State. So ISI is diverting its resources from Kashmir Valley to Punjab now," a senior intelligence official said. Senior home ministry officials too are closely monitoring the situation and are in constant touch with their counterparts in Punjab. Sources said BSF was also rushing sophisticated equipment and gadgets to its border surveillance units in Punjab to intercept the Drones coming from Pakistan loaded with weapons. A close surveillance is also being kept on hawala channels to check the inflow of foreign funds into some areas of Punjab.

Army Chief visits forward posts, reviews LAC situation

PAWAN BALI
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

Army Chief Gen. Manoj Mukund Naravane on Wednesday visited frontline posts in Ladakh, including Rechin La in Chushul sector, where Indian troops in August in a tit for tat action against Chinese army had occupied strategic heights. Indian Army action was in response to Chinese troops occupying areas between finger 4 to 8 in Northern banks of the Pangong Tso in the month of May. Indian Army's action had taken Chinese by surprise and they made several failed attempts to

dislodge Indian troops from these strategic heights. In Rechin La, Indian and Chinese troops are reported to be just 200-300 metres apart. Gen. Naravane undertook on the spot inspection of the state of habitat of troops on the forward line of defences at Rechin La. He was on a one day visit to Leh based Fire and Fury Corps. The Army Chief visited forward base Tara and interacted with the local commanders and troops. Lt. Gen. P.G.K. Menon, the commander of "Fire and Fury" Corps briefed the Army chief on various aspects of the situation in

eastern Ladakh. The military stand-off between India and China in Eastern Ladakh has entered in its eighth month with no agreement on disengagement in sight. The soldiers deployed in front bases in Ladakh are now fighting the elements with temperatures having already dropped to minus 20 degrees Celsius. The Army Chief also distributed sweets and cakes to soldiers on the eve of Christmas. Last week during foreign ministry level talks between India and China, two sides had agreed to hold the next round of military dialogue at an early date.

Didi gets invite to join farm stir, sends 5 MPs to Singhu

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, DEC. 23

A section of agitating farmers, demanding withdrawal of three controversial farm bills, have urged West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to join them after she again reached out to them on Wednesday with her support on the occasion of Kisan Diwas. Sending five MPs of her party to the protest site at Singhu border near Delhi, the Trinamul Congress supremo also spoke to the farmers over phone for the second time within three weeks in her bid to make the burning issue a poll plank against the BJP in the next year's Assembly Election in the state. It is not, however, clear whether Banerjee has responded to their plea to join them as she had earlier



A Trinamul Congress leader shares langur with a farmer at Singhu border in New Delhi on Wednesday. — PTI

er only pledged her "moral" support to the December 8 nationwide strike by several farmers' bodies against the bills. Her party stated, "On

Mamata Banerjee's direction a five-member delegation comprising Derek O'Brien, Satabdi Roy, Prasun Banerjee, Pratima Mondal and Md Nadimul Haque on behalf of the All India Trinamul Congress, is meeting and interacting with farmers who are on a relay hunger strike on the highway at the Singhu Border to show solidarity." It said, "many farmers in small groups had an interaction on the telephone with Mamata Banerjee who assured them of her solidarity with their movement. Some farmers also requested her to visit the dharna site. They shared their demand: the Centre must repeal the farmer bills." The TMC added, "It is unfortunate that farmers, who feed the entire country are being forced to go hungry."



West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee dances with a tribal woman during the inauguration of Bangla Sangeet Mela in Kolkata on Wednesday. — PTI

■ Agnimitra, Sayantan had opposed TMC MLA's induction

BJP showcauses 2 Bengal leaders

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, DEC. 23

The West Bengal BJP has pulled up it's two prominent leaders — Sayantan Basu and Agnimitra Paul — and served them show cause notice for publicly voicing their dissent against Trinamul Congress MLA of Pandabeshwar and former Ansol mayor Jitendra Tiwari, thus scuttling his induction to the saffron party during Union home minister Amit Shah's last visit to the state.

Basu, the state BJP general secretary and Paul, the state BJP women's wing chief, were served the notices on Tuesday. Stung by their dissent, Tiwari, who had quit the TMC and held a meeting with Shubhendru Adhikari to join BJP with him, returned to his party within a day. State BJP vice-president Pratap Banerjee told them in their notices, "It has been observed that on 18th December, 2020 you have ventured to give bytes to the electronic media,

● **SAYANTAN BASU** informed that he apologised to the party leadership, regretting his comments. Paul could not be reached for her comments

which constitute derogatory and anti-party statements reflecting severe anti-organisation sentiments which go directly against decisions taken by the party." He said, "As per Article 25D of the Constitution of

BJP such action should result in your immediate expulsion. I have been directed by our state president Dilip Ghosh, MP, to instruct you to show cause for the same within seven days explaining why the party should not take adequate action against you considering the senior, respected and important post held by you." Mr Basu informed that he apologised to the party leadership, regretting his comments. Paul could not be reached for her comments.

Cabinet approves merger of 4 govt film media units

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23

Soon the iconic Films Division, Children's Film Society of India, National Films Archives of India and Directorate of Film Festival will cease to function as individual entities, as on Wednesday the Union Cabinet approved the information and broadcasting ministry's proposal to merge all these four units under the aegis of National Film Development Corporation (NFDC). Significantly though none of the employees working under the four units would be retrenched, official sources confirmed. Union minister for information and broadcasting Prakash Javadekar told mediapersons after the Cabinet meeting that the decision was taken to merge the four media units under NFDC, as functions of a few of these were overlapping.

He, however, assured that all the four units would continue to perform their respective functions under the umbrella of NFDC, with greater cohesion and convergence. The umbrella organisa-

● **JAVADEKAR, HOWEVER,** assured that all the four units would continue to perform their respective functions under the umbrella of NFDC, with greater cohesion and convergence

tion NFDC, consequent upon the merger of film media units will be uniquely placed with regard to promotion, production and preservation of film content - all under one management. The vision of the new entity will be to ensure balanced and focused development of Indian cinema in all its genres-feature films, including films/content for the over the top (OTT) platforms, children's content, animation, short films and documentaries. Films Division, a subordinate office of the ministry of I&B, was established in 1948, primarily to produce documentaries and news magazines for publicity of government programmes and cinematic record of Indian history. Over the years it has produced some of the most iconic and well known documentaries charting the important developments in the journey of Independent India.

PoK women in fray: Count of votes in 2 regions put on hold

YUSUF JAMEEL
SRINAGAR, DEC. 23

Even as almost all the results in Jammu and Kashmir's first-ever District Development Council (DDC) elections have been announced officially, the counting of votes in two segments, one each in frontier districts of Kupwara and Bandipore, remain suspended for among the contestants are two female candidates whose nationality has been contested by their rivals in the fray. One of these candidates is Somaya Sadaf seeking election from Drugmulla, a DDC constituency of Kupwara which witnessed a nail hitting contest among eleven candidates. She told this newspaper that she is at loss and wondered why her nomination papers were accepted in the first place if the

nationality issue was involved. She, however, also said, "I'm neither Pakistani nor Indian. I'm a bonafide citizen of Jammu and Kashmir and have every right to contest an election in any part of the state." She claimed that at the time of filing of the nomination papers she had shown the returning officer all the required documents including Aadhaar card, election card and the state subject certificate. "I've all those documents which a citizen is supposed to possess. I even showed them academic certificates. I graduated from Muzaffarabad and did my post graduation here only. Whatever documents and evidence of my being a citizen of Kashmir they asked for I presented to them," she said. The other contestant caught in a similar situa-

tion is Shazia Aslam who joined the fray in Hajin-A segment of neighbouring Bandipore. Like Somaya, Shazia is said to have been brought up in Muzaffarabad, the capital of PoK, and is married to a former Kashmiri militant. After the concerned returning officer ordered suspension of voting count on Tuesday, she said that she wanted to live in peace and with dignity and the purpose of her joining the fray was to serve the people of the constituency. Though the officials are tight lipped over the issue, the local sources said the counting of votes was halted following objections raised by other candidate over the citizenship issue. The Centre, despite their repeated representations and requests, is undecided on their nationality issue.

Govt should listen to J&K people's voice, says Omar

Srinagar, Dec. 23: The Centre should listen to the people's voice against the abrogation of Article 370 since it has itself termed the DDC polls as a victory of democracy, National Conference (NC) vice-president Omar Abdullah said on Wednesday. Addressing party workers at NC headquarters Nawa-i-Subah, he said the people have made clear their view by supporting the People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD) in the District Development Council polls. The NC leader also said he does not foresee assembly elections in the union territory anytime soon because of the poll results. The seven-party PAGD swept the maiden DDC polls by winning 110 seats out of 276 for which results were declared, while the BJP emerged as the single largest party by getting 74 seats after securing the biggest vote share in Jammu and Kashmir. If you really say that democracy has won, then you will have to listen to the voices of the people, and the people of Jammu and Kashmir have said it with a huge majority that they do not accept (the decisions of) August 5, 2019, he said. The Centre abrogated Article 370 which gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir and bifurcated the erstwhile state into two UTs on August 5 last year. — PTI

Farmers ready for talks if govt has 'open mind'

■ **Continued from Page 1**
unions will discuss our request. Whatever they want to add and subtract from the government's proposal, they should tell us. We are ready for a discussion at a time and date of their convenience. I hope they will give us a date and we will find a resolution. I am hopeful of a solution." Wishing farmers on "Kisan Diwas", which marks the birth anniversary of ex-PM Chaudhary Charan Singh, defence minister Rajnath Singh said the government has holding talks with farm-

ers "with full sensitivity". He tweeted: "On Farmers' Day, I greet all the annadaatas (farmers) of the country. They have provided the country with food security. Some are agitating against farm laws. The government is holding talks with them with full sensitivity. I hope that they'll end their agitation soon." At the Tikri border, that has emerged as one of the epicentres of the protests, Rashtriya Kisan Mazdoor Mahasangh president Shiv Kumar Kakka said: "Even the Supreme Court has said suspend imple-

mentation of farm laws. This will lead to a better environment to hold talks." Bhartiya Kisan Union leader Yudhvir Singh said the government's aim was to tire out the farmers to end their protest. "The way the Centre is carrying this process of talks, it's clear that govt wants to delay this issue and break morale of protesting farmers. The government is taking our issues lightly. I am warning them to take cognisance of this matter and find a solution soon," he said. Swaraj India's Yogendra

Yadav said the government should not repeat the amendments rejected by the farmers but come up with concrete proposals in writing. He said: "We urge the government not to amend those meaningless amendments which we have rejected but come up with a concrete proposal in writing so that it can be made an agenda, and the process of negotiation can be started as soon as possible." Mr Yadav said the government was constantly holding talks with so-called farmers' leaders

and organisations who are not associated with their movement. "This is an attempt to break our movement. The government is dealing with protesting farmers the way it deals with the Opposition (parties)," he said. The agitating farmers also marked "Kisan Diwas" by paying their tribute at Kisan Ghat while those protesting at the Ghazipur border held a "havan". The farmers' unions had also urged people to skip a meal on "Kisan Diwas" in support of the ongoing protests.

THE ASIAN AGE

24 DECEMBER 2020

BJP's 'new politics' fails to get off the ground in J&K

The result of the eight-phase District Development Council election in J&K, for which counting was begun on Tuesday, is an emphatic pointer that the basic paradigm of electoral politics shows no sign of changing in the former state (now a UT), although the BJP has vowed to bring its brand of "new politics" to Kashmir.

This transformation is to be achieved by opening up the space for new political actors and driving the established mainline parties such as the National Conference and the People's Democratic Party — and their leaders — to the ground. Going by the just-concluded DDC polls, however, it would appear that the BJP's ambitions are not rooted in the reality of the present.

As expected, as a single party, the BJP dominated the polls in the Hindu-majority Jammu region, but here too the reasonably good showing of the National Conference might have surprised the saffron party. The Congress, which was part of the original group of mainline J&K parties that called itself the Gupkar Alliance and aimed to work for the reinstatement of J&K's autonomy, appears to have faltered in its stride. Traditionally, in Jammu, the Congress pretty much alternates with the BJP in winning the most seats. But that equation of rough parity appears to be changing with the pointed communalising of the politics in this region.

Subcumbing to the BJP's propaganda against it and fighting the election on its own, the party let confusion persist about the degree to which it was associated with the Alliance. This may have caused it to suffer in the Valley as well, where the Alliance parties — NC, PDP, main — pretty much swept the polls. The Independents have fared well in Jammu and in the Valley, and many of them are thought to be proxies for NC, PDP and BJP.

The BJP is making much of the three DDC seats it picked up out of a total of 140 in Kashmir valley. These convey no trend, and can have no deeper political or electoral meaning. Introduced for the first time, the DDC polls were the last to be held in the three-tiered panchayati raj structure and each constituency was limited to about half-a-dozen villages. A BJP candidate won in South Kashmir's Kakapora, one of the seriously militancy-infested areas in Pulwama district, causing considerable surprise. The explanation lies in very low polling and the attendant local factors.

But for restrictions imposed by the administration on campaigning by non-BJP parties in the Valley on the apparently unreal grounds of security and detaining or maligning Alliance leaders, the election process appears to have been quite smooth. The Valley had evidently made up its mind to restrict the BJP to the Jammu region.

For this reason, the polling averaged about 30 per cent in the Valley (in the southern districts between six and 10 per cent) — quite high for the Kashmir division. The separatists did not call for election boycott so as not to allow BJP a free run. The regional parties, despite some misunderstandings, managed to fight as an Alliance, thus not permitting the splitting of anti-BJP votes in any big way. Steps such as these showed effect. Apni Party, the BJP's sidekick in the valley, floundered, no more than 10 seats. To raise its tally post-election, the BJP could now look to incentivise Independents. But on the ground, it is yet to cross the Pir Panjal.

Justice, but at what cost?

The conviction and sentencing to life imprisonment of a Catholic priest and a nun for the murder of student-nun by a CBI special court in Thiruvananthapuram may bring the curtain down on a 28-year-old quest for justice but end up exposing nonetheless the deep fault lines in the system of administration of criminal justice in our country. Sr Abhaya, a 21-year-old student of BCM College and an inmate of Pius X convent in Kottayam, was found dead in the well of the hostel where she was staying on March 27, 1992. The state police, that started the investigation, concluded it to be a case of suicide. Unconvinced, the nun's parents and public-spirited citizens raised a hue and cry and pressed for a CBI investigation which then chief minister K. Karunakaran conceded a year later. The premier investigative agency first said it was unable to decide if it was a suicide or homicide but changed stance before an insistent court which wanted the truth to come out. The agency then said it was indeed a case of homicide but there were few clues to the identity of the culprits. The courts again refused to buy the argument and returned the closure report four times, forcing the agency to plumb deeper and come up with the names of two priests and a nun as accused. The other priest was discharged by the court before the trial.

The Abhaya murder case is a grim reminder that pursuit of justice is a tough job in our country and its results are painfully slow to come. Apart from allegations of destruction of or tampering with key pieces of evidence, including forensic reports, the case also saw one CBI officer quitting the service alleging pressure on him not to pursue it professionally while a number of key witnesses turned hostile during the trial. The agency can take credit for the productive prosecution but the deceased parents of the unfortunate victim would vouch for the dictum — justice delayed is justice denied.

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Subhani



Christmas '91: The day Red Flag was lowered



Mohan Guruswamy

Twenty-nine years ago, at 7 pm on December 25, as the rest of the world celebrated Christmas, Mikhail Gorbachev announced to the world that he was resigning as President of the Soviet Union and formally pronounced the end of the continental state forged by Vladimir Lenin. No sooner had Gorbachev finished, the Red Flag came down from the top of the Senate Dome in the Kremlin for the last time. At the same time Marshal Yevgeny Shaposhnikov, the defence chief, arrived at Gorbachev's office to collect the *chemodanchik*, or the Soviet version of the black suitcase, referred to by the Americans with Strangelovian fondness as the "football", containing the nuclear codes for the Soviet President to launch all-out and unrestrained nuclear war.

This was contrary to the agreement between Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. In that script, Yeltsin was to call on the Soviet President and receive it from him. So Marshal Shaposhnikov improvised and persuaded Gorbachev to let him sign for it. Thus, this symbol of supreme power quietly left Mikhail Gorbachev and went over to Boris Yeltsin, the President of the Russian Federation, who was waiting for it elsewhere in the Kremlin.

Twice that year I visited the USSR. The first trip took me from Moscow to Vladivostok, where I saw how the average Russian outside Moscow lived. We stayed in Vladivostok's only hotel for foreigners and lived on a diet of fish, watery cabbage soup and black bread for all four days. Providentially, the

Indian embassy had provisioned our group with some tinned fruit, condensed milk, instant coffee and breakfast cereal.

The second time I stayed in a small Moscow apartment belonging to an old Russian widow, who for a small dollar price agreed to part with her state-allotted home. The flat, a few kilometres away from the Indian embassy at Ulitza Obhuka, was as tiny as they come. The bedroom had enough place for just a single bed. The living room was of the same size and had a sofa-cum-bed. The kitchen was tiny and bare. The bathroom was not much bigger than a train toilet. Food was not available for love or money, but there was a lot of love available for food or money.

After the first visit, I had occasion to tell Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao about what I saw in Russia. I told him that we were on the verge of something significant and that events in Russia may lead to a shakeup hitherto unthinkable.

At the PMO's suggestion I made a second and longer visit to Russia that ended just a couple weeks ahead of the KGB-led abortive coup in August 1991. It only reinforced my views and but the external affairs ministry in New Delhi, and particularly the Indian ambassador in Russia, were not willing to accept this view. After I met with the MoS at the PMO, Bhuvanesh Chaturvedi, and briefed him, the ambassador, who was on a visit to New Delhi, invited me for lunch at the IIC and berated me for peddling unfounded fears to the PM. He said that the USSR was eternal and that the Red Army was the vanguard of the rev-

The new Russia was not the superpower that the USSR was. It lurched till 1999 when Vladimir Putin took over as President.

olution and will ensure the longevity of the Soviet Union. He urged with me not to fill the PM with unfounded inferences and confidently predicted that I will be proved wrong.

In the immediate wake of the failed KGB coup, the PM did make a mild comment deriding the pace of Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms. But with the return of a somewhat diminished Gorbachev from his confinement in Foros on the Black Sea, the know-alls were quick to deride the PM for being hasty and uninformed. The day was saved by a revolt in the Red Army with Shaposhnikov leading the rejection of Marshal Yazov's order to arrest Boris Yeltsin and the new arrangements after the August 1991 events were to put the USSR into a steep dive.

Shortly after the failed coup the three Baltic states seceded. The economic situation became chaotic. On December 8 that year, the Presidents Boris Yeltsin of the Russian Federation, Ukraine's Leonid Kravchuk and Belarus' Stanislav Shuskevich secretly met at a hunting lodge in Belovezh in Belarus and decided to dissolve the USSR. Thirteen days later, on December 21, representatives of 11 of the 12 remaining Soviet republics — all except Georgia — signed the Alma Ata Protocol which confirmed the end of the Soviet Union and announced the establishment of something called the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The summit of Alma Ata also provisionally accepted Gorbachev's resignation as President of the Soviet Union and agreed on several other practical measures consequential to the disso-

lution of the USSR.

For most of that decade that followed, Russia teetered on the brink with Yeltsin's mood swings worsened by the alcoholic haze he was in most of the time. In 1993, Yeltsin finally visited India after postponing it a few times. Russian foreign policy had taken a new direction under foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev, and India was concerned about Russian support in the UN. Our MIGs were also mostly grounded, as were the submarines, and India was keen to get the supply chains restored. So much hinged on getting Yeltsin's attentions and into his good books.

From my contacts I had learned that Yeltsin's preferred vodka was a brand called Kristal and that Yeltsin collected daggers. The appropriate officials were informed, and the government quickly swung into action and several crateloads of Kristal were procured from Moscow and flown into India as diplomatic baggage. The vodka was placed prominently in the visiting dignitary's suite at Rashtrapati Bhavan. An officer from the Cabinet Secretariat was dispatched to Jaipur to buy a jewelled encrusted Rajasthani dagger.

When Prime Minister Narasimha Rao gifted it to him, Yeltsin quickly unwrapped the gift and beamed with pleasure. He was clearly pleased with the attention to detail and he signed a joint statement restating Moscow's position on Kashmir. But quite clearly, the new Russia was not the superpower that the USSR was. It lurched till 1999 when Vladimir Putin took over as President. In the last 22 years, Mr Putin has to a great extent brought Russia back to the superpower status it has missed since that Christmas Day in 1991.

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

LETTERS

NOT ENOUGH AID

At US \$900 billion, the emergency Covid-19 rescue package finally passed by the US Congress is bigger than the Recovery Act that averted a depression during the 2008 financial crisis but it's not nearly enough. And after a shocking power play by President Donald Trump, it may not even survive. Mr Trump, who didn't bother to take part in negotiations before the bill was passed, is now threatening to blow it up, citing "wasteful" expenditures unrelated to Covid-19. Republican senators who cheer presidents of their own party even when they explode the national debt are already reclaiming their hypocritical positions as deficit hawks when a Democrat is in the White House.

C.R. Krishnan
Mumbai

LET BORIS SKIP R-DAY

APROPOS YOUR EDITORIAL, "Act quickly to stave off new virus strain threat" (Dec. 23), the vital question is whether the ceremonial Republic Day parade on January 26 should be totally put off in view of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. This year UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson is scheduled to be the chief guest. The Centre may play it safe by consulting the UK High Commission in New Delhi on whether it is advisable to review the scheduled visit of the British PM in view of advent of new virus strain in the UK.

M.C. Joshi
Lucknow

SAFETY FOREMOST

THE GOVERNMENT issuing stringent standard operating procedures, mandating RT-PCR tests at all airports for each traveller from the UK, and isolation at a separate institutional facility for positive cases given the new coronavirus strain being discovered there is commendable. At least 20 flyers from the UK tested positive for Covid-19 on Tuesday. Though there is no cause for alarm yet, one would do well to exercise caution.

N.J. Ravi Chander
Bengaluru

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

Sundeep Bhutoria



Why are 'fat cats' being so reckless in Covid times?

Just consider: A group of 30 revellers at a destination wedding return to Kolkata and test Covid-positive. Some have to be hospitalised.

■ A group of friends goes to a nearby resort to celebrate an anniversary and 10 out of 12 of them test positive; and one of them even succumbs to the deadly virus.

■ And yet... every star hotel banquet in town is booked for a wedding, an anniversary, a birthday... name it, and you have it.

■ One prominent hotel is brimming over about a hundred honeymoon couples, and every hand on the kitchen deck is busy whipping up anniversary cakes.

I just cannot reconcile the two. What is happening to us?

Even as the Covid-19 pandemic is raging all across the planet, sending much of the world reeling, more and more invitations for weddings and sundry other social events are piling up on my desk. This is causing an acute FOBI (fear of being included) in

me. Every invitation seems to be an open challenge to put my own and my family's life at risk. But for the vast majority of people in my social circle, FOMO (fear of missing out) continues to be a mantra to mingle.

Make no mistake, I am not alone in the FOBI group. There are others I know who feel anxious at being invited to various group or social events now. A recent invitation from a friend inviting me for his wife's 35th birthday left me speechless, more so because my polite refusal was summarily rejected! Acquaintances, who are home-schooled in the traditional rules of etiquette, simply refuse to take no for an answer and insist that you must be there. This "ati aachar", or extreme behaviour, is nothing short of "emotional atyachar".

One can understand it when poor, often illiterate citizens are unable to comply with some of the Covid-19 norms and restrictions out of dire necessity. Work from home is, after all, a luxury that is possible only for those in white-collar jobs, and is

something that not many can afford, and nine months into the pandemic, financial compulsion has forced the vast majority of people out into the world to keep food on the table.

But when educated social fat cats use their clout to flout the pandemic rules for their own merriment, it causes far more harm to society. All those messages and campaigns urging people to maintain social distancing seem to go simply down the drain. It also tends to provoke resentment in several quarters as it puts society's inequalities on full public display.

Hotels, restaurants and travel agencies are facing a grim dichotomy — while having to cope with declining revenues and job cuts, they also have to contend with some clients who have scant respect for regulations and often misuse their "influence" to bend the rules. I know about mega-weddings in luxury hotels where a limited number of visitors are allowed as per the pandemic rules. One organiser, who was simply not to be curbed by these restrictions,

booked three banquets in different names on the same day at the same hotel. On the day of the wedding, the stunned hotel authorities looked on as guests from three different venues converged at the spot where the ceremony was taking place, in a blatant violation of all social distancing norms. And this is a formula that is becoming increasingly common, and people are accepting it as the norm.

I know of so many people who have been organising totally avoidable public gatherings and events with a business-as-usual approach. It is almost as if there has been a lockdown on one's reasoning and good sense. We have all seen the pictures on the social media of crowded Goa nightclubs with no hint of any Covid-19 precautions. I was even more stunned to see on television a crowd marching hand in hand, many of them not wearing masks, to spread "awareness" about the coronavirus!

The Delhi government has increased fines for not wearing face masks in public to ₹2,000 in order to

help check the spread of the disease. But for the rich and often infamous, this is hardly any deterrent.

The rush to circumvent the rules is like an epidemic in itself. Political rallies, holidaying, weddings, anniversaries and sundry social gatherings during a crisis like this reveal an attitude that reeks of arrogance and downright stupidity. One of the primary advantages of being educated is supposed to be the ability it gives us to connect the cause and effect of events. But in a society where money, influence and hubris rank higher than any reasoning, our very survival is at stake.

The world over, this pandemic debate has been about the two "Ls": Life and Livelihood. I would like to add a third "L": Lunacy.

What else can explain our crazy compulsion for hosting and attending utterly unnecessary social functions when a pandemic is still raging?

The writer is a social and cultural activist based in Kolkata

SHORT TAKES

CANADA COP: PAK DISSIDENT DEATH NOT SUSPICIOUS

Toronto, Dec. 23: Police in Toronto said Tuesday they are not treating the death of a prominent Pakistani dissident as suspicious.

Authorities said the body of Karima Mehrab was found on Monday near Toronto's downtown waterfront. Mehrab, 37, had been reported missing a day earlier.

"It is currently being investigated as a non-criminal death and there are not believed to be any suspicious circumstances," Toronto police spokeswoman Caroline de Kloet said.

Mehrab, also known as Karima Baloch, was granted asylum in Canada in 2016. Police said she was known to frequent Toronto's waterfront and island areas.

MOLDOVA'S PM RESIGNS AFTER PROTESTS

Chisinau (Moldova), Dec. 23: Moldova's pro-Russian prime minister has resigned to, as he put it, pave the way for an early parliamentary election and "bring normalcy" to the tiny former Soviet state.

Prime Minister Ion Chicu, who led a pro-Russian government since November 2019, tendered his resignation Wednesday, a day before the country's newly elected pro-Western president, Maia Sandu, is due to take office. Chicu is a close ally of outgoing pro-Russian President Igor Dodon.

His government controlled only 51 of 101 seats in the Moldovan parliament. The new president can dissolve parliament if the prime minister resigns and there are two failed attempts to find a successor.

HK MEDIA TYCOON JIMMY LAI GETS BAIL

Hong Kong, Dec. 23: Hong Kong media tycoon Jimmy Lai was granted bail on Wednesday, nearly three weeks after he was remanded in custody over fraud and national security-related charges.

Lai, an outspoken advocate for democracy in Hong Kong, was charged with fraud on Dec 3 for allegedly violating the lease terms of office space for his media company, Next Digital. He was later charged again on Dec 12 under the national security law, on suspicion of colluding with foreign forces and endangering national security.

Lai appeared in court Wednesday and was granted bail by the High Court. He had been kept behind bars since Dec 3.

UN TO HALT PEACEKEEPING IN DARFUR

Cairo, Dec. 23: UN Security Council members decided to end the joint UN-African Union peacekeeping force in Sudan's western Darfur region when the mission's mandate runs out on Dec. 31, after pressure from the country's transitional government, Russia and African nations.

The council voted unanimously late Tuesday not to extend the mandate of the joint mission, known as UNAMID. In June, the Security Council unanimously approved replacing it with a much smaller and solely political mission, which will be known as United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan, or UNITAMS.

The UNAMID force was established in 2007.

\$169 MN U.S. MILITARY AID TO BALTIC NATIONS

Helsinki, Dec. 23: The United States has allocated \$169 million in military aid to the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for 2021, the Estonian Defense Ministry said Wednesday.

The aid earmarked through a new joint US-Baltic security program was included in the US defence appropriations bill approved by Congress and signed into law on Tuesday.

In a Twitter post, Estonia's Defence Ministry called the move "important & highly appreciated news" Washington has provided military assistance before to the three Baltic nations, which are NATO members. However, the Estonian ministry said this was the first time the aid is being allocated through a dedicated programme.

Don refuses to ink virus relief bill, seeks \$2K stimulus outlay

Prez: Too much money given to foreign countries, not enough to Americans

Washington, Dec. 23: US President Donald Trump has refused to sign the Covid-19 relief bill, saying the \$600 stimulus payment to most Americans was not enough as he asked Congress to increase the amount to \$2,000. Trump, in a video posted on Twitter on Tuesday night, said that the bill delivered too much money to foreign countries, but not enough to Americans.

"A few months ago, Congress started negotiations on a new package to get urgently needed help to the American people. It's taken forever. However, the bill they are now planning to send back to my desk is much different than anticipated. It really is a disgrace," he said. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin was part of the negotiations. "Despite all of this wasteful spending and much more, the \$900 billion package provides hardworking taxpayers with only \$600 each in relief payments, and not enough money is given to small businesses and in particular restaurants whose owners have suffered so grievously," said the president in his video.

"I am asking Congress to amend this bill and increase the ridiculously low \$600 dollars to \$2,000, or \$4,000 for a couple," he said. Congress passed the USD 900 billion pandemic relief bill on Monday night to provide cash to businesses and individuals, and resources for vaccination amidst the raging Covid-19 pandemic.

The bill went to President Trump for his signature. However, Trump said: "I am also asking Congress to immediately get rid of the wasteful and unnecessary items in this legislation, and to send me a suitable bill, or else the next administration will have to deliver a Covid relief package. And maybe that administration will be me, and we will get it done".

Trump's proposal was immediately supported by House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi. "Republicans repeatedly refused to say what amount the President wanted for direct checks" Pelosi said in a tweet. — PTI

Bomb, shooting in Kabul kill two

Kabul, Dec. 23: A bombing and a shooting attack in Kabul killed at least two people Wednesday including the head of an independent Afghan elections watchdog, officials said. The attacks are the latest in relentless violence in Afghanistan even as the Taliban and Afghan government negotiators hold talks in Qatar, trying to hammer out a peace deal that could put an end to decades of war.

Unknown gunmen shot and killed Mohammad Yousuf Rasheed, executive director of the non-governmental Free and Fair Election Forum of Afghanistan, said Ferdaws Faramarz, spokesman for Kabul's police chief. The attack took place during Rasheed's morning commute to FEFA's office in Kabul, and his driver was also wounded and taken to the hospital, Faramarz said.

In a separate attack in the capital on Wednesday, a police vehicle was targeted by a sticky bomb in eastern part of the city. The blast killed one police officer and wounded two others, according to Faramarz. No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attacks. The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for an attack in Kabul on Tuesday in which a roadside bombing tore through a vehicle, killing five people, three of them doctors on their way to work at the city's main penitentiary.

Among those killed was Nazefa Ibrahim, the acting health director of the prison. Another doctor was in serious condition. IS said it had targeted the prison administration employees in the attack. Their car, a white sedan,



A woman poses for a photo in front of a Christmas lights display in Seoul on Wednesday, as South Korea banned gatherings of more than four people in the capital and surrounding areas amid a surge in cases of the Coronavirus. — AFP

France allows UK passengers, cargo in after variant fright

Calais, Dec. 23: Freight from Britain and passengers with a negative virus test began arriving on French shores Wednesday, after France relaxed a two-day blockade over a new virus variant that had isolated Britain, stranded thousands of drivers and raised fears of shortages.

Associated Press reporters witnessed a ferry pulling into the French port of Calais before dawn and trains carrying freight and car passengers were allowed to cross to the continent beneath the English Channel again.

People arriving from Britain are required to have a virus test capable of detecting the new variant, according to a late-night agreement reached after 48 hours of frenzied negotiations among French, British and EU authorities. European nations and others around the world began slamming borders shut to Britain on Sunday, a day after the UK prime minister announced that the new variant was mostly responsible for an enormous surge in new infections in London and southern England and he

Pandemic reaches Antarctica, 58 +ve

Santiago, Dec. 23: The pandemic has finally reached every continent on Earth. Chilean authorities announced that 58 people that were at two military bases in Antarctica or on a navy ship that went to the continent tested positive for the new Coronavirus.

So far no other country with a presence in Antarctica has publicly reported any other cases. Chile's army announced Monday that 36 people at the Gen

Bernardo O'Higgins Riquelme Antarctic base have tested positive, and on Tuesday the health minister for the Biobio region in Chile said there are 21 infections involving people aboard the Chilean navy's Sergeant Aldea supply vessel. One more case was reported in Las Estrellas' village, where civilian personnel working at the Lieutenant Rodolfo Marsh Martin Air Force Base live. — AP

nday, a day after the UK prime minister announced that the new variant was mostly responsible for an enormous surge in new infections in London and southern England and he

was imposing tight lockdown restrictions. The company that runs the Eurotunnel said that truck drivers lined up on the highway leading to the English port of Dover. — AP

UK IDENTIFIES S. AFRICAN VARIANT, TIGHTENS CURBS

London, Dec. 23: Two cases of another new strain of Covid-19 linked to South Africa have been identified in the UK, Health Secretary Matt Hancock revealed here on Wednesday. Like the UK variant identified earlier, the new variant of the novel Coronavirus is also driving a massive resurgence of the disease in South Africa, with experts warning the country is probably facing a much larger second wave.

"Both [cases of the new variant] are contacts of cases who have travelled from South Africa over the past few weeks," Hancock said, addressing a briefing from 10 Downing Street. "This new variant is highly concerning because it is yet more transmissible and it appears to have mutated further than the new variant that has been discovered in the UK," he said. — PTI

NCP elects Prachanda new parliamentary leader

Kathmandu, Dec. 23: Nepal Communist Party's executive chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' was on Wednesday elected as the ruling party's new parliamentary leader, replacing Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli.

The 66-year-old leader's nomination was proposed by senior leader Madhav Kumar Nepal, who was earlier named as one of the two chairmen of the party, at a parliamentary party meeting of the Prachanda-led faction at the Parliament Building in New Baneshwar. *My Republica* reported.

Oli, 68, was removed from the post of party's chairman on Tuesday by a central committee meet-

ing of the Prachanda-led faction, which also decided to take disciplinary action against him for dissolving the House of Representatives unconstitutionally. Prachanda said that his first priority would be to restore the dissolved House of Representatives and form a new government.

ent. "I will unify all the democratic forces and political parties to keep the hard-won political system and parliament lively and functioning," he said.

He thanked lawmakers for electing him as the parliamentary leader and said that he has been handed over a huge responsibility during this challenging time.

Earlier in the day, the Supreme Court forwarded all the writ petitions against Prime Minister Oli's move to dissolve Parliament to a Constitutional bench.

Chief Justice Chandra SJB Rana passed the order after a preliminary hearing on the 12 different writ petitions. — PTI

ISOLATION | TIMES

People worried about jobs, potentially contagious virus variant

Christmas: A season of fear, not cheer

Barcelona, Dec. 23: Montserrat Parelló lost her husband eight years ago, and Christmas gatherings with children and grandchildren had helped her deal with her loneliness. But this year, the 83-year-old will be alone for the holiday at her home in Barcelona, due to the risk of infection from the Coronavirus. "In these days of pandemic, I feel loneliness and anger," she said, expressing fears that "I will leave this life devoid of affection, of warmth."

All most people wanted for Christmas after this year of pandemic uncertainty and chaos was some cheer and togetherness. Instead many are heading into a season of isolation,

grieving lost loved ones, worried about their jobs or confronting the fear of a new potentially more contagious virus variant.

Residents of London and surrounding areas can't see people outside their households. Peruvians won't be allowed to drive their cars over Christmas and New Year to discourage visits even with nearby family and friends.

The patchwork of restrictions being imposed by local and national governments across the world varies widely — but few holiday seasons will look normal this year. People the

world over are facing wrenching decisions — to see isolated elderly relatives despite the risk or to miss one of the potentially few

● **RESIDENTS OF** London and surrounding areas can't see people outside their households.

● **PERUVIANS WON'T** be allowed to drive their cars over Christmas and New Year to discourage visits even with nearby family and friends.

● **SOUTH AFRICANS** won't be able to go to the beach on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day or New Year's Day.

Biden: Cyberattack perpetrators must face consequences

Wilmington, Dec. 23: President-elect Joe Biden said Tuesday that the perpetrators of a massive cyberattack on the US government, unofficially blamed on Russia, must face consequences, and assailed President Donald Trump over his response to the threat.

"We can't let this go unanswered," Biden said in pre-holiday remarks to the American people.

"That means making clear, and publicly, who is responsible for the attack and taking meaningful steps to hold them in account." Biden, who as president-in-waiting has received intelligence briefings on key national security issues, says much remains unknown about the extent of the damage from the attack.

Last week the US cybersecurity agency said a well-coordinated, highly technical operation penetrated US government and corporate systems months ago by hacking widely-used security software. "I see no evidence that it's under control," Biden said, responding to Trump's claim to the contrary. "This president hasn't even identified who is responsible yet," he noted. He warned he would retaliate once he becomes president on January 20.

"When I learn the extent of the damage and, in fact, who is formally responsible, they can be assured that we will respond, and probably respond in kind," he said. "There are many options which I will not discuss now." According to US officials, the most dev-

US GOVT TWITTER FOLLOWERS: NO BIDEN TRANSFER

Washington, Dec. 23: Twitter said Tuesday it would not automatically transfer the millions of followers of official Trump administration accounts to the incoming Biden administration, but instead give users the option to continue or not.

The move affects followers of government-led accounts such as @WhiteHouse and @POTUS, which will be transferred to Joe Biden when he takes over the presidency in January.

Twitter's decision won't affect the personal account @realDonaldTrump, which is frequently used by President Donald Trump and has some 88 million followers.

The official government accounts "will not automatically retain their existing followers. Instead, Twitter will notify followers of these accounts to provide context that the content will be archived and allow them the choice to follow the Biden administration's new accounts," a Twitter statement said. — AFP

astating breach of US computer security in years affected at least the departments of State, Commerce, Treasury, Energy and Homeland Security, as well as the National Institutes of Health. — AFP

Trump pardons two Republicans

Washington, Dec. 23: President Donald Trump has pardoned 15 people, including a pair of congressional Republicans who were strong and early supporters, a 2016 campaign official ensnared in the Russia probe and former government contractors convicted in a 2007 massacre in Baghdad.

Trump's actions in his final weeks in office show a president who is wielding his executive power to reward loyalists and others who he believes have been wronged by a legal system he sees as biased against him and his allies. On Tuesday, Trump issued the pardons not an unusual act for an outgoing president even as he refused to publicly acknowledge his election loss to Democrat Joe Biden, who will be sworn in on Jan. 20. Trump is likely to issue more pardons before then. He and his allies have discussed a range of other possibilities, including members of Trump's family and his personal attorney Rudy Giuliani.

Those pardoned on Tuesday included former Republican Reps. Duncan Hunter of California and Chris Collins of New York, two of the earliest GOP lawmakers to back Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Trump also commuted the sentences of five other people, including

PADILLA TO REPLACE HARRIS IN US SENATE

Los Angeles, Dec. 23: Alex Padilla was named Tuesday as Vice President-elect Kamala Harris' replacement in the US Senate, becoming the first Latino to represent California in the nation's upper house.

Padilla, the son of Mexican immigrants who became California's first Latino secretary of state in 2015, was selected by Governor Gavin Newsom to represent a state that is around 40 percent Hispanic. In a statement, Padilla pledged to "work each and every day to honor that trust and deliver for all Californians." — AFP

ing former Rep. Steve Stockman of Texas.

Collins, the first member of Congress to endorse Trump to be president, was sentenced to two years and two months in federal prison after admitting he helped his son and others dodge \$800,000 in stock market losses when he learned that a drug trial by a small pharmaceutical company had failed. — AP

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	46,444.18	0.95
Nifty 50	13,601.10	1.00
S&P 500*	3,704.08	0.46
Dollar (₹)	73.76	0.12
Pound Sterling (₹)	98.97	0.12
Euro (₹)	89.92	0.28
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	50,180.99	0.20
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	51.35	1.27
IN 10-Yr bond yield	5.950	-0.001
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	0.961	0.043

* As of 9:30 PM IST

Centre launches contest to better Covid distribution

The government on Wednesday launched a technology contest to invite solutions from IT companies and start-ups to strengthen digital platform CoWIN, which will be used for rolling out and scaling up Covid vaccine distribution across the country. The contest will be jointly run by the ministry of health and family welfare and the ministry of electronics and IT, a statement said.

Tata Comm buys 58.1% stake in eSIM firm Oasis



Tata Communications on Wednesday acquired 58.1 per cent stake in France-based eSIM company Oasis Smart SIM Europe SAS (Oasis). Oasis develops and provides advanced technologies and personalised services to enable deployment of eSIM and SIM technologies. With this investment, eSIM technology will be fully integrated into Tata Communications' connectivity solution offering, it said.

Vikram Solar commissions solar plant in WB

Vikram Solar on Wednesday announced commissioning of a 919.73 kilowatt rooftop solar plant at its Falta facility in West Bengal. The newly commissioned plant will fulfil over 27 per cent of the total electricity requirement of the said unit where the company produces photo-voltaic modules. The 919.73 KWp plant consists of 2,574 solar panels ranging from 325Wp to 400Wp covering an area of 6,500 sq metres.

Securitised pool collections reach pre-Covid levels

Crisil Ratings on Wednesday said that with extensive recovery efforts by NBFCs and uptick in economic activity, the collection efficiency ratios of its rated securitised pools for November 2020 payouts have improved to near pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels for most of the asset classes. The median collection efficiency ratios for November 2020 payouts improved to their highest levels in the financial year 2020-21.

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Indian GDP stabilises in Nov on retail push

RBI revises its forecast; expects to exit recession this quarter

Mumbai, Dec. 23: India's economic activity showed signs of stabilising in November, even as concerns of fresh virus outbreaks and a new strain in the UK mount amid news of vaccines fueling hope.

All eight high-frequency indicators tracked by Bloomberg News were steady in November, keeping the needle on a dial measuring the so-called 'Animal Spirits' unchanged at five. The level was arrived at by using the three-month weighted average to smooth out volatility in the single-month readings.

The pace of activity thus far was enough for the nation's central bank to revise its forecast for the economy, which it now expects to exit a recession in the current quarter to December.

Activity in India's dominant services sector expanded for a second straight month in November, although at a slower pace. The Markit India Services Purchasing Managers' Index was at 53.7 last month versus 54.1

GREEN SHOOTS AHoy

● Activity in services sector expanded for a second straight month in November.

● Manufacturing activity lost some of the momentum in November, but the growth still remained in the positive territory

● Passenger vehicle sales, a key indicator of demand, rose 4.7 per cent in November.

● Demand for loans picked up from lows seen in October.

in October, with a reading above 50 indicating expansion. IHS Markit, which conducts the survey, said the level of positive sentiment had climbed to the highest since February amid predictions that conditions would normalize once a vaccine is rolled out.

Manufacturing activity lost some of the momentum seen in the past few months, and as a result caused the composite index to drop to 56.3 in November from 58 a month earlier. Both manufacturing and services sectors witnessed broad price pressures, a factor that is

likely to keep the inflation-targeting central bank from resuming interest-rate cuts in a hurry.

Exports lost some momentum last month, declining 8.7 per cent in November from a year ago as trading partners were hit with fresh restrictions amid a second wave of Covid-19 infections.

Gems and jewelry and engineering goods exports were a drag, although a deeper fall was arrested by healthier shipments of drugs and pharmaceuticals along with farm products. Imports were weak, with demand for capital goods still subdued and

remains a possible cause for worry.

Passenger vehicle sales, a key indicator of demand, rose 4.7 per cent in November from a year ago, although the pace was slower than what was seen in the run up to Diwali. Overall retail sales signaled demand picking up, even though they were 44 per cent below the year-ago level, according to ShopperTrak.

Demand for loans picked up from lows seen in October. Central bank data showed credit grew at more than 5.5 per cent in November from a year earlier, higher than the 5.1 per cent growth seen in the second half of the previous month. Liquidity conditions were broadly stable last month.

Industrial production rose 3.6 per cent in October from a year earlier. Production of capital goods, which had declined for several months in a row, rose 3.3 per cent from a year earlier, and so did consumer durables and non-durables.

— Bloomberg

RBI tells banks to raise capital, step up lending

FC BANKING BUREAU MUMBAI, DEC. 23

Reserve Bank of India governor Shaktikanta Das has prodded banks to strengthen their resilience and lending capacity by raising capital and providing for impaired assets.

In a two-day meeting with top officials of public sector banks and a select private banks, the RBI governor reiterated the need for banks to remain vigilant.

During the meeting, the RBI officials and bankers discussed several issues including monetary policy transmission and liquidity situation, credit flows to different sectors of the economy including stressed sectors and MSMEs.

In a statement issued on Wednesday after the end of the two-day meeting, the RBI said, "The governor touched upon the current economic situation and emphasised the importance of the banking sector in supporting the ongoing revival in economic activities. With specific reference to the financial sector, he highlighted the

RBI alert on illegal lending platforms

FALAKNAAZ SYED MUMBAI, DEC. 23

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Wednesday cautioned people against unauthorised digital lending platforms and mobile apps that promise quick, hassle free loans but in reality charge excessive rates of interest, have hidden charges and use high handedness to recover their money.

The RBI said such lending platforms also apps misuse the agreements to access data on the mobile phones of

borrowers.

"Members of public are hereby cautioned not to fall prey to such unscrupulous activities and verify the antecedents of the company/firm offering loans online or through mobile apps," said the RBI.

The central bank said that consumers should never share copies of KYC documents with unidentified persons, unverified/unauthorised apps and should report such apps/bank account information associated with the apps to police.

measures taken by the RBI since the onset of the pandemic to stabilise the economy and to ensure financial stability."

Among other matters, the RBI discussed the current economic situation and outlook, monetary

policy transmission and liquidity situation, credit flows to different sectors including stressed sectors and MSMEs, progress in the implementation of resolution framework for Covid-related stressed assets, RBI said.

Google tells scientists to be positive on AI

Oakland, California, Dec. 23: Alphabet Inc's Google this year moved to tighten control over its scientists' papers by launching a "sensitive topics" review, and in at least three cases requested authors refrain from casting its technology in a negative light, according to internal communications and interviews with researchers involved in the work.

Google's new review procedure asks that

researchers consult with legal, policy and public relations teams before pursuing topics such as face and sentiment analysis and categorisations of race, gender or political affiliation, according to internal webpages explaining the policy.

"Advances in technology and the growing complexity of our external environment are increasingly leading to situations where seemingly inoffen-

sive projects raise ethical, reputational, regulatory or legal issues," one of the pages for research staff stated. Reuters could not determine the date of the post, though three current employees said the policy began in June. Google declined to comment for this story.

The "sensitive topics" process adds a round of scrutiny to Google's standard review of papers for pitfalls such as disclosing

of trade secrets, eight current and former employees said.

For some projects, Google officials have intervened in later stages. A Google manager reviewing a study on content recommendation technology shortly before publication this summer told authors to "take great care to strike a positive tone," according to internal correspondence.

— Reuters

Firms must pay 1% of GST dues in cash: Centre

New Delhi, Dec. 23: Businesses with monthly turnover of over ₹50 lakh will have to mandatorily pay at least one per cent of their GST liability in cash, the finance ministry said as it moved to curb evasion by fake invoicing. The Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) has introduced Rule 86B in Goods and Services Tax (GST) rules which restricts use of input tax credit (ITC) for discharging GST liability to 99 per cent.

"... The registered person shall not use the amount available in electronic credit ledger to discharge his liability towards output tax in excess of 99 per cent of tax liability, in cases where the value of taxable supply ... in a month exceeds ₹50 lakh, the CBIC said.

While calculating the turnover threshold, sales from GST exempt goods and zero rates supply would not be included.

However, this restriction will not apply where the managing director or any partner have paid more than ₹1 lakh as income tax or the registered person has received a refund amount of more than ₹1 lakh in the preceding financial year on account of utilised input tax credit.

EY tax partner Abhishek Jain said the government has put restrictions on seamless input credit utilisation with introduction of Rule 89B, which blocks utilisation of ITC beyond 99 per cent of the output liability.

● CBIC has amended GST rules restricting filing of outward supply details in GSTR-1 for business that have not paid tax for the past periods by filing GSTR 3B.

● So far, non-filing of GSTR 3B resulted in blockage of e-way bill but will now result in GSTR 1 blockage also.

ty, for businesses having taxable turnover of more than ₹50 lakh per month.

With the government providing reasonable exceptions to this rule, the idea remains to prevent misutilisation of credit by businesses taking fake credits, Jain added.

Further, the CBIC has amended GST rules restricting filing of outward supply details in GSTR-1 for business that have not paid tax for the past periods by filing GSTR 3B.

So far, until now, non-filing of GSTR 3B resulted in blockage of e-way bill but will now result in GSTR 1 blockage as well.

Abhishek Jain, Tax Partner, EY said the government has now restricted filing of outward supply details in GSTR 1 return for businesses who have not paid tax for the past periods by filing GSTR 3B. "The government's idea here seems to be to curb input tax credit passing by businesses which have otherwise not paid their GST liability," Jain added.

— PTI

Antony WHC IPO gets subscribed 15 times

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, DEC. 23

Antony Waste Handling Cell's initial public offering (IPO) got subscribed over 15 times on the last day of the public issue on Wednesday.

As per the latest update, Antony Waste IPO has been subscribed 15.04 times. Earlier in March 2020, the company had to withdraw the IPO after it received poor response due to Covid-led market

meltdown.

The public issue aiming to raise ₹300 crore in the price band of ₹313 to ₹315 per share was subscribed 9.67 times by qualified institutional buyers, 18.69 times by non-institutional buyers and 16.55 times by retail individual investors, according to sources close to merchant bankers handling the issue.

Antony Waste public issue received over 9.55 lakh applications for subscription of shares.

Cairn wins arbitration, Centre told to pay \$1.4b

New Delhi, Dec. 23: India has been ordered to return up to \$1.4 billion to Cairn Energy plc of the United Kingdom after an international arbitration overturned tax demanded retrospectively — an award the government indicated it may challenge.

The three-member tribunal, which also comprised of a nominee of the Indian government, unanimously ruled that India's claim of ₹10,247 crore in past taxes over a 2006-07 internal reorganisation of Cairn's India business was not a valid demand.

India, it said, "failed to accord the Claimants' (Cairn Energy's) investments fair and equitable treatment" under the bilateral investment protection pact the nation had with the UK, it said.

The tribunal ordered the government to desist from seeking such a tax and return the value of shares it had sold, dividends seized and tax refunds withheld to recover the tax demand.

The government was asked to compensate Cairn "for the total harm suffered" together with

Defensive stocks rally boosts Sensex

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, DEC. 23

Equity markets made gains for the second day after the sharp fall on Monday with defensive sectors IT, pharma and real estate stocks gaining. The Sensex closed 0.95 per cent or 437 points up at 46,444 while broader Nifty-50 index gained one per cent or 134.80 points to close at 13,601.10. The broader market outperformed with BSE midcap index up 2.40 per cent and BSE Small-cap index up 2.65 per cent.

Volatility in the market is set to rise with the daily foreign buying tapering and continued selling by the domestic institutions.

"The Nifty has gained over 50 per cent of the sharp fall it had earlier this week. What needs to be seen is if we are able to cross the 13,700-13,800 levels on a closing basis as that could prove to be a runway to achieving 14,000. I would still suggest caution until we have not crossed the above levels," Manish Hathiramani, proprietary index trader and technical analyst, Deen Dayal Investments said.

On Wednesday foreign portfolio investors were net buyers by ₹536.13 crore while the domestic institutions were net sellers by ₹1,326.92 crore. BSE IT index gained 2.34 per cent while BSE Healthcare index gained 1.74 per cent.

The top IT gainers included Wipro (5.88 per cent), Infosys (2.64 per cent), TCS (1.27 per cent) and HCL Technologies (0.95 per cent).

Mega strategic partnerships announced by Infosys and Wipro added to the defensive sector charm to the IT stocks. BSE realty gained the most at 3.97 per cent.

"Intermittent corrections cannot be ruled out post the sharp rally witnessed over the last few weeks. Sustenance of the demand recovery after the festive season would be key to any further upside," said Hemang Jani, head, equity strategy, Motilal Oswal Financial Services.

— PTI

TRAIL | BLAZERS

Anu Aiyengar becomes the only woman and person of colour to head mergers in major US banks

Indian woman rakes billions for JP Morgan with M&As

New York, Dec. 23: As JPMorgan Chase & Co. searches for its first major acquisition in more than a decade, Anu Aiyengar will have a hand in shaping the giant bank's future. She's the co-head of its global mergers and acquisitions business, and the only person of colour and only woman to hold that position on Wall Street.

It's been a remarkable trajectory for an Indian immigrant who moved to the US as a teenager to study at Smith College, shivering through the bitter

Massachusetts winter in a \$5 coat.

"M&A was traditionally a male bastion—often cigar-smoking men in suspenders—and now she is at the top of the field, because she is simply outstanding at what she does," says her boss, JPMorgan chief executive officer Jamie Dimon.

Advising companies on M&A is one of the prestige roles in investment banking, generating both huge fees and headlines when a deal comes together.

Aiyengar was promoted



to her current position in February; almost 20 years after ignoring one Wall Street interviewer who told her she couldn't be

ANU AIYENGAR, who grew up in Kerala, was promoted to her current position in February, almost 20 years after ignoring one Wall Street interviewer who told her she couldn't be hired for M&A because she was of the wrong colour, gender, and country.

hired for M&A because she was of the wrong colour, gender, and country. Her year began with a bang when JPMorgan

advised ETrade on its \$13 billion sale to Morgan Stanley, a deal that earned the bank \$81 million in fees.

After travelling every week for two decades to meet clients across the US and sometimes overseas, Aiyengar found herself grounded. She didn't leave her Midtown Manhattan apartment for 66 days, running her team over Zoom and devising new ways of thinking about dealmaking amid what she calls a "seismic shift."

"The future of work and

the future of how things happen in all industries is forever changed," she says.

Aiyengar grew up in the southern Indian state of Kerala. Her father worked for the government; her mother didn't work but went back to school and later became a teacher. Aiyengar says she struggled in her early days at the bank — not with the work but with the culture. "I didn't know basic things like how you behave and how you talk and how you present and

how you dress in a professional environment," she says.

She tried to change her Indian accent to sound more American and fretted about how to do her hair and makeup. She asked the assistant of the only senior female on her floor for advice on where to shop for clothes, but the prices at the boutique her colleague recommended shocked her. She turned instead to Dress for Success, a charity that provides professional attire for women. — Bloomberg

SHORT TAKES

Pregnant woman completes 10K run

Bengaluru: One of the inspiring stories of the TCS World 10K Bengaluru 2020 is a five-month pregnant woman completing the race in just 62 minutes. Meet Ankita Gaur, a mom-to-be, who completed her TCS World 10K run on Sunday.

Ankita, who has been running regularly for the past nine years, feels the activity is like breathing, something which comes naturally to her. "This is something I have been doing for the past nine years, almost every day. You know, you wake up and go out for a run. Of course, there are times, when you are injured or unwell, you have to take a step back," said Ankita.

"Otherwise, I have been running regularly for nine years, so this is something, which is like breathing for me. It comes to me very naturally," said Gaur. "Apparently, running is actually very safe. It's a good exercise to run during pregnancy. Also, if you look at the American Council of health, everything is recommended that if you are a runner, it's absolutely okay."

An engineer by profession, Ankita has been running TCS World 10K since 2013. — PTI

Paul clips Lakers' wings in opener

Los Angeles: The Los Angeles Lakers sure didn't have long to savor their 17th NBA title. Little more than two months after the Lakers locked up the 2020 crown with a Finals win over the Miami Heat, they were back to the grind in a 116-109 loss to the Los Angeles Clippers on the opening night of the 2020-21 campaign on Tuesday.

Paul George led the Clippers, less than two weeks after signing a four-year contract extension worth a reported \$226 million.

George scored 26 of his 33 points in the second half as the Clippers kept the Lakers at bay. Kawhi Leonard added 26 points for the Clippers, who are out to expunge the memory of their agonizing Western Conference semifinals loss to the Denver Nuggets, who trailed 3-1 in the series but won in seven games. LeBron James led the Lakers with 22 points. Anthony Davis added 18 and German point guard Dennis Schroder — a new addition — scored 14 points with 12 rebounds and eight assists. — AFP

Sarin, Rakshitta & Gukesh win titles

Chennai: It was a memorable treble for India as Grandmaster Nihal Sarin, Woman International Master Rakshitta Ravi and D Gukesh won the titles in their respective categories in the FIDE Online World Youth and Cadet Rapid Championships on Tuesday. While the highly-rated Sarin (Elo 2620) beat Armenian GM Shant Sargyan 1.5-0.5 in the Open under-18 section final, Rakshitta Ravi also won by a similar margin against China's Song Yuxin in the girls under-16 final.

The 16-year old Sarin won a marathon 58-move second game after honours were shared in the first. Meanwhile, Rakshitta after a draw in the first game, won the second in 39 moves to emerge champion. Earlier in the semifinals, Sarin had beaten Italian Francesco Sonis 1.5-0.5. Also, Gukesh made it three wins for India when he beat Volodar Murzin 2-1 in the final of the under-14 category. — PTI

Angulo takes Goa past Jamshedpur

Goa: Igor Angulo scored a stoppage-time winner to help FC Goa script a thrilling 2-1 win over Jamshedpur FC in the Indian Super League on Wednesday. Stephen Eze (33') had put Jamshedpur ahead in the first half but Angulo's brilliant brace (64', 90+4') helped Goa claim all three points and end JFC's six-match unbeaten run. Both sides showed attacking intent from the word go but had just a single shot on target in the first half as they failed to create clear-cut opportunities. Goa were lucky not to concede late in the game when Valskis played Lima on goal. — PTI

BACK TO BASICS

India begin preparation for second Test

Melbourne, Dec. 23: Determined to leave behind the embarrassing defeat in the series-opener, the Indian team, under stand-in skipper Ajinkya Rahane, switched its focus to red-ball cricket on Wednesday with Shubman Gill and others grinding it out during a net session ahead of Boxing Day Test.

Gill, who was not considered for the opening Test despite scoring 43 and 65 in the pink-ball warm-up match, looked in good nick as he along with Mayank Agarwal honed his skills at the nets, indicating that the duo could be the opening combination for the second Test.

The 21-year-old Gill also opens for Punjab in the Ranji Trophy and could be favoured over struggling Prithvi Shaw, who returned with scores of 0 and 4 in the two innings at Adelaide.

KL Rahul, who received the backing from the legendary Sunil Gavaskar for the opening slot, too had a long stint at the nets.

Also back at the nets was Ravindra Jadeja, who had missed the first Test due to concussion.

Jadeja went for an hour-long spell at the nets during which he bowled to Cheteshwar Pujara. He again returned for a second stint later, an indication that he could be included in the playing XI for the Boxing Day Test.

India were bowled out for their lowest-ever score of 36 in their second innings in the eight-wicket loss to Australia in the pink-ball Test.

With Virat Kohli returning home for the birth of his first child, Rahane will now have to take the onus of inspiring the team to script a turnaround.

The practice session begun with head coach Ravi Shastri giving a pep



(From left) India's Wriddhiman Saha, Cheteshwar Pujara, Shubman Gill and R. Ashwin chat during a training session ahead of the second Test against Australia in Melbourne on Wednesday. — AFP

talk to the team members, who stood in a circle at the MCCG.

"We are in Melbourne and now as the red-ball Tests start, it is time to regroup. #TeamIndia," BCCI wrote on its Twitter handle.

Shastri also had a chat with Rishabh Pant, who came out to bat at the nets ahead of Wriddhiman Saha. Pant may replace Shah in second Test even though many believe the veteran wicketkeeper should be given one more

chance. With Mohammed Shami ruled out of the remainder of the series with a fractured forearm, Mohammad Siraj and Navdeep Saini were seen bowling to Rahane alongside Shardul Thakur as the trio look to stake claim

for the third pacer's slot.

Batting coach Vikram Rathour, meanwhile, had a word with young Shaw, who is under tremendous pressure to retain his place in the XI after his below par show in Adelaide. — PTI

LYON DOESN'T WANT ASHWIN COMPARISON

Melbourne, Dec. 23: Ace Australian spinner Nathan Lyon says he and India's R Ashwin are similar yet different type of bowlers, so comparisons should not be made between the two. Lyon spoke highly of Ashwin, who he says stands out with his variations.

"Ashwin is a world-class bowler, to be honest. I have watched him a lot especially when I had gone to tour India and the subcontinent to try and learn of him. But he is a very cagey bowler, he has got all the variations," Lyon said.

"He's very cagey with the way he changes his pace, so he is a very talented bowler. We are similar in a way but we are very different as well, so I can't really compare myself to him. I think his records speak for his own, so hats off to Ashwin," he added. — PTI

Confident Rahane is a bowler's captain: Ishant

New Delhi, Dec. 23: Stand-in skipper Ajinkya Rahane is a "bowler's captain" whose calm demeanour and clear communication with players should help him lead the team well in remainder of the Test series against Australia, says India fast bowler Ishant Sharma.

Ishant, who missed the Australia tour due to a side strain injury, said Rahane has ability to nicely play the leadership role.

"He's very quiet and confident and I must say he's a bowler's captain," Ishant told *ESPNews*. "Whenever we have played together and Virat has not been around on the field, he'd ask me 'What kind of field you want? When you want to go on (bowling)?'"

"He's a bowler's captain. He's not someone who'd



India's Ajinkya Rahane (left) and coach Ravi Shastri chat during the training session on Wednesday. — AFP

say 'do this or do that ... He is very clear about what he wants from his team," he added.

Rahane has led India to victories both the times he had captained the side in absence of Kohli against Australia and Afghanistan.

"You can see what kind of person he is in his cap-

taincy. He is very calm and composed. I can't say he does not have a sense of humor. He jokes around with us.

"Rahane spreads calm energy in a pressure situation. There won't be any tension, he'd communicate with the bowlers very well," Ishant further added. — PTI

WARNER, SEAN RULED OUT OF SECOND TEST

Melbourne, Dec. 23: Star opener David Warner and pacer Sean Abbott were on Wednesday ruled out of the second Test against India, beginning here Saturday, because of a mix of injuries and Covid-19 protocols. Both Warner and Abbott were outside the team's bio-secure hub to get treatment for their respective injuries. The duo was flown out to Melbourne ahead of schedule on Saturday due to concern's over the recent outbreak of Covid-19 in Sydney's northern beaches.

"While neither player has been in a specific 'hotspot' on Sydney's northern beaches as outlined by NSW Health, Cricket Australia's biosecurity protocols do not allow them to rejoin the squad in time for the Boxing Day test," Cricket Australia said. — PTI

All eyes on Dada and his conflicts

Ahmedabad, Dec. 23: The inclusion of two new IPL franchises, a discussion on the contentious tax exemption demanded by the ICC for global events in India and the formation of various cricket committees will be on top of the agenda when the BCCI holds its 89th AGM here on Thursday.

The BCCI will also have a new vice president in Raviv Shukla, who is going to officially take over after being put forth as the unanimous choice. Brijesh Patel will also continue to head the IPL governing council.

There have been some discussions on whether BCCI president Sourav Ganguly will be asked about his brand endorsements and the related allegations of conflict of interest. But there is no clarity if the floor would officially seek an explanation from him on the matter.

The biggest development could be the approval of new IPL teams but primarily from the 2022 edition. "At this point, the 10-team IPL, if BCCI intends to conduct it in 2021, will be a hurried one given that the tendering process and a mega auction will be difficult to organise in such a short span of time," a senior BCCI official said.

TAX EXEMPTIONS FOR WORLD T20

There's only a week left for the BCCI to meet the ICC's deadline of giving com-

plete assurance that the global body will get full tax exemption for holding the World T20 in October-November or else it will be shifted to the UAE. While there has been precedence of exemptions during earlier global events, the current tax laws won't allow exemption for a sporting event and it will be interesting to see what will be the BCCI's stand on the issue.

BCCI REPRESENTATIVE IN ICC

BCCI secretary Jay Shah will remain India's representative at the ICC on various issues like last year along with Ganguly.

CRICKET IN OLYMPICS

If BCCI supports cricket at the Los Angeles Olympics in 2028, it might end up losing its autonomy as being a National Sports Federation means coming under the ambit of sports ministry with constant government interventions.

VARIOUS CRICKET COMMITTEES

The BCCI hasn't constituted important cricket sub-committees for the longest time. It is understood a new Cricket Advisory Committee (CAC) will be formed which will interview candidates for three new selectors. Also the various cricket committees like umpiring committee and the technical committee are also likely to be formed. — PTI



BCCI officials pose after their friendly match at the Motera stadium in Ahmedabad on Wednesday. — Twitter

BEDI QUILTS DELHI BODY OVER JAITLEY STATUE

New Delhi, Dec. 23: Lambasting the DDCA for deciding to install a statue of its late former President Arun Jaitley at the Feroz Shah Kotla ground, spin legend Bishan Singh Bedi has asked the body to remove his name from the spectators' stand, named after him in 2017.

Lashing out at the Delhi and District Cricket Association's (DDCA) culture, which he alleged promotes nepotism and puts "administrators ahead of cricketers", Bedi also renounced his membership of the body. He made the demand in a scathing letter addressed to DDCA President Rohan Jaitley, the son of the late politician, who was a minister in the BJP-led NDA government and died last year owing to multiple health issues.

"I pride myself as a man of immense tolerance and patience...but all that I'm afraid, is running out. DDCA has truly tested me and forced me to take this drastic action," Bedi wrote in his letter. — PTI

ICA nominates Ojha to IPL GC

New Delhi, Dec. 23: The Indian Cricketers Association (ICA) on Wednesday nominated former India spinner Pragyan Ojha as its representative to the IPL governing council, a day before the BCCI's Annual General Meeting.

The BCCI will hold its 89th AGM in Ahmedabad on Thursday. The association was earlier represented by former India player Surinder Khanna, as according to the BCCI constitution, the ICA is required to send a member to the IPL governing council every year.

"Yes, the ICA's directors have nominated Pragyan Ojha to the IPL governing council. Surinder Khanna has done a very good job and we like to give opportunity to every one," ICA president Ashok Malhotra said.

The ICA, whose Board of Directors arrived at the decision after its AGM on December 19, also issued a press release in this regard.

"The members had authorised the Board of Directors to nominate the member to the IPL GC and the ICA Board, after due



Pragyan Ojha

deliberations and taking into consideration any possible issues of conflict of interest, found in Ojha a suitable candidate to represent them. This nomination will hold good for one year," the ICA stated.

"The AGM conducted via video conference, touched upon the issues that had been raised by the ICA Representatives to the BCCI Apex Council to further the cause of ICA's members," the ICA added. Besides Ojha, Brijesh Patel and Khairul Jamal Majumdar, who were unanimously chosen by the BCCI last year, will be the other members of the IPL governing council. — PTI



Barcelona's Lionel Messi (centre) jumps to head the ball against Valladolid during their Spanish league match at the Jose Zorrilla stadium in Valladolid, Spain, on Tuesday. — AFP

Madrid, Dec. 23: Lionel Messi overtook Pele's record of goals for a single club on Tuesday as Barcelona strolled to a 3-0 La Liga win at Real Valladolid, while Atletico Madrid kept hold of their place at the top of the table.

Messi struck his 644th goal for Barca, one more than Brazil legend Pele scored for Santos, in the 65th minute of a routine win for Ronald Koeman's side, who are fifth in La Liga after the win and eight points behind leaders Atletico.

Barca started on the front foot at the Jose Zorrilla Stadium, with Messi flashing a curling shot wide in the seventh minute and forcing a superb save from Jordi Masip in the 20th minute.

Barca took the lead seconds later when Messi clipped over a beautiful cross which France defender Clement Lenglet headed home.

Martin Braithwaite gave the away side a deserved second 14 minutes later, Messi slipping through Sergio Dest who rolled over a perfect low cross for the Danish international to tap home.

The easy win puts Barca two points behind Sociedad and fourth-placed Villarreal, who drew 1-1 at home with Athletic Bilbao.

Earlier second-half goals from Mario Hermoso and Marcos Llorente earned Atletico a 2-0 win away at a Sociedad team.

FIORENTINA FIRE JUVE

Elsewhere, Ten-man Juventus crashed to their first Italian league defeat of the season 3-0 at home against Fiorentina on Tuesday in a nightmare final game before Christmas.

The defeat came hours after the champions learned they must play the match against Napoli which was

cancelled on October 4 after Napoli decided not to travel to Turin because of coronavirus cases.

On Tuesday, Napoli won their appeal to the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI) after being handed a 3-0 defeat and a one-point deduction. As a result Juventus, who had started the day with 27 points, finished it with 24.

Juventus are fourth, tied on points with Napoli and Roma, and seven points behind leaders AC Milan.

The champions go off to a terrible start with Fiorentina's Franck Ribery setting up Dusan Vlahovic for the opener after just three minutes.

Fiorentina doubled the lead after 76 minutes with the ball bouncing off Juve's Alex Sandro and into the goal. Martine Caceres turned in a Cristiano Biraghi cross from close range five minutes later. — AFP