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India records 2L fresh Covid cases, days after breaching 1L-mark

STAY AT HOME

UTTAR PRADESH, DELHI, KARNATAKA, MADHYA PRADESH, GUJARAT, RAJASTHAN, HARYANA, WEST BENGAL AND BIHAR ARE THE NINE STATES, WHICH RECORDED THEIR HIGHEST EVER TALLY IN THE LAST 24 HOURS.

India has emerged as the worst hit nation by the latest wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, recording more than two-fold rise in fresh cases with 2,00,739 new infections getting reported on Thursday, as compared to the country's highest previous peak of 97,894 cases recorded on September 17 last year. Covid-19 cases have been on the rise at an alarming rate for the past fortnight, with India recording over one lakh daily cases for the first time on April 4.

- Within 10 days, India became the second nation to record over 2 lakh daily cases.
- India has been recording more than 1.5 lakh cases a day for five days in a row now.
- India reported 2,00,739 new Covid-19 cases in the last 24 hours, the biggest single-day spike so far, taking its overall tally to 1,40,74,564, cases.

India's daily deaths due to Covid are also rising with 1,038 new deaths getting reported on Thursday, the second consecutive day the country reported over a thousand deaths. This took the overall death toll in the country to 1,73,123 till date.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

In April this year, India became the second nation after the US to log over 1 lakh daily coronavirus cases, and it also achieved the dubious distinction of crossing the 2 lakh fresh cases-mark within 10 days. In the latest wave of the pandemic, India has been the world's worst-hit country since April 2, forcing the states to impose new curbs to control the virus spread. As many as 93,528 patients recovered in the same time span, taking the total number of recoveries to 1,24,29,564 with a recovery rate of 88.31 per cent, the Health Ministry said. The



Health Ministry also said that a total of 13,84,549 samples were tested in the last 24 hours.

The exponential rise in the number of active cases across the country has led to a shortage of hospital beds across India. Many people are complaining of not getting admission to the hospitals due to high occupancy. On Wednesday, Maharashtra remained the worst hit as the state reported 58,952 fresh coronavirus cases, taking the tally to 35,78,160, while 278 new fatalities pushed its death count to 58,804. In terms of fresh caseload, Maharashtra is followed by Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

NEET-PG EXAMS POSTPONED: GOI

In light of the surge in #COVID19 cases, GoI has decided to postpone #NEETPG2021 exam which was earlier scheduled to be held on Apr 18. Next date to be decided later. Decision has been taken keeping wellbeing of our young medical students in mind.

MAPPING OF STATES WITH GREATER NEED OF OXYGEN

Amid reports of shortage of medical oxygen from various parts of the country, the Centre has clarified that the present availability of "oxygen is sufficient", however, it has started mapping of states with greater need of oxygen. Of the states with greater needs of oxygen are Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Chhattisgarh. Besides, there is more consumption of medical oxygen in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Punjab and Rajasthan. Considering reports, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHF) maintained that India's daily production Capacity of medical oxygen is 7,287 metric tonne and the current stock is more than 50,000 metric tonne, more than the daily consumption of 3,842 metric tonne.

Weekend curfew in Delhi till April 30

In order to break the chain of Covid-19 infections, the Delhi government on Thursday ordered imposition of weekend curfew in the city till April 30, except for essential activities or services. The curfew will be implemented from 10 p.m. on Friday to 5 a.m. on Monday from April 16. All shopping malls, gyms, spas, auditorium, assembly halls, entertainment parks and similar places will be closed while cinema halls or theatres or multiplexes will be permitted to open with 30 per cent of their seating capacity.

Now BJP's Dilip Ghosh barred from campaigning for 24 hours

Kolkata | Agencies

After Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, the Election Commission on Thursday barred West Bengal BJP President Dilip Ghosh from campaigning for 24 hours, charging him with making "provocative" public statements that can "seriously incite" emotions and lead to "breakdown" of law and order affecting the Assembly election process in the state. In a letter, the poll panel, unsatisfied with his reply, has found him guilty of violating clauses (1) and (4) of Part I of General Conduct of Model Code of Conduct for the guidance of political parties and candidates and making "highly provocative and inciteful remarks which could adversely impact law and order adversely affecting the election process". Besides warning Ghosh to abstain from making such remarks, it imposed a ban of 24 hours from 7 p.m. on April 15 to 7 p.m. on April 16.



Eight Pak nationals nabbed mid-sea with 30 kg heroin

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Eight Pakistan nationals were apprehended from the mid-sea off Gujarat coast for drug trafficking on Thursday. The law enforcement agencies seized 30 kilograms of heroin from them. Indian Coast Guard, a maritime law enforcement and search and rescue agency, spotted the Pakistani boat PFB NUH with eight of its nationals near the international maritime boundary line. They were searched and 30 kilogram of heroin was recovered from their boat. All the eight Pakistani nationals were apprehended immediately. The law enforcement agencies are trying to identify the mafia behind the drug traffickers. A team from a forensic science laboratory has been



called in to examine the contraband and ascertain its type. The last one year has proved to be a big setback for drug traffickers at seas as Indian Coast Guard has successfully seized about 1.6 tonnes of narcotics worth approximately Rs 4,900 crore. The Pakistani nationals were identified as Anees Isa

Bhatti, 30, Ismail Mohammed Kachchi, 50, Ashraf Usman Kutchi, 42, Kareem Abdulla Kutchi, 37, and Abubakar Ashraf Sumra, 55, all residents of different parts of Karachi, Pakistan. The drug mafias are trying to push contraband in Indian territory through land border and seas.

India stood firm to China's shove and push tactics: Gen Bipin Rawat

Team Absolute | New Delhi

India stood firm to China's 'shove and push tactics' on the northern borders in Eastern Ladakh, Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat said on Thursday. China feels that just by doing a little bit of shove and push, it will be able to compel nations to give in to their demands, but India has stood firm on the northern borders, General Rawat said. "We have proven that we will not get pushed," he said while speaking at a virtual discussion during the ongoing Raisina Dialogue 2021. General Rawat said that by standing firm, India prevented a change in the status quo, besides being

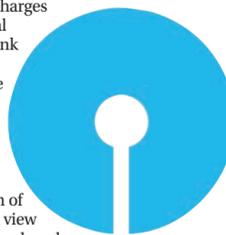
able to garner world support. General said that India is concerned about the vacuum that will be created after withdrawal of the US and NATO troops from war-torn Afghanistan. The UN, together with Turkey, and Qatar, announced on Tuesday that a high-level conference aimed at ending decades of conflict in Afghanistan will go ahead beginning on April 24. There would be representatives from both the Afghan government and the Taliban.



"We would be very happy to provide whatever support we can in the development of Afghanistan and making sure peace returns to that nation. People have got tired and are looking at peace."

CASH WITHDRAWALS CHARGEABLE, DIGITAL TRANSACTIONS EXEMPTED: SBI

New Delhi: The country's largest bank, State Bank of India, on Thursday said that the bank has retained charges on cash withdrawals over and above four free withdrawals per month but has stopped recovering charges in such accounts on all digital transactions. The Reserve Bank of India, in August 2012, had mandated that banks are free to levy reasonable charges in BSBD (Basic Savings Bank Deposit) accounts beyond four free transactions. The availing of such additional services shall be at the option of the customers, it had said. In view of the regulations, the SBI introduced charges for debit transactions beyond four free transactions in BSBD accounts with effect from June 15, 2016 with prior intimation to the customers. The bank has also waived fees levied on SMS services and on maintenance of monthly average balance to all its Savings Bank account holders while promoting financial inclusion in the country.



Some more states postpones HSC/SSC exams

Gandhinagar: The Gujarat government on Thursday decided to postpone the Board examinations for Classes 10 and 12 and also announced mass promotion for all the rest of the classes in view of the Covid resurgence. The Telangana government on Thursday decided to cancel the annual Class 10 exams and promote the students of intermediate first year (Class 11) without exams in view of the surge in Covid-19 cases. Punjab, Chief Minister Amarinder Singh on Thursday announced promotion of students of classes 5, 8 and 10 to the next class. He said that those students would be promoted without taking any examination, while the decision on

Class 12 Punjab State Education Board (PSEB) exams, which have already been postponed, will be taken later, based on the emerging situation. Goa Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Examinations, said on Thursday that Class X and XII board examinations will not be rescheduled in the wake of the spike in Covid-19 cases in Goa, Bhagirath Shetye. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has postponed the state Board examinations for Classes 10 and 12, while the government of Tamil Nadu informed the Madras High Court on Thursday that no student will be promoted without taking an online exam.

Rahul Gandhi attacks govt on Covid surge

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Amid surging Covid cases, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Thursday attacked the government on shortage of beds and ventilators in hospitals. Rahul said in a tweet, "There is no test, no bed in the hospital, no ventilators, no oxygen, no vaccine, bus utav ka dhong hai (a festive pre-tence)... PM cares?"

Rahul Gandhi's comments came after India reported an unprecedented surge in Covid with 2,00,739 cases recorded on Thursday, the biggest single day spike ever, taking the overall tally of infections 1,40,74,564, according to the Health Ministry data. The former Congress president has been critical of the government on the issue of Covid management.

Citigroup to exit consumer banking ops in India

New Delhi/New York: In a global restructuring to allocate resources in markets with scale, Citigroup will exit consumer banking operations in India as well as 12 other countries. The multinational investment bank headquartered in New York on Thursday announced strategic actions in the global consumer banking segment as part of an ongoing strategic review, which will allow Citi to direct investments and resources to the businesses where it has greatest scale and growth potential. The announcement was made as Citigroup reported its first quarter results.

Temperature crosses 40 degree in northern India

Team Absolute | New Delhi



According to the National Weather Forecasting Centre of the India Meteorological Department (IMD), maximum temperatures more than 40 degree centigrade were recorded at most places over East Uttar Pradesh; at many places over Haryana, Chandigarh & Delhi, Gangetic West Bengal and West Rajasthan; at a few places over Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat and West Uttar Pradesh and at isolated places over Chhattisgarh, Vidarbha, Odisha, Jharkhand and Marathwada. As per the IMD, thunderstorm with lightning, hail

& gusty winds (speed reaching 40-50 kmph) is very likely at isolated places over Telangana; with lightning, hail & gusty winds (speed reaching 30-40 kmph) also likely at isolated places over Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, coastal Andhra Pradesh & Yanam, Odisha and Chhattisgarh; with lightning & gusty winds (speed reaching 40-50 kmph) at isolated places over Rayalaseema, Marathwada; lightning & gusty winds (speed reaching 30-40 kmph) at isolated places over Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh, Gilgit-Baltistan & Muzaffarabad, Rajasthan and Punjab. While on Friday thunderstorm with lightning, hail & gusty winds (speed reaching 30-40 kmph) is very likely at isolated places over Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh, Gilgit-Baltistan & Muzaffarabad; with lightning and gusty winds (speed reaching 40-50 kmph) at isolated places over Assam & Meghalaya; with lightning

& gusty winds (speed reaching 30-40 kmph) at isolated places over Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Gangetic West Bengal, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram & Tripura, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry & Karaikal and Kerala & Mahe and with lightning at isolated places over East Madhya Pradesh, Vidarbha, Sub-Himalayan West Bengal & Sikkim, Madhya Maharashtra, Marathwada, Odisha, Coastal Andhra Pradesh & Yanam, Rayalaseema, Arunachal Pradesh, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Karnataka and Lakshadweep. Heavy rainfall is very likely at isolated places over Coastal and South Interior Karnataka, Kerala and Mahe and Tamil Nadu, Puducherry & Karaikal. Duststorm/Thunderstorm with gusty winds (speed reaching 30-40 kmph) very likely at isolated places over West Rajasthan.

No heat wave conditions are likely over the country on Thursday but heavy rainfall is very likely at isolated places over Coastal & South interior Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Karaikal on April 16, said the Ministry of Earth Sciences. However, heat wave conditions were observed in isolated pockets over Saurashtra and Kutch and Haryana on April 14.

Heavy rainfall very likely at isolated places over Odisha, Telangana, Karnataka, Kerala and Maha and Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Karaikal. Heat Wave conditions very likely in isolated pockets over Haryana and Saurashtra & Kutch.

IMD



BJP eyes 25 lakh Gurkhas in next phase of polls in Bengal

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which won seven of the eight Lok Sabha seats in north Bengal in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, is once again trying to woo 25 lakh Gurkhas in the region.



Navneet Mishra | New Delhi

The party, this time in the assembly elections, aims to get the upper hand in North Bengal with 54 assembly seats as Gurkhas are considered its votebank. Union Home Minister Amit Shah himself has taken over the command to get the Gurkhas to his side by making big promises during one of his trips to the state.

As a part of its strategy, Shah spent one full night in Darjeeling on April 12. This is the first time that a home minister of the country has spent the entire night in Darjeeling, meeting the various leaders of Gurkha associations. The next day, on April 13, he held an election rally in Darjeeling and tried to woo this community by making several big promises. There are as many as nine districts in north Bengal, which include Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Malda North,

Malda South, North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur. These nine districts have eight Lok Sabha seats. Gurkhas play an important role in the election here and in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections extended their full support to the BJP which resulted in the party winning seven seats -- Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Balurghat (Dakshin Dinajpur), Raiganj (Uttar Dinajpur), Malda North and Darjeeling. BJP Lok Sabha MP from Darjeeling Raju Bisht told correspondent, "The manner in which North Bengal has been neglected by the Mamata government and the Gurkhas have been sidelined and even subjected to atrocities, the Home Minister is very much aware of this. That is why he focused on local problems and gave them assurances that these will be addressed if the party comes to power. The Gurkhas can get a chance to join the mainstream of development of the country only if the BJP forms the government in the state."

Trinamool proposes to club last 3 phases of Bengal polls

Kolkata | Agencies

A day before the all-party meeting convened by state Chief Electoral Officer Ariz Aftab on maintaining the Covid protocols during the ongoing Assembly elections in West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress on Thursday proposed to club the last three phases of polls scheduled on April 22, 26 and 29. The ruling Trinamool Congress proposed to conduct the last three phases in one or two phases, considering the upward trend of Covid cases in the state for the last one month.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said in a tweet, "Amid the ongoing pandemic, we firmly opposed @ECISVEEP's decision to conduct WB polls in 8 phases. Now, in view of the huge surge in #COVID19 cases, I urge the ECI to consider holding the remaining phases in ONE go. This will protect the people from further exposure to #COVID19."

The Trinamool supremo had earlier said in an interview, "It is upon the (Election) Commission to decide whether the last three phases of polls will be clubbed in one or two phases in the backdrop of the rise in Covid cases. We have no objection if the phases are clubbed."

"If the polls are on, we are bound to campaign. People from states like Bihar, UP, Jharkhand are coming to the state during BJP's campaign. I do not know why the Election Commission did not consider the Covid factor earlier."

Though senior officials in the Commission said that the proposal to integrate the three phases of polling into one or two phases is technically and logistically impossible, the alarming rate at which Covid cases are mounting in the state is also a cause of worry, both for the political parties and the poll panel.

According to the data released by the state gov-



ernment, the number of new cases in Bengal touched 5,892 on Wednesday, which is the highest single-day spike recorded in the state so far. Capital city Kolkata alone added 1,601 cases to the state's tally.

On Thursday morning, Congress candidate Rezaul Haque, who was scheduled to contest from the Samsheganj Assembly constituency in Murshidabad district, succumbed to Covid-19 at a private hospital in Kolkata.

Murshidabad is set to go to the polls on April 26 in the seventh phase. The Commission is likely to

postpone the polls in Samsheganj owing to the unfortunate demise of the Congress nominee.

Not only that, Trinamool candidate from Goalgokhor in North Dinajpur district, Golam Rabbani, and RSP candidate from Jangipur, Pradip Nandi, have also tested positive for Covid-19. BJP MP Roopa Ganguly had earlier tested positive.

When asked about the developments, an Election Commission official said, "In the next phases, at least 70 per cent to 80 per cent booths are marked as sensitive and, in this condition, we need an adequate deployment of Central forces."

UNION MINISTER DESCRIBES VIJAYAN AS 'COVIDIOT'

Thiruvananthapuram | Agencies

The long running feud between Union Minister of State for External Affairs V. Muraleedharan and Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan took an ugly turn with the former calling the latter a 'Covidiot'.

He wrote this in his official Twitter handle, "Kerala CM @VijayanPinarayi's #COVIDIOT. There is no better word to describe a Chief Minister who continuously violates #COVID Protocols".

He further tweeted, "In an attempt to protect @vijayanpinarayis #COVID violations @shallajateacher is misleading people with half-cooked info on #COVIDProtocols. If a Health Minister cannot understand @ICMRDELHI revised guidelines, how can she help people? Their ego & arrogance costing lives. Shame", wrote Muraleedharan.

His tweet came after he slammed Vijayan while speaking to the media in Delhi and demanded that a case be registered against Vijayan for violating Covid protocols.



"None is above the law and for the past one year practically every day we all saw Vijayan holding press conferences speaking on how Covid protocols should be followed. At times even he admonished political leaders for violation of Covid protocols. I want to ask him one question," said Muraleedharan.

MEHBOOBA MUFTI'S MOTHER SKIPS ED SUMMONS

New Delhi | Agencies



New Delhi: The mother of former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti on Thursday did not appear before the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in connection with a money laundering case. According to ED sources, Gulshan Ara was asked to appear before the ED at its Srinagar office on Thursday, but requested it defer her questioning to any other alternate date. On March 25, the ED has recorded the Mehbooba Mufti's statement in connection with the case. She had appeared before the ED after skipping two summons of the financial probe for her questioning in the national capital.

Bengal fifth phase: Congress may find the going tough

Siliguri/New Delhi | Agencies

The Congress may find it tough to retain its last tally in the fifth phase of the polling in West Bengal where the party is contesting on 12 seats and has 3 sitting MLAs including a second term MLA in Naxalbari, said sources. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi had campaigned for the fifth phase and had targeted both the TMC and the BJP for dividing the state. Congress Senior Observer BK Hariprasad speaking on phone from West Bengal said, "this phase the Congress is strong and will enhance its last time tally in the elections." The Congress has retained the seat -- Matigara-Naxalbari Assembly constituency -- twice in a row and is represented by Sankar Malakar who is the MLA since 2011. The seat is reserved for Scheduled Castes. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi had addressed two public meetings on Wednesday at the Lodhan school ground in Goalgokhar in Uttar Dinajpur and at the Sarojini ground in



Darjeeling district, which is part of the Naxalbari Assembly constituency. Apart from this seat the area has become a stronghold of the BJP but the Congress is hopeful that its alliance with the Left will

give it enough seats in this phase. While Rahul Gandhi is a late entrant in the poll arena of West Bengal, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has led the BJP campaign so far in the state.

The ruling Trinamool Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party are involved in a direct contest in Bengal, the Left is trying to win back its rural support, and the Congress is looking to retain its tally of 44 seats it won in the 2016 elections.

The Congress' vote share had declined to 4 per cent in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, but it still remains an important factor in some districts such as Purulia, Malda and Murshidabad.

In the fifth phase there will be elections in six districts including 16 constituencies in North 24 Parganas, 8 constituencies in Nadia district, 8 constituencies in East Burdwan district, 7 in Jalpaiguri district, 5 in Darjeeling and one constituency in Kalimpong district. There will be voting in 15,789 booths spread across 44 constituencies in six districts.

India simplifies process for re-issue of OCI Cards

Team Absolute | New Delhi

In a decision which is expected to significantly ease the process for re-issue of Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) cards, the Central government has simplified the process.

Presently, the OCI card is required to be re-issued each time a new passport is issued up to 20 years of age and once after completing 50 years of age, in view of biological changes in the face of the applicant. With a view to facilitate the OCI cardholders, it has now been decided by the Central government to dispense with this requirement, the Ministry of Home Affairs said on Thursday. This decision has been taken on the directions of Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

A person who has got registration as OCI cardholder prior to attaining the age of 20 years will have to get the OCI card re-issued only once when a new passport is issued after his or her completing 20 years of age,



so as to capture his or her facial features on attaining adulthood. If a person has obtained registration as OCI cardholder after attaining the age of

20 years, there will be no requirement of re-issue of OCI card. With a view to update the data regarding new passports obtained by

the OCI cardholder, it has been decided that he or she shall upload a copy of the new passport containing his or her photo and also a latest photo on the online OCI portal, each time a new passport is issued up to 20 years of age and once after completing 50 years of age. These documents may be uploaded by the OCI cardholder within 3 months of receipt of the new passport. However, in the case of those who have been registered as OCI cardholder as spouse of foreign origin of a citizen of India or an OCI cardholder, the person concerned will be required to upload on the system, a copy of the new passport containing the photo of the passport holder and also a latest photo along with a declaration that their marriage is still subsisting each time a new passport is issued. These documents may be uploaded by the OCI cardholder spouse within three months of receipt of his or her new passport.

Congress candidate from Murshidabad dies of Covid

Kolkata | Agencies

Murshidabad's Congress candidate Rezaul Haque died of Covid-19 at a private hospital here on Thursday morning.

Haque was contesting in this Assembly election from Samsheganj in Murshidabad district where election is supposed to take place in the seventh phase on April 26.

Party sources said that Haque was tested positive a couple of days before and was in home isolation but after his condition deteriorated, he was initially admitted to a local private hospital and later shifted to a medical facility in Kolkata.

State Congress president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury said: "His death is a huge loss to



the party. He had contributed to the party all through his life and we had a strong hope that he would win from Samsheganj constituency. May his soul rest in peace".

However, Trinamool congress spokesperson and Minister-of-State for Parliamentary Affairs Tapas Roy blamed the BJP government for this second Covid wave.

Girl found dead in mysterious circumstances in UP



Pilibhit | Agencies

A 19-year-old girl, said to be mentally unstable, was found dead under mysterious circumstances in her house in the Gajraula area of Pilibhit district.

Her family alleged that she was murdered on Tuesday night after a failed rape attempt by a local who entered their house through the roof.

The police said there were no injury marks on the body and the post mortem report on Wednesday also failed to ascertain the cause of death. The viscera has been preserved for a further test.

The police have detained a 35-year-old suspect, a labourer and resident of the same village, for questioning. No evidence has yet been found against the suspect.

People have to die when they get old: MP Minister

Team Absolute | Bhopal

In a statement set to spark off controversy, Madhya Pradesh Minister Prem Singh Patel on Thursday said no one can stop deaths due to coronavirus, and that people have to die when they get old.

"You said that many people are dying every day. People get old and they have to die," he said.

Patel's remarks came in reply to a question about the rising number



of Covid deaths. "I agree that these deaths are happening. But nobody can stop these deaths. Not only me, everyone in the country is talking about cooperation for protection from corona. We seek people's cooperation. It is necessary to follow all necessary Covid precautionary measures including wearing masks, washing hands, following social distancing and getting treated by a doctor," he said.



PROCLAIM COVID-19 'NATURAL CALAMITY', THACKERAY URGES NARENDRA MODI

Bring 'life-saver' Remdesivir under drug price control: Maha Barrister

As Maharashtra bears the brunt of the second wave of Covid-19 sweeping India, Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray on Thursday appealed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to declare the pandemic a "natural calamity".



In view of the Covid-19 pandemic situation in the state, a mini-lockdown is a necessity. Covid-19 pandemic may be notified as a natural calamity for the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF). The banks may be asked to defer the instalments that are becoming due at least in the first quarter of the current financial year may be postponed without interest.

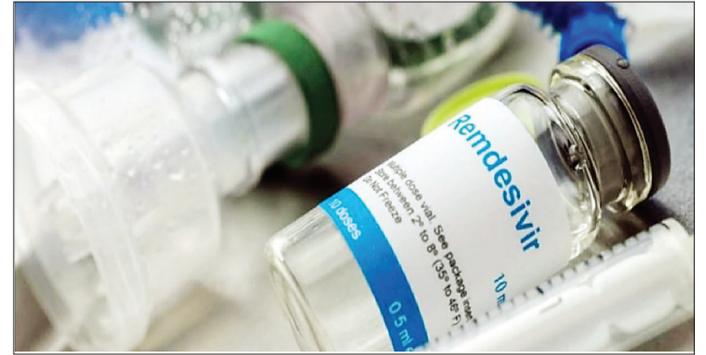
Thackeray said. Stating that these are the ones whose livelihoods are seriously affected due to the lockdown, he asked that the entire expenditure may be allowed from the SDRF during the current financial year, and the first installment of the Central share of the SDRF may be released to tide over the financial situation. Referring to the plight of small scale industries, businesses, and

startups which have taken bank loans under different Central schemes and supported the country in becoming 'Atmanirbhar' in various sectors, he said today they are reeling under the Covid-19 restrictions. On the state's serious Covid-19 status, the CM said that Maharashtra currently has 5.64 lakh active cases, or almost 88 percent higher than the peak of September 2020.

"The biggest concern to the state is liquid medical oxygen (LMO) supplies. The requirement of oxygen is crossing the total capacity of 1,200 MT of LMO manufacturing. We have projected that the demand would be 2,000 MT April-end," he said. Expressing his thanks to the Centre for mapping state demand to steel plants in eastern and southern India, he urged it to invoke the National Disaster Management Act (NDMA) for the movement of LMO and reiterated his earlier plea to consider options of air-lifting the oxygen supplies by the Indian Air Force.

Lauding the decision to ban remdesivir exports, Thackeray requested the authorities concerned to grant compulsory licence as per Section 92 of Indian Patents Act, 1970, which would facilitate approval to those exporting units to manufacture and sell the drug in the domestic markets.

He sought the PM's "personal intervention" to address the concerns of the state on these issues to combat the pandemic situation.

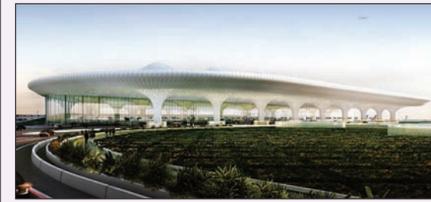


- Justifying his contentions, he pointed out that Cipremi is sold for Rs 4000 though it is given to the distributor for barely Rs 1,080+GST, Covifar is sold at Rs 5,400 by the stockist who gets it for Rs 935+GST. Ditto is the case with Desrem bought for Rs 935+GST but sold at Rs 4,800, Redyx bought for Rs 900+GST but sold to the patient at Rs 5,400, he pointed out.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Penning two separate letters addressed to the PM, Thackeray said that this would enable relief funds to be extended by the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) for the pandemic victims. "Accordingly, the state may be allowed to pay Gratuitous Relief of Rs 100 per adult per day and Rs 60 per child per day during the period of lockdown to all the Antodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) and Priority House Hold (PHH) family members whose names are included in the AAY and PHH ration cards,"

MUMBAI AIRPORT TO HERD ALL FLIGHTS IN SINGLE TERMINAL



Mumbai: In view of the worsening Covid-19 pandemic situation, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport (CSMIA) in Mumbai has decided to re-consolidate all domestic passenger flights currently operating from Terminal 1, an official said here on Thursday. From April 21, the CSMIA will operate all domestic and international services from the advanced Terminal 2. It has also requested all passengers booked on GoAir, Star Air, AirAsia, Trujet and IndiGo flights to contact their respective airlines for further details. The CSMIA assured that it is strictly adhering to all the Covid-19 protocols and other guidelines issued by the Centre and Maharashtra government to curb the spread of the virus.

RBI received 8 applications to set up universal, small finance banks

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Reserve Bank has received eight applications for acquiring 'on tap' licenses to set up universal banks and small finance banks.

The RBI received four applications each to set up universal banks and small finance banks.

Applicants like the UAE Exchange and Financial Services, the Repatriates Cooperative Finance and Development Bank, Chaitanya India Fin Credit, and Pankaj Vaish and others have applied to set up universal banks. Similarly, VSoft Technologies, the Calicut City Service Co-operative Bank,



Akhil Kumar Gupta, and the Dvara Kshetriya Gramin Financial Services have applied for the license to establish Small Finance Banks. The RBI had issued guidelines for 'on tap' Licensing of Universal Banks and Small Finance Banks in the Private Sector' on August

1, 2016 and December 5, 2019, respectively. The 'on-tap' facility allows the RBI to accept applications and grant licence for banks throughout the year. Besides, the policy allows aspirants to apply for universal bank licence any time, subject to fulfilment of set conditions.

Quaid Najmi | Mumbai

A prominent Maharashtra legal luminary on Thursday petitioned the Centre to declare the Remdesivir medicine - currently in huge demand owing to the Covid-19 pandemic - as a 'life-saving' medicine with controlled pricing to prevent blackmarketing and corruption.

Remdesivir is manufactured by a handful of companies under brand names like Cipremi (Cipla), Covifar (Hetero), Desrem (Mylon), Remdac (Zydus), Redyx (Dr. Reddy's).

In a plea to the Central Government which controls the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA), a statutory authority under the Drugs Price Control Order (DPCO), Mumbai Barrister Vinod Tiwari has demanded a high-level investigation into the artificial scarcity, hoarding, blackmarketing and misuse of the drug which could run into a racket of over Rs 25,000-crore under the nose of the NPPA, in the past ten months since the drug was launched after the pandemic was declared.

Despite efforts by certain states like Maharashtra to bring Remdesivir under the ambit of DPCO, he accused the NPPA of ignoring the grave situation which led to massive irregularities and corruption, besides desperation among Covid-19 patients across

India.

Tiwari pointed out that under the DPCO, 1995, amended in 2013, issued under the Essential Commodities Act, the Centre is empowered to include any item of medical importance, like Remdesivir currently, within the DPCO list to control its manufacture, stocking, distribution, sale, etc. and make it easily available at a reasonable price to the patients.

"It was the duty of the NPPA under DPCO to follow its statutory functions and responsibilities by taking immediate steps to bring Remdesivir under the DPCO regime soon after the biggest pandemic afflicting mankind was witnessed last year. Why did it wait for so long? Who's responsible and what were the ulterior motives behind the delays?" Tiwari told correspondent.

Citing various documents and RTI replies, Tiwari said the NPPA took no initiative to bring Remdesivir under the DPCO regime and in the process crores of patients and people were looted of more than Rs 25,000 crore.

"The country is witnessing a tsunami-like second wave of Covid-19 but the NPPA has failed to rein in the prices of Remdesivir and the needy patients are left at the sheer mercy of the pharma companies and the medical mafia since over 13 months now," rued Tiwari.

PM should heed RaGa's advice to control Covid-19 spike: Kamat

PANAJI | Agencies

In a classic 'we told you so' barb, Goa's Leader of Opposition Digambar Kamat on Wednesday said that had Prime Minister Narendra Modi heeded Congress vice president Rahul Gandhi's advice on reshaping the country's vaccination outreach effort, the Covid-19 situation in India may have been less sinister.

Kamat's taunt at Prime Minister Narendra Modi comes at a time when Covid-19 cases in India have seen a severe spike across the country. "If @BJP4India Government had listened to the Voice of @INCIndia Leader @RahulGandhi, #Covid situation in India would have been different today," Kamat tweeted. "@PMOIndia must act wisely & accept the 7 demands made by Shri Rahul Gandhi to improve Covid & Economic situation in the Country. @INCGoa," the former Chief Minister also said.

Gandhi in a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi had raised questions about the manner in which the country's vaccination programme has been rolled out, amid reports of a shortage in vaccine availability in several parts of the country.

States like Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh,



Punjab, Odisha and Rajasthan have complained about the lack of availability of Covid-19 vaccines. Office bearers in the Maharashtra government have openly blamed the central government for not making enough vaccines available to the non-BJP ruled state.

Highlighting concerns related to the vaccine roll-out, Rahul Gandhi, in a letter to Modi last week, had made several suggestions to enhance the efficacy of the inoculation drive, which includes putting in place an immediate moratorium on vaccine export.

Goa striking taxi drivers want negotiations with govt broadcast live

PANAJI | Agencies

Even as the ongoing taxi strike has dragged for more than a week, office bearers of the taxi associations in Goa have demanded that the lobby's negotiations with Goa government ministers would be held if they are broadcast live on social media.

Speaking to reporters in Panaji, where hundreds of taxi drivers have been staging a protest since last week, Bappa Korgaonkar, a spokesperson for the striking drivers said that the demand for live broadcast of the negotiations was made to overcome fears among a section of the public transporter lobby about a secret deal being struck between taxi union leaders and the government.

"Any negotiation with our delegation should be broadcast live on social media," Korgaonkar said.

Women and children of striking taxi drivers have now joined the protest in a bid to leverage pressure on the state government to agree to their demands.



Transport Minister Mauvin Godinho has said that the government was willing to talk with the protesters, but only on April 20.

"We do not know why the government wants to wait for five more days to talk to us, but we are willing to carry on our strike for five months if need be," Korgaonkar said.

Taxi operators in Goa have gone on strike, demanding an immediate end to GoaMiles, a cab aggregator service backed by the state tourism development corporation, claiming it was impacting the livelihood of nearly 30,000 private tourist taxi operators in the state. A large section of Goa's 30,000 odd

tourist taxis and the drivers who man them, have often been accused of overcharging, intimidating and operating in an unregulated environment.

Following a slew of complaints, the state Tourism Ministry in 2018 started an outsourced private app-based taxi service GoaMiles, which has been opposed by local taxi unions.

B'Town faces 15-20% loss, small film shoots may move out of Maha

Anjuri Nayar Singh | Mumbai

Cinema halls have been shut, and the Maharashtra government has ordered all film and TV shoots to be stopped immediately. This has come to a huge impediment to Bollywood as many big-ticket films including Shah Rukh Khan's 'Pathan', the Ranveer Singh-starrer 'Cirkus', and Ajay Devgn's 'Mayday' and 'Maidaan' were currently being shot in the state.

According to reports, Salman Khan's 'Tiger 3' and the Prabhas-starrer 'Adipurush' has also been put on hold.

Approximately, Rs100-150 crore is at stake as besides these films shot, there were numerous other films at various stages of production -- where sets were being constructed or other stages of pre-production or shooting.

"Around 20 to 25 films were at different stages of shooting. Some shoots were on, or sets were being constructed. But there was no other option, the way it (Covid) is spreading. Almost every unit is reporting (Covid cases). It made sense to stop shooting," says trade analyst



Komal Nahta.

Adding to this, producer and film business expert Girish Johar says there will be considerable cost that will be added to the budgets of these films. "To every film project, vis-a-vis their budget, 15 to 20 per cent loss is there. This cost will be added. It's a comprehensive loss. Mumbai, Maharashtra is the hub of content production. Not only artists and technicians but also for daily age workers who help in shootings, it's a big blow to them," he says.

However, there are films where the shoot might be shifted outside Maharashtra. "There are quite a few. These are small films. If a big set has already been set up in the state, you don't want to move out.

Small films can plan and move out to another state. But, for that, you need to follow other protocols," says Johar. He says producers are looking towards East India to complete shoots. "East is what they are looking at. The cases are quite less. That's the key area where a lot of shootings are being directed to. But it depends on the pending shooting content and if it gels with the story or not and if you can take the crew or not,"

MCAI Elections held virtually

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Music Composers' Association of India had its AGM where for the first time it was held virtually due to the current pandemic. The interesting aspect of the AGM this time was the declaration of election results of the new committee after a hotly contested election between 2 panels of composers, spread over 3 days, online from 27th - 29th March 2021! On one side there was a panel primarily comprising of Bollywood song composers of the 90s such as Anand - Milind, Jatin-Lalit & Dileep Sen - Sameer Sen among others, and on the other panel which called itself "The Progressive Team", there were primarily contemporary composers from across musical sections with Ranjit Barot, Salim - Suleiman & Ram Sampath from Films, Raju Singh & Aashish Rego from TV & Webseries, Julius Packiam & Tubby Sharma from Background Scores, Rahul Ranade from the Marathi Industry, Justin - Uday, Tapas Relia & Vipin Mishra from advertising, Santosh Nair & Ambrish Shroff from TV & Pt. Somesh Mathur from the Classical/ Folk industry. In the end, the Progressive team triumphed with all its candidates winning by huge margins, and achieved a clean sweep of the elections. This was the first time ever that a total of 446 votes were cast in the elections, across 6 countries and 25 cities. The advertising composers were elected unopposed. The new team promised to



unite the association to actively secure the rights and royalties of all sections of composers, by treating all music with equal weightage.

The winning results were as follows:

Table with 2 columns: Name and Votes. Includes Salim Merchant (287 votes), Ranjit Barot (234 votes), Indrajit 'Tubby' Sharma (184 votes), Julius Packiam (177 votes), Raju Singh (309 votes), Aashish Rego (276 votes), Santosh Nair (222 votes), Ambrish Shroff (187 votes), Ram Sampath (284 votes), Suleiman Merchant (263 votes), Rahul Ranade (194 votes), Somesh Mathur (145 votes).



DELHI TO BE UNDER WEEKEND CURFEW TILL APRIL 30

Team Absolute | New Delhi

In order to break the chain of Covid-19 infections, the Delhi government on Thursday ordered imposition of weekend curfew in the city till April 30, except for essential activities or services.

The curfew will be implemented from 10 p.m. on Friday to 5 a.m. on Monday from April 16.

All shopping malls, gymnasiums, spas, auditorium, assembly halls, entertainment parks and similar places will be closed while cinema halls or theatres or multiplexes will be permitted to open with 30 per cent of their seating capacity.

The Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) issued the order on Thursday, nine days after it imposed night curfew in the city from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. till the end of April. The night curfew was imposed on April 6 to curtail the growth of Covid-19 pandemic which so far has infected over 7,67,438 people across the national capital and claimed lives of 11,540 so far.

In view of sharp increase in the Covid cases, the DDMA decided to impose weekend curfew to contain



the fast spread of virus which infected over 17,000 people in the last 24 hours till Wednesday. As per the order, only one weekly market per day per zone across the Delhi will be allowed under Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and all instructions or guidelines issued from time to time by the DDMA to contain the spread of Covid. Officers of Centre, its autonomous or subordinate offices and public corporations and officers of Delhi government or Delhi autonomous bodies or Delhi corporations involved in emergency services like health, medical establishments, police, prisons, Home Guards, Civil Defence, fire and emergency services will be exempted from the restriction

of weekend curfew. District administration, Pay and Account office, electricity, water and sanitation, and public transport like railways, buses, air will also be exempted. Besides, all incidental services that are essential for smooth functioning of all modes of public transport (such as handling of cargo, ticketing, air freight stations, CFS, ICD), Disaster Management and related services, NIC, NCC and uninterrupted delivery of public services will also be allowed.

All judicial officials or officials of courts of Delhi will be allowed to move on production of valid card. All private medical personnel such as doctors, nursing staff, paramedical and other hospital services will also

be allowed on production of valid I cards.

Pregnant women and patients for getting medical or health services will be exempted from the restriction. Person coming from or going to airports, railway stations or ISBTs will also be allowed to travel on production of valid ticket. Officers related to functioning offices of diplomats of various countries as well as persons holding any constitutional post will also be allowed on valid I card.

Electronic and print media will also be exempted from the weekend curfew on production of valid I card.

There shall be no restriction of inter-state or intra-state movement or transportation of essential or non-essential goods. No separate permission or e-pass is required for such movements.

Movement of persons for marriage related gatherings up to 50 persons and funeral related gathering upto 20 persons is continued to be allowed.

Public transport such as Delhi Metro, buses, autos and taxis shall be allowed to function within its stipulated time.

Persons going for Covid vaccination will also be allowed.

Delhi CM seeks Hindu Rao, Dayanand hospitals be made Covid only

Team Absolute | New Delhi

With Delhi reeling under surging Covid-19 cases, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Thursday suggested that the Hindu Rao and Swami Dayanand hospitals, coming under the BJP-ruled MCDs, be made Covid hospitals. Making the suggestion at a review meeting on the Covid situation, he said that this measure will lead to an increase of 900 beds for Covid patients, as he sought full cooperation and no politics on the matter.

The Chief Minister also assured every possible help, including funds, to the MCD hospitals.

Kejriwal said that the focus of his government is towards increasing the bed capacity, which will ensure adequate treatment for people requiring urgent assistance, and the government and private hospitals should aim towards taking over more facilities.

It was also suggested that a time-bound preparation plan should be prepared to monitor the increase and availability of beds.

Noting that he came across a situation recently where an asymptomatic patient was turned back from a hospital and created a ruckus, Kejriwal said: "This situation should never happen."

"We must issue an order to allow directing patients to our Covid Care Centres (CCCs), to make the patient feel safe and in the care of the doctors. More and more patients should be shifted to these centres to cater to very critical patients in the hospitals." Secondly, all the helpline numbers of the hospitals, which are also mentioned on our app, should remain fully functional. The hospitals must be



directed to make people available round the clock for providing assistance through the helpline numbers. Thirdly, all the hospitals must be directed to ensure an adequate flow of information on the real-time availability of beds. This data should be updated every day," Kejriwal said.

In the meeting, special focus was laid on the three-tier arrangement of health infrastructure in Delhi, of which first is home isolation, second is Covid Care Centres, and third is an increase in beds and facilities in hospitals in Delhi. Additionally, the Delhi government has requested the Centre to increase and make 2,700 beds from Central government hospitals available for the treatment of coronavirus patients.

Currently, around 15,048 beds have been made available as Covid beds, out of which over 5,000 beds are empty.

The availability of 2,700 beds will further increase the Covid bed capacity in Delhi to around 20,000. Along with this, the current number of ambulances available with the Delhi government is 629, and the current response time is 14 minutes, with no refusals recorded.

Delhi govt allows passes for essential services

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Thursday announced a weekend curfew in the national capital to break the chain of Covid-19 pandemic, which has shown an uptrend for the past few days.

Considering exponential surge in Covid cases, Kejriwal, in a virtual video conference, announced weekend curfew in the city giving relaxation to essential services and upcoming marriages with provisions of providing them certain passes to avoid panic. Iting that the decision has been taken after a series of meetings conducted since morning -- first with

Lieutenant Governor Anil Bajjal and then with the Health Minister, Chief Secretary, Health Secretary and other top officials -- Kejriwal said 'it is decided to impose weekend curfew in Delhi to break the chain of transmission of coronavirus'.

"It is unanimously decided to impose weekend curfew because people normally visit outside their homes for entertainment or other activities which can be curtailed. The restriction may not create much problem to the people. The purpose is to break the chain of Covid infection on weekends," Kejriwal said.

Kejriwal, however, clarified that essential services like

visiting hospitals, railway stations and airports will not be hampered. Besides, the marriages, which are already fixed, will not face any kind of difficulties, he said.

"All such activities will be allowed by providing curfew passes," the Delhi Chief Minister clarified, adding "all such persons can apply passes and they will be provided these passes without any harassment". Kejriwal further announced that Malls, Gyms, Spas and Auditoriums will be closed during the restrictions, and cinema halls will be allowed to run with 30 per cent capacity. One weekly market with per day, per zone method will be allowed, Kejriwal said.

59% DELHI RESIDENTS FAVOUR A 3-WEEK LOCKDOWN

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Ahead of the meeting Thursday between Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and LG Anil Bajjal, 59 per cent Delhi residents are in favour of a 3-week lockdown.

As per a Local Circles survey, 16 per cent residents of Delhi were in support of lockdown at the end of March and the number of people supporting it has risen by 275 per cent in less than three weeks.

Covid-19 cases are rising exponentially amid the SARS-COV-2 variant propagating in Delhi with the city registering a 4,200 per cent increase in its daily caseload within the last 30 days.

On March 15th, the city had 400 Covid cases which on April 14th had gone up to 17,282. The positivity rate is currently at 15.92 per cent, with 7,67,438 positive cases, which is the highest ever in the state. Notably, 91.92 per cent of ventilator beds are currently occupied, with only 99 beds



now available from the total 1,226 beds. LocalCircles conducted a survey which received over 8,000 responses from residents located in all 11 districts of Delhi. As daily caseload in Delhi goes past 17,000, 59 per cent residents say impose lockdown, the survey said. Taking cognizance of the drastic increase in the daily Covid

caseload that has surpassed 17,000 the survey sought residents of Delhi's perception if they support imposition of a complete 3-week lockdown in the city. In response, 59 per cent said "Yes". There were also 36 per cent of residents who said "No", while 5 per cent couldn't say. The question in the survey received 8,211 responses.

At the end of March, when LocalCircles did a similar exercise, only 16 per cent residents of Delhi, who participated in the survey, were in favour of a lockdown.

However, with rising cases, people seeing their contacts in social networks struggling to find hospital and ICU beds, remdesivir, etc. many are now understanding the criticality of the situation and as a result 59 per cent residents of Delhi, who participated in the survey concluding on April 15, voted in favour of a 3 week lockdown. It was categorically stated that while lockdown is imposed, all essential services must continue to function in the city so that people do not face hardships in running their households. LocalCircles has shared the findings of this survey with the Office of Lieutenant Governor of Delhi and the Office of Chief Minister so as they discuss the Delhi situation and decide on the way forward, this collective public feedback is taken into account.

Mobile apps help urban Indians meet daily needs in 2nd wave

Team Absolute | New Delhi | Noida

For 28-year-old Pratyush Ranjan, the Covid-hit 2020 taught him hard lessons in embracing a digital life, not only for shopping clothes or shoes but also daily essentials like groceries, milk, vegetables, meat and more.

A year later, living in a high-rise apartment in Noida which has over 40 Covid-positive cases and rising, he is well prepared to cope with the unprecedented second Covid wave, thanks to easy-to-operate apps and a robust digital payments system just few clicks away.

"Life is so easy now. As I and several of my friends now work from home, ordering daily essentials was never so easy thanks to user-friendly apps. Last year made us realise the importance of going digital," said Ranjan. He is not alone as thousands of urban Indians - who never looked at using smartphones to purchase items of daily needs and are once again locked up in their homes - across the country have become comfortable in using apps like BigBasket, JioMart, Grofers, Country Delight, FreshToHome, Licious and Zappfresh, etc to fulfil their needs without venturing out.

Moreover, digital payments providers like Paytm, PhonePe, Google Pay and BharatPe have made



their digital journey easy.

"Whether it be hyperlocal O2O commerce models, contactless deliveries and pick-ups, and new mobile apps for an array of use cases and contexts - there has been a rapid progress in experimenting and improvising to deliver strong digital experiences for consumers," Prabhu Ram, Head-Industry Intelligence Group (IIG), CMR, told IANS.

During the pandemic, consumption of online branded meat has also increased by more than two times. "Since Covid, customers increasingly preferred purchasing meat online. This was driven by the assurance of safety and hygiene, availability of various products under one umbrella, doorstep service provided by online meat providers," accord-

ing to Bengaluru-based market research firm RedSeer. The reality is that the pandemic has resulted in a significant increase in meat orders online and key delivery players have seen three times growth in meat orders since the outbreak of the pandemic in the country.

"Covid-19 transformed the fish and meat purchasing behaviour of consumers dramatically. Due to safety concerns, consumers made the habit-forming shift to e-commerce and we saw online demand for our products going up many folds this year," said Shan Kadavil, Co-Founder and CEO of FreshToHome. Reliance Industries' e-commerce venture JioMart is now giving a fight to BigBasket.

According to a BofA Global Research report, JioMart, launched in May last year, has gained a 20 per cent market share among distributors in Bengaluru.

When it comes to daily/monthly user base, "the DAU/MAU ratio, a function of retention, is also highest for Big Basket and JioMart at 17 per cent and 16 per cent, respectively," said BofA.

BigBasket, which saw a huge slump last year as the country went into lockdown, later doubled its business, servicing over 300,000 deliveries a day compared to around 150,000 deliveries prior to the lockdown.

LeT cadre held for introducing Bengal student to Pak handlers

Team Absolute | New Delhi

In a major breakthrough, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) has arrested Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) member Altaf Ahmed Rather, who introduced West Bengal college student Tania Praveen to the terrorist organisation handlers in Pakistan. An NIA spokesperson here said that schoolteacher Rather, a resident of Jammu and Kashmir's Bandipora, was arrested in connection with his probe into the LeT recruitment module case registered on April 5 last year. The official said that Praveen, against whom the NIA had filed a charge sheet after her arrest by the West Bengal Police for her association with the LeT,



had come in contact with him over social media. "Rather was instrumental in introducing Praveen to LeT members based in Pakistan, in pur-

suance in the conspiracy of LeT to radicalise, motivate and recruit youth for violent Jihad in India," the official said.

Relief, doubt, uncertainty - CBSE decision on board exams evokes mixed response

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The decision taken by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) to cancel the Class X board exams and postpone the Class XII exams has evoked mixed response from the parents, teachers and students.

Union Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank had announced on Wednesday that the CBSE board exams for Class X have been cancelled while the exams for Class XII have been postponed in view of the exponential spike in the number of Covid-19 cases across the country. According to the minister, Class XII exams will be held at a later date after the CBSE reviews the situation on June 1.

While Class X students are concerned about the criteria to be announced for promotion to the next level, Class XII students are worried about their academic future after school.

Ritu Rinwa, the mother of a Class XII student at The Mother's International School located in Delhi's Sri Aurobindo Marg, said that the decision must be welcomed amid the sudden surge in Covid cases across the country, particularly in the national capital.

"But there is some uncertainty and doubt among the students with regard to their academic future. My daughter and her friends are now concerned about NEET and JEE, and about the chances of going abroad for higher studies. The government has taken a clear stand for the Class X exams, but doubts persist over the Class XII exams. What happens to the future of Class XII students if the situation doesn't improve in May? The government must clarify this point," Rinwa said.

Welcoming the decision, Meenakshi Gupta, the Principal of SD Public School at Delhi's Patel Nagar, said, "Amid this unprecedented crisis, the mental and physical health of our children is more important than any examination. This is a well-bal-



anced decision which has brought relief to the students of Class X. Given that the Class XII boards are a gateway examination, it is fair on the part of the CBSE to borrow more time before reaching a final decision."

Echoing Gupta's sentiments, the President of All India Parents Association (AIPA), Ashok Agarwal, said, "The decision has been taken in the best interest of the students' health, therefore we welcome the move. But the way the decision was

taken shows the government's causal approach. At first, despite suggestions from different quarters, the government did not take a stand for conducting the exams," Agarwal said. Agarwal also demanded that the exam fee collected from Class X students must be returned. The President of Affordable Private Schools' Association, Lakshya Chhabaria, said, "We are facing a global education crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The students have suffered huge academic loss. The CBSE's decision to suspend and postpone exams due to the sudden burst of cases is tough, but in favour of the children's health. Therefore, we appreciate the government's decision and we are hopeful that the CBSE will do justice to the Class X and Class XII students of 2020-21."

Realising that the exam centres could soon turn into Covid hotspots, the parents said that the decision is good for the students' health.

Narendar Sharma, the father of a Class X student at St. Thomas School in Ghaziabad's Indirapuram, said that health is the first priority for everyone, but the CBSE must ensure that the cancellation doesn't give undue benefits to the students who did not study throughout the year.

Few students believe that cancellation of Class X exams will benefit the non-meritorious students. One student said that all her hard work of one year have gone waste as everyone will be promoted to the next class without actual and proper evaluation. We learnt that Class X students will now be evaluated on the basis of some criteria fixed by the CBSE, but it is unfair for the students who worked hard throughout the year," she said.

The Managing Director of Little Flowers Group of Schools, Rohit Dua, said, "It's a great decision taken by the Education Ministry, a very timely step taken for the safety and well-being of the students. This is really beneficial for Class X students, now they can timely plan their future endeavours."



Home isolation monitoring should be up to the mark, Corona Test Report should arrive within 24 hours, The Chief Minister reviewed the corona conditions and arrangements in the state

ADEQUATE ARRANGEMENT OF BED, OXYGEN, INJECTION, FOR THE TREATMENT OF CORONA

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has said that there is adequate arrangement of beds, oxygen supply, Remdesivir injection etc. for treatment of corona in all districts. Also, keeping in view the future requirements, war footing efforts are being made in all districts to increase the bed, supply of oxygen and on the receiving ramdesvir injection. Covid care centers have been started in 49 districts of the state. 450 MT for the state by the central government Oxygen has been approved. Arrangements are now being made to bring him as soon as possible.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Chouhan instructed that the administration should keep complete information about home isolation in all the districts and ensure good arrangement of home isolation. An ambulance should also be made to take home isolation patients to the hospital if required, along with medicines and medical consultation.

Chief Minister instructed that after the corona test its report should be made within 24 hours, it should be ensured. He said that until the report comes after the test, the person is in isolation, otherwise there is a possibility of infection spreading.

Chief Minister Chouhan was reviewing the situation and arrangements of Corona in the state through video conferencing from his residence today.



Medical Video Minister Vishwas Sarang, Chief Secretary Iqbal Singh Bains, Additional Chief

Secretary Health Mohammad Suleman, Additional Chief Secretary Home Rajesh Rajaura,

Additional Chief Secretary Water Resources. SN Mishra, Controller through Video Conferencing at

the meeting Food and Drug Administration, P. Narhari etc. were present.

37 thousand 719 beds for corona treatment

There are currently 37 thousand 719 beds for the treatment of corona in the state, out of which 21 thousand 516 are in government hospitals and 16 thousand 213 are in private hospitals. 500 beds have been contracted with AIIMS Bhopal, out of which 165 beds are ICU. Belong to Bhopal currently has 6,361 beds, which is planned to be increased to 9,822. Similarly, there are currently 6,774 beds in Indore, which are being increased to 13 thousand. There are 3,150 beds in Jabalpur which are being increased to 5,132. Ujjain has 1090 beds, which is being increased to 1933. 600 beds are being increased in Gwalior. A 150-bed Kovid Care Center is being started at the Academy of Administration Bhopal, oxygen concentrators are being installed there for oxygen.

Have adequate staff

Chief Minister Chouhan said that adequate doctors and paramedical staff should be ensured for the treatment of corona in all hospitals. The staff of the Ayush department, the nursing college team and the medical students doing internships should also be engaged in the work.

295 MT Oxygen availability

The state currently has an availability of 295 metric tonnes of oxygen, which is being increased. 120 MT from INOX Gujarat And 112 MT from Bhilai. Oxygen will be received. Total 450 MT as per Central Government approval. The state will get oxygen. Chief Minister directed that follow-up and pilot guards should be given to oxygen tankers to bring oxygen from oxygen plants to the state, so that oxygen can reach the state in real time. A green corridor should also be built to bring oxygen.

175 oxygen concentrators will be received

175 oxygen concentrators will be received in various districts in the state. Liquid oxygen plants in major hospitals will also be operational soon.

42 thousand Remdesivir injections received

So far, 42 thousand remodevir injections have been received in the state. Mylan company has been ordered to order 50 thousand Remdesivir injections, which will be received soon by the state. Apart from this, Remdesivir injections are also being purchased from companies like Cipla.

SOMETHING BETTER...



Gan Gour festival was celebrated in the Capital in a simple manner amid the surge of pandemic.

9,264 Remdesivir injections reach Indore, sent to districts through helicopters and state plane

Team Absolute | Bhopal

It was told in the video conference that 200 boxes with a total of 9 thousand 264 Remdesivir injections have reached Indore Airport. Out of these 42 boxes were transported through the state plane to Bhopal, 7 to Ratlam and 4 to Khandwa. Similarly, 19 boxes are being transported from the state plane to Gwalior, 18 to Rewa, 39 to Jabalpur and 14 to Sagar. 57 Remdesivir injection boxes have been kept for Indore. All necessary arrangements should be ensured for citizens. Precautions must be fully followed. All essentials including oxygen, medicines and beds should be arranged in due course. Chief Minister in detail about the works being done for the prevention and management of Corona infection with the collectors of the state through video conference.

Infection will be controlled only with public support

Chief Minister Shri Chouhan said that he had a discussion with Corona Volunteers yesterday. They have great enthusiasm. Voluntary organizations should cooperate in breaking the chain of Corona infection. Residents associations and colony committees should give people the message to not leave their homes unnecessarily. With public support, this infection will be controlled.



Corona curfew should be strictly followed

It said that Corona curfew should be strictly followed. Corona curfew should be imposed wherever necessary. Collectors should also consult the ministers' in-charge of the districts, and be in constant touch with the CM Office and Health Department as well.

Offer prayers and ibadat at home

Chief Minister Shri Chouhan said that this is an emergency. Get out of the house only when it is absolutely necessary. Citizens should offer prayers and do pooja at home. Celebrate festivals at home. Our combined efforts can defeat Corona.

10th and 12th admit cards will be amended by May 10

Bhopal: Now the students will be able to get amendment in the admit cards of the High School, Higher Secondary, Higher Secondary Vocational and other examinations conducted by the Board of Secondary Education by May 10, 2021. Earlier, this date was fixed as April 15. Keeping in mind Covid 19, the period for amending the admit card has been increased. All the Principal will download the admit card to the candidates, make their signature and post currency and make it available to the students. In case of error of subject or medium in the admit cards, the desired error can be corrected by going to MP Online portal and depositing the prescribed fee.

Green corridor will be made for oxygen tankers, piloting will also be done

Drug inspectors will do surprise inspections to restrict the black marketing of Remdesivir

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Medical Education Minister Vishwas Kailash Sarang said that the state government is striving at every level to prevent corona infection. For the treatment of patients, on one hand there is a continuous increase in beds, on the other hand, efforts are also being made to keep oxygen supply uninterrupted.

Sarang informed that so far there are about 38 thousand beds in the state, the number of which is being increased to one lakh. The manufacturers are also being talked to directly for Ramdasevir injection. Today, 13 thousand 480 units have been received in the state. Out of these units from Nagpur to Indore, 10 thousand units are being transported to state medical colleges and district hospitals with the help of 6 helicopters, remaining 3,480 units are being made available to private hospitals.

Sarang informed that now the distribution of Remdesivir injection will be direct to hospitals / nursing homes in the private sector through stockists. The District Administration and the Drug Inspector of the concerned district will make sure that the delivery of Remdesivir Injection is being done to hospitals / nursing homes in all the private sectors in the district. Also, it will be ensured that there is no black marketing of injections. For this, instructions have been given to drug inspectors to do surprise inspections.

Sarang informed that in order to make the transportation of oxygen quick and effective, the oxygen vehicle approved by the state government has been considered as the equivalent of an ambulance. The green corridor will also be made for oxygen tankers on the same lines as the green corridor is constructed at the time of organ transplant. In addition, piloting the police car will transport these oxygen tankers to the destination. For the transportation of oxygen in the state, oxygen is being supplied through a total of 9 tankers including two additional tankers.

450 MT oxygen supply from Bhilai, Rourkela and Deori soon

Chief Minister has appealed to the common people not to leave their houses unnecessarily. Farmers should go for procurement of produce only after obtaining SMS. We will win this battle with self-discipline, self-determination, strong will, restraint, patience and enthusiasm.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has thanked the central government for supplying oxygen to the state. Chouhan has said that Union Industries Minister Piyush Goyal and Steel Minister Dharmendra Pradhan had been urged to supply oxygen to the state. With their efforts, supply of about 450 metric tonnes of oxygen to the state was agreed upon from Bhilai, Rourkela and Deori. Chouhan has thanked the ministers for this cooperation. Chouhan said that arrangements for transportation of oxygen are being made on war footing, in which the cooperation of private sector is also being taken.

Chief Minister said that continuous efforts are being made for Remdesivir injections. On Wednesday evening, 10 thousand injections were obtained. Private hospitals are arranging injections through their sources. The state government has ordered 50 thousand injections. Chouhan said that he himself held discussions with

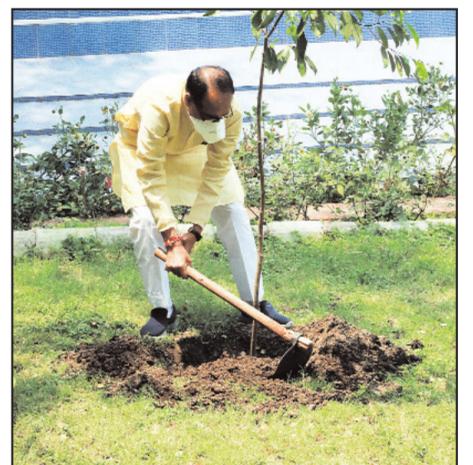


three companies and they have given positive answers.

Chief Minister said that the number of beds in the state is increasing constantly. Arrangements of multi care hospital are being made in AIIMS Bhopal. By marking it for Covid, the beds available here and the beds to be vacant in the coming days will be reserved for Covid. Along with this, a 150-bed Covid Care Center is being

developed in collaboration with Narmada Hospital in the Academy of Administration. Covid Care Center is also being developed at Red Cross Hospital Bhopal. A 500-bed Covid Care Center is being built in Indore in collaboration with Radha Swami Satsang Trust. Soon arrangement of two thousand beds will be made here. Efforts are on to increase beds in Jabalpur, Gwalior and other

cities with the help of private sector. Chouhan said that action is on at war footing in all directions to overcome the Corona infection. It is necessary to break the chain of infection. For this, the Disaster Management Groups are likely to impose Corona curfew in the districts. The public is coming forward to break the chain infection on their own, as a result of awareness.



Chief Minister plants Maulashree sapling in CM House

Bhopal : Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan planted Maulashree's sapling at his residence today. The Chief Minister Shri Chouhan plants a sapling every day. Maulashree is a well-known tree with its medicinal values. It is called Kesava in Sanskrit, Molsari or Bakul in Hindi. This medicinal tree has been used in Ayurveda for centuries.

WHERE CAN I GET A BED IN BHOPAL

Chief Minister Chouhan called the call center 1075 and inquired about the beds.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan called the 1075 call center like a normal person today and inquired about the availability of beds for Kovid treatment in Bhopal. He called and asked that 'I want beds in Bhopal, where is available, will get oxygen beds in AIIMS, J.K. I will find it in the Peoples, how many beds are there, there is also oxygen. Jk And the People's Hospital is in the government facility, beds and oxygen are available here too.



Farmer Yash!

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Rocking Star Yash who recently wrapped up the shooting of the movie 'KGF: Chapter 2', has taken up a new role. He has now indulged in the water restoration of his land near his beautiful farmhouse in Hassan. The actor has been personally monitoring the entire process. He intends to build lakes in his land which will activate and restore the ground water levels. This noble work by Yash will not only increase the productivity of the land but also help the farmers residing in the surrounding areas.

Fans and netizens are impressed and are appreciating the actor after seeing the photos of Yash supervising the land work, which have gone viral.



RASIKA DUGAL POSTS PICTURE TO BEAT 'LOCKDOWN BLUES'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress Rasika Dugal took to Instagram to post a still from her web series "Mirzapur".

In the picture, Rasika is dressed in blue saree and gold jewellery as Beena Tripathi, her popular avatar in the show. In the caption, she encouraged fans to beat the "lockdown blues", saying together they would survive lockdown. She wrote: "To everyone feeling lockdown blues - Hum bhi survive karenge, tum bhi survive karoge #Mirzapur #BeenaTripathi

#ThrowbackThursday #TBT #Lockdown2021." Section 144 has been imposed in Maharashtra by the state government owing to rise in Covid cases. The section bars groups of more than five people in public.

Rasika was last seen essaying a cameo role in the sci-fi comedy web series "Ok Computer". She has been known for her versatile roles in series such as "Out Of Love", "A Suitable Boy", "Delhi Crime" and "Mirzapur". She has also been a part of films such as "Qissa", "Tu Hai Mera Sunday" and "Manto".

BOMBAY HIGH COURT CENSURES KRK

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Bombay High Court has censured Kamal Rashid Khan alias KRK for his controversial and defamatory tweets against producer Vashu Bhagnani, his family, his business, his profession as well as all his projects.

KRK has been stopped by the Bombay High Court from putting out any further tweets against Vashu Bhagnani and all his business interests till the pendency of the Rs. One crore defamation suit filed by the veteran producer for

defamatory, 'slanderous', and 'distasteful' statements as well as 'patently false allegations' on KRK's Twitter and YouTube accounts.

As per the court order, an injunction has been issued, pending the final disposal of the suit, that in simple terms, prohibits "the defendant from publishing, circulating or repeating the allegations and tweets and/or making, publishing, circulating and/or communicating to the public any defamatory/slanderous comments and/or statements against the plaintiff and/or his family and/or his busi-

ness, profession and/or his projects.

After hearing the matter at length, the court observed that the tweets are not in the nature of criticism given by a film critic, which is contrary to the defence of KRK and are in the nature of serious defamatory and slanderous remarks made against Vashu Bhagnani, his family members, his business, profession and his projects. The court's actions came soon after KRK made light of the suit and put out another series of slanderous tweets against the Bhagnanis.



Big B recalls 'the years when films did 50 weeks and 100 weeks'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Amitabh Bachchan went down memory lane to recall how he had nearly half a dozen releases the same year, in the seventies. He shared a throwback picture from his younger days along with his post, dressed in a white T-shirt and is sporting big chunky retro sunglasses.

"The 1970's .. and the years when films did 50 weeks and 100 weeks .. and 6-7 of them being released in the same year .. DON , KASME VAADE, TRISHUL, MUQADDAR KA SIKANDAR, GANGA KI SAUGANDH etc and all doing more than 50 weeks .. now OTT millions make success graphs," he wrote as caption with the Instagram post he shared on Wednesday night. The Bollywood veteran recently announced he would be starring in the Hindi remake of the 2015 Hollywood hit "The Intern", starring Robert De Niro and Anne Hathaway.

Also starring Deepika Padukone, the film is directed by Amit Ravindernath Sharma, who helmed the 2018 comedy hit "Badhaai Ho". The Hollywood hit was directed by Nancy Meyers.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actor Ranveer Singh, who is all set to work with Tamil director S. Shankar in a Bollywood remake of his 2005 Tamil blockbuster "Anniyan", hails the filmmaker as one of the finest minds in cinema. Ranveer shared a string of pictures on Instagram on Wednesday, where the actor-director duo is seen having a discussion.

"What an honour... to be under the tutelage of one of the finest minds in cinema.... @shanmughamshankar," Ranveer wrote.

Shankar also shared a few photographs with Ranveer and welcomed him aboard. "He is a maverick and charismatic showman no one else can play! Welcome aboard, @ranveersingh Can't wait for this magnificent journey to begin mid 2022," Shankar wrote. "Anniyan" is a psychological action thriller that revolves around a disillusioned man, whose frustration at the corruption, social apathy and public negligence all around leads to a split personality that attempts to right the system.

RANVEER SINGH HAILS SHANKAR AS 'ONE OF THE FINEST MINDS IN CINEMA'



NEHA KAKKAR EXCITED TO HEAR RAMLEELA STORIES LIVE ON 'INDIAN IDOL'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Singer Neha Kakkar, who is a judge on the music reality show "Indian Idol 12", is excited about the upcoming Ramnavmi Special on the show. In the episode, top contestants will sing songs magnifying the festival mood. They will narrate the story of Ramlleela through their performances. Neha is excited for the special episode as this will give her a chance to listen to Ramlleela. "I am very excited to be part of this upcoming episode as I have never got a chance to watch or listen to the stories of Ramlleela. During my childhood, I was occupied with the Jagraata functions and it is for the first time in my life that I will be listening to Ramlleela stories live through this show," she says.

Yoga guru Baba Ramdev will make an appearance in the show. "Indian Idol 12" is hosted by actor Jay Bhanshali, and airs on Sony Entertainment Television.



JOHN CENA: 'FAST & FURIOUS' NOT SENSELESS ACTION FOR SAKE OF ACTION

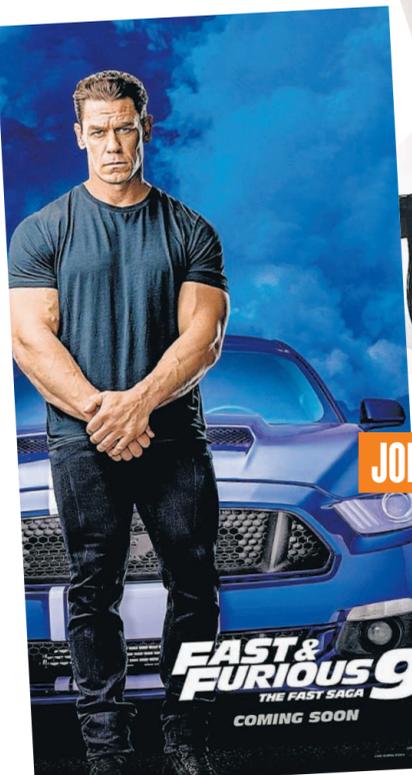
Durga Chakravarty | New Delhi

WWE champion and Hollywood star John Cena is the latest addition to the "Fast & Furious" world. He admits being aware he is getting the opportunity to be a part of a legacy body of work, and adds that the franchise is not senseless action.

In the upcoming ninth instalment of the franchise, the 43-year-old star will be seen playing the character of Jacob Toretto, brother of actor Vin Diesel's character Dominic Toretto.

Talking about being the new addition to the family, Cena said: "I love the perspective of F9, of Dom (Dominic Toretto) having to face Jacob, his blood family. Someone that has been forgotten and long lost. I have to be equal to Dom or greater than Dom to be challenging, to let the viewer get to the edge of their seat and get knocked back in their chair." "But what I love about the franchise is that it is not senseless action for the sake of action. It will deliver," Cena told select media globally, during the trailer launch. Speaking about the upcoming installment he said:

"Now we get to dive into the concept of, yes, we can choose who we love and we can choose who we are close to, and call them family, even if they don't share our last name. We cannot run away from our past and choices. Sooner or later, if we have any regrets, if we have any second thoughts and if we have any self-doubt we have to look into that glass and face it and that's what I love about the power and gravity of this," he said. "This movie delivers on so many fronts, the trailer leaves so much meat on the bone and that's what I am really excited about," Cena added.



FAST & FURIOUS 9
THE FAST SAGA
COMING SOON



COLIN FARRELL FOUND 'VOYAGERS' SCRIPT A PAGE-TURNER

Los Angeles | Agencies

Hollywood star Colin Farrell says the script of his upcoming sci-fi thriller "Voyagers" was quite a page-turner.

"Voyagers" tells the story of 30 men and women sent on an interstellar mission to save the human race.

Talking about his role and the potential he saw in it, Farrell said: "I saw the part that I had, as quite obviously on the page was a father figure and somebody that was there to kind of corral and guide and care for and monitor these children as they go from birth into young adulthood. I loved it."

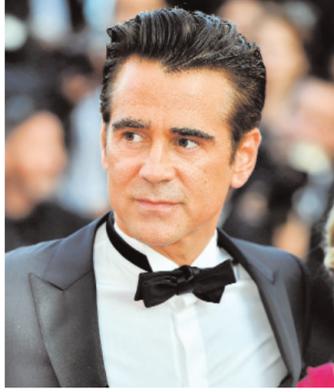
Delving deeper into the character, Farrell gained a new perspective on

his character's psyche.

He said: "I think Richard (his character) is lonely, I mean he's got to be lonely. He's in space and he's again the only senior member of this team heading into the void. So, I think he has no one!"

A big fan of the script, he shared how invested he was in first reading it: "It was a page-turner! It was really, really lovely. It was very unusual. I thought it was very cleverly drawn, and the questions that it provoked in me as a reader were fairly profound and substantial questions."

The film also stars Tye Sheridan, Isaac Hempstead Wright, and Lily-Rose Depp among others. It is scheduled to release in India by PVR Pictures.

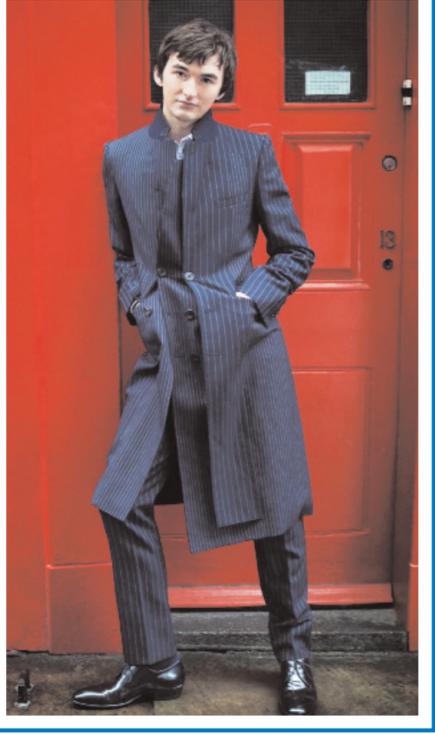


ISAAC HEMPSTEAD JOINS 'VOYAGERS'

Los Angeles | Agencies

Actor Isaac Hempstead Wright, best known for his role of Bran Stark in "Game Of Thrones", says his upcoming sci-fi thriller "Voyagers" has a cool concept. "Voyagers" explores the repercussions of taking away feelings and emotions from a bunch of youngsters tasked with saving the human race. The film features Wright in the role of Edward, a pragmatic and chillingly calculative character. Wright said: "I thought it was a really cool concept because in the real world this is something that we're going to have to think about if we ever to send a human mission into the depths of space."

He added: "Edward's one of those sort of quiet slightly weird characters, I've always liked how still he kind of is, and the fact that he's just focused on the data, even when people start breaking down and going a bit crazy! The fact that he's a character who is evidence-based and focused and just loves the data, it's quite a fun thing to get to play." Also starring Collin Farrell, Tye Sheridan, and Lily-Rose Depp among others, "Voyagers" will be released in Indian by PVR Pictures.



Chrissy Teigen calls little Luna her 'dream daughter'



Los Angeles | Agencies

Model Chrissy Teigen penned a note on daughter Luna's fifth birthday, calling her a "dream daughter", and tagging the little girl as a "prop" to her and her husband John Legend.

Teigen posted a string of pictures

from her vacation on Instagram on Wednesday morning, India time. She also shared a picture of Luna dressed in an all-white dress paired with a colourful bead necklace.

"To my beautiful, kind, funny, smart, incredible little girl, I can't believe you are 5 today!!! Thank you for 5 truly perfect years. our dream daughter. also

CAREY MULLIGAN: A 'PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN'

Los Angeles | Agencies

Actress Carey Mulligan, who plays the protagonist Cassie Thomas in "Promising Young Woman", says she is fortunate to have landed the Oscar-nominated role, although the 35-year-old actress wishes such a role came her way when she was younger.

"I just felt very lucky to work on this as an actor. This is the kind of story I wish had come out when I was 18. What was sort of so immediately obvious to me reading the script, was how regrettably commonplace so much of this was," Mulligan said in an interview to Metro Newspaper, reports femalefirst.co.uk.

In the black comedy thriller, her character, Cassie seeks to avenge the rape of her best friend.

"Of course, it's important to have a broader understanding, but really, it felt like such a tragically familiar story. There are countless examples of things like this happening to people that you know, people you love, and every woman has a connection to somebody who's been through something close to this," said the actress.

Rita Ora goes Red

Los Angeles | Agencies

sleek silver eyeshadow, a

She is known for her trademark blonde locks. But Rita Ora swapped her light tresses for red hair in sultry new snaps uploaded to her Instagram on Thursday.

The singer, 30, looked incredible in the shots which were taken behind the scenes of filming for her new music video for the EP Bang. She opted for a very glamorous makeup look with



light pink lip and dyed red

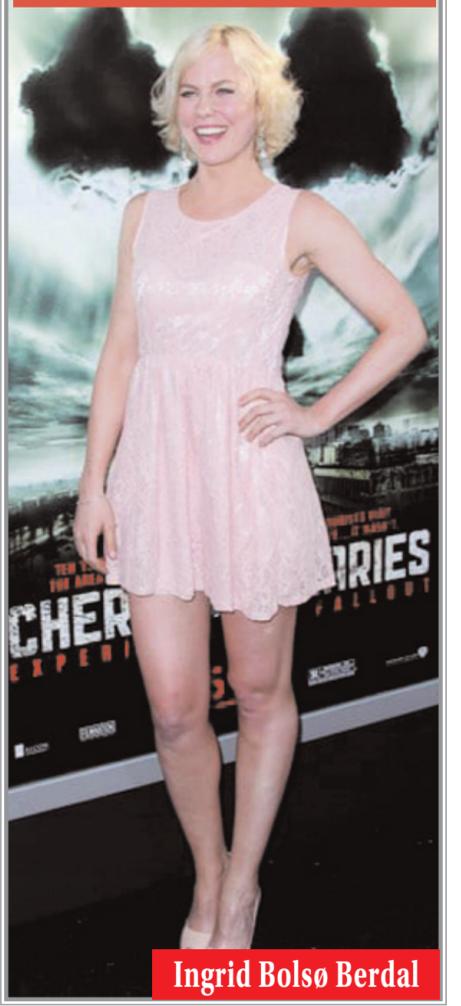
eyebrows.

Clearly excited about fans seeing her new music video, she captioned the snaps: 'Some behind the scenes for you from the #BANG EP shoot! Thank you to everyone who's been listening!! Rita landed in Australia at the start of February to film the new season of The Voice, and the show has now officially

wrapped production.

According to The Daily Telegraph on Tuesday, producers have filmed a number of endings in order to keep the identity of the winner a secret. The finale was shot on Sunday at Carriageworks in Sydney, with coaches Rita, Guy Sebastian, Keith Urban and Jessica Mauboy in attendance.

ABSOLUTE PIC OF THE DAY



Ingrid Bolsø Berdal



Line Of Duty is hit with 323 complaints

Los Angeles | Agencies

Line Of Duty has received 323 complaints about Down's Syndrome character Terry Boyle being branded the 'local oddball'.

The term was used during the first episode of series six, with many viewers taking to Twitter to say its inclusion was 'disappointing' - and made worse by the show airing on World Down Syndrome Day.

More than 300 people have now contacted the BBC to say they were 'unhappy' with the use of the phrase which was said by Adrian Dunbar's character Superintendent Ted

Hastings, reports dailymail.co.uk. Towards the end of the episode, Hastings suggested another suspect was 'more likely to be the gunman than the local oddball, that's for sure' while talking about suspect Carl Banks, sparking a furore on Twitter. However, following the episode airing on March 21 the Down's Syndrome Association (DSA) said it was 'fantastic' to see an actor with the condition in the show - and this was 'the most important part' about it. Writer Jed Mercurio insisted the term 'oddball' referred to what Barry George had thought the police perceived him as after being cleared of killing Jill Dando in 2008.

Demi SPLITS from Francesca

London | Agencies



TOWIE star Demi Sims has split from her girlfriend Francesca Farago and blocked her on social media after four months of dating. The reality star, embarked on a whirlwind romance with the Too Hot To Handle beauty, who confirmed they have separated on Wednesday, reports dailymail.co.uk.

Sharing a picture of roses, Francesca revealed to her 4.8million followers: 'I really didn't want to have to address this today, but I am already getting attacked on social media so I might as well bite the bullet since I have no choice.'

'Demi and I are no longer together. We decided to go our separate ways this morning. Nothing bad happened. We were both loyal to one another and still love each other.'

She continued: 'Sometimes people just don't work perfectly together and that's OK. We rushed into living together without knowing if our personalities and daily life meshed well together.'





EDITOR'S SPECS

Computers are better than Humans!

From choosing the next song on your playlist to choosing the right size pants, people are relying more on the advice of algorithms to help make everyday decisions and streamline their lives. "Algorithms are able to do a huge number of tasks and the number of tasks

DESPITE INCREASING CONCERN OVER THE INTRUSION OF ALGORITHMS IN DAILY LIFE, A NEW RESEARCH SHOWS THAT PEOPLE ARE MORE LIKELY TO RELY ON ALGORITHMS THAN HUMANS, ESPECIALLY IF A TASK BECOMES TOO CHALLENGING.

that they are able to do is expanding practically every day," said researcher Eric Bogert from the University of Georgia. "It seems like there's a bias towards leaning more heavily on algorithms as a task gets harder and that effect is stronger than

the bias towards relying on advice from other people," Bogert added. For the study, published in the journal *Scientific Reports*, the team involved 1,500 individuals evaluating photographs. The team asked volunteers to count the number of people in a photograph of a crowd and supplied suggestions that were generated by a group of other people and suggestions generated by an algorithm. As the number of people in the photograph expanded, counting became more difficult and people were more likely to follow the suggestion generated by an algorithm rather than count themselves or follow the "wisdom of the crowd", the researcher said. According to the researcher, the choice of counting as the trial task was an important one because the number of people in the photo makes the task objectively harder as it increases. It also is the type of task that laypeople expect computers to be good at. Facial recognition and hiring algorithms have come under scrutiny in recent years as well because their use has revealed cultural biases in the way they were built, which can cause inaccuracies when matching faces to identities or screening for qualified job candidates, the team said. Those biases may not be present in a simple task like counting, but their presence in other trusted algorithms is a reason why it's important to understand how people rely on algorithms when making decisions, they added.

ANNOUNCING AFGHAN PULLOUT, BIDEN ASKS INDIA TO 'DO MORE' FOR KABUL

Arul Louis

Announcing his plans on Wednesday to unconditionally bring home the last of the US military before September 11 this year, Biden said: "We'll ask other countries, other countries in the region, to do more to support Afghanistan, especially Pakistan, as well as Russia, China, India, and Turkey. They all have a significant stake in the stable future for Afghanistan."

The US and the NATO invaded Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001, attacks by the Al Qaeda using hijacked aircraft on New York and Washington.

The terror group was sheltered by the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban, which ruled Afghanistan. The way out of Afghanistan was charted by Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, who had set a deadline of May 1 for troops' withdrawal. Biden is following through, but has extended the deadline to September 11, a date seared in American minds. NATO also announced on Wednesday a collective withdrawal from Afghanistan. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told reporters that there are 10,000 troops in Afghanistan, a majority from countries other than the US, and they would begin to be withdrawn starting on May 1. The Kabul government of President Ashraf Ghani and the Taliban have been holding negotiations that began during Trump's administration for power-sharing and transition.

The longest US war is estimated to have cost the nation more than \$2 trillion, claimed the lives of 2,448 American personnel and left 20,722 troops wounded in action. In addition, several tens of thousands of Afghans, many of them civilians, have died in the war. Soon after his speech on his Afghan withdrawal plan, Biden went to the Arlington National Cemetery, the final resting place for military personnel, to pay tributes to those killed in Afghanistan.

While Biden downplayed the terror threats from a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan, just a few hours before his speech, the head of the CIA issued a warn-

ing before a Senate panel that "there is a significant risk once the US military and the coalition militaries withdraw". CIA Director William Burns said: "When the time comes for the US military to withdraw, the US government's ability to collect and act on threats will diminish. That's simply a fact."

Biden, however, was underdressed asserting: "We'll reorganise our counterterrorism capabilities and the substantial assets in the region to prevent re-emergence of terrorists, of the threat to our homeland from over the horizon." "We'll hold the Taliban accountable for its commitment not to allow any terrorists to threaten the US or its allies from Afghan soil." Explaining the rationale for leaving Afghanistan, Biden said that the nature of the terror threats that brought the US and NATO forces to Afghanistan in 2001 have changed and now terrorists were "more dispersed, metastasizing around the globe". He listed Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula; al-Nusra in Syria; the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq with affiliates in Africa and Asia. Therefore, he said, "keeping thousands of troops grounded and concentrated in just one country at a cost of billions each year makes little sense to me and to our leaders". At the same time, he tried to reject any notion of a defeat, instead asserting: "We went to war with clear goals. We achieved those objectives. (Al Qaeda leader Osama) Bin Laden is dead, and Al Qaeda is degraded in Iraq, in Afghanistan. And it's time to end the forever war." But the withdrawal would be unconditional. He asserted that if the US exit was tied to conditions, certain questions such as justification for the continued impact on troops and money would have to be answered. "And if you can't answer them, in my view, we should not



stay," he said, making the retreat unconditional. The Afghan withdrawal plan underscores Washington's abandonment of nation-building and moulding societies to an image it imagines, and also a move away from the Middle East-Central Asia region towards what is perceived as the threat from China.

The US has already scaled back its troop presence in Iraq to a nominal 2,500 and is now on its way to leaving Afghanistan. This will let Washington put more focus and resources into the Indo-Pacific for meeting threats from China. The Annual Threat Assessment report from the US intelligence agencies sent to Congress on Tuesday made China the top global danger to the country's security.

Within the US, the two polar opposites, the left and the right, in politics have welcomed the Biden commitment to troop withdrawal, while the moderates of the Democratic and Republican parties have opposed it. In a sampling of reactions, Senator Ted Cruz on the Republican Party's right and Ro Khanna, a member of the House of Representatives belonging to the Democratic Party's left, welcomed Biden's decision. But Mitch McConnell, the Republican leader in the Senate who is a moderate, criticised Biden and asked: "Why he thinks abandoning our partners and retreating in the face of the Taliban will make America safer?"

McConnell had also criticised Trump when he set the withdrawal deadline.

Democrat Senator Jeanne Shaheen, a moderate, tweeted: "The US has sacrificed too much to bring stability to Afghanistan to leave without verifiable assurances of a secure future." Biden, who is trying to draw India closer on the strategic front in the

Indo-Pacific also wants to increase its involvement in Afghanistan. It would be to India's advantage to be involved in that country, which could harbour anti-India terrorists under the Taliban.

As Biden said, India has "a significant stake in the stable future for Afghanistan". India and the Taliban do not have a history of cordial relations, but that may be changing. Prior to 2001, India had opposed the Pakistan-backed Taliban and supported the Northern Alliance.

With the US involvement imminent, New Delhi has tried to open a line to the Taliban.

Last year India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar participated virtually in the start of the talks in Qatar between the Taliban and the Kabul government expressing New Delhi's support for an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" peace.

The Taliban, in turn, has denied reports that it supports terrorists in Kashmir and asserted that it was against interfering in other countries. Biden said that he would hold the Taliban to its commitment to not allow any terrorists to threaten US allies from Afghan soil. The test will be if Taliban abides by the commitment and if the US can enforce it if it doesn't.

New Delhi, which signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement with Kabul, has given Afghanistan economic assistance of over \$3 billion since 2001 and also provided security assistance through training over 4,000 Afghan military and security personnel and supplying helicopters.

India has built Afghanistan's parliament, a Taliban target for being a symbol of democracy, and is constructing a network of roads that would also provide a link for the landlocked country to a port it has constructed in Chabahar, Iran.

LOW-COST AIR CIRCULATED PPE FOR COVID WARRIORS

Brij Khandelwal

Addressing a major challenge to Covid warriors, a medical equipment manufacturing factory of Mysuru, has developed a unique and affordable PPE suit that allows free flow of filtered air. GloAir, produced by Glowtronics of Mysuru, has been designed to make life comfortable and efficient for the doctors and frontline Covid fighters. Jagan Gupta, executive director, on a visit to Agra, Mathura, told IANS, that his organisation was inspired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's appeal to go 'swadeshi' and to support governmental efforts to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, we have produced this unique safety kit.

GLOAIR keeps the whole body sweat-free and comfortable enabling the wearer to put in long hours of work.

Gupta said it would now be possi-



ble for doctors and frontline COVID warriors to work longer without the discomforts and hassles associated with conventional PPE kits that often result in profuse perspiration and a feeling of suffocation. "GloAir" will add to the arsenal required to supplement efforts to contain the spread of the Coronavirus and equip

the doctors to address the health hazards.

"Our continuous interactions with doctors at the hospitals where Covid patients were being treated, highlighted the hassles of wearing PPEs for long hours resulting in not only fatigue and loss of energy due to lack of fresh air to various parts of the

body. To overcome this inadequacy, we worked on developing a kit that allowed for circulation of fresh, filtered air for the whole body," Gupta explained.

"Our system filters out most airborne contaminants, as we are using filters that have a viral removal efficacy of 99.99 per cent, and can be used for up to 100 hours. The Gloair PPE kit is equipped with air blower, air filters, motor, power bank, charger, waist belt and a user manual. It is a comfortable with light weight design that does not require any external help to put on or take off. We have deliberately kept the unit price affordable to make Gloair's large-scale use possible," the company director added. Asked to explain the operation of the system, Gupta said, "the Gloair PPE kit has a tube connected to the air outlet of the air supply module. To turn on the air supply, the USB connector from the air supply module is

plugged into the power bank which starts the motor of the blower to pump in filtered air into the full body PPE kit through the connecting air tube. The air flow can be increased or reduced by using a Flow Control Knob. A fully charged Power Bank will supply air up to eight hours in normal conditions." Another problem faced by users is that the eyeglasses or visor gets fogged out due to perspiration thereby obstructing view. The Gloair PPE has a larger visor that provides clear vision without fogging because of the continuous supply of filtered air. For details visit our website www.Glowtronics.com, he added. Gupta said that the company is planning to market Gloair in a big way to support Government efforts to fight the pandemic, as also to provide a user friendly PPE to secure the health of the Corona warriors who have been relentlessly waging this war for more than a year.

This bureaucrat brings beauty of nature on bottles with art

Archana Sharma

Senior civil servant in Rajasthan, Mugdha Sinha with an aim to bring out the artist within her, organised a unique two-in-one art exhibition - 'Bottle is Canvas' and 'Freehand Meditative Mandalas' in Jaipur-based Jawahar Kala Kendra. This exhibition has been drawing art connoisseurs from different parts of the country.

The exhibition, organised from April 8 to 14, portrays a wide range of bottle arts depicting COVID in its latest avatar to divine series encompassing Buddha, Aadi Yogi, Ganesha as well as the hues of Turkish Church, Sufis among others, all painted on bottles collected from 'scrap dealer' in exchange of newspapers. The bottle art has been painted on these discarded bottles of different shapes and sizes on which strokes of colours have been added in a series on floral, tribal and Madhubani art, Halloween, stylized leaves and multi-hued flowers.

Bringing her experiences of travel to different parts, she has also painted doors and cityscapes on bottles and showcased her talent in other themes as well. Sinha, secretary, art and culture, government of Rajasthan, said, "I have been engaged in art activities since long, however, there was a hesitation to organise exhibition thinking what people will say, these bureaucrats think they are all in one. However, a book offered by my friend - Die Empty, came as an inspiration. Also the famous quote, "The graveyard is the richest place on earth, because it is here that you will find all the hopes and dreams that were never fulfilled, the books that were never written, the songs that were never sung,

the inventions that were never shared, the cures that were never discovered, all because someone was too afraid to take that first step, keep with the problem, or determined to carry out their dream, changed my thoughts and all my hesitation for this exhibition disappeared. I did not want to die with unfulfilled dreams and hence came up this exhibition," the IAS officer said. Does she have a trained hand? She said no. During her posting from the Government of India to the Government of Rajasthan, she thought of experimenting with brush and paints and, that was a wonderful experience. "Further in 2015, after my return from Amarnath, the art bloomed fully and I started considering myself as an artist. This exhibition is my hard work taken in the last 10 years," she says. In fact, one afternoon in 2012, I had an urge to work on a discarded vodka bottle as my canvas. Inspired by Van Gogh's sunflowers, I painted my version which was the start of my experimenting with the bottle art. During the lockdown, I painted a glass bottle each day and the work over



the 200 bottles has been exhibited here from 8 April, she added. How did she source her canvas? "I began exchanging the raddi (old newspapers) of her house with glass bottles instead of money. Over the years, there was a substantial collection of over 200 painted bottles," Sinha said. The bureaucrat says, "My art brings me happiness and helps me relax after a long day at work. After I complete all my daily tasks for the day, I like to sit and take the time to paint my bottles. It helps refresh my mind. I am inspired by the beauty of nature all around me. I feel that art provokes you and acts as a wonderful medium of communication."

PEOPLE WHO EXERCISE REGULARLY HAVE BEST CHANCE TO BEAT COVID

Regular exercise or a 30-minute brisk walk in the neighbourhood park or in your society five days a week while following the social distancing norms can improve your chances of beating Covid-19, reveals a significant study that analysed 48,440 adults who were Covid positive.

On the other hand, patients who were consistently inactive had 1.73 times greater chances of ICU admission, while the risk for death was 2.49 times greater for patients who were consistently inactive. Other than being over the age of 60 or having a history of organ transplant, being consistently inactive conferred the highest risk for death from Covid-19.

Even patients who were inconsistently active had lower chances for severe Covid-19, suggesting any amount of physical activity has benefit, revealed the findings published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*. "This is a wake-up call for the importance of healthy lifestyles and especially physical activity," said Robert E Sallis, physician at the Kaiser Permanente Fontana Medical Centre in the US.

"People who regularly exercise had the best chance of beating Covid-19, while people who were inactive did much worse," Sallis added. For the study, the team identi-



fied 48,440 adults with a Covid-19 diagnosis from January 1, 2020, to October 21, 2020.

They found 6.4 per cent were consistently active and 14.4 per cent were consistently inactive, with the remainder falling in the inconsistently active category. Among all Covid-19 patients, 8.6 per cent were hospitalised, 2.4 per cent were admitted to the ICU, and 1.6 per cent died.

"What surprised me the most from this study was the strength of the association between inactivity and poor outcomes from Covid-19," said Deborah Rohm Young from the Kaiser Permanente Southern California.

"Even after we included variables such as obesity and smoking in the analysis, we still saw inactivity was strongly associated with much higher odds of hospitalisation, ICU admission, and death compared with moderate physical activity or any activity at all," Young added. The results showed that inactivity is strongly associated with poor Covid-19 outcomes, Sallis said, while suggesting walking 30 minutes a day, five days a week at a moderate pace, to prevent Covid-19.

"Exercise is medicine that everyone should take -- especially in this era of Covid-19," Sallis said.



Biden announces complete US troops withdrawal from Afghanistan

Washington | Agencies

US President Joe Biden has announced that all US troops will be withdrawn from Afghanistan before September 11, a move to end the longest war in American history.

"The United States will begin our final withdrawal, begin it on May 1 of this year," Biden said on Wednesday in his remarks at the White House, Xinhua news agency reported.

"US troops, as well as forces deployed by our NATO allies and operational partners, will be out of Afghanistan before we mark the 20th anniversary of that heinous attack on September 11th."

"It is time to end America's longest war. It is time for American troops to come home," he said, noting that the US has achieved counterterrorism objectives in Afghanistan.

In his remarks, Biden made clear that the withdrawal is not subject to any changes of conditions on the ground. "We cannot continue the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan hoping to create ideal conditions for the



withdrawal and expecting a different result," he said.

"I'm now the fourth United States president to preside over American troop presence in Afghanistan. Two Republicans, two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility on to a fifth." The upcoming September 11 is the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks that drew the United States into war in Afghanistan. Biden said that 2,488 US military personnel were killed, and 20,722 have been wounded in this longest war in American

history. Biden highlighted that the US would continue to support the Afghan government and provide assistance to the Afghan military after the withdrawal. "While we will not stay involved in Afghanistan militarily, our diplomatic and humanitarian work will continue."

Meanwhile, he voiced US support for the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban facilitated by the United Nations.

Biden spoke with Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani earlier in

the day. The two leaders discussed continued commitment to a strong bilateral partnership following the departure of US troops from Afghanistan, according to a readout issued by the White House.

The latest decision extends the deadline negotiated between the previous administration and the Afghan Taliban last year to pull US troops out of the country on May 1.

The United States and the Taliban signed an agreement in late February 2020, which called for a full withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan by May 2021 if the Taliban meets the conditions of the deal, including severing ties with terrorist groups.

The Biden administration had concluded that the Taliban had not met its commitment under the US-Taliban deal.

The Pentagon said that there are roughly 2,500 US troops in Afghanistan, but US media recently said the number did not include 1,000 more US special forces in the country. Besides, about 7,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan rely on US logistics and security support.

Global Covid cases spike for 7th consecutive week : WHO



Geneva | Agencies

Global Covid-19 cases have continued to increase for a seventh consecutive week, with over 4.5 million new infections reported last week, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported.

As of Thursday morning, the current global caseload and death toll stood at 138,021,474 and 2,971,130, respectively, according to the Johns Hopkins University. In its latest update, the

WHO said that number of new deaths also increased for the fourth consecutive week, increasing by 7 per cent compared to last week, with over 76,000 new fatalities.

The outbreak was especially violent in India, which recorded an increase of 70 per cent in the number of new cases compared to last week.

It also saw the number of new deaths growing by 51 per cent.

On Thursday, India reported 2,00,739 new Covid-19

cases in the last 24 hours, the biggest single-day spike ever, taking the overall tally to 1,40,74,564, while the death toll stood at 1,73,123.

The US came the second with a 5 per cent increase of 468,395 new cases; and Brazil listed the third with a rise of 463,092 new cases.

In terms of global Covid deaths, the South-Asia, Southeast Asia and Western Pacific region saw sharp surges with the Western Pacific displaying an increase of 189 per cent in number, the Philippines leading with the grim record of 1,321 new deaths, 400 per cent more than last week.

Furthermore, new virus variants continue to spread to other countries, with the variant B117 first identified in the UK reported in 132 countries, the variant B 1351 originating from South Africa present in 82 countries, and the P1 first identified in Brazil now established in 52 countries. The WHO also noted that existing vaccines have displayed reduced efficacy against variants, even if the related studies remained limited in number.

Italy halts J&J Covid vax roll-out plans

Rome | Agencies

Italy has halted its roll-out plans for the US-made Johnson & Johnson Covid-19 vaccine just before it was set to begin distribution of the one-dose jab, a government official said.

The news on Wednesday comes after the US suspended the use of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine while investigating into speculations that the jab may cause blood clots, reports Xinhua news agency. Italy had been scheduled to start using the Johnson & Johnson vaccine this week. Dozens of articles appeared in the Italian media in recent weeks about the impending arrival of the new vac-



cine, which has a big advantage over the two-dose vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, and AstraZeneca already approved for use in that it is also easier to store and transport.

On Tuesday, however, reports began circulating saying the distribution plan would be temporarily halted following worries of blood clots in the US. A government press official confirmed those

reports to Xinhua on Wednesday. According to a report in Corriere della Sera, 184,000 doses of the vaccine had already arrived in Italy and were being stored at the Pratica di Mare military base just south of Rome.

Fire at Saudi university after Houthi attack

Riyadh | Agencies

A fire broke out at a university in southern Saudi Arabia on Thursday after the air defence system intercepted an attack by Yemen's Houthi militia. Saudi air defences intercepted and destroyed four bomb-laden drones and five ballistic missiles between Wednesday evening and early Thursday launched by the Houthis towards the southern Saudi city of Jazan, according to a statement by a Saudi-led military coalition.

"The interception resulted in scattered debris on campus, which caused a limited fire that was contained," dpa news agency quoted coalition



spokesman Turki al-Malki as saying, adding that there were no casualties.

In Yemen, a Houthi military spokesman said the group launched 11 ballistic missiles and one drone targeting an oil facility for

Aramco, Patriot anti-missile platforms and sensitive targets in Jazan. The attack on Aramco "caused a huge fire", the Houthi said. There was no comment from Saudi Arabia on an attack on an Aramco facility.



INDONESIAN POLICE KILLS SUSPECT LINKED TO CHURCH ATTACK

Jakarta | Agencies

Indonesian police on Thursday shot dead a man allegedly linked to last month's suicide bombing outside a church in South Sulawesi province, a spokesman said.

Members of the police anti-terrorism unit used lethal force after the suspect attacked them with a sickle during a raid on his home in

the provincial capital Makassar, dpa news agency quoted a police spokesman as saying. "The suspect was believed involved in the group that attacked the cathedral church," Zulfan said. Police have arrested at least 31 people in connection with the March 28 attack on the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral in Makassar, which left the two attackers dead and injured 20 people.

INDIAN TRADERS ARE GETTING CHINESE COVID JAB IN NEPAL

Kathmandu | Agencies

Indian traders and businessmen doing business in China are now queuing up in hospitals in Kathmandu to get the Chinese Covid-19 vaccines, according to officials.

The officials said that there was an acute surge of Indian businessmen and traders in Kathmandu hospitals this week.



We started probing this issue after we noticed that Indian businessmen are getting jabs, two senior Nepal government officials said.

After the probe, we came to know that Indian businessmen flying to Kathmandu to receive the jab and going back after the immunisation, they added. Some Indian traders had shown their identity cards written in Chinese and they spoke in Hindi, the officials said, adding that

it was later found they were flying from India only to receive the jab.

Over 30 Indian traders who are doing business in China got the Covid jab on Wednesday, while a huge number are still looking for the jab, a senior official at the Shukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital in Teku told reporter. Since Beijing has made Covid vaccination mandatory to enter the country, Indian traders and businessmen are submitting the identity of doing business in China, the official said.

But only later we came to know that they were Indians, the official added. On March 16, the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu issued a notice and informed that anyone visiting Beijing should have to submit a certificate of Covid-19 vaccination manufactured in China while applying for the visa. Nepal has recently received 800,000 doses of Chinese vaccine called "Vero Cell" developed by Sinopharm as a grant and started inoculating its selected population.



Syria rejects accusation of chemical weapons use

Damascus | Agencies

The Syrian Foreign Ministry has denied an accusation by a global watchdog about the use of chemical weapons against the population in the country's northwestern region.

In a statement on Wednesday, the Ministry slammed the "misleading" report by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which said that "the Syrian government forces used chemical

weapons against its population in the city of Saraqib in 2018", reports Xinhua news agency. The report by the OPCW "reached the conclusion that there are reasonable grounds to believe that, at approximately 9.22 p.m. on February 4, 2018, a military helicopter of the Syrian Arab Air Force under the control of the Tiger Forces hit eastern Saraqib by dropping at least one cylinder". "The cylinder ruptured and released chlorine over a large area, affecting 12 named individuals," it said.

Ukrainian tank units hold drills near Crimea

Kiev | Agencies

Ukraine's tank units held exercises in the south near Crimea, the Joint Forces Operation (JFO) Command said in a statement.

"Artillery and tank reserves performing combat missions along the border with the temporarily occupied territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, advanced to certain areas to counter the offensive of the supposed enemy," Xinhua news agency quoted the statement as saying on Wednesday.

According to the legend of the exercises, an enemy tank unit, supported by infantry, tried to break through the Ukrainian defence line.

To counter this attack, Ukrainian anti-tank artillery and a tank reserve entered the battle. Since last month, tensions have been escalat-



ing on the border between Ukraine and Russia.

The commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian army Ruslan Khomchak said that Russia was building up troops near the Ukrainian border in the northern, eastern and southern directions.

Commenting on the recent movement of Russian troops near the border with Ukraine, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Russia was taking necessary measures to ensure its border security and the measures posed no threat to others.



UAE mediating between India, Pak to restore 'functional relations'

Islamabad | Hamza Ameer

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is facilitating and mediating back-channel talks between India and Pakistan with an aim to turn their rivalry into a healthy and functional relationship, its envoy in Washington has confirmed.

As part of the backdoor talks and meetings, top intelligence officials from both Pakistan and India have had secret meetings in Dubai during January 2021 as the UAE played important part in bringing the two sides to calm military tensions over the Kashmir region.

"UAE played a role in bringing Kashmir escalation down and created a ceasefire, hopefully ultimately leading to restoring diplomats and getting the relationship back

to a healthy level," said Ambassador Yousef Al Otaiba, during a virtual discussion with Stanford University's Hoover Institution.

"They might not sort of become best friends but at least we want to get it (relations) to a level where it's functional, where it's operational, where they are speaking to each other," he added.

The revelation made by the UAE Ambassador to Washington has hinted towards the US's indirect intervention in the India-Pakistan relationship through its trusted ally, the UAE. It has also raised questions over statements from Pakistan's top ministers, of not having any backdoor channel active between India and Pakistan.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi has repeatedly maintained that there can be no talk with India until the Narendra

Modi government reverses its decision to abrogate Articles 370 and 35A, stripping the special status of Jammu and Kashmir and bifurcating into two Union Territories.

However, the intervention of the UAE to de-escalate tensions between India and Pakistan, especially in reference to the boiling tensions along the Line of Control (LoC), has certainly yielded positive results as both sides agreed to enforce the ceasefire along the borders. Positive results of the backdoor secret negotiations were also evident with exchanges of complementing letters from Indian PM Modi and his counterpart PM Imran Khan, sharing a mutual desire for peace. But what remains, as the major point of contention between the two sides, is Kashmir. Pakistan has reiterated that it will not be taking any forward movement

towards dialogue with India until New Delhi agrees to put the Kashmir 'dispute' on the table. One reason for Pakistan's rigid position on Kashmir is because it cannot afford to show any flexibility on the issue as it not only plays an important role in gaining political mileage for all political parties in the country, but any deviation on Kashmir and forward movement on other matters, would trigger a massive response from across the country, something that no ruling party of Pakistan can afford to see happen.

With UAE playing its role in bringing both countries closer, it remains to be seen if the Modi government and the Imran Khan led government, would agree to compromise on political backlash domestically and give priority to rational and functional relations with each other.



MILLER, MORRIS TAKE RR HOME AFTER EARLY SCORE

Team Absolute | Mumbai

South African flavour stood out in Rajasthan Royals' (RR) batting line-up as Chris Morris 18-ball 36 and a 43-ball 62 by David Miller helped the Jaipur franchise script a thrilling three-wicket win over Delhi Capitals (DC) in an Indian Premier League (IPL) clash at the Wankhede Stadium here on Thursday. RR won the match with two balls to spare.

Things had looked difficult for RR as they lost three early wickets, including that of skipper Sanju Samson, and ended the powerplay period at an abysmal 26/3 while chasing DC's 147/8.

The third over of the innings saw DC strike bowler Chris Woakes (2/22) take two wickets -- Manan Vohra and Jos Buttler.

In the next over, Kagiso Rabada (2/30) got rid of the centurion from the first match, Samson (4), leaving RR at 17/3. Samson played leaden-footed and gave a catch to Shikhar Dhawan at slips. Pacer Avesh Khan (3/32) then got rid of Shivam Dube and Riyaj Parag in successive overs to leave RR tottering at 42/5 after 9.2 overs.

However, Miller stitched a 48-run partnership (off 33 balls) with Rahul Tewatia to bring RR back into the match.

Miller took 15 runs off Stoinis's 13th over, hammering the Australian medium-pacer for three boundaries.



Brief scores: Delhi Capitals 147/8 in 20 overs (R Pant 51, T Curran 21, L Yadav 20, J Unadkat 3/15, M Rahman 2/29) lost to Rajasthan Royals 150/7 in 19.4 overs (D Miller 62, C Morris 36 not out, A Khan 3/32, C Woakes 2/22, K Rabada 2/30) by three wickets.

Soon after, a well-set Miller threw his wicket away. RR needed 44 runs off 32 balls when Miller, after hitting two sixes off Avesh Khan, hit one too many and was caught at long-on.

With 27 needed off two overs, Morris brought the equation down to 21 off 11 balls after hitting Rabada for a six off the first ball of the penultimate over. He hit another six off the fifth ball

to narrow the gap. The South African all-rounder, who was picked for a record Rs 16.25 crore in the auctions, then hammered two sixes off Tom Curran in last over to win the game for RR. Earlier, left-arm pacer Jaydev Unadkat took three early wickets to rattle the DC top-order as RR restricted the Delhi franchise to 147/8 in 20 overs.

Unadkat removed Prithvi Shaw (2), Shikhar Dhawan (9) and Ajinkya Rahane (8) to leave DC at 36/3 at the end of the powerplay. RR's left-arm seamer from Bangladesh, Mustafizur Rahman, then removed Marcus Stoinis (0) in his first over which he bowled immediately after the end of powerplay.

Skipper Rishabh Pant (51 off 32 balls), however, played a timely knock to stem the rot. Pant added 51 for the fifth wicket with debutant Lalit Yadav (20 off 24 balls) as DC moved close to the 100 run-mark. With Pant at the crease, it looked like DC would get beyond 160. However, two quick wickets put the breaks on the DC innings. Pant was run out off a throw from Riyan Parag as he looked to steal a run, while Yadav fell to Morris to suddenly push DC on the backfoot again.

Tom Curran (21 off 16 balls) and Chris Woakes (15 not out off 11 balls) took DC to their eventual score.

For RR, Unadkat picked up 3/15 from his four overs, while Rahman scalped 2/29 from his four overs.

The bowling efforts paid off as despite the poor start, RR managed to win the game.



DRAW RAISED THE INDIAN HOPES TO QUALIFY IN THE NEXT ROUND

Goa hold shape to take stunning 0-0 draw against Al Rayyan

Margao (Goa) | Agencies

FC Goa put on a sensational defensive display to hold Al Rayyan to a 0-0 draw in their AFC Champions League opener at the Fatorda Stadium in Goa. This draw against the comparatively stronger Al Rayyan boosts the confidence of the FC Goa ahead of the important group matches.

Once the opening whistle blew, it was Al Rayyan who started brighter, sensing an opportunity to pounce as FC Goa played out from the back. They fashioned the first chance of the game as early as the sixth minute as Yacine Brahimi emerged with the ball in a dangerous area as the Gaurs gave away possession. But Ferrando's man

failed every chance the opponent team took on their post. Goa sorted themselves out at the back soon after and started dictating the tempo as the game went on, and had their best chance of the half just five minutes from the halftime whistle. Alexander Romario struck a ferocious effort towards goal, and it needed dealing with from Fahad Younes in the Al Rayyan goal.

The second period saw much the same resistance from the Men in Orange, even though the Qataris bossed much of the possession in the early stages. Nonetheless, Goa gradually grew in confidence, with the likes of Ghan Martins and Edu Bedia winning multiple midfield battles and pushing

the team forward.

At the other end, some desperate defending was needed in the final ten minutes, and multiple heroic efforts from Ivan Gonzalez and co in the backline kept the hosts in it.

Dheeraj made a point blank save from Boli in the 86th minute as the Ivorian found himself with a free header, while Shoja Khalilzadeh headed the ball into the side netting in the 90th minute following a deep cross from the right flank.

Despite the tiring minds and exhausted bodies, Goa displayed grit and determination to see the final tense moments out and held on to achieve a historic draw against one of the toughest teams in the competition.

Nataraj inches closer to Olympic 'A' qualification mark

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Teenage swimmer Srihari Nataraj clocked 54.10 seconds in the men's 100 metres backstroke preliminary round of the Uzbekistan Open Summer Swimming Championships in Tashkent on Thursday to inch closer to Olympic 'A' qualification time of 53.85 seconds. The 19-year-old Nataraj, who hails from Bengaluru, has a personal best of 54.69 seconds, which is 'B' qualification mark clocked in the 2019 World Junior Championships held in Budapest.

The final will be held later in the evening. If he cracks the Olympic 'A' qualification mark in the men's 100 metres backstroke he will



become the first Indian swimmer to achieve the feat.

Six Indians swimmers, including Sajjan Prakash, had achieved Olympic 'B' qualification time in the 2019. The 'B' qualification time doesn't guarantee an automatic berth for the Olympics. The 2020 season was disrupted by the Covid pandemic and as swimming competitions resumed this year, all the six swimmers are chasing 'A' cut time in their respective events.

Kohli named Wisden Cricketers' Almanack's ODI player of the decade

Team Absolute | New Delhi

India captain Virat Kohli has been named the One Day International cricketer of the decade for the 2010s in the 2021 edition of the Wisden Cricketers' Almanack.

Kohli is one of five cricketers who have been named for each decade from 1971 to 2021. He was part of the team that won the 2011 World Cup at the start of the decade and went on to establish himself as one of the leading batsmen in all formats of the game, particularly in ODIs.

He scored more than 11,000 runs in the ten-year stretch, averaging over 60 and scoring 42 centuries.

Kohli joined the club of greats Virat kohli became the third Indian Player to be named as ODI player of the decade by Wisden Cricket. Sri Lanka spin legend Muttiah Muralitharan



was named the ODI Cricketer of the 2000s. He helped Sri Lanka make the World Cup final in 2011 and claimed 335 wickets in the decade, more than

any other bowler has in a single decade.

Indian batting great Sachin Tendulkar and legendary former all-rounder Kapil Dev have been named for the 1990s and 1980s. Tendulkar scored nine ODI hundreds in 1998 alone, more than any other batsman in a single calendar year ever has.

Kapil, meanwhile, claimed more wickets than any other in the 1980's, and scored at the highest strike-rate of any batsman with more than 1000 runs. He also famously led India to a stunning win in the 1983 World Cup against the all-conquering West Indies.

West Indies batting great Viv Richards was named the ODI cricketer of the year for the 1970's, which was the first decade of the format. Richards fuelled West Indies' dominance in the first decade of the format, scoring a century in the final of the 1970 World Cup to help them win the trophy.

WRESTLER POOJA DHANDA TESTS POSITIVE FOR COVID-19

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Pooja Dhanda, the 2018 World Championships bronze-medallist in women's 57kg category, has tested positive for Covid-19 and is in home quarantine in Hisar.

The 27-year-old international from Haryana was training at the Sports Authority of India (SAI) training centre in Lucknow, but tested positive during a routine precautionary test.

SAI is conducting weekly tests at its centres as a precautionary measure to avoid the spread of Covid-19. Earlier this month, Pooja had failed to make cut for the ongoing Asian Wrestling Championships in Almaty and was training in Lucknow. Due to a surge in new wave of Covid-19, SAI on Tuesday shut the women's national wrestling camp in Lucknow and the men's national camp in Sonapat. Sanjay Saraswat, SAI's regional head in Lucknow had communicated to the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) on Tuesday that the men's camp in Sonapat and women's camp in Lucknow will be shut with immediate effect till further orders. "Two coaches associated with wrestling have tested positive for coronavirus and are in home quarantine. The wrestling arena was disinfected," SAI's regional head had informed WFI.

TENURES OF BOTH ENDED IN MID 2020 Shah & Ganguly stay on, SC adjourns BCCI hearing

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Supreme Court of India on Thursday adjourned the case pertaining to the Indian cricket board (BCCI) and will hear it after two weeks leaving the India cricket board (BCCI)'s top office-bearers Sourav Ganguly and Jay Shah with more time to stay in charge of affairs.

The SC had earlier deferred the matter on December 9 into the new year. After that in February, the Court adjourned the matter to March. The tenures of both, the BCCI president Ganguly and secretary Shah had ended in mid-2020. However, the two have continued as the Supreme Court (SC) hasn't been able to take up the matter.

The continuous delay has ensured that neither Ganguly nor Shah have been replaced.

The new BCCI constitution makes it mandatory for its office-bearers -- president, vice-president, secretary, joint secretary, and treasurer -- to go into a three-year cooling-off



period after being in the chair for six consecutive years, either in the BCCI or its affiliate state associations, or a combination of both. The person can return for another term of three years after the cooling-off period (a person can be an office-bearer

in the BCCI for a maximum of nine years and another nine years in a state association). And this is one of the seven crucial rules, on which the edifice of the new constitution is erected, and which the BCCI wants amended. Any such amendment would allow the present office-bearers to continue in the chair.

After being elected BCCI president on October 23 in 2019, Ganguly had only 278 days to remain as the BCCI chief as his previous tenure at the Cricket Association of Bengal (CAB) was added to his BCCI term (he had joined the CAB as a joint secretary on July 2014). So, his BCCI term effectively ended on July 26, 2020.

Secretary Shah, according to reports published in mainstream newspapers in 2013, took over as joint secretary of the Gujarat Cricket Association (GCA) on September 8, 2013, though he was a GCA executive before that. And he has been associated with the GCA since. So, his tenure, too, has got over some time ago.

CSK LOOKS TO OPEN THEIR ACCOUNT IN POINTS TALLY

CSK need to shed off rustiness against Punjab Kings

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Chennai Super Kings (CSK) have their work cut out as they take on buoyant Punjab Kings in their second match of the IPL 2021 on Friday night.

The MS Dhoni-led side put in a horrible performance on the field in their first match against Delhi Capitals, dropping catches and bowling too many poor deliveries.

Punjab Kings on the other hand survived a scare from Rajasthan Royals captain Sanju Samson, who hit a century, in their first match as they held on to win the game by a slender margin of four runs even after having put up 221. CSK have had too many ageing cricketers in their side. That apart, many of the players, including



skipper MS Dhoni, haven't played too much cricket in recent times which is why they look rusty.

On a belt of a wicket at the Wankhede Stadium, CSK's bowling struggled for ideas. Spinners Ravindra Jadeja and Moeen Ali looked ineffective partly because Prithvi Shaw was dropped twice off Moeen's bowling.

CSK's top-order batting also needs to fire. Had it not been for Sam Curran, who hit a 15-ball 34 towards the end, CSK would have barely crossed 150. Skipper Dhoni had said after the match that a 200-run total would be the safest considering the dew sets in later. Dew could have been the problem for CSK in their first match and Friday's match against PK will prove further if it was dew or plain rustiness.

Sarita Mor bags gold in Asian Wrestling Championship

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Haryana's Sarita Mor stamped her authority in the Asian Wrestling Championships in Almaty on Thursday by winning back-to-back titles in the women's 59 kg. The 25-year-old defending champion made a dramatic turn-around in the closing stages of the six-minute bout to score a thrilling 10-7 win over Mongolia's Shoovdor Baatarjav. Trailing 1-4 after the opening three minutes, the Indian wrestler bounced back to level the score at 7-all in the second half of the contest. With just 12 seconds to go she raced to a 10-7 lead to retain her crown.

In New Delhi's Asian Championships held in February 2020, Sarita had won gold while in the 2017 edition of the continental



competition, she had won silver in her 58kg. India picked up their second medal, a bronze in the women's 50 kg category, when Seema scored a thumping 10-0 win over Yung Hsun Lin of Taipei.

Seema got a good start in the competition outpacing Mongolia's Anudari Nandintsetseg 7-3 in the second round but lost her next

round match to Uzbekistan's Jasmina Immaeva 2-3.

Since Jasmina entered the final as per repechage rule, Seema got a chance to contest in a bronze medal match.

Nisha too had a good start in the women's 68 kg by scoring 8-0 win over Mongolia's Delgermaa Enkhsaikhan but lost to Korea's Eun Sun Jeong 2-6 in the second round.

INDIA'S WPI INFLATION RISES TO 7.39% IN MARCH

India's annual rate of inflation based on wholesale prices sequentially rose to 7.39 per cent in March from a rise of 4.17 per cent in February.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Similarly, the inflation rate last month was higher on a year-on-year basis. "The annual rate of inflation stood at 7.39 per cent (provisional) for the month of March, 2021 over March, 2020. However, the month-on-month (March 2021 over February 2021) rate of inflation stood at 1.57 per cent," the Ministry of Commerce and Industry said in a statement on WPI. "The prices of crude oil, petroleum products and basic metal substantially increased in March 2021 as compared to the corresponding month of last year." Besides, the ministry said that due to a nationwide lockdown, the WPI index for the month of March 2020 (120.4) was computed with relatively low response rate.

On segment basis, prices of primary articles, which constitute 22.62 per cent of the WPI's total weightage, inflated by 6.40 per cent last month from 1.82 per cent in February 2021.

Besides, WPI food index rose to 5.28 per cent from 3.31 per cent reported for February.

The prices of manufactured items remained at elevated levels with a rise of 7.34 per cent from 5.81 per cent reported for February.



On the same note, the prices of fuel and power with a weightage of 13.15 per cent rose 10.25 per cent from 0.58 per cent.

The index for this major group increased by (5.28 per cent) to 109.7 (provisional) in March, 2021 from 104.2 (provisional) for the month of

February, 2021."

"Prices of 'Mineral Oils' (9.76 per cent) increased in March, 2021 as compared to February, 2021.

Prices of Coal (-) (0.08 per cent) declined in March, 2021 as compared to February, 2021. Prices of electricity remain unchanged."

Equities edged higher, metal stocks rise

Team Absolute | Mumbai

India's key benchmark equity indices made healthy gains during Thursday's late afternoon session. Accordingly, volatility was observed as rising Covid cases capped any major recovery attempts on the back healthy Q4FY21 results. However, a bout of late session buying spree pushed both the indices higher. On the sectoral front, Metal and Health Care have shown some strength while Auto and IT sector were the top losers each shredding nearly 2 per cent.

Around 1.55 p.m., Sensex traded at 48,722.19, higher by 178.13 points or 0.37 per cent from its previous close.

The Nifty50 on the National Stock Exchange traded at 14,564.20, up 59.40 points or 0.41 per cent from its previous close.

"Currently, both Nifty and Bank Nifty are showing some signs of recovery; but are quite volatile within a



range," said Jay Purohit, Technical & Derivatives Analyst, MOFSL.

"Support for Nifty is placed at 14200 while on the upside hurdle is seen at 14600 and 14700 zones."

According to Gaurav Garg, Head of Research at CapitalVia Global Research: "Market opened with a gap

up but with increased concerns over rise in Covid cases, the market could not maintain the higher levels and corrected till the level of 14400."

"Market continues to trade in a range between 14250-14800 with 14200 being a major support in the short period of time."

Flipkart to acquire online travel tech firm Cleartrip

Bengaluru | Agencies

E-commerce major Flipkart will acquire online travel technology company Cleartrip.

A statement from Flipkart on Thursday said that it will acquire 100 per cent of Cleartrip's shareholding, as the company further enhances its investments to strengthen its digital commerce offerings for customers. Under the terms of the agreement, Cleartrip operations will be acquired by Flipkart. Cleartrip will continue to operate as a separate brand, retaining all employees while working closely with Flipkart to further develop technology solutions to make travel simple for customers, it added. Kalyan



Krishnamurthy, CEO, Flipkart Group, said that Cleartrip is synonymous with travel for many customers, and as Flipkart diversifies and looks at new areas of growth, this investment will help strengthen its wide range of offerings for customers.

"We welcome the Cleartrip team with their deep industry knowledge

and technology capabilities to the Flipkart Group and look forward to providing deeper value and travel experiences for customers together," he said.

Stuart Crighton, CEO and co-founder of Cleartrip said that Cleartrip has been a pioneer in capitalising on technology to simplify the travel experience for our customers.

Etihad Airways Chef Wins The First Vegan Dessert Category

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Upfield Professional, the Foodservice division of Upfield behind the brands Rama Professional, Flora Plant™ and Violife sponsored the first ever vegan category at this year's Emirates Salon Culinaire. The competition took place across the UAE with the winner announced on 5th April in Radisson Blu Hotel, Dubai Deira Creek. Emirates Salon Culinaire, running on its 24th year, is a series of culinary competitions, open to professional chefs, pastry chefs, cooks and bakers to showcase their culinary skills judged by prominent chefs world-wide.

As an official sponsor, Upfield Professional launched the vegan category referred to as the Flora Plant™ Four Plates Vegan Dessert Category. This new category aims to promote the use of plant-based dairy



alternatives in cooking and baking to help local chefs and bakers meet increasing demand for plant-based food. All entries used Flora Plant

Butter and Flora Plant Cream and among all these innovative desserts, Chef Reina Joanne Marasigan from Etihad Airways won the first place

prize.

"This is the first time Upfield is sponsoring a competition at the Emirates Salon Culinaire. With plant-based or no-allergen options becoming more popular than ever across the UAE, we felt it was the right time to partner with such an influential competition. Chefs and hospitality business owners look to the Salon Culinaire for inspiration for new ideas and we hope the dishes created by chefs in the vegan dessert category will give them the confidence to use more plant-based food in their menus," says Chef Marwan Abidaud, Upfield North Africa and Middle East Corporate Lead Chef.

Available to buy in local retail stores nationwide, Flora Plant™ is one of Upfield's latest product innovations and is the only 100% plant-based cream and butter without any allergens available in the UAE and across the Gulf.

PRIVATE EQUITY INFLOW IN INDIA REALTY UP 19% IN FY21

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Bucking the pandemic private equity (PE) investments into the India real estate sector rose around 19 per cent in FY 2020-21 to over \$6.27 billion, according to an Anarock report. During the previous financial year, PE investments into the realty sector stood at \$5.8 billion.

Indian real estate recorded its highest-ever private equity investments since in the last fiscal, since FY16, noted the Anarock Capital's 'Flux - FY20-21 Market Monitor for Capital Flows'. Unlike earlier, FY21 saw private equity investors focus majorly on portfolio deals across multiple cities and assets, rather on specific projects or cities. Such portfolio deals constituted 73 per cent of



the overall investments, with around \$4.58 billion invested through portfolio deals in multiple cities.

The average ticket size of PE deals rose by 62 per cent from \$110 million in FY20 to \$178 million in FY21. Both structured debt and equity witnessed strong growth during the year at 84 per cent and 15 per cent respectively, said the report.

Structured debt was largely towards portfolio deals instead of project-level assets, it said.

Petrol, diesel prices finally cut after 15 days pause

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Fuel prices in the country finally fell on Thursday with oil marketing companies deciding to pass the benefit of softer global oil prices earlier this month to the consumers.

Accordingly, pump prices of petrol and diesel fell by 16 paise and 14 paise per litre respectively on Thursday.

With this, petrol is now being retailed at Rs 90.40 a litre in Delhi, down from previous day's level of Rs 90.56 a litre. Similarly, diesel is now priced at Rs 80.73 a litre in the national capital from earlier level of Rs 80.87 a litre.

With crude remaining below \$65 a barrel, for most part of the last fortnight along with softer product prices, the oil companies decided to break their pause and passed



on the benefit to the consumers. The OMCs benchmark retail fuel prices to a 15-day rolling average of global refined products' prices and dollar exchange rate.

However, the global crude has again gained and crossed \$66 a barrel mark. If this holds for a few days, fuel prices may have to be revised upwards.

Before the long drawn pause, petrol and diesel fell by 22 paise and 23 paise per litre respectively last on March 30.

Across the country as well the petrol and diesel prices fell on Thursday but its retail levels varied depending on the level of local levies in respective states.

Premium petrol, however, continues to remain over Rs 100 a litre in Mumbai and several other cities across the country.

The OMCs went on price cut for the first time this year on two consecutive days - March 24 and March 25 after keeping oil prices steady for 24 days. It again reduced the price on March 30. Thereafter, fuel prices remained unchanged for the past 15 days before falling again on April 15. Earlier, petrol and diesel prices increased 26 times in 2021 with the two auto fuels increasing by Rs 7.46 and Rs 7.60 per litre respectively so far this year.

AIRLINES GAIN ALTITUDE, BUT WILL FLY INTO LOSSES THIS FISCAL, TOO

Team Absolute | New Delhi

New Delhi: back of lower domestic air traffic compared with pre-pandemic levels, together with high fuel prices, ratings agency Crisil said. However, the agency said that these net losses will be 35-40 per cent below the ones reported for fiscal 2021 mark at Rs 9,500 - Rs 10,000 crore.

A Crisil Ratings study of the top three airlines, which account for 78 per cent of total passenger traffic, noted: "A resurgence of Covid-19 infections across the country -- especially in Mumbai and Delhi, which account for 36 per cent of overall air traffic - is expected to stall the recovery seen over the past six months."

"In fact, average daily domestic passenger air traffic has fallen in April by almost 20 per cent to 2.35 lakh compared to February 2021." Nonetheless, it said that domestic traffic, which accounts for 75 per cent of airline revenues, is expected to surge 120-130 per cent this fiscal on a low base though it will still be significantly lower at 70 per cent of fiscal 2020 level.



Improving collections, growth revival provide solace to MFIs: ICRA

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Improving collection efficiency and growth pick-up in H2FY21 is expected to help the MFI industry's long term prospects, ratings agency ICRA said on Thursday.

However, incremental covid-19 related disruptions remains a concern. "The overall long-term growth outlook for domestic microfinance industry, including microfinance institutions and micro finance focused small finance banks (SFBs), remains robust, even though the near-term outlook is clouded given the Covid-19 induced disruptions," ICRA said. "The onset of lockdown restriction and the moratorium on loan repayments extended to borrowers had led to the industry recording negligible collections in April 2020,



but the situation improved gradually over the subsequent months with easing of restrictions and pick-up in economic activity."

As a result, the agency pointed that collection efficiency improved to 102 per cent in December 2020.

"The disbursements also started picking up from Q2 FY2021 onwards, which is expected to help the industry achieve growth of 9-11 per cent in its assets under management (AUM) in FY2021." Consequently, the trend provided some respite to the industry,

which has been reeling under the stress induced by Covid-19.

In an ICRA's study sample of 20 MFIs indicated that the liquidity flow to the sector has improved over the last few months and overall Rs 22,900 crore were raised in 9MFY21.

It further said that industry witnessed reduction in its overall cost of funds during this period, however, despite this; the industry is expected to witness reduction in net interest margins (NIMs), owing to reduced interest income with portfolio growth happening only towards H2FY21 and negative carry because of excess on-book liquidity.

In addition, increased recovery efforts are expected to negate the impact of the expense optimisation efforts to some extent and put pressure on the operating profitability.

HMSI LAUNCHES 'OVERSEAS BUSINESS' VERTICAL TO BOOST EXPORTS

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Two wheeler major Honda Motorcycle & Scooter India (HMSI) on Thursday said it has established an 'Overseas Business' expansion business vertical under the 'Making in India for the World' initiative.

Accordingly, the new vertical of 'Overseas Business Expansion' is expected to spearhead HMSI's ambition to export two-wheelers to the most advanced markets of the world. "This major organisational restructuring within Honda 2-Wheelers India will harness the strength of over 100 Associates' across different functions coming together with one aim - Make Honda India the global hub for two-wheeler exports," the company said in a statement.

"Located at Honda's Manesar facility, new Overseas Business Expansion vertical strate-



gically integrates SEDBQ (Sales, Engineering, Development, Purchasing & Quality) functions under one roof to create a globally optimal operating system."

According to the company, the new overseas business vertical shall unlock new synergy by integrating "Honda 2-Wheeler India's Export-Import sales function with Quality", purchase, development, homologations, manufacturing and logistics.



VIDYA BELIEVES IN BLACK AND WHITE FOR PICTURE ONLY

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Bollywood actress Vidya Balan shared a monochrome picture on Thursday on social media, saying she does not believe in a black and white world except for a picture.

Vidya posted the picture on Instagram, where she is seen

sitting on a chair dressed in a black outfit. She completed her look by leaving her long hair open with a middle parting.

"I don't believe in a black and white world, except for a picture maybe," she wrote as the caption.

The actress had recently reminded her fans to wear

masks amid the ongoing second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has badly affected Maharashtra. Vidya will next be seen in "Sherni", for which she has been shooting in Madhya Pradesh. The film, directed by Amit Masurkar, casts her as a forest officer.



Team Absolute | Mumbai

Bollywood action star Tiger Shroff shared a video on Wednesday, where he is seen acing a double flying kick although his trainer fails to execute it. Tiger posted the video on Instagram, where he is seen in workout gear. In the clip, the star runs and hits a boxing bag by doing a double flying kick. When his trainer tries the same, he falls flat on the ground.

"Wait for it... when your trainers don't look like your trainer," the actor captioned the funny video.

Tiger has a slew of films lined up including "Ganapath", co-starring Kriti Sanon. He will also be seen in the second instalment of his 2014 debut film "Heropanti".

Tiger aces double flying kick even as his trainer fails!

SHAMA SIKANDER STARS IN MUSIC VIDEO 'HAWA KARDA'



Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress Shama Sikander will be seen in the music video "Hawa karda" and the track is set to reach the audience on April 15. The song stars Shama alongside Gaurav Bajaj. The track is sung by Afsana Khan and Sahil Syndicate. The music is by Geet and the lyrics have been done by Raas. The video of the song is directed by Dhvani Gautam and Alok Thakur. "It's a fun song, a peppy and trendy number. I am sure the young guns around are going to love it. We shot it with the utmost respect to all protocols and we wrapped up pretty quick," Shama says. The actress, who is known for her role of Pooja in the TV series "Yeh Meri Life Hai", can't wait for the audience reaction. "(I am) Waiting for the song to come out and the audience's reaction to it. I am happy to be able to work during such times where people have no work and are seeing some really difficult days," she says.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress Ileana D'Cruz dazzles in white, in her latest Instagram post that she shared on Thursday.

In the image, Ileana wears an ivory coloured low-neck, cut-out crop top paired with a linen shirt. She completed the look with thin gold chains and earrings. As caption, the actress chose the sun and glitter emojis. Ileana's latest release was the digital film "The Big Bull", starring Abhishek Bachchan. She will next be seen in "Unfair N Lovely", a comic take on India's obsession with fair skin. The film is set against the backdrop of Haryana, and features Ileana opposite Randeep Hooda.

ILEANA'S 'GOLDEN GLOW'



GUNEET MONGA DEDICATES FRENCH HONOUR TO 'EVERY GIRL WITH A DREAM'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Film producer Guneet Monga on Wednesday posted a series of tweets on Wednesday expressing gratitude and respect for French cinema, on being honoured with the prestigious Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, or Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters. She dedicated the award, which is the second highest French civilian honour, to "every girl with a dream". The founder of Sikhya Entertainment, Monga expressed that it feels like her life and work had come full circle.

"Truly humbled and grateful for being conferred with the honour of the 'Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres' (Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters) by H.E. Mr @Y_LeDrian. @IFInde," Monga tweeted. "I've been in awe of French Cinema even since I began my career as a filmmaker hence being honoured with this title is extremely special for me -- it feels like my life and my work has come full circle today," she wrote in another tweet. "With my content, I've constantly strived to uplift women narrative in cinema. I'm grateful for this honour and would like to share it with my co-founders of Indian Women Rising and my entire team at Sikhya Entertainment," she further wrote. "Even though the honour has mine and my family's name on it, I dedicate this award to every girl with a dream. Continue to dream freely and create fearlessly. The universe is always conspiring in favour of the brave and I stand here as a proof, of that! May our tribe rise!" wrote "The Lunchbox" producer.

The announcement was made official by the French Institute in India on Twitter, on Tuesday.



Diana Penty

Fatima Sana Shaikh: I am constantly doubting myself

Durga Chakravarty | New Delhi

Fatima Sana Shaikh became popular even before the audience knew her name. Way back in 1997, she endeared herself to viewers playing Kamal Hassan and Tabu's daughter in "Chachi 420". Years later, she would score her first blockbuster with the 2016 Aamir Khan-starrer "Dangal".

She has lately been seen in films such as "Ludo" and "Suraj Pe Mangal Bhari", and is now gearing up for her next film, the OTT anthology "Ajeeb Daastaans". The actress says she constantly doubts herself, adding that she wants to better herself.

"Every day you go through your own journey of asking questions to yourself. There are your own challenges and weaknesses. You have to overpower them and overcome. You'd cross those and then you have more challenges and insecurities. That is a constant journey. Everyday, there is a new mindset," Fatima told correspondent. She added: "Sometimes you feel confident and sometimes no matter how successful you are, (you could be) the most insecure person in the room in spite

of your success. It's your mindset at that moment. I am constantly doubting myself but I think that is important for me because I want to grow. If I am being happy with what I am right now I will stop growing. I want to be better." "Ajeeb Daastaans" brings together four stories that analyse the complexity of human emotions including jealousy, entitlement, prejudices and toxicity, and their after-effects. What was it like exploring topics like sex, gender, class and patriarchy? "A topic can be anything as long as it is said properly in a nice way and beautiful manner. I think stories written well, no matter what they are about, will engage you. If you choose to write on sex, gender or socio economic status -- issues are in everything. It is how you write a story more than the topic," Fatima said.

She features in the first story of the anthology, titled "Majnu". She plays Leepakshi, a young woman stuck in an unhappy marriage with actor Jaideep Ahlawat's character. Always vying for love and attention, her life is thrown in a turmoil with the entry of a young new male in the household.

