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INDIA REPORTS 2.4L COVID CASES, 3,741 DEATHS IN 24 HRS

- According to the Health Ministry, a total of 3,55,102 people have been discharged in the last 24 hours, with 2,34,25,467 being cured from Covid till date.India's overall tally of Covid-19 cases now stands at 2,65,30,132 with 28,05,399 active cases and 2,99,266 deaths so far.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

With 2,40,842 fresh cases of Covid-19, India on Sunday witnessed the lowest rise in infection since April 21, even as 3,741 people died due to the pandemic in the last 24 hours, according to the Union Health and Family Welfare Ministry.

India's overall tally of Covid-19 cases now stands at 2,65,30,132 with 28,05,399 active cases and 2,99,266 deaths so far.

According to the Health Ministry, a total of 3,55,102 people have been discharged in the last 24 hours, with 2,34,25,467 being cured from Covid till date.The Health Ministry said that a total of 19,50,04,184 people have been vaccinated so far in the country, including 16,04,542 who were administered vaccines in the last 24 hours.

According to the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), 32,86,07,937 samples have been tested up to May 22 for Covid-19. Of these 21,23,782 samples were tested on Saturday.India registered record deaths due to Covid on Wednesday with 4,529 deaths -- the highest number of fatalities from Covid infection in any country since the coronavirus outbreak was reported in China's Wuhan in December 2019.

It surpassed 4,468 deaths in the US on January 12, and earlier 4,211 in Brazil on April 6. These three are the worst-hit by the pandemic.

After battling a brutal second wave for weeks, fresh Covid cases came down below the three lakh-mark for the first time on May 17 after touching record high of 4,14,188 on May 7.

No decision on Class 12 board exams yet, suggestions sought from states

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Any decision on conduct of Class 12 exams and entrance examinations for professional courses remained inconclusive in a high-level meeting here on Sunday with further direction to states and UTs to examine the matter and send their feedback to Centre in writing by May 25.

Following the consultative meeting with the states and UTs, it was decided that the Centre will examine the suggestions received from the various state governments this week and convey further information in this regard to the students by or before June 1, the Education Ministry said.

"While a broad consensus was there, however, it was decided that states and the Union Territories may like to further examine the matter and send their feedback in writing by May 25, 2021," the Education Ministry said in a statement.

Charing the meeting, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh requested states and UTs to submit other suggestions, if any, to the Education Ministry by May 25.

The Ministry will consider all those suggestions and take a final decision soon, he said, reiterating "the priority of the government is to conduct all the examinations in a safe and secure environment".Union Education Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' also expressed commitment towards the safety and security of children as the first priority of the Central government.The entire country has come together to ensure the safety and academic welfare of the students and smooth functioning of the education system, he said.The Minister said that despite challenges posed by Covid-19, the government has left no stone unturned to successfully bring education to online mode, and that the homes were converted into schools.

Stressing the importance of the Class 12 board exams and the All-India Entrance exams in shaping the future and defining the careers of students, Pokhriyal said that keeping in view the present circumstances, they had earlier decided to cancel the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) board examinations of Class 10 and evaluate through internal assessment, but Class 12 examinations are very important in deciding the future of a student.He said that this meeting was called to enable Central and State Boards and other examination agencies to be able to examine various options available in the present challenging circumstances through a consultation process.Pokhriyal assured that the deliberations with all stakeholders in the meeting will help in reaching a suitable decision on exams in the interest of all the students and ensuring a bright future for the children.

The discussions were held around two themes -- board exams to be conducted for Class 12 by the CBSE and other state boards and the All-India Entrance examinations for various higher education institutions and professional courses."Various options regarding the methodology, process, duration and timings of the exams were discussed," the Education Ministry said.Union Ministers Smriti Irani, Prakash Javadekar, Sanjay Dhotre, Higher Education Secretary Amit Khare, School Education Secretary Anita Karwal and senior officials of the Ministry also attended the meeting.

The meeting was also attended by Chief Ministers of Jharkhand and Goa, Deputy Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, and state Education Ministers and Secretaries, Chairpersons of Examination Boards , Administrators of UTs, the Chairmen of the CBSE, UGC and AICTE, Director General, NTA and several other officials.

Wrestler murder case: Sushil Kumar sent to 6 days police custody

Team Absolute | New Delhi

A Delhi court on Sunday sent wrestler and Olympic medallist Sushil Kumar, arrested in connection with his alleged involvement in the death of a 23-year-old old wrestler at the city's Chhatrasal Stadium, to six days police custody.

The police questioned Sushil Kumar inside the court and then sought his custody for 12 days for further interrogation in the matter. Duty Metropolitan Magistrate Divya Malhotra, however, granted six-day custody of him, along with co-accused Ajay.

Additional Public Prosecutor Atul Shrivastava, representing Delhi Police, submitted that some CCTV footage, the alleged weapon used for committing the offences and also the mobile phones are yet to be recovered by the police as he sought 12 days custody.

Sushil Kumar was evading arrest and he has been on the run for close to three weeks. According to the police, he and his associates allegedly assaulted fellow wrestler Sagar Dhankar and his two friends Sonu and Amit Kumar at the stadium on May 4 night. Dhankar succumbed to his injuries later.

Shrivastava added the accused would have to taken to various states for the purpose of interrogation and 12 days remand was justified against the backdrop of Covid-19 guidelines.

Sushil Kumar's counsel contested this argument and submitted that non-bailable warrants were issued against the accused persons which shows police have already identified all of them.

Police cannot seek Sushil Kumar's custody for the purpose of identification of other persons when his client had already stated he was falsely implicated in the case, he said.Shrivastava, however, insisted that Kumar's custodial interrogation was required to unearth the conspiracy and the motive for the offence. The police in the status report challenging Sushil Kumar's anticipatory bail plea cited the autopsy report, which claimed that cause of death to be "cerebral damage due to dandekipitaayi (beating with wooden staves)".

In the anticipatory bail plea, Sushil Kumar said: "The victims are falsely implicating the applicant because he had asked Sagar to leave his property as the same was being misused by him. It is also known to everyone associated with the Chhatrasal stadium that the purported victims were trying to defame and fix the Applicant for a long time and are trying to falsely implicate the applicant in the present matter." Kumar's anticipatory bail plea was rejected by the court.

COVID: GOA CANCELS CLASS X BOARD EXAMS

Panaji: The Goa government on Sunday cancelled the upcoming Class X board exams, due to the rising number of Covid cases in the state, Chief Minister Pramod Sawant said. Sawant also said that Class X students will instead be assessed according to their already accrued internal marks. "I'm aware of what kind of pressure the students who were answering Class X exams were facing and the kind of pressure that was on their parents. Over the last many days, parents, teachers and students too were phoning the Goa Board (of Secondary and Higher Secondary Examination) and even me personally, as an education minister, or asking whenever they meet me and asking when and how the exams are going to be held and what decision will be taken," Sawant said in his address to students.

6 extremists gunned down in Assam, huge cache of arms recovered

Team Absolute | New Delhi

At least six Dimasa National Liberation Army (DNLA) militants are killed on Sunday in an encounter with police and Assam Rifles in Dhansiri Area of KarbiAnglong district, a top police official said.

Four AK-47 rifles, four revolvers, some live grenades, improvised guns and huge rounds of ammunition were found in the possession of the slain militants.

A section of media, however, said that eight DNLA guerillas were killed in the counter-militant operation, which is still underway under the command of the KarbiAnglong's Additional Superintendent of Police Prakash Sonowal.

Director General of Assam Police Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta said that six hardcore top cadres of DNLA were neutralised in KarbiAnglong District when they fired at a joint team of police and Assam Rifles during an anti-terror operation. The police chief said that the outlawed DNLA has been involved in kidnapping, extortion, killing and these are not tolerated in Assam.

Counter-insurgency operations in the Dhansiripar area of the KarbiAnglong district, bordering Nagaland, were recently intensified after the suspected DNLA militants killed one Sanjoy Ronghang at Daojingphang village on May 19. Several organisations including Dimasa Students' Union had condemned the killing of Sanjoy Ronghang and demanded action against the perpetrators.

The DNLA was formed in April 2019 to fight for a sovereign "Dimasa nation". The members of the DNLA outfit have allegedly been trained by the Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, which has been engaged in talks with the central government for the past many years.

Cyclone Yaas: PM directs officers to ensure timely evacuation

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday directed all senior officers to work in close co-ordination with states to ensure the safe evacuation of people from high-risk areas in the wake of cyclone Yaas and instructed all concerned departments to ensure timely evacuation of those involved in off-shore activities.

While chairing a high-level meeting to review the preparedness of states and Central ministries and agencies concerned to deal with the situation arising out of cyclone Yaas, the Prime Minister spoke about the need to ensure that time duration of outages of power supply and communication network are minimum and are restored swiftly.

Modi also asked officials to ensure proper co-ordination and planning with state governments to ensure no disruptions in Covid treatment and vaccination in hospitals.

He also spoke about the need to involve district administrations in the process of planning and preparedness for better learning from best practices and seamless co-ordination.

The Prime Minister directed officials that advisories and instructions on do's and dont's during the cyclone be made available in easy to understand and local language to citizens of the affected districts.

He further spoke about the need to involve various stakeholders like coastal communities and industries by directly reaching out to them and sensitising them.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) said that the cyclone is expected to cross West Bengal and north Odisha coasts by May 26 evening with the wind speed ranging 155 kmph gusting to 185 kmph.

The cyclone is likely to cause heavy rainfall in the coastal districts of West Bengal and north Odisha.The IMD has also warned of storm surge of about 2-4 metre in costal areas of the two states.

Modi was apprised that the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) is reviewing the situation round the clock and is in touch with the state governments and UTs and the Central agencies concerned.The Prime Minister was informed that the MHA has already released first instalment of SDRF in advance to all states. The National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) has pre-positioned 46 teams which are equipped with boats, tree-cutters and telecom equipments in five states and UT.In addition, 13 teams are being airlifted on Sunday for deployment and has kept 10 teams on standby.Indian Coast Guard and the Navy have deployed ships and helicopters for relief, search and rescue operations.

Air Force and Engineer task force units of Army, with boats and rescue equipment, are on standby for deployment. Seven ships with Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Units are on standby along western coast. Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas has taken measures to secure all oil installations in the sea and to bring back their shipping vessels to safe harbour.

The Ministry of Power has activated emergency response systems and is keeping in readiness transformers, DG sets and equipments for immediate restoration of electricity.The Ministry of Telecom is keeping all the telecom towers and exchanges under constant watch and is fully geared to restore telecom network and the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare has issued advisory to the sates and UTs, likely to be affected, for health sector preparedness and response on Covid in affected areas.Ministry of Port, Shipping and Waterways has taken measures to secure all shipping vessels and has deployed emergency vessels (Tugs).The NDRF is assisting the state agencies in their preparedness for evacuating people from the vulnerable locations and is also continuously holding community awareness campaign on how to deal with the cyclonic situation, the Prime minister was informed.The meeting was attended by the Home Minister, Principal Secretary to Prime Minister, Minister of State for Home Affairs, Cabinet Secretary, Secretaries of Ministries or Departments of Home, Telecommunications, Fisheries, Civil Aviation, Power, Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Earth Sciences, Chairman Railway Board, Members & Member Secretary of NDMA, Director Generals of IMD and NDRF, and senior officers of PMO, MHA.

Make public daily vaccination district wise: Chidambaram

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Congress leader P Chidambaram on Sunday demanded that government should put out a daily statement of the number of vaccines administered district-wise as there is a huge shortage in the country.

Chidambaram said in a statement, "After Delhi suspended vaccination of 18-44 years age group because of shortage of vaccines, there is more bad news from Telangana. No vaccines have been administered in 29 out of 33 districts of Telangana because there are no vaccines." He demanded that the Union Health Ministry should put out a statement of the number of vaccines administered district-wise every day as the number for the whole State hides many alarming facts. "Will the 'no shortage' Union Health Minister please answer the facts emerging from Delhi and Telangana," he asked.

Vaccination for the youth (aged between 18-44 years) in Delhi has been halted from Saturday, except in a few centres, since no stocks of the anti-Covid vaccine for the age group now remain with the Delhi government.

All centres administering vaccine jabs to youth have been temporarily shut from Saturday and will remain closed until the Delhi government receives further supply from the Centre. Addressing a press conference on Saturday, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said he has written to the Centre and requested it to provide vaccines for those aged between 18-44 years.As per government data a total of 19,33,72,819 vaccine doses have been administered through 27,76,936 sessions, according to the provisional report till 7 a.m on Saturday. These include 97,38,148 Healthcare Workers (HCWs) who have taken the first dose and 66,91,350 HCWs who have taken the second dose.

YAAS LIKELY TO INTENSIFY INTO CYCLONIC STORM BY MAY 24

The depression over Bay of Bengal is very likely to move north-north-westwards and intensify into a cyclonic storm by Monday morning and further into a very severe cyclonic storm during the subsequent 24 hours, the India Meteorological Department's National Weather Forecasting Centre said on Sunday.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Sharing latest satellite imageries and ocean buoy observations of cyclone 'Yass', the IMD said Saturday's low-pressure area which became well marked over east central Bay of Bengal in the same evening has concentrated into a depression over the area.

"It lay centered at 11.30 a.m. on Sunday near latitude 16.1 degree north and longitude 90.2 degree east, about 560 km north-northwest of Port Blair (Andaman Islands), 590 km east-southeast of Paradip (Odisha), 690 km south-southeast of Balasore (Odisha) and 670 km south-southeast of Digha (West Bengal)," the IMD said.

Cyclone 'Yaas' is very likely to move north-northwestwards and intensify into a cyclonic storm by May 24 (Monday) morning and further into a very severe cyclonic storm during the subsequent 24 hours, it said."It would continue to move north-north-westwards, intensify further and reach Northwest Bay of Bengal near West Bengal and north Odisha coasts by May 26 morning."

The cyclone is very likely to cross north Odisha-West Bengal between Paradip and Sagar islands by May 26 evening as a very severe cyclonic storm.

Light to moderate rainfall is expected at most places with heavy to very heavy falls at isolated places on Sunday and Monday in Andaman & Nicobar Islands.In Odisha, light to moderate rainfall is likely to take place at many places with heavy to very heavy rainfall at isolated places in the north coastal districts on May 25. Heavy to very heavy rains at a few places with extremely heavy falls is likely in Balasore, Bhadrak, Kendrapara, Mayurbhanj and heavy to very heavy falls at a few places in the districts of north Odisha, namely Jagatsinghpur, Cuttack, Jajpur and Keonjhar is expected on May 26.The IMD forecast suggests light to moderate rainfall at most places in West Bengal and Sikkim. Heavy to very heavy rainfall is likely over Medinipur, South and North 24 Parganas, Howrah and Hooghly districts of West Bengal on May 25.Extremely heavy rainfall is expected at isolated places over Jhargram, Medinipur, North and South 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, Kolkata and heavy to very heavy rainfall at a few places over Nadia, Bardhaman, Bankura, Purulia, Bhirbhum, Murshidabad, Malda and South Dinajpur districts on May 26. Extremely heavy rain is expected at isolated places in Malda and Darjeeling, Dinajpur, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Sikkim, Bankura, Purulia, Bardhaman, Bhirbhum, and Murshidabad on May 27.Squally wind speed reaching 45-55 kmph gusting to 65 kmph is likely to prevail over and around Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Andaman Sea and adjoining east central and southeast Bay of Bengal on Sunday, the IMD said.It is very likely to increase becoming 55-65 kmph gusting to 75 kmph over east central Bay of Bengal and adjoining north Andaman Sea from Sunday night. It is very likely to increase further becoming gale wind speed reaching 65 to 75 gusting to 85 over major parts of central Bay of Bengal from May 24 forenoon for subsequent 12 hours and would decrease gradually thereafter.

MAHA, KARNATAKA, TN AMONG 10 STATES ACCOUNTING FOR 73.88% COVID DEATHS

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are among the 10 states in the country that account for 73.88 per cent of the new Covid deaths.

The inputs came when 3,741 deaths were reported across the country in the last 24 hours with the National Mortality Rate currently standing at 1.13 per cent.

Maharashtra saw the maximum casualties (682) followed by Karnataka (451), Tamil Nadu (448), Uttar Pradesh (218), Punjab (201), Delhi (182), Kerala (176), West Bengal (154), Uttarakhand (134) and Andhra Pradesh (118).

On a positive note, the daily positivity rate has declined to 11.34 per cent.

India has recorded less than three lakh daily new cases for seven consecutive days now.

A total of 2,40,842 daily new cases were registered in the last 24 hours -- the lowest figure since April 17 this year, when the daily new cases were 2.34 lakh.

India's daily recoveries have also continued to outnumber the daily new cases for the ninth consecutive day. A total of 3,55,102 recoveries were registered in the last 24 hours.

India's cumulative recoveries have also reached 2,34,25,467 on Sunday with National Recovery Rate graph at 88.30 per cent.

On the other hand, India's total active caseload has decreased to 28,05,399 on Sunday. A net decline of 1,18,001 was witnessed in the last 24 hours. It now comprises 10.57 per cent of the country's total positive cases.

Seven states cumulatively account for 66.88 per cent of India's total active cases.

Maximum of the 4,83,225 active cases have been reported from Karnataka followed by Maharashtra (3,54,830), Kerala (2,89,657), Tamil Nadu (2,84,278), Andhra Pradesh (2,10,683), West Bengal (1,31,688) and Rajasthan (1,22,330).

India also set a record with more than 21.23 lakh tests conducted in the last 24 hours. This is also the fifth successive day of more than 20 lakh tests in India.

India has significantly ramped up its testing capacity to about 25 lakh tests per day, since January 2020. Cumulatively, 21,23,782 tests conducted in the last 24 hours in the country.

Chh'garh police issues notice to Patra to join probe on toolkit issue

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Chhattisgarh Police has issued notice to BJP national spokesperson Dr Sambit Patra for allegedly spreading fake news over 'toolkit' issue.Chhattisgarh Police has asked Patra to report at Raipur's Civil Lines police station at 4 p.m. on May 23.

The notice has been issued to former chief minister Raman Singh and Patra on a complaint registered in Raipur for allegedly spreading fake news related to the toolkit issue.The complaint was filed by Akash Sharma, the Chhattisgarh NSUI Chief under the IPC. Head of Congress research wing Rajeev Gowda and Rohan Gupta are made co-complainant after they approached Chhattisgarh Police.

In the notice issued to Patra, Chhattisgarh Police has asked him to present himself at the police station either physically or through video conference. Police has warned Patra of legal action in case of failure to respond the summon.Earlier, Chhattisgarh Police had issued a notice to Raman Singh asking him to remain at his residence on Monday for questioning for allegedly spreading fake news related to the toolkit.

On May 18, the BJP alleged that Congress used a toolkit to malign Prime Minister Narendra Modi's image during the Covid pandemic. Sharing a page on his Twitter account, Patra said, "Friends look at the Congress 'ToolKit' in extending help to the needy during the Pandemic. More of a PR exercise with the help of 'Friendly Journalists' and 'Influencers' than a soulful endeavour. Read for yourselves the agenda of the Congress: #CongressToolKitExposed."

Levelling further allegations against Congress and Rahul Gandhi, Patra tweeted, "Disgusting to say the least. Rahul Gandhi wanting to use this opportunity of pandemic to destroy the image of PM Modi. Congress workers were instructed to call the mutant strain as 'Modi strain'. No stone left unturned to scar the name of India with the help of Foreign Journalists."

Barge toll climbs to 70, divers continue search for missing persons

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Indian Navy recovered four more bodies from the Arabian Sea as divers from a specialised vessel continued to search for the remaining missing persons after the tragedy that befell Barge Papaa-305 last Monday in the Bombay High Fields, officials said here on Sunday.With this, the toll has shot up to 70 and around six are still reported missing, while 188 have been rescued safely so far.The specialised vessel, INS Makar, which located the wreckage of the Barge Papaa-305 late on Saturday is now continuing to search for the sunken anchor-handling tugboat 'Varaprada'.Divers went down and completed their survey of the barge and no more bodies were found in it, said an official spokesperson.In a related development, bodies of eight persons - suspected to be fishermen from fishing vessels that may have gone missing during the Cyclone Tauktae fury last week - washed ashore in Raigad in the past 24 hours and further investigations are underway.The Indian Navy deployed INS Makar and INS Tarasa to the BHF, around 175 km off Mumbai, to make an underwater search for the wrecks of the two vessels which sank and trace more bodies using expert divers and special equipment.INS Makar is a lead ship of the Makar-class of catamarans used for hydrographic surveys by the navy, producing navigational charts and is capable of collecting marine environmental information by conducting limited oceanographic surveys.INS Tarasa is a patrol vessel of the Car Nicobar-class in the series of four Water Jet Fast Attack Craft.Besides, a P81 long-range multi-mission maritime patrol aircraft conducted reconnaissance missions over the designated areas along with ALH, Seaking, and Chetak helicopters, besides the ships like INS Kolkata, INS Kochi, INS Betwa, and INS Beas still in the vicinity to trace more bodies.

"The ongoing search and rescue operations by the ships, helicopters and aircraft will continue in the area to locate the remaining crew of the sunken vessels," said the official.

ABANDON PROPOSED PROTEST, PUNJAB CM APPEALS TO BKU

Chandigarh | Agencies

Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh on Sunday urged the Bhartiya Kisan Union (Ekta-Ugrahan) not to go ahead with their proposed sit-in protest, which could turn into a "super-spreader of the contagion".The Chief Minister said his government had fought hard to prevent Punjab going the way of some other states, such as Delhi, Maharashtra and even Uttar Pradesh, where bodies floating in the Ganga river had exposed the total pandemic "mismanagement" by the BJP-ruled state.Any event, such as the proposed three-day 'dharna' of the BKU (Ekta-Ugrahan) in Patiala, had the potential to negate the gains made by his government in tackling Covid in the state, he said. Amarinder Singh urged the farmers' group not to "jeopardise

the lives of their own people with such reckless behaviour" amid the pandemic, especially when there is a complete ban in the state on all gatherings and any violation of the ban would be highly detrimental to the interests of Punjab and its people.Such a 'dharna' would draw people mainly from the villages, which were in any case going through a crisis during the second wave of the pandemic, he pointed out. The group's action was also completely unwarranted considering the total support the state government had extended all these months to the agitating farmers on the issue of the Centre's 'black' farm laws, said Amarinder Singh.His government was the first to pass amendment laws in the state Assembly to negate the farm laws, he pointed out. "It is time for the farmers now to reciprocate by supporting the state in the fight against the pandemic," he said, adding just as the farmers' interests were inexorably linked with that of Punjab, so was Punjab's interest dependent on the farmers' support to his government in the battle against Covid-19.Pointing out that even during the peak of the second Covid surge in Punjab, things had not gone out of control here as they had in several other states, the Chief Minister said the state had been one of the best performing so far as the management of the pandemic was concerned. There were no widespread shortages of oxygen in hospitals despite shortfall in supply, as the state government had ensured judicious management of the critical commodity, he noted, adding that even availability medications, beds, etc., had been continuously ramped up to keep pace with the spiralling cases. This, he pointed out, was in sharp contrast to states like Delhi, Maharashtra and UP, among others.

The only serious problem being faced by Punjab was the shortage of vaccines, which was not due to any mismanagement of the state government but that of the Centre, said Amarinder Singh, rejecting all charges of his government failing to tackle the pandemic effectively.

FAIL TO UNDERSTAND REASON FOR HOLDING CLASS 12 EXAM: PRIYANKA

Team Absolute | New Delhi

As the Education Ministry began deliberations to conduct the Class 12 board exams, Congress General Secretary Priyanka Gandhi has raised concern about conducting exams and said the health and safety of students matter. "I have said this before and am repeating it again. The mental health of children is as important as their physical well-being. It's about time our education system incorporates sensitivity towards children's well-being and starts taking these issues seriously," she said. "Gatherings in closed spaces promote the spread of Covid. This wave has shown that children are vulnerable to new strains. In any case, expecting children who are already under immense pressure to sit for their exams wearing all sorts of protective gear for hours at a stretch day after day is insensitive and unfair. Many of them are likely to have family members who are down with Covid too. They are already dealing with enough stress.

"I fail to understand the reasoning behind holding these exams, not to mention having stretched this decision out for months," she said.Students preparing for the CBSE Class 12 examinations have been sharing their concerns about these exams being held during the second wave of Covid-19 pandemic. "Their health and safety matters. Why are we not learning our lessons?" she asked. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) had in April cancelled the exams for Class 10, while those for Class 12 were postponed in view of the exponential spike in Covid-19 cases across the country.

POOR HEALTH INFRA, MANAGEMENT ADD TO CORONA WOES IN BIHAR

Patna | Agencies

The fatality rate due to Covid-19 in Bihar is a cause of worry, and many attribute it to the poor health infrastructure in the state and the ill-preparedness of the Bihar government during the second wave of the pandemic.The state's fatality rate in May (till May 21) is 180 per cent higher as compared to April this year. While the health department registered 989 deaths in April, from May 1 to May 21, as many as 1,779 fatalities have been reported from across the state. Alarmingly, many believe that the actual death toll is much higher than the official figures.

Some experts feel that had the Nitish Kumar-led state government focused more on infrastructure development and providing proper treatment facilities at the hospitals, both in rural and urban areas, Bihar would not have witnessed such a high death toll.

As per the data released by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, as many as 4,339 people have lost the battle against Covid-19 in Bihar till Saturday morning.

"We are witnessing that though the infection rate is decreasing in Bihar, the fatality rate is not coming down accordingly. One of the reasons for this is lack of health facilities and poor infrastructure. Moreover, the hospitals are facing a huge crunch of medical, paramedical and trained technical staff.

"While the state government has started roping in MBBS doctors, nurses, and ICU and ventilator operators in the middle of the pandemic, the new recruits are not showing much zeal, primarily due to the fear of the infection," said Sunil Kumar, a prominent physician at a Patna-based private hospital.

Bihar has several hospitals in many districts, which have not been completed or are non-operational.

A sub-divisional hospital at Majhaul in Begusarai district has not been completed even after 15 years. The foundation stone for the hospital was laid in 2006.Similarly, one sub-divisional hospital at Pupri village in Sitamarhi district is still not operation even 15 years after the construction work began in 2006.A health centre at Inderwa village in Gopalganj's Thawe block is closed due to unavailability of doctors and nurses. The villagers pointed out that though three ministers in the Nitish Kumar government represent Gopalganj district, they still go to neighbouring Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh for treatment. Similarly, the JannayakKarpoori Thakur Medical College in Madhepura was completed at a cost of Rs 800 crore, but it is only partially operational.

The state of affairs in Bihar could be gauged by the fact that 207 unused ventilators are kept in different Sadar hospitals in different districts. These ventilators were given by the Centre under the PM-CARES fund, and the state health department received them between July and September last year.

While the health department decided to allot these ventilators to the private hospitals of the state on April 30, the private facilities in as many as 13 districts did not apply for them.

According to the Health Minister of Bihar, Mangal Pandey, "We do not have trained technicians and anesthetists to operate the ventilators in the government hospitals. Hence, we decided to allot the same to the private hospitals. There were 140 vacancies for anesthetists but only 77 applicants were recruited. They have been deployed in different hospitals."

As per the data, Begusarai has nine operational ventilators in the Sadar hospital, followed by Nawada (6), Purnea (5), Saharsa (5), Jahanabad (5), Siwan (4), Aurangabad (4), Sheikhpura (3) and Buxar(2).

It may be noted that JDU leader MewaLal Chaudhary had died due to severe corona infection in lungs, and he was not given timely ventilator support.

Another JDU MLA, AchmitRishidev, lost his wife due to non-functional ventilators at the Sadar hospital in Araria district on Wednesday.

RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav has pointed out the mismanagement in the hospitals on several platforms. He has also accused Nitish Kumar and the BJP of doing politics in the middle of a severe pandemic in Bihar.

"The Nitish Kumar government is neither helping patients, nor is it allowing us to help the people of Bihar. This can be attributed to negative politics. The government is unable to provide ambulances, medicines, life saving drugs and proper treatment to corona patients in Bihar," Tejashwi said.

Jan Adhikar Party (JAP) leader Raju Danveer claimed: "Poor patients in several districts are transported on garbage carts as the state government is unable to provide ambulances."

ALL HAVE TO WORK TOGETHER TO END CORONA: CM CHOUHAN

Team Absolute | Bhopal

In order to completely eliminate the corona from the state, everyone will have to work together in full capacity. This was stated by Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan in the review meeting held in Budhni. Chouhan said that wards and villages have to be made aware. For this, the members of the Crisis Management Committee at the village and ward level should work continuously to make people aware. He said that maximum sampling and testing should be done.

Chouhan said that members of Crisis Management Committee should motivate people for yoga and pranayama. Also, if anyone in the village has a cold, cold, fever, then make sure to send it to the Covid Center or Hospital for immediate examination and treatment.

Chouhan said that micro-provision should be made in the houses of Corona positive persons and it should be ensured that the corona does not come out of the infected house. He called for the continuation of the Kill-Corona campaign with all seriousness. Also asked to ensure regular screening, treatment and counselling of Covid patients in home isolation.

Chouhan said that the government is making proper arrangements for the treatment of black fungus. He campaigned from June 1 to ask for vaccination. He asked the public representatives present at the meeting to make an active contribution in ending the corona. It should be ensured that if any person is ill in the village, he gets immediate treatment. He said that the state government is preparing for the third wave of possible corona by epidemiologists.

Chouhan said that the positivity rate in the state is steadily decreasing. We will not sit peacefully until the corona is finished. The government is fighting Covid at full capacity.

Chouhan said that after setting up of a 300-bed Covid Care Center at Budhni, people of the area will be able to get immediate benefits and treatment. Chouhan reviewed district-wise corona infection. At the meeting, Divisional Commissioner KavindraKiyawat, Collector Chandra Mohan Thakur and CEO Zilla Panchayat Harsh Singh gave information about prevention and treatment of corona infection in the district.

Chauhan inspected the 300-bed oxygen-covered Covid Care Center at Budhni. In this, all the facilities for treatment of Covid will be available. During the inspection, Shri Chauhan said that all necessary facilities should be made available for proper treatment of corona patients. Instructions were also given to ensure availability of adequate medical staff in the Covid Care Center. Chouhan said that a separate coved ward of 50 beds should be made for children in view of the third wave.

Corona curfew should be strictly followed to completely break the transition chain

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Energy Minister and Minister in charge of Gwalior district for Covid, Pradyuman Singh Tomar has said that the positive rate of corona infection has decreased, but the areas where there are Covid positive patients, consider the areas as hot spots, Covid guide-line. Be strictly adhered to. The public curfew imposed in the district should be strictly followed till May 31, so that the rate of corona infection can be reduced to zero. We need to make every effort to make Gwalior district a corona-free district by 31 May. Tomar said this while discussing with the district officials in Gwalior.

Tomar has also said that special attention is needed to break the chain of transition in urban as well as rural areas. Vaccination of all people should be done by running vaccination work as a campaign. Under the Kill Corona-3 campaign, teams reached 100 percent of the households and survey work should be done. On the basis of the survey, the people to whom medicines are to be made available, should also be made available on time. This arrangement should be ensured that there is regular communication with the home quarantine people as well.

The Energy Minister has said that the Kill Corona-4 campaign will also be run in the entire state. The outline of this campaign should also be prepared from now. He said that along with the challenges of the present time, we also have to be ready for the challenges of the future. For this, there is a need to prepare a strategy from now on and start implementing it.

Collector Kaushalendra Vikram Singh said during the discussion that a complete plan has been prepared for the present circumstances as well as future challenges in the district. Action is being taken to arrange two-and-a-half thousand beds in the district. Along with this, action is also being taken on complete planning on oxygen, ICU and other necessary arrangements. He also informed that arrangements are being made to lay oxygen lines in the urban area as well as Dabra, Bhitarwar and Ghatigaon.

Superintendent of Police Amit Sanghi informed that regular actions are being taken to ensure adherence to the public curfew through the Police Department. Police is taking action against those who roam the city without any work, as well as challaning against those who roam without masks. Municipal Corporation Commissioner Shivam Verma informed in the meeting that sanitation work is being done in all the wards through the Municipal Corporation. Along with this, the work of providing medicines to the home quarantine people is also being done through the corporation. CEO District Panchayat Kishore Kanyal gave detailed information about the survey work being carried out in rural areas under the Kill Corona-3 campaign. He informed that many gram panchayats in the district have become corona-free panchayats. Restrictive action has been taken in villages where Covid has patients, keeping them in quarantine center or home quarantine.

Special efforts will be made to control Corona this week

- PUBLIC SUPPORT MUST TO MAKE BHOPAL FREE OF CORONA CURFEW: SARANG
- MEDICAL EDUCATION MINISTER HOLDS IMPORTANT MEETING IN NEW POLICE CONTROL ROOM

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Medical Education Minister Vishwas Kailash Sarang has said that the next 7 days will be important to free Bhopal from Corona curfew. He appealed to the public not to leave the house during these 7 days. Patients in home isolation must remain at home. Only self-discipline and restraint can keep Bhopal free from Corona infection. Shri Sarang held discussions with the police, administration and municipal officials in the new police control room on Sunday to prevent Corona infection.

Sarang said that monitoring should be done at the ward level. For this, work should be done by forming micro teams and dividing work in micro areas. Home isolation patients must be monitored ward wise. SDM, CSP and Deputy Municipal Commissioner should form teams and work. Locations with more than 20 positive patients of Corona infection should be marked as red, 10 to 20 patients as orange, 5 to 10 as yellow, and those with less than 5 positive patients as green zone.

Sarang said that a campaign should be conducted to prevent Corona infection in the manner in which people were made aware by displaying a sticker at the home of the positive patient in the first wave. The tracing of the people who came in their contact should be ensured. People in their neighbourhood should also be made aware.

Sarang said that people can give information about positive patient moving in the open or leaving home on the toll-free number 1075. He said that the health information of the patients in home isolation will be taken by the team in the next 2 days. Physical verification of each person will be conducted.

Sarang said that if the Covid patients do not follow the code of conduct, they will be shifted to Covid Care Center or Hospital. In addition, positive patients with smaller homes are also covered with Covid care so that their families are not affected.

Sarang said that the number of tests will also be increased. He told the ward in-charge to hold a meeting with the Crisis Management Group. He said that a micro-containment zone will be created to prevent spread of infection on a large scale.. He said that strict action should be taken in the top 10 wards where more cases are being reported.

Sarang said that medical kits will be made available and testing ensured in every household rural areas by May 31. The society will have to cooperate with the Crisis Management Committee to deal with it. Corona infection can be prevented only with the cooperation of the whole team and people. Sarang said that the police and administration should made all possible efforts, so that Corona infection can be curbed in the next 7 days and Bhopal can be reopened from June 1. For this, the public should cooperate with the police and the administration. This is important for their own safety.

Tigress dead, tiger takes care of 4 cubs in MP's Panna Reserve

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Panna Tiger Reserve (PTR) in Madhya Pradesh is witnessing a rare scene of a tiger taking care of its cubs after the tigress that gave birth to them died, officials said on Saturday.

The PTR authorities have released a video showing the tiger, officially called P-243, taking care of four cubs after their mother, tigress P213 (32), died in the last fortnight.

In the video, the cubs can be seen playing on rocks and making themselves comfortable as the tiger moves among them. "The cubs are the offspring of P-243. It has

been taking care of four cubs who are six to eight months old now. Due to this paternal care, we will not have to shift the cubs elsewhere. The situation is being monitored as the tiger has been collared a couple of days ago," said PTR field director Uttam Kumar Sharma. Tigress P213(32) was seen with a swelling on its left leg on May 12, and it was given medical treatment post tranquilization and released, but its carcass was found in PTR's Gahrighat range on May 15, he said. The death appears to have taken place due to natural causes, the official added. However, this is not first occasion when a tiger is seen taking care of cub, a similar incident had happened earlier in the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve where male tiger B 39 had taken care of the cubs for about 6 months, after the death of the tigress. Madhya Pradesh is known as the tiger state of India with the 2018 census putting their number at 526. The state is home to several tiger reserves like Kanha, Bandhavgarh, Pench, Satpura and Panna.

VILLAGERS ARE INSPIRED BY CORONA VOLUNTEERS FOR VACCINATION AND SANITIZATION

Bhopal: In a campaign to end the corona infection, Corona Volunteers is encouraging villagers for vaccination and sanitization. These volunteers are also helping in the sanitation and vaccination in the colonies. Volunteers free mask distribution in District Coordinator Jan-Abhiyan Parishad Anuppur, Thermal screening of visitors to the railway station and checkposts located on the Chhattisgarh border, Kovid testing camp along with support in Kil-Corona campaign-3. With the cooperation in the wall writing, etc. are doing the work prominently. In Gram Panchayat Mediras, sanitization was done to prevent corona. Sanitation was done by Corona Volunteers in the homes of Corona positive patients at Village Panchayat Pyari No. 1. In Pushparajgarh development block, Corona volunteers are motivating people between 18 and 45 years to get Kovid vaccine. Volunteers went to the Lila Tola crossroads to stop them from working without stopping through the Roko-Toko campaign. Similarly, in Headquarters Pushprajgarh, Corona Volunteers made round circles to maintain social distance in Balak Middle School, Rajendra Village.

Volunteer Vivek Kumar Sharma conducted a door-to-door survey with the Gram Panchayat Secretary at the Gram Panchayat Chilpa under the Kill-Corona campaign and distributed the corona kit to the patients. Volunteers distributed free masks to the laborers working for the MGNREGA work conducted by Village Gram Panchayat at Payyar-2 and they were advised to work the distance. Corona Volunteer Pratibha Sahu in village Budhanpur under development block Kotma supported people in vaccination by providing support in Kovid testing center.

Decision to conduct class twelve examin the first week of June: Parmar

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Minister of State for School Education (Independent Charge) and General Administration Inder Singh Parmar informed that in view of the situation of corona infection in the first week of June, necessary decision will be taken regarding the conduct of class XII examination. While deciding, the health and safety of the candidates will be given top priority. Necessary preparations for the 12th examination have already been done by the School Education Department. At present, no change is proposed in the examination system. If the circumstances are favorable, examinations will be conducted according to the old pattern.

Parmar attended the meeting organized by the Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, to conduct the Class XII examination by the Center and to discuss the proposals for entrance examinations for vocational courses. Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank', Women and Child Development Minister Smriti Zubeen Irani, Information and Broadcasting Minister Prakash Javadekar, Principal Secretary School Education and Chairman Secondary Education Board Rashmi Arun Shami, including all the States / Union Territories Education ministers, education secretaries and state exam boards presidents were involved virtually.Parmar requested the Defense Minister Singh regarding the CBSE examination that due to the ground reality of the state, an appropriate decision should be taken regarding the examination. Along with this, a request was made to prioritize teachers in the age group of 18 to 45 years and to prepare an urgent strategy for the vaccination of students. Class XII examinations have an impact on state board exams and other entrance examinations across the country. Keeping this in mind, suggestions have been sought from various state governments and union territories in writing by 25 May. Based on the input of the states, the examinations of class XII will be considered by the Central Government in the interest of all students. It is noteworthy that the Covid-19 epidemic has affected various sectors including education sector, especially board exams and entrance examinations. Keeping in mind the current situation, almost all the state boards of education, CBSE and ICSE have postponed the class XII examination, 2021. Similarly, the National Testing Agency (NTA) and other national examination conducting institutes have also postponed the entrance examination for professional course admission.

CHEETAH TO BE RE-INTRODUCED IN INDIA FROM AFRICA IN NOVEMBER: SHAH

"According to the approved timeline sent to us by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change this week, the tentative budget outlay of the 'Project Cheetah' is Rs 1,400 lakh for this fiscal," minister Vijay Shah said.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Cheetah, the world's fastest land animal, which was declared extinct in India in 1952, is expected to be re-introduced into the country in November this year at the Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh, state Forest Minister Vijay Shah said on Sunday.

The country's last spotted cheetah died in Chhattisgarh in 1947 and it was declared extinct in the country in 1952. The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) some years back prepared a cheetah re-introduction project.

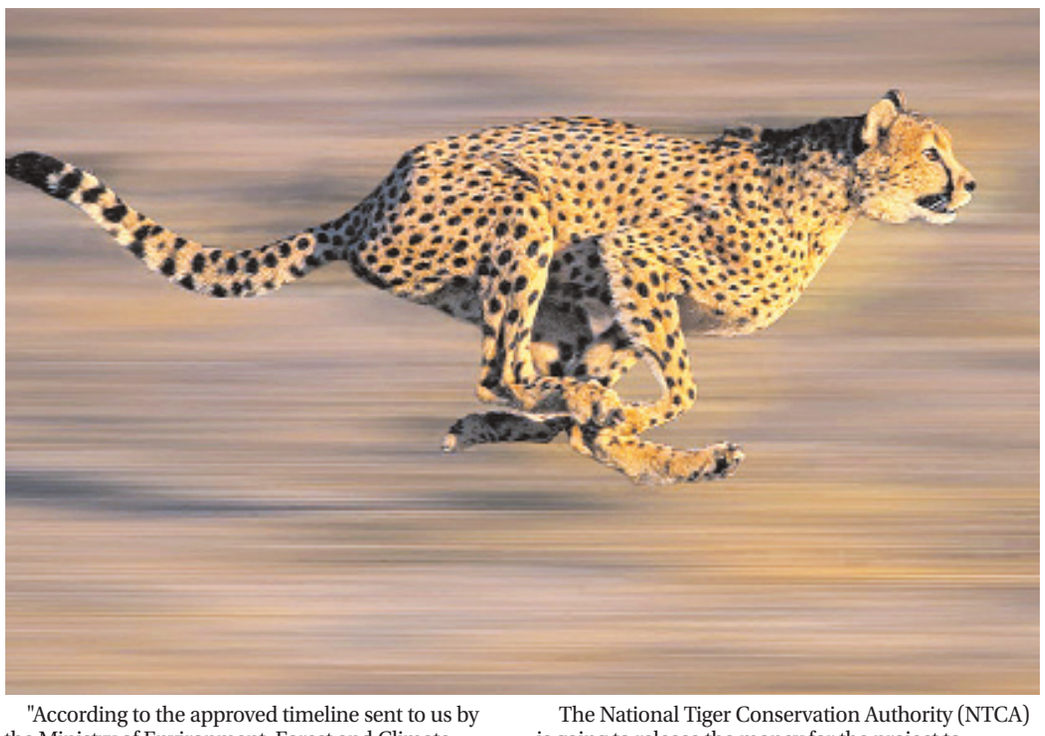
The Supreme Court had earlier given its approval to introduce African cheetahs to a suitable habitat in India on an experimental basis.

"We have started the process of creating an enclosure for around 10 cheetahs, including five females, to be brought from South Africa to Kuno in Sheopur district and it is going to be completed by August," Shah told PTI.

Officials from India will be sent to South Africa for sensitisation and training in June and July this year and according to the plan, the transportation of the cheetahs will take place in October and November, he said.

Kuno, located in the Chambal region, is spread over an area of over 750 sq km and has a conducive environment for the cheetah, he said.

The protected area, comprising a considerable population of four-horned antelopes, chinkara, nilgai, wild boar, spotted deer and sambar, has a good prey base for the cheetahs, he said.



"According to the approved timeline sent to us by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change this week, the tentative budget outlay of the 'Project Cheetah' is Rs 1,400 lakh for this fiscal," the minister said.

The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) is going to release the money for the project to Madhya Pradesh and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) at Dehradun next month, Shah said.

An expert from South Africa visited the Kuno National Park on April 26 this year along with scientists from the WII and inspected the facilities and habitat created there for the introduction of African cheetahs. They approved it and now the final process of bringing the cheetah is underway, a forest official said.

Earlier, experts from the WII had visited four places in Madhya Pradesh to look for the best habitat for the introduction of African cheetah in the country last year, Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests J S Chauhan, told PTI.

The WII team had visited the Kuno National Park in MP's Sheopur district, the Nauradehi sanctuary in Sagar district, the Gandhi Sagar sanctuary on the northern boundary of Mandsaur and Neemuch districts and the Madhav National Park in Shivpuri district, Chauhan said.

"Madhya Pradesh had in the past been home to cheetahs. The state has a long conservation history...we have the habitat. We also have a successful animal translocation track record," Chauhan said, referring to the tiger reintroduction programme in the Panna Tiger Reserve in 2009.

Cheetah is considered vulnerable under the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) red list of threatened species, with a declining population of less than 7,000 found primarily in African savannas. The Supreme Court last year set up a three- member committee to guide the NTCA on the cheetah re-introduction project.

The panel has asked the WII to carry out a technical evaluation of all possible sites for the re-introduction of cheetah in the country.

DELHI UNDER LOCKDOWN TILL MAY 31

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Despite the Covid positivity rate in the national capital declining to 2.5 per cent and the single-day cases also reducing to around 1,600, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday announced the extension of the ongoing lockdown in the city until May 31 in view of the second wave of the pandemic.

Delhi has been under a lockdown since April 20 and during this period daily Covid cases were over 25,000 and the average positivity rate was above 30 per cent.

Addressing a press conference, Kejriwal said the second wave of the pandemic has been very dangerous and the Delhi government had imposed the after consultations with people from various sections.

"Daily cases are still above 1,000. So, we are extending the lockdown till May 31, 5 a.m. If cases keep decreasing like they are right now, we will start the process of unlocking next week. We will not open everything at once. Unlocking will be gradual," he said.

Delhi reported around 1,600 cases in the last 24 hours with the positivity rate dipped to around 2.5 per cent.

On Saturday, 2,260 cases were reported and the positivity rate was 3.58 per cent.Sunday is the third straight day Delhi's daily positivity remains below 5 per cent.

Delhi's vaccination drive for those in the 18-44 age group has however, come to a halt as the national capital has run out of jabs.

Kejriwal said he was sure that the city would get help from the Centre to combat the shortage.

"As of now, our top priority is to see how we can vaccinate people as quickly as possible. However, there is a shortage across the country. There is also an apprehension about a third wave. If we vaccinate everyone, we might be able to avoid it. I am personally speaking to vaccine manufacturers about the availability.

"We are ready to buy vaccines from any authorised company, irrespective of the costs involved. We are even willing to spend an amount that is equivalent to Delhi's budget to get everyone inoculated," Kejriwal added.In Delhi, around 50 lakh people have received at least one dose of the vaccine so far.

While stocks are available for those above 45 in the healthcare and frontline workers category, Delhi has run out of vaccines for those in the 18-44 age group.

Kejriwal also lauded healthcare workers, who have worked tirelessly during the pandemic.

"Doctors and nurses didn't sleep for days. They have worked day in and day out to serve patients. Many of them have als succumbed to Covid. We are indebted to them and cannot repay what they have done.

"The Delhi government has decided to give Rs 1 crore to their families. I have been meeting the kin of the frontline workers who have succumbed to the virus," the Chief Minister added.

No COVAXIN for 45+, frontline and health workers from tomorrow: AAP MLA

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Amid the concerns regarding the shortage of COVID-19 vaccines, the Delhi government today notified that there will be no Covaxin doses left for those aged above 45, frontline and healthcare workers in the city after Monday. The city government further said, it does not have a clarity yet regarding when it would be receiving next installment of Covaxin for those above 45 years.

There will be no Covaxin doses left for those aged above 45, frontline & healthcare workers in Delhi after Monday, AAP MLA Atishi stated adding, "No clarity yet from Centre on supply of next installment of Covaxin for those above 45 years."

Around 64,000 people given COVID-19 vaccine jabs in Delhi on May 22.

The vaccination for the 18+ category has been halted in Delhi from Saturday because the state has consumed its allocated share of the vaccine, said Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Saturday. "Due to this, their vaccination centres have been shut. Only a few vaccines are available at some centres which will be administered today," said Delhi CM.Meanwhile, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Saturday wrote a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and said that Delhi requires 80 lakh COVID-19 vaccine doses per month to vaccinate the people of the national capital in three months. The Chief Minister, in his letter, mentioned that the national capital received just 16 lakh doses of the COVID-19 vaccine in May.

Reiterating his appeal to increase the quota of COVID-19 vaccine for the national capital, he requested the Centre to import COVID-19 vaccines at a national level instead of leaving it to the states to raise global tenders.

"Vaccination of the young population is halted from today because the doses that Centre has given us is over so the vaccination centres for young population will be closed," he said.

Delhi reports lowest daily spike in Covid-19 cases since March 30

Delhi recorded 189 Covid deaths and 1,649 fresh Covid-19 cases in 24 hours on Sunday. This is the lowest daily spike in cases the city has seen since March 30.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Delhi reported 1,649 fresh Covid-19 cases in 24 hours on Sunday. This is the lowest daily spike in Covid cases the city has seen since March 30 when 992 cases were recorded. There are currently

27,610 active cases in the city.

The city also recorded 189 Covid deaths in 24 hours on Sunday, taking Delhi's cumulative Covid toll to 23,202. For the second consecutive day, the daily fatalities remained below 200.

The case positivity rate in Delhi has consistently been falling. On Sunday, it stood at 2.42 per cent while on Saturday, it was 3.6 per cent.

According to the state government's health bulletin on Sunday, 68,043 Covid tests were conducted in 24 hours. Of these, 46,745 were RT-PCR tests.

With more than 5,000 patients having been discharged on Sunday, a total of more than 13.6 lakh people

Covid positivity rate comes down to 12.13% in Gurugram

In two weeks' time, Covid-19 positivity rate in Gurugram district has come down to 12.13 per cent from 24 per cent. Similarly, the recovery rate has also increased to 95.65 per cent, according to an official statement of the district administration.

GURUGRAM | Agencies

According to health officials, now the number of daily reported patients in Gurugram district has come down significantly. Only 516 Covid cases were reported in Gurugram on Saturday.

Deputy Commissioner Gurugram Yash Garg said that on April 29, the district registered a positivity rate of 41.98 per cent, 34.91 per cent on April 30, 34.4 per cent on May 2, 24 per cent on May 11 and on May 23, it came down to 12.13 per cent.

"The recovery rate of the district's corona patients is increasing rapidly. Presently, the recovery rate of the district has been 95.65 per cent, which is commendable," Garg said.

He said that to provide maximum health facilities to the people and increase awareness about preventive measures of Covid infection, the health workers are providing health facilities to the people as per their needs. Also, the awareness of corona infection in the district has increased among the people. Corona patients in Gurugram are now also recovering from home.

Civil Surgeon Gurugram, Dr Virender Yadav said that the trust of people about home isolation in the district has increased compared to the previous year.

Also, the team of dedicated doctors has also been set up for counseling of patients living in home isolation so that people can seek help during home isolation period.

Yadav said that 8 to 10 thousand people are being tested daily. An intensive testing campaign is being carried out by the Health Department team in the high-rise area.

"To combat Covid infection, it is necessary to identify corona infected patients in the district as soon as possible. Due to timely identification of such patients, they are treated in time, which also reduces the risk of their lives.

We appealed to the general public that the only way to prevent corona infection is Covid appropriate behaviour and Covid vaccination. Therefore, people should get their registration done soon for vaccination on the Arogya Setu App or CoWin portal so that the chain of corona infection can be broken," Yadav said.

Most teachers, students in Delhi want Class XII board exams cancelled: Sisodia

The meeting was held on the eve of a high-level meeting to be chaired by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh to decide on holding board exams, which were postponed in view of the second wave of Covid-19.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia Friday consulted teachers, principals and students of Delhi schools regarding the possibility of conducting the Class XII board exams. He also took to social media to seek suggestions.

The meeting was held on the eve of a high-level meeting to be chaired by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh to decide on holding board exams, which were postponed in view of the second wave of Covid-19. It will also include Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal among others. All state education ministers will also be present in the meeting.

In a statement, the Delhi government said "most teachers, principals and children are of the view to cancel 12th Board Exams". "The consensus that emerged from all meetings with these key stakeholders was that in the absence of vaccines to children, conducting any kind of examinations will only make our students and teachers more vulnerable to the virus," it said.

Sisodia also said "obsession with examination will not serve any purpose" and "will only create more problems for students."

"Majority of school teachers and principals present at this meeting concurred that final grades should be awarded on the basis of unit tests, practical examinations, general tests, and pre-board exams already conducted in February-March 2021," the government said.

"In addition, teachers and students also suggested that the 'historical reference' of students performance ie. their past grades, projects, activities be taken into account for the final evaluation. Options of taking exam be exercised by only those who are willing to take it," it added.

Ashok Pandey, Director of the Ahlcon Group of Schools, also said holding the Class XII exams was not feasible. "Under these circumstances, the option of a physical board exam is completely out. Now the question is how to evaluate. In my opinion, one model could be evaluating along the lines of Class X students. The other model could be if we could consider shifting the entire process of evaluation to individual schools, based on an overall standard," he said.

Mount Abu School Principal Jyoti Arora said the feedback she had received from parents was divided: "About 50% don't want the Class XII Board exams to be held, but there are also an equal number of students who said they have studied for a year and they want to give the exam now."The overwhelming opinion in favour of cancelling the board exams was also visible when Sisodia took to Twitter and Instagram to seek suggestions.

"Centre Govt. has invited all education ministers to discuss possibilities to conduct 12th Board & entrance exams. I would request teachers/parents/students to give suggestions here, so that best decision can be made considering the future of our students," he tweeted.

Sumanjeet Sharma, a social activist, said, "Exams can be conducted/given after a year also, but right now we should safeguard our children as the third wave of Covid is likely to affect them more. It would be a foolishness if we send our children to school/exam centres. Online exam for class XII students wouldn't be right (sic)."

A student, Ananya, wrote, "In unprecedented times like these wherein children of 17-18 years of age are having to deal with immense grief, trauma and loss of loved ones, it's unfair to ask us to risk our lives for an offline exam, methodology for internal assessment should be developed."

On Instagram too, nearly everyone demanded cancellation of exams. Some said it should be made optional. On alternative ways of assessment, various suggestions were given including considering marks of the last three years, evaluating on the basis of internal assessment and pre-boards, or considering class X marks.

Vaccinate all Class 12 CBSE students before exams: Sisodia

Sisodia, who holds the Education portfolio, made the demand during the high-level virtual meeting with Union Education Minister Ramesh PokhriyalNishank and other Union Ministers along with state education ministers to deliberate on the conduct of the exams. However, it was inconclusive.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

If health experts clear anti-Covid vaccine jabs for 17.5-year-olds, then all Class 12 students across the country must be vaccinated before the CBSE exams, said Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia on Sunday.

Sisodia, who holds the Education portfolio, made the demand during the high-level virtual meeting with Union Education Minister Ramesh PokhriyalNishank and other Union Ministers along with state education ministers to deliberate on the conduct of the exams. However, it was inconclusive.

"During the meeting, I demanded making arrangements for vaccinating Class 12 students before board exams at a meeting with the central government. Conducting the

examination by toying with students' safety will prove to be a big mistake. First vaccine, then exams," Sisodia said.

In a post meeting press conference, he demanded that the Central government should arrange vaccines for around 1.5 crore Class 12 students across the country and the same number of vaccines for teachers.

Sisodia said that nearly 95 per cent of Class 12 students are above the age of 17.5 years, and suggested that Centre should talk to experts aif they can be given anti-Covid vaccines. Following the Centre's directive, he had on Saturday held a virtual meeting with teachers, educational experts, parents, and students to gain view of collective view regarding holding of the CBSE's Class 12 board exams. Keeping in mind the severity of the second wave of the pandemic and the emergence of new variants like black fungus etc., many students, teachers and their families are apprehensive about holding the exams, Sisodia had said.

Delhi man forced to stay in old age home after son dies of Covid

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The second wave of Covid-19 pandemic has taken a heavy toll of human lives, especially the senior citizens who have become helpless after their sons or daughters died and are now being forced to stay in old age homes.

Manoj Sharma, who lives in Toronto, Canada, lost his brother due to a heart attack. His 88-year-old father is now alone in Delhi and now has been shifted to an old age home as noone left to look after him.

Though some of his family members live in Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR), they could not come and meet him due to the fear of contracting Covid-19. Thereafter, the old father had to be sent to the Panchvati Senior Citizen Centre in Delhi.

The Panchavati Senior Citizen Centre is an old age home for senior citizens run by a trust where the elderly are provided a place to stay though they have to pay for it.

Manoj Sharma told IANS, "The health system has collapsed during the Covid-19 crisis, my brother died of a heart attack. Though, my brother did not contract Covid-19 nor did my father."

"After my brother passed away, we (immediate family) sent my father to an old age home where he is being looked after."

"Some of our family members reside in Delhi-Noida but due to the strict restrictions enforced during the Covid-19 lockdown nobody is permitted to enter anybody else's house.

We considered many options and also spoke to an agency to look after my father at home, but he had not undergone a Covid test," Manoj added.

"We got support from a place so we shifted my father to an old age home to avoid disturbing anybody from the family during the Covid-19 crisis. Right now my father is fine there and only he will decide what to do next if the situation becomes normal again?"

Praising the Shaheed Bhagat Singh Seva Dal which performs cremation of people in Delhi free-of-cost, Manoj said, "My father was calling an ambulance at the time my brother suffered a heart attack but no one could reach out to him for help. After which my father called the Shaheed Bhagat Singh Seva Dal which cremated my brother and are doing a commendable job of helping other people."

There are several stories where people have become alone after losing their loved ones, with no one to look after. A Delhi resident Lavina Singh has nobody by her side in this world anymore. Her father died years ago and her mother died of Covid-19 last year. Since then she has become an orphan.Her immediate family members also left after her mother's death. She is now living alone. Lavina Singh told IANS, "My mother died of coronavirus infection on December 6 last year. Nobody came to see her after her death, I did e everything on my own, from treatment to funeral, all alone. Some neighbours residing in the same building helped me a lot in these difficult times."

"I have been living here for the last seven years and was working in a dental clinic where I used to earn Rs 6,000 per month. But during the Covid crisis, they have asked me not to come to the clinic.""My mother and I used to earn but now she is no longer alive and my workplace is also shut down. I have to pay the house rent, electricity bill and other expenses. However, my landlord did not ask me to pay rent during the lockdown but how long will they support me. Once the lockdown is lifted, I will have to find another job."

"My family lives in Delhi but neither did they come at the time of my mother's death, nor have they contacted me."

CM THACKREY ASKS PARENTS TO BE ALERT ABOUT ANY COVID-19 SYMPTOMS IN CHILDREN

Addressing paediatricians virtually, chief minister Uddhav Thackeray said immediate diagnosis was the need of the hour. Adding that paediatricians need to comfort parents and not cause fear among them. "We trust our doctors completely when it comes to treating children. Treatment shouldn't be a bigger problem than the actual disease itself. Doctors should advise parents properly. The threat of coronavirus still looms large," he said.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Amid the raging coronavirus pandemic and some experts warning of a possible third wave, Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray on Sunday appealed to people to consult doctors immediately if children show any symptoms.

Addressing paediatricians virtually, the chief minister said the immediate diagnosis was the need of the hour.

"Don't be complacent and negligent regarding any symptoms in children. Consult a doctor immediately," Thackeray said.

During his interaction with 6,300 paediatricians from different parts of Maharashtra along with the members of the paediatrics COVID-19 task force and other medical experts via a video link, guidelines for the treatment protocol for children were discussed. The CM hailed the efforts of the medical fraternity in dealing with the pandemic.

Thackeray said paediatricians need to comfort parents and not cause fear among them. "We trust our doctors completely when it comes to treating children. Treatment shouldn't be a bigger problem than the actual disease itself. Doctors should advise parents properly. The threat of coronavirus still looms large," he said.

A statement from the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) said paediatricians were advised on how to identify mild, medium and severe symptoms of coronavirus infection among children. The meeting also discussed aspects like treatment of infected children with comorbidities, precautions to be taken by parents while handling their infected children, the diet of child patients etc among other issues, it said.As of Saturday, Maharashtra's COVID-19 tally stood at 55,53,225 while the number of fatalities stood at 87,300, as per the state health department.

MAHARASHTRA SUSPENDS COVID VACCINE DRIVE FOR 18-44 AGE GROUP AFTER DELHI, KARNATAKA

Maharashtra has now also suspended the COVID-19 inoculation drive for the 18-44 age group, confirmed Chief MiniterUddhav Thackeray in a virtual meeting.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

After Delhi and Karnataka, Maharashtra also has now suspended the COVID-19 inoculation drive for the 18-44 age group, confirmed Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray in a virtual meeting with pediatricians.

Maharashtra CM Uddhav Thackrey said, "COVID inoculation drive for 18-44 age group has been suspended as the supply of vaccines isn't smooth. I'm hopeful that from June production capacity of vaccines will increase, then, we can run 24hr vaccination drive in the state."On May 11, the Maharashtra government had temporarily halted the inoculation for the 18-44 age group owing to a dearth of vaccines even as the number of people aged above 45 waiting for their second dose was increasing. Addressing the media, Maharashtra Health Minister Rajesh Tope had stated that the stock of nearly 3 lakh doses directly procured by the state government for the 18-44 age group will be diverted to administer the second dose to individuals in the above 45 years category.

On Saturday, the inoculation drive for the 18-44 age group came to a halt in Delhi due to a shortage of vaccines, with Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal saying it will take 30 months to vaccinate people in this category if the supply crisis continues. The chief minister also wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, requesting him to ensure an immediate supply of jabs and increase the quota for Delhi. Delhi requires 80 lakh doses a month to vaccinate people in three months. But it only received 16 lakh doses in May and the Centre has further decreased Delhi's quota in June to 8 lakh doses, Kejriwal said.On May 14, Karnataka Government had suspended the COVID-19 inoculation drive for the 18-44 age group due to a shortage of vaccine doses. However, on May 21, the state government had said that they would resume the COVID-19 vaccination drive for people in the 18-44 years age group from Saturday.

Allow reopening from June: Retail shop owners urge Maharashtra govt

Traders said they have been facing massive losses since the lockdown remains in effect for over 55 days.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Amid a dip in daily Covid-19 cases in Mumbai, retail shop owners have urged the state government to allow them to reopen shops from June. Mumbai's daily cases have gone below 1,500 after a spike in April.

Traders said they have been facing massive losses since the lockdown remains in effect for over 55 days.

"We request the Maharashtra government to allow us to reopen our shops from June 1 in a phased manner to revive the economy as cases are coming down in the state and especially in Mumbai. We have suffered a huge loss of revenue and jobs. We hope that now after 55 days of lockdown, the government will allow to resume the businesses of small traders across Maharashtra," said Viren Shah,

president of the Federation of Retail Traders Welfare Association.

He added, "We will ensure proper precaution and safety for all our staffers and customers around."The Federation said by May end, they will face a huge loss to the tune of approximately Rs 70,000 crore across 13 lakhs shops in Maharashtra. Also, 55 lakh jobs are at stake, it added."Even during the first lockdown, shops were not closed for these many days, both essential and non-essential. Shops of essential items were allowed to function throughout the lockdown," said Shah.

Will Maharashtra Ease Lockdown Restrictions? Health Minister Hints Govt Might Reduce Curbs After June 1

As the Covid-19 situation in Maharashtra undergoes gradual improvement, state health minister Rajesh Tope on Saturday hinted that the government could consider easing the restrictions in a phased manner.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Covid-19 situation in Maharashtra undergoes gradual improvement, state health minister Rajesh Tope on Saturday hinted that the government could consider easing the restrictions imposed in a phased manner after June 1.

This comes as the positivity rate in Maharashtra reached 12 percent and authorities believe that they have adequate supplies and medicines.

"The government will assess the situation in the last week of May. If the positivity rate falls below 10percent and the number of active cases comes down, the state may consider easing some restrictions," The Times of India quoted Rajesh Tope as saying.

The state health minister added that the government would take a cautious approach considering the possibility of third wave and CM Uddhav Thackeray would announce the final decision with regard to easing restrictions.The state authorities may slowly consider easing restrictions if the number of active cases goes down and 50 percent of hospital beds are vacant, he said.

On April 5, the Maharashtra government imposed lockdown-like curbs followed by stricter restrictions announced on April 15.

Maharashtra once again battled the worst Covid-19 situation with a worrying spike ahead of the second wave that hit the country. Finally, the state has managed to have its positivity rate below 15 percent as the state's positivity rate on Saturday was reported to be 12 percent.

Maharashtra's Covid death toll crossed the 87,000-mark on Saturday even as new infections dropped and remained below the 30,000 level, health officials said. Compared to the peak of 1,263 deaths reported on Friday, the state's fatalities dropped to 682 on Saturday, taking its overall death toll to 87,300, the worst in the country.The number of fresh cases remained below the 30,000-mark at 26,133, taking the state's Covid tally to 55,53,225 till now.

In its briefing on Saturday, the union government said that eight states, including Maharashtra, had more than one lakh Covid cases in the country. Karnataka topped the list with 5.14 lakh cases, followed by Maharashtra with 3.67 lakh cases and Kerala with 3.06 lakh cases.

Maximum of the 4,83,225 active cases have been reported from Karnataka followed by Maharashtra (3,54,830), Kerala (2,89,657), Tamil Nadu (2,84,278), Andhra Pradesh (2,10,683), West Bengal (1,31,688) and Rajasthan (1,22,330).

SSC Exam 2021:

Will tell Bombay HC about potential threat of third COVID-19 wave to children: Gaikwad

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Days after Bombay High Court slammed the Maharashtra government for cancelling the Class 10 board exam, education minister Varsha Gaikwad on Sunday stated that the government will tell the high court about the threat to the children in the third COVID-19 wave.

Gaikwad was speaking to media after the high-level meeting of the education ministers with union education minister Dr Ramesh Pokhriyal and others.

She also informed that the Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray will chair a meeting in the next two days to make the decision about the Class 10 and Class 12 exams.

As India battles the second wave of the pandemic, many states across the country have decided to cancel and postpone the board examinations for classes 10 and 12. However, there is no confirmation on the dates of the Class 12 exam yet. Even, Maharashtra government has cancelled the Class 10 exam.

However, the vacation bench of the Bombay

High Court of Justices Shahrukh Kathawalla Surendra Tawade on Thursday came down heavily on the Maharashtra government for deciding to promote class 10 students.

The bench said the state should not make a mockery of the entire education system and destroy the careers of students in the name of a pandemic.The bench later granted time to the state to file a fresh affidavit.

today, a high-level meeting was held with all the States/UT education ministers, education secretaries and chairpersons of state examination boards and stakeholders to discuss the proposals for the conduct of examinations for Class 12 and entrance examinations for professional courses.

The CBSE had on April 14 announced the cancellation of Class 10 exams and postponed Class 12 exams in view of the surge in COVID-19 cases. The decision was taken at a high-level meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The exams, which are usually conducted in February-March every year, were scheduled to be held from May 4.

The CBSE had announced that a decision on the Class 12 board exams will be taken on or after June 1.

Maha: Covid toll crosses 87K-mark, but new infections drop

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Maharashtra's Covid death toll shot past the 87,000-mark on Saturday though new infections dropped and remained below the 30,000 level, health officials said.

Compared to with the peak of 1,263 deaths reported on Friday, the state's fatalities dropped to 682 on Saturday, taking its overall death toll to 87,300, the worst in the country.

The number of fresh cases remained below the 30,000-mark at 26,133, taking the state's Covid tally to 55,53,225 till now.

In Mumbai, 1,268 new cases took the city's Covid tally to 695,483 till date, after touching the highest daily spike of 11,206 cases on April 4 last month, while 52 fatalities mounted its Covid death toll to 14,516.

The state's death rate continued to remain stable at 1.57 per cent, while its active caseload stood at 352,247 on Saturday.

On a brighter note, 40,294 fully cured patients returned home on Saturday, more than the number of fresh infections, taking the state's overall recoveries to 51,11,095, as the recovery rate improved from 91.74 per cent on Friday to 92.04 per cent now.

The Mumbai Circle (MMR) - comprising Mumbai, Thane, Palghar and Raigad districts - recorded a drop in new cases, from 3,780 a day before to 3,603 now, compared to the peak of 19,953 infections recorded on April 11.With the latest additions, MMR's caseload has shot up to 15,04,985, while 106 fatalities on Saturday took its death toll to 26,720.

Of the day's 682 deaths, Pune and Beed led the chart with 53 fatalities each, followed by 52 in Mumbai, 43 each in Solapur and Kolhapur, 37 in Aurangabd, 36 each in Ahmednagar and Sangli, 32 in Raigad, 31 in Nashik, 29 in Gadchiroli, 18 in Wardha, 17 each in Sindhudurg, Osmanabad and Amravati, 16 in Latur, 15 in Satara, 14 each in Ratnagiri and Nagpur, 13 in Yavatmal, 12 each in Palghar and Jalgaon, 11 in Akola, 10 in Thane, 9 each in Nanded and Chandrapur, 8 in Washim, 7 in Jalna, 6 in Hingoli, 4 each in Parbhani and Buldhana, and 2 each in Dhule and Nandurbar.

Meanwhile, the number of people under home isolation in the state stood at 27,55,729, while 22,103 persons were shunted to institutional quarantine on Saturday.

DIVERS FIND SUNKEN BARGE, ARABIAN SEA TRAGEDY TOLL CLIMBS TO 66

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Indian Navy has recovered six more bodies from the Arabian Sea, while an expert diving team with specialised vessels located the sunken Barge Papaa-305 resting on the seabed, officials said here on Saturday.

With this, the death toll in the Arabian Sea tragedy caused by Cyclone Tauktae earlier this week has shot up to 66, while around 10 persons are still reported missing. A total of 188 persons have been rescued safely so far. On Saturday morning, the INS Makar and INS Tarasa set out for the Bombay High Fields, around 175 km off Mumbai, to make an underwater search for the wreckage of Barge Papaa-305 and an anchor-handling tugboat, Varaprada, using experts and special equipment.

INS Makar is a lead ship of the Makar-class of Catamarans used for hydrographic surveys by the Navy for producing navigational charts and is capable of collecting marine environmental information by conducting limited oceanographic surveys.INS Tarasa is a Navy patrol vessel of the Car Nicobar-class in the series of four Water Jet Fast Attack Craft.Besides, a p81 long-range multi-mission maritime patrol aircraft conducted reconnaissance missions over the designated areas along with helicopters like ALH, Seaking and Chetak, besides ships such as INS Kolkata, INS Kochi, INS Betwa and INS Beas that are still in the vicinity to trace more bodies.

"To augment the ongoing SAR operations for the crew of Barge Papaa-305 and Tug Varapradha, the specialised diving teams onboard INS Makar (with sonar) and INS Tarasa sailed out early morning today from Mumbai for carrying out an underwater search," an Indian Navy spokesperson said.

Pune NGO exposes human trafficking scam in J&K, sends 8 NE youths home

Team Absolute | Pune/Srinagar

A Pune NGO has laid bare an alleged human trafficking racket perpetrated in the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir since the past few months and has urged the Centre and local administration to intervene in the matter on priority.

Recently, at least eight youngsters, including a girl, were rescued by volunteers of NGO, Sarhad, and sent back to their homes in Assam by an AirAsia flight on Sunday afternoon.

Sarhad founder Sanjay Nahar said that the scam recently came to light after the eight were lured to Srinagar by a local recruitment firm on the promise of well-paying jobs in apple or fruit-processing factories.

Sarhad Jammu & Kashmir Students Association President Aqib Bhat told IANS that "a woman representative of Madiha Placements offered these Assam youngsters factory jobs paying Rs 8,500 month, plus other benefits. These youths immediately agreed and decided to come here, 3,000 km from their home state."

The excited young group comprised Philimon B. Basumatary, 21, Rahul Basumatary, 20, Pusha Kerketta and AjitTigga, both 24, Yekub Ekka, 19, JyotishLakra, 18, TahimaTigga, 20 and the 17-year old girl -- all dreaming of the prospects of building a good future in a distant land.Around mid-April, they were picked up by the woman agent, representing Madiha Placements, from Assam and brought to New Delhi in an unreserved general compartment of a train.

After the long and arduous journey, they were dumped to

spend the night on a pavement in the national capital and the following day, herded in buses to reach Srinagar on April 20.More shocks lay in store for the weary group that wiped off all their joys of reaching the beautiful valley, now in its mid-summer bloom."Instead of the promised jobs in apples or fruit-processing factories, they were sent to some private homes or estates to serve as domestic labourers. When they protested, they were threatened and at least one of the youths was assaulted and forced to live and perform tough menial jobs against their wishes," Bhat said.

As their ordeal continued, one of the duped youths, Philimon - who had been educated with Sarhad in Pune - happened to come in contact with Bhat and recited the travails of his friends - all stuck in Srinagar with false job promises, no resources, no help and no hopes.

"We were shocked. We immediately contacted the local authorities and with great difficulty, got them freed from their employers in different locations. As they had nowhere to go, last week they stayed with me for three days. The recruiter had paid them only part salary - Rs 5,500, and promised to pay their full dues only if they work for a year, virtually making them bonded labourers," Bhat said.

Bhat and his team decided to send them back and again made huge efforts to collect funds to book them on an AirAsia flight bound for their homes - seeking to eject the bitter memories of ther 'heaven on earth'.

On its part, Nahar has decided to take up the issue of such human-trafficking and bonded labour style employment very seriously and systematically.

"We have written to Union Home Minister Amit Shah seeking his intervention and also appealed to Divisional Commissioner of Kashmir, Pandurang Pole, for a thorough investigation into such fraudulent manpower consultants," Nahar said. According to Nahar, the recent incident could be just the tip of the iceberg and there are more than 2,000 such people brought from Assam and other northeastern states to Kashmir and reportedly ditched in a similar fashion.Bhat and Nahar have urged that all people who come for jobs to Jammu & Kashmir must have a compulsory police verification done at both ends, and a copy of the employer's appointment letter or contract with all the terms and conditions including salary, etc, should be deposited with the Collector. Sarhad independently plans to verify the credentials of the scores of such recruitment agencies that have cropped up in Jammu & Kashmir in recent times and inform the UT administration and Centre of the same.

Sonakshi Sinha checks in on fans, asks them to 'hang in there'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress Sonakshi Sinha motivated her fans to not give up through a post on Instagram on Sunday. The actress looked stunning in a picture that she posted of herself wearing a black ensemble. She teamed this up with open hair. She wrote about how she was checking in on her fans and encouraged them to "hang in there".

"Just checking in... you got this, hang in there," she posted.

Meanwhile, the actor had also taken to Instagram a few days back to inform her fans that she had received a jab against Covid-19.

On the work front, Sonakshi will be seen in "Bulbul Tarang", which will have a digital release.

She also has the film "Bhuj: The Pride Of India" lined up where she will be seen alongside actors Ajay Devgn, Sanjay Dutt and Nora Fatehi.

Besides this, the actress is gearing up for her web series debut "Fallen", where she plays a cop.

ELLI AVRRAM: I'VE LEARNT SO MUCH LIVING IN INDIA

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress Elli AvrRam, who moved to India at a young age to pursue her dream of becoming a Bollywood actress, says that her stay here has taught her a lot.

The actress is originally from Stockholm, Sweden, and says that her experiences in India have contributed to shaping her personality in a big way."The struggle have truly been worth it, I'm so proud of myself for taking the step and leap of faith, to move to India at a young age, because it has truly shaped me into a person that has so many more perspectives and understandings about life and it's different situations. I've learnt so much living in India, and I feel blessed about it," said Elli.Meanwhile, the actress, who has been seen in films such as "Malang" and "Mickey Virus", says that she is glad about the way her career has shaped up.

"In regards to my place in Bollywood, I have not only the filmmakers who have believed in me, to thank, but also the Indian audience who accepted, appreciated and supported me and keeps doing it. Without their love I wouldn't be where I am today," she says.

GEETA BASRA HAS A WORD OF ADVICE FOR MOMS-TO-BE DURING COVID

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress Geeta Basra, who is expecting her second child with cricketer-husband Harbhajan Singh, feels that expecting mothers should follow proper government guidelines when it comes to considering getting the Covid-19 vaccination. Geeta, who often talks about parenting and women's health, feels unless the government announces that it is safe for mothers to take the jab, no one should make a poorly informed decision.

Geeta's social media account is flooded with messages from a lot of expecting mothers on whether they should take the Covid vaccine. Commenting on the same, Geeta says: "Vaccination is something which is new to of all us. It's a known fact that the vaccine helps keep the virus at bay but at the same time many doctors are advising to-be moms against taking the jab. The government guidelines and the medical organisations suggest that breast feeding and pregnant women should not take the vaccine." Geeta, who has been part of films such as "The Train", "Mr Joe Carvalho", reveals that she too, has been waiting for the government to give a clear guideline. "As of now there aren't enough evidences and studies carried out on the effects of the vaccine on lactating and pregnant women. I have also been advised by the doctors to not take the vaccine for now and I would urge expecting mothers to refrain as well till we don't have further announcements from the government in this regard," she added.

AdiviSesh gives major fitness goals

Team Absolute | Hyderabad

Actor AdiviSesh, who is known for his work in Telugu blockbusters such as "Goodachari", "Evaru" and "Kshanam" uploaded a workout video on his social media page on Sunday. The actor said he wants to maintain a strict workout regime. Sesh, who will soon be seen in bilingual film "Major", will be seen essaying the role of 26/11 martyr Sandeep Unnikrishnan. In the video posted on his Instagram page, the actor is seen lifting weights. Dressed in a red and white T-shirt, and adding a slight geeky look with spectacles on, the actor captioned the video as: "No music, no filter, just breath. Gotta keep up that #majorfilm workout".

The post invited a great response, with his fans appreciating his workout regime. "Major" also marks the production debut of well known star Mahesh Babu. Besides this, Sesh has "Goodachari 2" and "Hit 2" lined up next. "Major" is expected to release on July 2 in Hindi, Telugu and will be dubbed in Malayalam.

JACQUELINE FERNANDEZ THANKS MUMBAI POLICE FOR 'ALWAYS BEING ON THEIR TOES'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress Jacqueline Fernandez took to Twitter on Sunday to share her gratitude for the work that the Mumbai Police have done.

The actress had recently provided the Mumbai Police personnel with raincoats and other safety gears. "I salute @MumbaiPolice for always being on their toes, doing their duty; come rain, come storm. Thank you for everything that you all do for us," she wrote.

The Mumbai Police force thanked the actress for her contribution. Taking to Twitter, it said: "As June is nearing, Mumbai is gearing up for the monsoons- so are we. Thank you @Asli_jacqueline and #YoloFoundation for your valuable contribution- this will help our personnel stay safe in pandemic as well as monsoons. #StongerTogether."

She has also set up the You Only Live Once foundation where she has tied up with several NGOs that cater to the different needs of people during the pandemic.

The actress had also contributed to the Pune Police Foundation recently.

On the work front, Jacqueline will be seen in "Cirkus", "Bhoot Police" and "Kick 2", "Attack" and "Bachchan Pandey".

Get your heart pumping with aerobic exercises

Team Absolute | New Delhi

With people being contained to their homes this year as well, one may consider stepping up your workout routine. Aerobic exercises are not only beneficial to build strong bones, improve muscle strength, endurance and flexibility, but also to reduce the risk of heart disease, hypertension, stroke, diabetes and some cancers. The benefits go beyond physical with research suggesting that it may improve your thinking and memory in just six months.

"Walking, running, bicycling, swimming and cross country are a few popular aerobic activities. To get the most out of your aerobic exercise, flexibility and strength training exercise should be worked into your fitness routine," says orthopaedic sports surgeon Vonda Wright, MD, FAAOS.

To strengthen your cardiovascular system, it is important to increase your heart rate for 20 to 60 minutes at your target heart rate each time you exercise. Exercising at your target heart rate ensures your body is exerting enough energy to reap the benefits. To accurately track how hard your body is working, calculate your target heart rate and track beats per a minute. A general calculation to determine your target heart rate is 220 minus your age.

"The FITT principle of exercise is an effective guideline to follow for aerobic activity," says Dr Wright. "Standing for frequency, intensity, time and type, the FITT principle can provides the building blocks for an optimal workout. No matter what you're trying to achieve or how your goals change over time-toning up, improving strength, speed, or endurance, or losing weight-you can seamlessly apply the FITT Principle to stay on track. The key is to keep your heart rate steady and to exercise to your fitness level in order avoid injury."

The American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons suggests these safety tips to eliminate injury while taking part in aerobic activity.

Consult your doctor. If you have a pre-existing condition, are overweight, a smoker or haven't been active in a while, consult with your physician before beginning a new exercise routine.

Wear appropriate shoes. When selecting a pair of running shoes, look for good shock absorption and construction that will provide stability and cushioning to the foot. Make sure that there is a thumbnail's width between the end of the longest toe and the end of the shoe. Buy shoes at the end of the day when your foot is the largest. Warm up and stretch. Warm up with some easy calisthenics, such as jumping jacks. Continue with walking or light running for five minutes. Gentle stretching of the back, hamstrings can be helpful.

Cool down and stretch. Never skip stretching at the end. Stretching can help reduce muscle soreness and keep muscles long and flexible. Slowly and gently stretch after activity, holding each stretch for 30 seconds.

Hydrate. Even mild levels of dehydration can hurt athletic performance. If you have not had enough fluids, your body will not be able to effectively cool itself through sweat and evaporation.

ROCK BAND MANESKIN WINS EUROVISION SONG CONTEST FOR ITALY

Amsterdam | Agencies

Move over sequins, disco beats and power ballads. A four-piece band of Italian rockers won the Eurovision Song Contest in the early hours of Sunday.

The music festival was cancelled last year amid the global pandemic but the event in Rotterdam's Ahoy arena with its regime of testing and strict hygiene protocols was seen as a step toward a post-COVID-19 return to live entertainment.

Maneskin's win was only Italy's third victory in the immensely popular contest and the first since Toto Cutugno took the honor in 1990. Italy, the bookmakers' favorite, trailed Switzerland, France and Malta after the national juries delivered their votes but were propelled to victory by votes from the viewing public.

A crowd of 3,500 fans, who all tested negative for the coronavirus, watched the finalists perform live.

Maneskin is Danish for moonlight, a tribute to the home country of bassist Victoria. The band won with a total of 529 points from second-placed France. Switzerland, which led after national juries had voted, finished third.

United Kingdom singer James Newman's song, "Embers," failed to ignite any love at all and did not score a single point, finishing last, just as the U.K. did at the previous Eurovision two years ago.

U.S. rapper Flo Rida didn't manage to translate his star power into points for tiny San Marino's entry that was sung by Senhit. They finished with just 50 points.

Matt Smith dating Millie Brady's sister Caroline

Los Angeles | Agencies

Actor Matt Smith is reportedly in a relationship with Caroline Brady, an investment banker. Caroline is actress Millie Brady's sister.

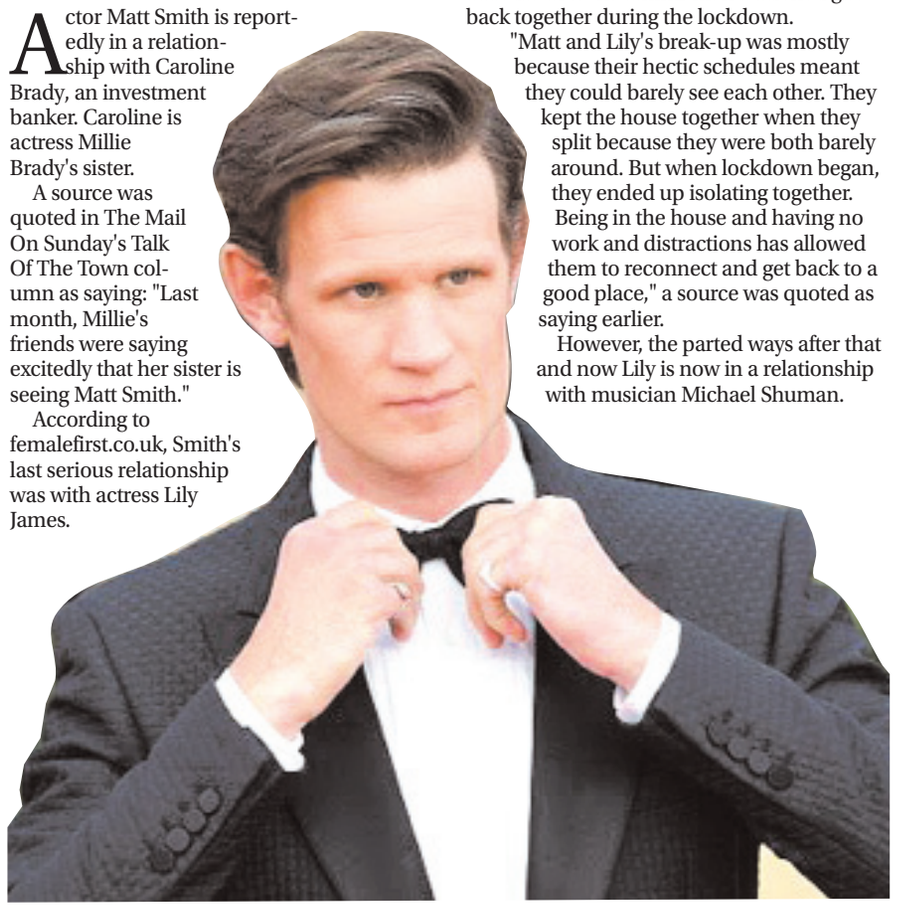
A source was quoted in The Mail On Sunday's Talk Of The Town column as saying: "Last month, Millie's friends were saying excitedly that her sister is seeing Matt Smith."

According to femalefirst.co.uk, Smith's last serious relationship was with actress Lily James.

According to sources, the two had split up because of work commitments but had got back together during the lockdown.

"Matt and Lily's break-up was mostly because their hectic schedules meant they could barely see each other. They kept the house together when they split because they were both barely around. But when lockdown began, they ended up isolating together. Being in the house and having no work and distractions has allowed them to reconnect and get back to a good place," a source was quoted as saying earlier.

However, the parted ways after that and now Lily is now in a relationship with musician Michael Shuman.



Michael Caine: Never knew there was such a thing as drama school

London | Agencies

Veteran actor Michael Caine says he did not know anything about actors or that drama schools even existed when he was young, and adds that he is proud of being from the working class.

"I'm very proud of being from the working class. We didn't have money when we were growing up, but we had plenty of love," the 88-year-old actor said.

"I joined an amateur dramatic society but I never went to drama school because, in the milieu I come from, not only did we not know anything about actors, we never even knew there was such a thing as drama school," he recalled.

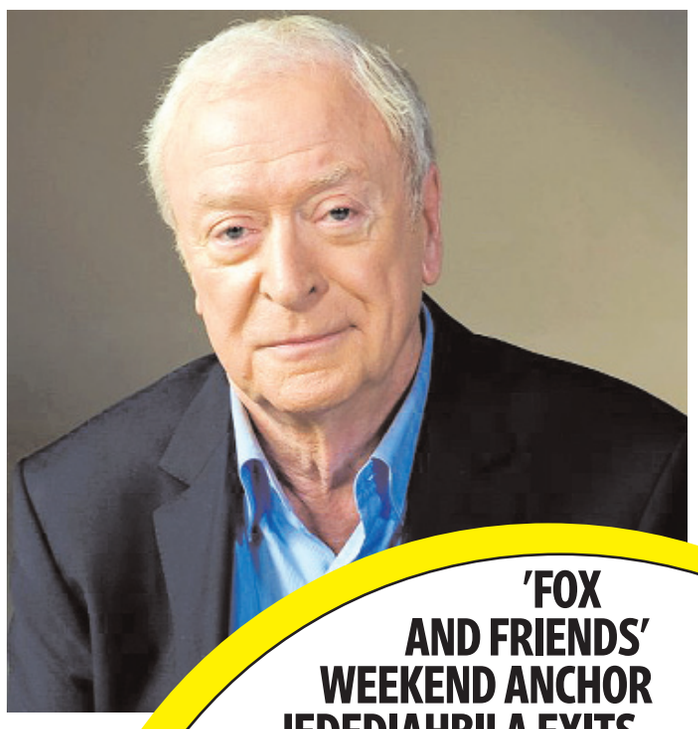
Caine advises youngsters against signing up for drama school because he believes budding stars can get a better education in acting from simply watching others, reports femalefirst.co.uk.

"Kids today say to me, 'Should I go to drama school?' And I say, 'No, you'll learn more by sitting in the subway and watching people opposite you than you'll ever learn at school'," he said.

The actor also feels "very proud" of being in 1960s England when he played a part in "destroying the snobbery of the class system".

He told Candis magazine: "The sixties in England was all about class. It wasn't to do with rock and roll, or drugs, or everybody screwing around. It was when the working class in England told the rest of the country, 'We don't care about what class, colour, or religion anyone is. Just because you're Lord Ponsonby of the manor, that doesn't mean we want to come to your home -- we'll have such a good time that you will want to get out of your home and come to ours."

"And we made it stick, too. We destroyed the snobbery of the class system. I'm very proud of that,"Caine recalled.



'FOX AND FRIENDS' WEEKEND ANCHOR JEDEDIAHBILA EXITS CHANNEL

Los Angeles | Agencies

On May 10, Amazon Prime Video in partnership with Film at Lincoln Center and the National Center for Civil and Human Rights hosted a private virtual event in support of the streamer's new series The Underground Railroad. It featured Oscar winner Barry Jenkins and his star ThusoMbedu in a conversation moderated by best-selling author Ta-Nehisi Coates, who ended the 60-minute chat with niceties that typically close such an event. Fox and Friends weekend anchor JedediahBila is leaving Fox News Channel. "We have mutually and amicably parted ways with JedediahBila and wish her all the best," a Fox News spokesperson said in a statement. "The new co-host of Fox & Friends Weekend will be named soon." "Thank you to the Fox News reporters, anchors, contributors, and producers who have been an absolute pleasure to work with these last few years," Bila said in a statement. "To the viewers who supported me throughout my journey there - I'm deeply grateful for you and hopeful you'll join me on my next adventure. I'm really excited for what's to come."

Bila, who was named co-anchor of the program in 2019 after having served as a contributor to the cable news channel. She had previously served as a panelist on ABC's The View.

Bila was also a rare conservative critic of former President Donald Trump at Fox. Last April she defended her colleague, Fox News Sunday anchor Chris Wallace, after Trump attacked him on Twitter. And after the 2020 election, she said it was incumbent on Trump to publicly accept that he lost, and move on.

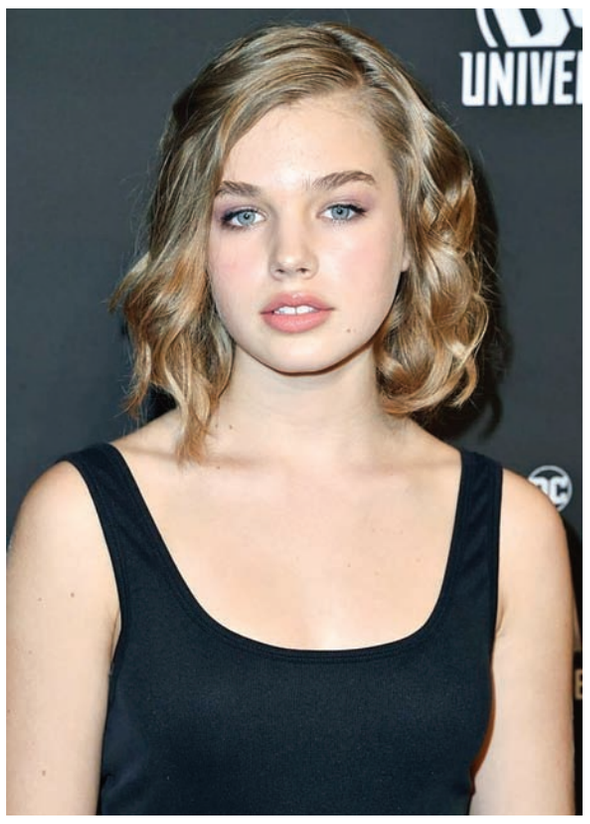
'Titans' Star Teagan Croft to Lead Family Film 'True Spirit' at Netflix

Los Angeles | Agencies

Teagan Croft, who is best known for her role on HBO Max's DC Entertainment series Titans, has been tapped to star in family film True Spirit for Netflix. Based on Jessica Watson's memoir of the same name, True Spirit follows the Australian sailor who in 2010, at just 16-years-old, became the youngest person to sail solo, non-stop, and unassisted around the world, surviving seven knock-downs while at sea for 210 days. Sarah Spillane is set to direct from a script she wrote with Cathy Randall and revisions by Rebecca Banner. Debra Martin Chase will produce under Martin Chase Productions, along with Susan Cartsonis for Resonate Entertainment, and Andrew Fraser for Sunstar Entertainment. Shahen Mekertichian, Sarah Spillane, Brent Emery, and Suzanne Farwell will executive produce.

The film will be shot on location in Queensland and Sydney, Australia later this year, with Watson consulting on the project.

Croft is repped by UTA, Circle of Confusion, and Australia's Meissner Management. Banner is repped by Kaplan Perrone and Katz Golden.



ABSOLUTE PIC OF THE DAY

Lottie Moss

Zack Snyder, Netflix Spent Millions Adding TigNotaro to 'Army of the Dead'

Los Angeles | Agencies

Zack and Deborah Snyder say that it cost millions of dollars to scrub Chris D'Elia from Army of the Dead and add TigNotaro to the ensemble.

In an interview with Vanity Fair published Friday, the husband-wife movie-making duo said it was a "fairly easy" choice to remove the scandal-plagued D'Elia from their zombie heist film and do reshoots with Notaro. But it was a costly decision.

"It was an expensive one, that's for sure," said producer Deborah Snyder. Director Zack Snyder put the figure at "a few million." Added Deborah Snyder, "I will say, Netflix did the right thing. They put their money where their mouth is."

Last summer, D'Elia was accused by multiple women of sexually harassing underage girls. In February, the comic-actor posted a video on his YouTube page, saying "I do have a problem," but maintained he did nothing illegal. D'Elia was dropped by CAA amid the scandal.

EDITOR'S SPECS

For oceans

Accompanying this new web tool is a handbook containing valuable guidance on how to navigate the database, as well as match and pitch projects to the most suitable funders.Both the website and handbook were designed specifically to support the work of the Commonwealth Blue Charter, a historic commitment made in 2018 by all 54 Commonwealth member nations to work actively together to solve ocean challenges.Welcoming the initiative, Commonwealth Secretary-General Patricia Scotland said: "Despite the central role of the ocean in our natural ecosystems, climate systems, economies and cultures, funding for ocean conservation is equivalent to less than one percent of global philanthropy, and an even smaller fraction of foreign aid."The Commonwealth Blue Charter Ocean Funders Database represents a major step forward for ocean action in the Commonwealth, which aims to support member countries to navigate the funding that is currently available internationally, understand the goals, criteria, and application processes for different prospective funders, and develop successful multilateral partnerships for greater ocean action."Under the Commonwealth Blue Charter, countries collaborate through voluntary 'action groups' on 10 key ocean issues: marine plastic pollution, coral reef protection, mangrove restoration, climate change, ocean acidification, ocean observation, marine protected areas, sustainable aquaculture, sustainable coastal fisheries and the sustainable blue economy.Over the past year, the 10 action groups have been setting out priorities and shared action plans, taking into account regional and resource needs.The new funding database will support them in finding resources and partners to implement joint projects across these action areas, such as developing legal frameworks for progressive ocean policies, conducting sought-after capacity building programmes and training courses, and supporting innovation.Since the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, the action groups have ramped up efforts to network and share solutions, through research, virtual dialogues and training, with the support of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

THE COMMONWEALTH SECRETARIAT HAS LAUNCHED AN ONLINE DATABASE TO HELP MEMBER COUNTRIES BE AWARE OF AND ACCESS MORE THAN $170 MILLION OF INTERNATIONAL FUNDING AVAILABLE FOR OCEAN-RELATED PROJECTS.

PEOPLE SHOULD NOT LET THE COUNTRY DOWN

D.C. PATHAK

The deadly second wave of Covid-19 has provoked an intense public debate and anger on the reasons why it was allowed to hit us at all and the points raised have varied from delayed preparatory moves to failures of response from an overrun healthcare system that resulted in casualties owing to shortages of beds, oxygen and medicines at the hospitals.

What matters more, however, is that once the crisis broke out the government at the Centre did speedily source the vital equipment including oxygen and its bureaucratic machinery, not used to micromanagement, also took on the national challenge of logistics and delivery to the people on the ground -- of whatever was available.

The pandemic overwhelmed all systems and inevitably a large number of tragic deaths occurring across the country could become a part of the collective historical memory -- but with the remembrance also of the enormous work done by our medical fraternity for saving lives despite shortages of supplies and equipment. The crisis has produced a political fallout and the opposition has seized the opportunity of pressing forth with its criticism of the Modi government in regard to the long-term preparations required for meeting the health hazard. It is the politics of perceptions that is in full play now but all of that could change in the future depending on the way events unfold themselves and the success the present regime achieved in planning for all contingencies in the times ahead. In the entire narrative of how the government of the day performed in helping the people, the vital question of how the public responded to this live threat to everybody's life should also be looked at as there are socio-cultural learnings on how a big nation should cope up with a human crisis of this magnitude.

There is no denying the fact that even in the 'unlock' phases Prime Minister Modi had constantly emphasised the need for Covid precautions to be followed strictly. Many people in India regrettably did not come out at their best as far as their own conscious or innocent contribution to the spread of the pandemic was concerned. Social festivities like weddings and get-togethers continued particularly in the North in utter disregard of the Covid restrictions. There could be a variety of reasons why this happened. Herd mentality, so typical of the public here, came into play in adding to the defiance of the standardisedCovid-appropriate behaviour.

Evidently, there was also a widespread absence of scientific temper that would be a major reason why people failed to grasp the prime importance of the elementary preventive measures of mask, safe distancing and hand sanitisation. This was seen even in the segments of population that could afford to buy quality masks and sanitisers. Migrations of the economically weak on account of lock downs -- that had not guaranteed their wages even for a temporary period -- proved to be a debilitating factor. The pull of faith as a mitigator of threat to health, and even of danger to life, was also there in the context of an event like Kumbh. The pandemic demanded voluntary postponement of mass agitations, a political activity in normal times, in the interest of the public at large.

An excessive reliance on the powers that be for delivery, big or small, in a public crisis, could be the outcome of a system where the voter accepted the promise that everything possible under the sun would be done by the victorious candidate or party. This would, in an emergency, focus the public wrath entirely on the government and completely disregard the importance of the attitude of 'self-help' among the people in overcoming a public crisis. On the whole, a higher degree of public awareness would have reduced the gravity of incidence of the second wave and checked its cumulative spread. As the government proceeds at a rapid pace to make up for deficiencies and arrange for universal vaccination the role of the people in countering the pandemic is still going to be extremely important in the months to come.

A few illustrations of the typical behaviour of people in the midst of the Corona threat would be worth mentioning. Even the educated lot were seen wearing a regulatory mask when they came out but not covering the nose. It is like displaying the mask but without an understanding of the crucial point about its utility -- covering the mouth and nose was for 'the user's own safety' against some other potential carrier around. It does not matter that the users might themselves be healthy. Further, it could even be in the psyche of a well-to-do person to put himself above the 'compliant' common man and not accept an 'inconvenience'. The logic of wearing a mask while facing a courier or a repairman is not understood well enough and there is an attitude of negligence towards anybody called for domestic assistance in the matter of checking out for any exposure elsewhere. There have been numerous cases of serious and even fatal consequences of exposure to an asymptomatic infected person who was a regular visitor to the victim's house. The point is about lack of awareness in a situation where common sense itself would have suggested the dos and don'ts of Covid precautions. Now that even children are said to be in the zone of vulnerability, the adults across the society have to once again redefine their responsibilities.

What is truly deplorable is that the health emergency exposed the socio-cultural degradation of many in Indian society, a society that prided itself and genuinely so for its inheritance of moral and spiritual legacies. This has produced a spectacle of innumerable individuals and philanthropic bodies coming forth to help those in distress on the one hand and a significant number of depraved individuals making huge monetary gains, on the other, by selling medical equipment and medical supplies in the black -- in full knowledge of the threat to life that this caused. Deterrent action against such culprits, wherever possible, has to be taken to build confidence of the citizens in governance.

The crisis has unravelled the poor state of management that various establishments deemed to be autonomous in their working, had suffered over the years -- whether it was the case of a hospital, a university or a civil supplies centre of the government. Misconduct of a ward boy with a Covid patient going unpunished has become the symbol of how this country's systems had been allowed to run without supervision. A lesson from this pandemic is that the internal governance of the country across all segments and states needed to be upgraded to a point where organisations in public or private sector would be audited for performance in terms of their compatibility with the national interests and public good.There are many more lessons to be drawn from the pandemic India is passing through, creating the 'fear of the unknown' in every citizen here. The experience calls for a greater public education on governance and policy making -- subject, of course, to the requirement of confidentiality on grounds of national security. A daily national bulletin on the important aspects of the pandemic would help to keep the people attuned to their responsibilities and counter any serious attempts at spreading misinformation. Robust functioning of Parliamentary Committees has to be ensured, accountability for failure of implementation of the given mandate on the head of an enterprise or a department of the government has to be fixed and punishment meted out to functionaries in leadership positions who misused the authority of the state for personal benefit.

The Covid crisis showed up flaws in the implementation process -- there was immediate public appreciation of the government functionaries who performed well -- and it is necessary, therefore, to determine whether some lives could be saved through competent and prompt handling by the personnel concerned. The challenge of riding a crisis tests decision-making and the pandemic would have revealed how outstanding performers stood in contrast to the incompetent. The Intelligence machinery of the Centre has once again proved its sterling worth by acting as the eyes and ears of the government to give an objective picture of the impact of the pandemic -- it should be strengthened further in the interest of the nation and democratic governance.

Perhaps the most meaningful lesson in handling a national emergency that affected the entire population is that the process should be taken down to the level of districts and the DM-SP duo made the nodal point of 'survey' and 'implementation'. Some of the districts of India are of the size of a small country and they offer a decentralised autonomous centre of governance closest to the people that could represent both the Centre as well as the state government. Shortages of hospital beds, oxygen and critical care medicine stocks in the district could be ascertained by the DM within hours and communicated to the authorities above for urgent attention and despatch of life-saving equipment on prioritisation. This practice should be invoked even now as the crisis is likely to prove to be a long-term challenge -- the virus is predictably spreading towards rural India. This strategy will also be of great value in helping to build the medical infrastructure across the country that had fallen so short of the national requirement -- and which was undoubtedly the biggest reason why India lost so many lives in this pandemic. It is a matter of great satisfaction that Prime Minister Modi himself reached out to the district magistrates of affected districts and encouraged them to take charge of the situation and boldly plan out the strategy of meeting the challenge of the Corona crisis on a long-term basis.

(The writer is a former Director of Intelligence Bureau)

It's time BJP rethinks Andhra strategy

NARENDRA PUPPALA

Much on the lines of the Dubbaka assembly bypoll in neighbouring Telangana, where the BJP scored an upset victory and went on to rattle the ruling TRS party in the Hyderabad civic polls by emerging as the second largest party, the Tirupati Lok Sabha bypoll in April was expected to be the turning point for the saffron party's fortunes in the coastal state of Andhra Pradesh.However, the results that emerged on counting day, May 2, were more like a thunderbolt for the BJP. Its candidate, former Karnataka chief secretary K. Ratnaprabha, came in a distant third polling around 57,000 votes, far behind the TDP candidate Panabaka Lakshmi's 3.54 lakh votes. In comparison, the victorious YSRCP candidate Gurumoorthy polled around 6.26 lakh votes.Post-bifurcation in 2014, the residuary state of Andhra Pradesh remains an enigma for the BJP which brought in Sunil Deodhar who scripted the party's stunning and historic poll victory in Tripura, to steer the campaign for Andhra Pradesh. The mission was simple and clear -- to win Andhra in the 2024 assembly polls.For the BJP behemoth that has gradually stamped its electoral imprint across the length and breadth of the country, the South, with the exception of Karnataka and Pondicherry, remains largely unconquered territory. Tamil Nadu and Kerala continue to resist the BJP's pan-Indian allure, for obvious reasons.

It is only in the two Telugu states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana that the BJP smelt potential for the near future -- read 2024. Telangana, with its traditionally strong RSS presence, readily accepted the saffron party, and it is where it has emerged as the only opposition party worth its name. However, it's been a different story in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh.

The BJP did get its shot at power in the residuary state of Andhra Pradesh following the 2014 assembly elections. The combined forces of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), the star power of filmstar-politician Pawan Kalyan, and the BJP managed to defeat YS Jagan Mohan Reddy's YSRCP. However, disagreements -- ostensibly over granting special category status to Andhra Pradesh following bifurcation but really more to do with the BJP's growing ambitions to carve out a solitary path to power in the state -- drove the allies inexorably apart. Fighting the ensuing polls in 2019 seperately, the three erstwhile allies were routed comprehensively at the hustings. Compared to 2014, when it won four Assembly and two Parliament seats, the BJP drew a blank in 2019. Ever since, the BJP had been targeting the ruling YSRCP as well as the opposition TDP on a range of issues.That Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy is a Christian, missionary and conversion activities are on the rise, had come in handy for the BJP. Incidentally, the last year also saw a number of incidents such as thefts, desecration, and temple mishaps in the state, prominent among them being the burning of the temple chariot at Antarvedi. The BJP never lost an opportunity to target the government on these issues while alluding to the Chief Minister's religious background.It was at this juncture that the Tirupati Lok Sabha bypoll, necessitated by the death of YSRCP's Balli Durga Prasad, offered a litmus test for the opposition camps to test their relative strengths. It was a no-holds barred poll campaign that saw the BJP bring out the armour, in addition to leaning on the starpower of Pawan Kalyan. But it all came to nought. The results are basically a repeat of the trends seen in the 2019 assembly polls. The results show that divided, the opposition stands no choice against the might of a young Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, who has consolidated his grip on the minorities and backward classes, apart from the forward Reddys.

The writing on the wall is now doubly clear after the Tirupati bypoll. With less than one per cent of the popular vote in its kitty, the BJP currently lacks the ground presence and the infrastructure to make its presence felt on the electoral landscape of Andhra Pradesh. Secondly, traditional strategies such as polarisation that helped in states such as Assam and Tripura won't work here. The party needs to customise its approach more like it does in regions such as the Northeast, or even perhaps Karnataka, where it does not overtly rattle the minority communities. More importantly, it must seriously work on retrieving the credibility it lost by reneging on granting special category status to Andhra Pradesh -- something that all concerned parties had agreed upon on the hallowed floors of Parliament.Going forward, the BJP needs a strong ally, much like the Janata Dal(U) in Bihar, to help it gain traction at the hustings. Under the circumstances, the only potential ally on the horizon remains the TDP. For the TDP as well, an alliance with the BJP could make the difference between regaining political power or fading away to oblivion. With three years to go before the state goes to the polls, there's ample time for waving olive branches, building bridges and sewing up a winning alliance which includes Pawan Kalyan and his Jana Sena.It's definitely time for the BJP to return to the drawing board, if gaining Andhra Pradesh in 2024 is the objective.

IN DEFENSE OF ISRAEL

Dr Amjad Ayub Mirza

Israel has "deep pockets" and "they control media", Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said during an interview on CNN. He vomited out these vile accusations while comfortably forgetting the fact that in his own country a significant number of senior journalists have been executed, while others including TV anchors and presenters are allegedly on the payroll of the Inter Services Public Relations, media and public relations wing of the Pakistan Armed Forces, and the ISI, the hateful secret service of the Pakistan military.Why is he blinded to the fact the the Azad Kashmir Press Foundation controls the press in the Pakistan-occupied-Jammu and Kashmir (POJK) and media is under constant surveillance in Pakistan occupied Gilgit-Baltistan?

Qureshi continued with his anti-Semitic remarks accusing Israel of not engaging, not negotiating, and, of genocide, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing. Well, let us remind him that it is his government that refuses to engage with the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), the Baloch freedom fighters and the Sindhi separatists. Let us also bring to his attention the fact that Pakistan has been occupying large chunks of Jammu and Kashmir since October 1947 and that of Gilgit-Baltistan since 1948. And what does he have to say about the ethnic cleansing of thousands of Hindus and Sikhs not only by massacring them in POJK in 1947 but also by conducting systematic forced conversation of the religious minorities into Islam to this day.

To launch a verbal attack on the only democracy in the Middle East, without uttering a word against terrorist Hamas, is in itself anti-Semitism, is it not? It is not only Pakistani establishment that runs its state on a diet of anti-Semitism and Hindu hate mongering, Turkey and Malaysia, too, never let go of an occasion to fool their populations by anti-Semitic speeches. However, they definitely do not consider it wrong to fill their own pocketswith Jewish money through trade with Israel.

Trade Between Turkey, Malaysia and Iran has always continued with discreet. Dozens of Israeli companies were allowed to work in Iran and in 2011, "The business relations (were) conducted through companies active in Turkey, Jordan and Dubai". Iranian officials secretly travel to Israel to seal deals to sell the Israelis pistachio, cashew nuts and mainly marble". Eran Siv, chairman of the Association of Renovation Contractors in Israel has himself admitted that marble "is mined on Iran's mountains and brought to Israel through Turkey". Not only that, Iran also did not hesitate to benefit from Israeli technology when in November 2000, they invited an Israeli company, for renovations of Tehran's sewage pipes! But Iran tells its population that Israel is their enemy number one, and that the Ayatollahs are determined to destroy the Jew state.

Malaysia is no different. This 'Muslim' country exported $289 worth of good to Israel in 2019. in 2013 it was reported that discreet trade between Malaysia and Israel was booming and the total trade volume has reached a whopping $1.5 billion almost double from 2012.

Turkey has seemingly been very angry at Israel recently and has publicly called upon the Muslim nations to support Hamas. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's politics revolves around the idea that he is some kind of an avatar of the by-gone Ottoman empire. His rhetoric against Israel and anti-Semitic comments are no secret. Yet, total trade volume between Turkey and Israel stood at $1.4 billion when Erdogan came to power back in August 2014. Today, it has reached $6.5 billion!

Like India, Israel has never attacked any of her neighbouring country. But it has always been her neighbours who have been hatching conspiracies and plotting against the only democracy in their region.The so called Islamic countries have used all sorts of undemocratic tactics and political manipulations to remain in power in their home countries. These tactics include to use heredity dynastic rule as a divine justification or as a collective of political clique of powerful usurpers. By striving to destroy Israel these Muslim ruling classes actually aim to destroy a living model of democracy that now exits in the front garden of middle eastern polity and that has taken root and become an organic symbol against dictatorships. And, it is in this light that Qureshi's anti-Semitic language should be seen.

(Amjad Ayub Mirza is an author and a Human Rights activist from Mirpur in POJK. He lives in exile in the UK. All views expressed are personal.)

PAK FM CALLS FOR UN'S DECISIVE ROLE IN RESOLVING KASHMIR DISPUTE

■ "Pakistan desires normal relations with India, however, the onus is on India to create an atmosphere to enable meaningful engagement," the Minister said during his interaction with the Guterres in New York.

Islamabad | Agencies

Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi has called on UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to take decisive measures and ensure implementation of the UN Charter and the UN Security Council Resolutions on Jammu and Kashmir and play a key role in resolving the longstanding dispute.

"Pakistan desires normal relations with India, however, the onus is on India to create an atmosphere to enable meaningful engagement," the Minister said during his interaction with the Guterres in New York.

Qureshi also renewed his invitation to India for a dialogue and said that the only solution to the Kashmir dispute is through talks, based on the aspirations of the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

"India is running away from table talks with Pakistan on Kashmir," he said.Qureshi briefed Guterres about what he called serious human rights violations in the "Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir", including incarceration of political leaders and extra-judicial killings.

The Foreign Minister also brushed aside the criticism on Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, by the opposition political parties, for selling of the Kashmir cause, stating that the premier can never compromise on the Kashmir cause as he is the "Ambassador of the Kashmir cause and is the voice of the people of Kashmiris to the world."

"Let this be clear, Pakistan's position on the issue of Kashmir is very clear. There can be no talks until India reverses its decision of August 5, 2019," he insisted.

Talking about his visit to New York for the Palestinian cause, Qureshi said that his visit to attend the UNGA session on Palestine was "an expression of Pakistan's support for the legitimate case of the Palestinian people for their right to self-determination".

Qureshi called for a collective effort to end the human tragedy in Palestine, aimed at averting threats to regional peace.

He demanded the UN to constitute an "International Protection Force" to ensure safety and security of the Palestinian people.

"If the world body cannot do it, a coalition of willing can be formed for the purpose."

Iranian Parliament calls to limit cooperation with IAEA

■ Under an interim agreement reached between Tehran and the IAEA at the end of February, full monitoring of Iran's nuclear facilities would only start when the 2015 Vienna nuclear deal was implemented, and US sanctions lifted.

Tehran | Agencies

The Iranian Parliament on Sunday called to limit cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), even though a resolution is in sight regarding talks with the US about ending sanctions linked to Tehran's nuclear programme.

"The IAEA had three months to fulfil its obligations, it did not do so and the deadline expired yesterday (Saturday)," Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf said on Sunday.

Accordingly, the UN agency should no longer have access to pictures of and information from Iran's nuclear facilities, dpa news agency quoted Ghalibaf as saying.

IAEA chief Rafael Grossi said he would make a statement later on Sunday.

Under an interim agreement reached between Tehran and the IAEA at the end of February, full monitoring of Iran's nuclear facilities would only start when the 2015 Vienna nuclear deal was implemented, and US sanctions lifted.

Iran would continue to allow the agency to monitor, but not within the framework of the so-called IAEA Additional Protocol and, accordingly, only in a very limited way.Ghalibaf's statements are seen by observers as part of an internal power struggle that has been going on for months ahead of the presidential election on June 18.he hardliners believe that an international agreement in the nuclear dispute before the election could harm their chances of victory.

Access relaxed to Temple Mount as Gaza ceasefire holds

Gaza | Agencies

The Temple Mount in Jerusalem's Old City, referred to by Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary, reopened for Jewish visitors on Sunday, days after a ceasefire came into force between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza.

Violence between Palestinians and Israeli security forces at site, which is sacred for both Muslims and Jews, contributed to increasing tensions before the outbreak of the 11-day military conflict in and around Gaza, reports dpa news agency.

The unrest earlier in May was triggered by Palestinian anger over Israeli police blockades in the Old City during the fasting month of Ramadan.

The confrontations meant that for Ramadan, no Jewish visitors were allowed in to the Temple Mount until access was restored on Sunday.In another sign of confidence that the ceasefire between Israel and the militant Hamas in Gaza will continue to hold, government offices in Gaza were set to resume their work on Sunday, a spokesman for the local government said.

Local government activities had ceased when Israeli airstrikes began on May 10 in response to rockets fired at Jerusalem.

In Gaza, Islamist Hamas controls the administration.

The airstrikes targeted Hamas military infrastructure and also caused extensive destruction to residential and high-rise buildings, health facilities and other public buildings, bringing the daily life of the more than two million inhabitants of the impoverished coastal strip to a standstill.

A ceasefire has been in place since May 21, ending 11 days of Israeli air raids and Palestinian rocket fire that left more than 240 people dead in Gaza, including 66 minors, and claimed 12 lives in Israel.Tensions in Jerusalem have remained high, however.

Israeli police arrested nine people on Saturday, according to a report.

Five Palestinian men were taken into custody in their homes in East Jerusalem and the Old City, and four other Palestinians near the al-Aqsa Mosque, according to the Palestinian news agency Wafa, citing witnesses.

The report said security forces had already arrested dozens of Palestinians on May 21.

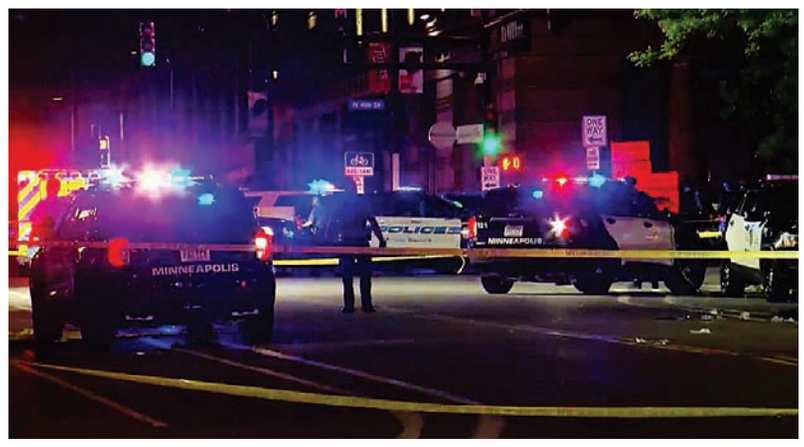
AUSTRALIAN BORDER FORCE ACCUSED OF RACISM OVER TRAVEL EXEMPTIONS

Canberra: The Australian Border Force (ABF) has been accused of racism over travel exemptions enforced after the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. ccording to government data released on Saturday, the ABF was significantly more likely to allow people to come to Australia from the US and the UK between August 2020 and March 2021, reports Xinhua news agency.Anyone trying to enter Australia who is not a citizen or resident of Australia amid the pandemic has had to apply for an ABF exemption to do so.

More than 23 per cent of applicants from the UK and one fifth of those from the US were granted exemptions to travel to Australia despite the pandemic raging in those countries.

2 dead, 8 injured in US city shooting

■ "Of the 10 victims shot, preliminary information shows all are adults. Five are males and five are females. The two deceased are males. One male is in critical condition and the remaining seven have non-life-threatening injuries," the MPD said in a statement.



Washington | Agencies

Two people were killed and eight others injured in a shooting incident that took place in the US city of Minneapolis in Minnesota state, police said.

The Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) said officers responded to "an exceptionally chaotic scene" at 1.59 a.m. on Saturday at a bar in the city centre, reports Xinhua news agency.

Preliminary investigation revealed two people both pulled out guns and began shooting at each other as they got into a verbal confrontation.

"Of the 10 victims shot, preliminary information shows all are adults. Five are males and five are females. The two deceased are males. One male is in critical condition and the remaining seven have non-life-threatening injuries," the MPD said in a statement.

The incident took place along the 300 block of North 1st Avenue.

The names of the victims and suspects have not been publicly released.

"These brazen senseless acts of gun violence must stop. The perpetrators of these crimes should never find refuge or anonymity in our communities," Minneapolis Police Chief MedariaArradondo said in a statement on Saturday evening as an investigation into the incident was still ongoing and additional law enforcement agencies were called to assist in the process.

The violence, which came just days before the one-year anniversary of the killing of George Floyd under police custody, followed other recent shootings in the city, including the death of a six-year-old girl earlier this week.

Pak's largest Chinese built n-power plant to start operating

Islamabad | Agencies

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan has inaugurated the largest Chinese-built nuclear power plant, as the country tried to stretch itself away from dependency of fossil fuels for its energy needs.

The Karachi Nuclear Power Plant Unit-2 (K-2), established with the cooperation between Pakistan and China, is a coal-fired power production unit, which would be the country's sixth nuclear power plant and is expected to bring dramatic increase the nuclear energy capacity.

Prime Minister Khan, who virtually inaugurated the K-2 nuclear power plant on Friday, said the unit would generate at least 1,100 MW of clear energy.

"This is important for us because Pakistan is among the top 10 countries at risk due to climate change," he said.

Unfortunately, we have not focused on producing energy from water and despite the country having potential to do so," the premier said lamenting the previous governments for ignoring the serious issue of the country's energy needs.

Pakistan has been struggling with fulfilling its rising energy needs, which have triggered due to energy shortage and the rising power prices, putting immense pressure on the people, who question the country's policies.

The Prime Minister said that the country would not pursue any more power based on coal, as their construction would come with an environmental cost.

However, with the rising energy shortage, large-scale construction of new power plants, most of which are coal-fired, have boosted the country's energy capacity.

The China National Nuclear Cooperation (CNNC) has designed the K-2 nuclear power plant.

Its construction started in 2015 and is planned to begin operation by the year 2022.

"The project will help to train manpower and facilitate technology transfer from China. 40,000 experts visited the country over an extended period of time. This is another area of cooperation with China," said Khan.

He added that Pakistan was fortunate to have strong ties with an emerging power like China, who he said has stood by Islamabad during difficult times.

"We are confident that China will stand with us during difficult times. It is fortunate for us that Pakistan has strong ties with an emerging power and a developed country such a China. "

The K-2 plant will be a major addition to facilitate the country's energy needs.

It has a 60-year life expectancy, extendable to 20 more years and is designed with higher plant availability and capacity factors, and extended refueling cycle.

4 IS MILITANTS KILLED IN IRAQ OPERATION

■ Despite repeated military operations in Diyala, IS remnants are still hiding in some rugged areas near the border with Iran and the vast areas extending from the western part of the province to the Hamreen mountain range in the north of the provincial capital Baquba, about 65 km northeast of Baghdad.

Baghdad | Agencies

Four Islamic State (IS) militants were killed during an airdrop operation in Iraq's eastern province of Diyala, a police source said.

Citing intelligence reports, the source told Xinhua news agency that a commando force carried out the airdrop operation on an IS hideout in the Himreen mountain range, destroying the hideout and killing the four militants, including a local leader.

Despite repeated military operations in Diyala, IS remnants are still hiding in some rugged areas near the border with Iran and the vast areas extending from the western part of the province to the Hamreen mountain range in the north of the provincial capital Baquba, about 65 km northeast of Baghdad.The security situation in Iraq has been improving since Iraqi security forces fully defeated the IS militants across the country late in 2017. However, deadly incidents still occur sporadically in the war-ravaged country as IS remnants have since retreated into urban areas or deserts and rugged areas, waging frequent guerilla attacks against security forces and civilians.

Lava reaches airport in DR Congo after volcanic eruption

■ Thousands of Goma residents have fled the city on foot to reach the border with Rwanda as the city with a population of nearly 2 million was illuminated with orange flames.

Kinshasa | Agencies

After an erupted of the Mount Nyiragongo volcano in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the lava flow reached the airport in the nearby Goma city on Sundaym prompting authorities to launch evacuation plans.

The evacuation plan for Goma has been activated, Xinhua news agency quoted government spokesman Patrick Muyaya as saying.

"The government is discussing urgent measures to be taken now," Muyaya tweeted.Thousands of Goma residents have fled the city on foot to reach the border with Rwanda as the city with a population of nearly 2 million was illuminated with orange flames.DRC President Felix Tshisekedi is returning from Europe to oversee the relief efforts and is closely monitoring the security and humanitarian situation in the country's eastern North Kivu province, his office said.

North Kivu Governor, Lt. Gen. NdimaKongba Constant, said in a televised address on Saturday that local civil defence forces started evacuating Goma residents following the eruption.The Nyiragongo volcano, located not far from the DR Congo's border with Rwanda, started to erupt on Saturday.According to the Goma-based volcanological monitoring office, the lava is heading towards the border with Rwanda.The city of Goma is home to two active volcanoes, Nyamulagira and Nyiragongo.

Origins of 470 asylum seekers to Germany remain undetermined

■ The "unclear" status is misleading, as most of these people are Kurds or Arabs, the latter predominantly Palestinians, who have demonstrably or "credibly resided in a state without possessing the nationality in question", a spokesperson said.

Berlin | Agencies

Data released on Sunday by Germany's refugee authorities revealed that they were unable to determine the origins of more than 470 asylum seekers last year.

That was out of a group of 4,535 who, according to the asylum statistics, had an "unclear" origin for the purposes of their asylum applications, dpa news agency quoted the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) as saying. owever, the "unclear" status is misleading, as most of these people are Kurds or Arabs, the latter predominantly Palestinians, who have demonstrably or "credibly resided in a state without possessing the nationality in question", a spokesperson said. In these cases, the security situation in the respective country, for example Syria, is the decisive factor for the asylum decision.

For example, Palestinians living as refugees in Syria can exercise almost all civil rights there.

As a rule, however, they do not receive Syrian citizenship. In total, 102,581 foreigners applied for asylum in Germany for the first time in 2020. Among them were 26,520 applications for protection involving children under the age of one born in Germany.

Oldest US race massacre survivor calls for justice

■ "I will never forget the violence of the white mob when we left our home. I still see Black men being shot, Black bodies lying in the street," said Viola Fletcher, aged 107 now, the oldest survivor of the massacre that occurred on Greenwood Avenue in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921.

Washington | Agencies

The oldest survivor of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre in the US and her two brothers have testified at a hearing of the ouse of Representatives recently and appealed to Congress for justice, according to the National Public Radio (NPR)."I will never forget the violence of the white mob when we left our home. I still see Black men being shot, Black bodies lying in the street," said Viola Fletcher, aged 107 now, the oldest survivor of the massacre that occurred on Greenwood Avenue in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921.

"I still smell smoke and see fire. I still see Black businesses being burned. I still hear airplanes flying overhead. I hear the screams," Xinhua news agency quoted Fletcher as saying by NPR on Wednesday when she testified before a House Judiciary Subcommittee hearing, which was also attended by her two younger brothers.

"I am 107 years old and I have never seen justice. I pray that one day I will," she told the lawmakers.Greenwood was destroyed by the attack that was launched on May 31, 1921 and the two-day massacre left hundreds of Black people dead, according to NPR.

INDIA COULD BEGIN PRACTICE AFTER 3-DAY HARD QUARANTINE IN ENGLAND

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Indian cricket team touring England may be asked to undergo only a three-day hard quarantine before being allowed to practice in a bio-secure environment during isolation ahead of the World Test Championship (WTC) final in Southampton.

The roadmap could be similar to what New Zealand is following on arrival in England for their Test tour that comprises a two-Test series against host from June 2 as well as the WTC final against India from June 18. Apart from the WTC final, India play five Test matches against England in August-September.

India depart from Mumbai on June 2 and will undergo, on arrival in England, a 10-day isolation period, details of which are not yet clear since there has been no official intimation from the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI).

However, it is understood that discussions between BCCI and England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) have been going on and since most India players are already in bio-secure bubble in Mumbai with others joining over the next couple of days, the quarantine wouldn't be a hard one for all 10 days despite India being in the red list of UK government due to rising number of Covid-19 cases.

New Zealand were asked to undergo a mandatory three-day hard quarantine before being allowed to practice in groups of six. They had arrived on Monday and Tuesday in batches.

"The first three days will be spent in hotel room isolation, before mini-training groups of six can be established from days 4-6, pending negative covid results," New Zealand Cricket had said on arrival.

While New Zealand, who are camping in Southampton now, will move to London at the end of this month for the Test series against England, India will move in from June 2.

Atletico Madrid smashed Real Madrid to La Liga title

Barcelona | Agencies

Luis Suarez fired Atletico Madrid to a 2-1 win at Real Valladolid to earn his team La Liga for the first time in seven years late on Saturday, and for the 11th time in their history. Atletico needed to win on the last day of the season to guarantee they would finish ahead of city rivals Real Madrid, who also earned a 2-1 win against Villarreal.

Real Valladolid went ahead through Oscar Plano but goals from Angel Correa and Suarez, the team's top scorer with 21 in La Liga, ensured Diego Simeone's side earned the trophy, reports DPA.

Simeone had led Atletico to the title in 2014 and it has seemed for months like he was going to add another title this season, but in 2021 their lead on Real Madrid and Barcelona crumbled, and they won it by a fraction.

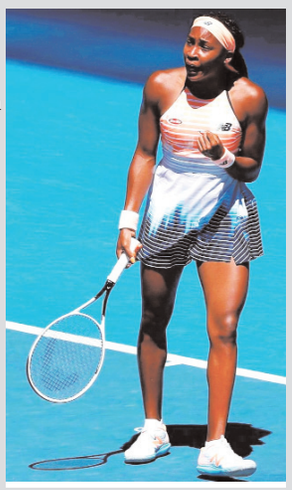
Atletico finished on 86 points, two ahead of Zinedine Zidane's Real Madrid on 84, after a topsy-turvy final day where both sides fell behind.

Eventually in the second half, Angel Correa broke the deadlock with a brilliantly-taken goal, beating two men and then poking the ball home from the edge of the box.

That turned the tide in their favour and Suarez ran through on goal to slot home the winner in the 68th minute.

The Uruguayan joined from Barcelona last summer, with the Catalans telling him he was no longer needed at Camp Nou.

COCO SWEEPS SINGLES AND DOUBLES TITLES IN PARMA



Parma (Italy): American tennis player Coco Gauff made a clean sweep of the titles at the Emilia-Romagna Open, as she paired with compatriot Caty McNally to win the doubles championship in Parma. The fourth-seeded team defeated the No. 2 seeds DarijaJurak (Croatia) and Andreja Klepac (Slovenia), 6-3, 6-2 to win the title late on Saturday.

Earlier on in the day, 17-year-old Coco won her second career WTA singles title in the tournament, dispatching China's Wang Qiang 6-1, 6-3. Coco, the world No. 30, needed an hour and 14 minutes to overcome the challenge from the 48th-ranked Chinese and add to her singles title collection, which she started as a lucky loser in Linz in 2019.

"I feel like all week I just was thinking about it," Coco said after winning the doubles title. "Especially when we got to the semi-finals, you're thinking about it, like, 'It would be pretty cool to win both the singles and doubles titles'. Happy that I was able to do that today," she added. At 17 years and 70 days old, Coco is the youngest player to sweep the singles and doubles titles at an event since Russia's Maria Sharapova won both titles at 2004 Birmingham, at 17 years, 55 days old. Sharapova completed the sweep 92 days after Gauff was born. Coco and Caty improved to 3-0 in doubles titles as a team, adding to their 2019 titles in Washington D.C. and Luxembourg. Caty also has a fourth doubles title, which she won with Hailey Baptiste earlier this season at the MUSC Health Women's Open in Charleston.

MAX VERSTAPPEN WINS MONACO GP

Monte Carlo: Max Verstappen of Red Bull won the Formula One Monaco Grand Prix and took the championship lead from Mercedes's Lewis Hamilton, who finished seventh despite recording the fastest lap of the race. Verstappen was on pole position after pole setter Charles Leclerc of Ferrari didn't start the race due to a last-minute issue with the left driveshaft, which could not be fixed in time. The Dutchman then held off Mercedes's ValtteriBottas at the start to hold the lead, which was crucial for the final result as overtaking is almost impossible in Monaco. Verstappen coasted to the finish line after Bottas was forced to retire due to a disastrous pitstop where his tyres didn't come off. Ferrari at least celebrated a first podium this season with Carlos Sainz in second, followed by McLaren's Lando Norris, who secured his second podium in 2021. Hamilton had his worst result since the Italian Grand Prix last year, when he was also seventh.

Dubai results won't have any impact in Doha: Indian football team

Doha | Agencies

Indian football team goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu said on Sunday that the results of the international friendlies in Dubai in March will not have an impact on the team's campaign in the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and AFC Asian Cup China 2023 Qualifiers, scheduled from June 3 onwards.

Following their return to action after a long Covid-19 break, India were held to a 1-1 draw by Oman before being thrashed 0-6 by the UAE in the friendlies.

"The less we think about it, the better. It's past. But it's significant to remember what happened as it drives us to understand the part we need to work upon. We have three clean slates in front of us. It's up to us as to what we need to write upon them," said Sandhu, referring to the three upcoming games against Qatar (June 3), Bangladesh (June 7) and Afghanistan (June 15) in Doha.

Defender PritamKotal said the "perspectives" are entirely different from one another.

"The perspective of Dubai and Doha are entirely different. In Dubai, we played two different teams in the two matches. That was our return to international football after almost 16 months. The two matches enabled us to slap all the negatives. June will surely be better," said Kotal, ahead of the team's training session at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha on Sunday.

India striker Manvir Singh said the "mixed bag in Dubai" will help the team in its Doha campaign.

"Friendly matches always present a chance to set an aim to improve yourself. Dubai was different, Doha will be entirely different. But yeah, Dubai helped us a lot in many aspects. In that sense, the mixed bag in Dubai has been extremely helpful," he said.

Rashid to play for Lahore Qalandars in PSL and Sussex in T20 Blast

Lahore | Agencies

Rashid Khan will rejoin the Lahore Qalandars for the remainder of the 2021 Pakistan Super League (PSL) after which he will join Sussex for the T20 Blast in England.

"I am excited to be back with PSL and Lahore Qalandars," Khan said in a Qalandars media release.

"I had a couple of good games with them earlier and the team went off to a good start, I am hopeful to help them continue with the momentum," he added.

The 2021 PSL was postponed in March due to several Covid-19 cases in the tournament's bio-bubble. The remaining 20 matches will be played in Abu Dhabi in June, though the dates and schedule are yet to be announced.

The T20 Blast, meanwhile, is scheduled to be held from June 9 to September 18. "Rashid will then be available for his third Vitality Blast stint with Sussex after completing any quarantine requirements," said Sussex in an official statement.

"I am really looking forward to joining up with my teammates at Sussex upon completion of the PSL. Whilst the travel restrictions in place have been a big factor in delaying my arrival, it is fortunate I am still able to play some high-level cricket before heading to Hove later in June. I can't wait to see everyone," said Rashid in a Sussex statement.

Postponed Asia Cup to be held in 2023

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Asia Cup 2021 will be held in 2023, the Asian Cricket Council (ACC) said on Sunday. The tournament, which was scheduled to be held in June this year in Sri Lanka, was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The ACC said that the tournament cannot be held at any earlier date due to the lack of a window for it during a packed cricket calendar. "It would therefore only be feasible for this edition of the tournament to be held in 2023 as there is already an Asia Cup in 2022. Dates for the same will be confirmed in due course," said the ACC in a statement.

The tournament had originally been scheduled to be hosted by Pakistan but India's unwillingness to travel to the country led to the event being shifted to Sri Lanka, where it was scheduled to be held in September 2020. However, the tournament was postponed for the first time due to the pandemic.

"The ACC Executive Board, in face of the risks and restrictions posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, had made the difficult decision to postpone the Asia Cup 2020 to 2021. Since then, the ACC has been working with its participants and stakeholders to try and ensure that the event is held in the year," said the ACC. "However, on account of a packed FTP [Future Tours Programme], it has been concluded that there is no practical window in the year when all the teams would be available to participate. The Board has accordingly considered the matter very carefully and determined that the only way ahead would be to postpone the event," it added.

Indonesia declares it will bid for 2032 Olympics

Jakarta | Agencies

Indonesia on Sunday said that despite Brisbane's strong bid for hosting the 2032 Olympics, it would continue to push for the quadrennial games, as a final decision had not yet been taken by the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Reports suggest that Brisbane could be confirmed as the 2032 Games host as early as at the Tokyo Olympics in July.

The last multi-discipline sports event Indonesia hosted was the 2018 Asian Games in Jakarta and Palembang.

President Joko Widodo had reportedly ordered his Cabinet to prepare a dedicated plan for the bid last year, according to The Jakarta Post. A Presidential decree was issued in April this year to form a Bid Committee for the Olympics. However, the odds are stacked heavily against Indonesia as the IOC had announced Brisbane as its preferred bidder in March. Brisbane's bid received a shot in the arm recently when Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, said that the Federal Government would cover half the cost of the Games.

"IOC's due diligence testing of every element of the Brisbane project is now underway. If this diligence yields a positive final report, the proposal to host the Games in 2032 will go to a vote of the full IOC membership," Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) chief John Coates had said recently.

"This is the pathway for Brisbane to host the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2032." National Olympic Committee of Indonesia (KOI) President Raja SaptaOktohari is, however, targeting the Tokyo Olympics as an opportunity to promote a potential bid by his country. "We already have many plans to promote (Indonesia as an Olympic host) but we have to realise as well that we cannot be so intrusive as we face this extraordinary (pandemic) situation," said Oktohari.

"We will still find ways to maximise our chances with lobbying. Tokyo will be a great opportunity to interact with other NOCs (National Olympic Committees) and draw some sympathy, as well as to prove that Indonesia is ready to host the 2032 Olympic Games," he said.

IPL's gilt-edged status comes back to bite BCCI

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Indian Premier League (IPL), the super baby and golden goose of the country's cricket board which drew the worlds best cricketers to India and forced other boards to change their international roster, has turned homeless this year and is instead looking for a window in a busy international calendar.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), in its hastiness to show that it is well prepared to host the T20 World Cup this October-November, went ahead with the tournament despite there being reservations about the Covid situation. It even went ahead and held the tournament in multiple venues, and not at one or two venues as was being discussed initially with the franchises. Both Delhi and Ahmedabad, that hosted the second phase, saw possible breaches in first-class grounds where practice sessions were scheduled. The breach could also have happened during travel. The players and support staff, who contracted the Covid-19 virus that led to the suspension of the tournament, are themselves unsure where they got the infection from. The breach in bio-bubble has now put the BCCI and its money-spinning IPL in a soup and instead of being able show to the world that the country is fit to host the T20 World Cup, it is likely that the tournament will be shifted out.

A decision will be taken soon, but as Michael Hussey was recently quoted as saying in the media, it will be tough for cricket boards to send teams to India now. No wonder, even having IPL in India at the moment is far-fetched.

Finding an alternate venue for IPL is not a problem. Venues in England have shown interest, Sri Lanka too has expressed willingness to host the remainder of IPL, while the UAE looks the best option with all the infrastructure and system in place. Australia and New Zealand, if approached, could also offer to host.

The problem is the magnitude at which IPL is played. It involves the world's best players and is easily the most sought-after league. Rescheduling any other T20 franchise league like Pakistan Super League, Caribbean Premier League or Australia's Big Bash T20 league isn't that big a problem for the number of big names and the money that players get isn't as huge as in IPL. Many of the stars in those leagues are the country's international and domestic players. But in IPL, the world's best compete and it will be tough to assemble them in one place at one time. It was agreed upon, even if unofficially, by boards that April-May period is reserved for IPL. Teams, other than Pakistan whose players are not allowed in IPL, wouldn't schedule international fixtures during this phase.

However, the IPL's suspension now has left other boards in a quandary. England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) recently said that they won't let their players to miss international commitments.

Amid all this emerged news of BCCI's request to ECB to advance the Test series by a week so that the Indian board can host the remainder of IPL in UAE and follow it up with the T20 World Cup at the same venue. While ECB had denied it, it is believed it was an unofficial request floated by the BCCI.

Advancing the series by a week will give BCCI 20-22 days to conduct the remainder of IPL. As per current schedule, there is only a month's time between the end of India-England series and the start of the T20 World Cup, slated to begin in mid-October and end in mid-November. Immediately after that, is the Ashes series between England and Australia.

England has a packed schedule in its own summer, beginning in June. Their schedule is made months, even one year, in advance. Add to that they are launching The Hundred - a 100-ball competition - this year. It will be held in July and August and all England international stars are expected to play the first few matches to attract eyeballs. Advancing the India Test series by a week would mean the series will begin on July 27, just six days after The Hundred starts forcing a lot of England's international stars to miss the 100-ball tournament.

Unlike the Indian cricket board, with which even July's limited-overs series in Sri Lanka is not yet properly scheduled, ECB is more organised with its schedule.

The venues are prepared, sponsors are signed, travel and hotel bookings are made, tickets are up for sale - all this is done months and even a year in advance. It is no surprise, according to British newspaper The Times, that tickets for the first three days of the fifth and final Test between India and England in mid-September have already been sold out.

"ECB cannot relent because the English counties which are hosting matches, international and The Hundred, will be up against them. There is a lot at stake. It is not just the counties but other stakeholders too," said an official in the know of things. That leaves the BCCI with a month between the England series and the T20 World Cup. It will be tough to fit the IPL there considering the current quarantine rules, the exhaustion of players and the fact that England and Australia play their first Test on December 8 of the Ashes series, which is again scheduled well in advance and is the biggest money-spinning series in Test cricket. Neither England, nor Australia will give away a piece of it, and without England and Aussie players the IPL is as good as an Indian domestic tournament with just a few India and foreign stars.

Fuel prices rise, diesel above Rs 84/litre in Delhi

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Similarly, in Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata, diesel was priced at Rs 91.30, Rs 88.87 and Rs 86.91 per litre respectively, up from the previous levels of Rs 91.01, Rs 88.62 and Rs 86.64 per litre.

The oil marketing companies (OMC) hiked petrol and diesel prices on Sunday across the four metros.In the national capital, diesel price crossed the Rs 84 per litre mark. Price of the fuel in Delhi increased 27 paise to Rs 84.07 per litre.Similarly, in Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata, diesel was priced at Rs 91.30, Rs 88.87 and Rs 86.91 per litre respectively, up from the previous levels of Rs 91.01, Rs 88.62 and Rs 86.64 per litre.Petrol prices also increased in the country on Sunday. In Delhi, petrol was sold for 93.21 per litre, 17 paise higher from 93.04 a litre on Saturday.Price of the fuel in Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata was Rs 99.49, Rs 94.86 and Rs 93.27 per litre, respectively, higher from their previous levels.

FMCG STOCKS SIGNIFICANTLY OUT PERFORMED MARKET OVER 20 YEARS

Consumer staple sector or FMCG stocks have significantly outperformed the market over the past 20 years.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

As per a research by Jefferies, over the last two decades, while Nifty has returned 11.4 per cent Cagr, the market-cap weighted performance for eight FMCG companies (HUL, ITC, Nestle, Britannia, Dabur, Marico, GCPL, Colgate) stood at 14.2 per cent Cagr. In absolute terms, while Nifty is up 10x in 20+ years, FMCG is up c.17x over the same period.

Most of this out-performance has come in the last decade (2010-20), with FMCG returns at 15 per cent Cagr, materially higher than those generated in Nifty (9 per cent Cagr).

In the prior decade (2000-2010), the sector performed broadly similar to the broader market although there were periods of significant underperformance and outperformance, the report said.

Consumer staple stocks have seen periods of both strong outperformance as well significant underperformance vis-a-vis the broader market.

For example, among the seven time periods considered in the analysis, consumer staples underperformed the Nifty in three time periods (CY02-CY03, CY04-CY07 and April-2020 to till date).

The most prominent period of underperformance was between CY02 to CY07, when Nifty was up 6x over a 6 year-period, while consumer staples was up only 2x. This was the period where India witnessed an investment-led strong economic growth.

The report said a lot changed post the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008 when FMCG companies showed resilience and the sector managed to outperform the broader markets (Nifty). This outperformance sustained through the next decade, across three subsequent time blocks, i.e., CY08-CY09, CY10-CY16 and CY17 to March 2020.

"Starting April-20, consumer staples has again underperformed vs. Nifty, as the latter has recovered sharply from lows made during the first Covid-19 wave," the report said.

It also said that FMCG stocks are boring in growth phase. The sector starts to under-perform in periods of strong economic growth. While a pick-up in economic activity does help accelerate revenue growth for staples too, the impact is much lower when compared to cyclical sectors.

Further, with only modest operating leverage and little financial leverage (net cash balance sheets), earnings growth does not exceed revenue growth by a large margin, unlike cyclical sectors.

It added that staples can do well on an absolute basis, even if it underperforms. For example, during 2004-07, FMCG sector returned 18% Cagr which is one of the best in identified time blocks. Yet, the sector underperformed as Nifty returns were at 34% Cagr, with BSE Capital Goods index returning 70% Cagr during this period. Stocks vs sector.

Even during periods of under/out-performance versus broader markets, there is always a potential to identify winners as 20 year history suggests significant divergence between individual stocks versus the sector. For example, the sector under-performance of 2004-07 (which saw strong Nifty returns) was mostly led by HUL while Marico and Dabur outperformed Nifty meaningfully.

INDIABULLS HOUSING EXTENDS RELIEF MEASURES FOR FAMILIES OF COVID-HIT STAFF

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Indiabulls Housing Finance has extended its support initiatives for the Covid-hit employees and their families. The company has decided that in case of a death of any of its employees due to Covid, it would continue to pay the monthly salary to the bereaved family for a period of two years, among other measures.

In an email to the employees, Gagan Banga, MD of Indiabulls Housing Finance Limited said: "I would like to reassure all of you that Indiabulls Housing is behind your family and you. In the unfortunate event of the demise of any of our employees to Covid, we will continue to pay the monthly salary of our employee to their family for two years." He also said that the company will cover their children's education till they graduate from any Indian college."This financial assistance won't be able to bring back our dear colleagues but I hope it will provide the family some time to stabilise, reorient and deal with this unfortunate life changing event," the MD wrote.

CII suggests changes in RBI norms for appointment of statutory auditors by banks, NBFCs

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Confederation of Indian Industry has come up with several recommendations for changes in the Reserve Bank of India's guidelines for appointment of statutory auditors by banks and NBFCs. Commending the RBI's intent of working towards strengthening the audit quality and governance process, CII in a statement, noted that this process is critical and fundamental to trust and credibility of the capital market.

CII has suggested that the requirements related to reduction in the tenure of audit engagement, cap on number of audits and extended cooling of periods, may not specifically address any perceived concerns on audit quality.

These are inconsistent with the provisions in the Companies Act, 2013 and are not comparable with international practices and regulations as prescribed by the IESBA, PCAOB, SEC, etc., which are widely accepted and adopted globally, it said.

"Implementing these requirements is likely to create avoidable complications without any appreciable enhancement to audit quality and governance. Further, lack of harmony amongst various regulations on this subject is likely to add to complexity and confusion in the sector and also impact ease of doing business," it said.

Further, it said that it is a widely accepted principle that, to reduce uncertainty and implementation challenges, significant policy measures are not applied retrospectively and also allow for a reasonable transition period. This helps various stakeholders to better understand, plan for the change and ensure effective compliance, it said.

"A sudden change in major policies, without any reasonable transitional provisions, is bound to create several practical challenges in successful implementation. It should also be noted that Appointment of Auditors is a critical and important process for an organisation and merits the right level of attention especially from senior management, board and audit committee, and approval from RBI."

The circular has also been extended to the NBFCs for the first time, equating them with the commercial banks.

As per the industry, it may be worth evaluating whether such restrictive norms need to be applied to the NBFCs, in addition to all the principles applicable as per the Companies Act, 2013, including rotation and cool off periods.

The reduction in the tenure of audit, cap on number of audits by an audit firm and extending the applicability of the provisions to NBFCs will make it mandatory for a large number of banks and NBFCs to immediately change their auditors, including requirements of joint audits in certain cases, based on monetary thresholds.

The challenge to identity an appropriate firm is further accentuated by the supply side constraints, which are likely to be caused, due to stricter eligibility criteria and independence considerations including association with group (including those using the same brand) on providing unrestricted non-audit services, that too in the past one year, CII said."All these amendments will create inconsistent policies vis-a-vis the Companies Act, 2013, without adding any qualitative parameters."

It is all the more challenging in present times, severely impacted by Covid-19, to implement these requirements without any transitional provisions, it said, among other suggestions.

Rising prices likely to moderate white goods demand: MOFSL

Rising prices due to high commodity costs is expected to moderate demand for white goods, said Motilal Oswal Financial Services (MOFSL)

Team Absolute | New Delhi

At present, copper, plastics, steel, and aluminium form the key commodity inputs for the white goods sector.

In 2HFY21, almost all commodities were at multi-year high levels - copper, steel, aluminium, and polyprop were up 44 per cent, 38 per cent, 22 per cent and 29 per cent, respectively.

According to MOFSL, price increase of 5-10 per cent by companies across most categories have somewhat cushioned gross margins but will dampen the demand.

"The primary reasons for this are the large ticket sizes of the product categories vis-a-vis other product categories and the availability of substitutes," the report said.

"Price increases of 5-10 per cent taken by companies across most categories have somewhat cushioned gross margins."

Besides, high commodity prices took a toll on companies' gross margins in 3QFY21 and 4QFY21.

Furthermore, it said that although commodity costs weighed on gross margins, the EBITDA margins of most companies expanded by sustained cost rationalisation in employee expenses and reduced discretionary spends in other expenses, particularly ad spends.

"While part of the cost reduction is attributable to higher efficiency and cost engineering, some of the other expenses may be incurred once the Covid situation normalises."

In terms of preference, MOFSL said it prefers companies in the 'Electrical' space over 'Durables' in the current commodity price inflationary environment.

"Orient and Crompton are our top picks in the sector. Havells could also be a beneficiary in current times - as it is a premiumization story and hence not as susceptible to commodity price inflation."

Start-up business to deliver necessities at the doorstep

Kolkata | Agencies

Covid-19 has brought several businesses to its knees. But it has also given small opportunities to hungry entrepreneurs, keen to display their social conscience. With companies declaring a work-from-home model and the novel coronavirus pandemic spreading its tentacles, BA graduate Hemlata Kushwaha from Kolkata has taken up the opportunity to provide 'pick up and drop service' to take the necessities at the doorstep of the people of the city.'Pick up and drop facility' has become an essential service for consumers all across the country. The service allows one to deliver or receive anything, be it lunch boxes, documents, laundry, items for repair, shoes, stationery and other materials from one location to another from anywhere in their city. It also allows one to buy stuff from beetle shops, supermarkets, pharmacies and home-cooked means making the daily errands easier. Those running a business can also opt for deliveries of office documents as well.

Kolkata based start-up 'Delivery Pigeon' - a self-funded start-up - provides 'same day pick and drop services' to working professionals, small businesses and senior citizens at their doorsteps within city limits.

Functioning from March 2021, "the start-up currently gets 200 orders per day. The number is steadily increasing due to an increase in Covid cases. We currently operate with more than 180 provider partners all over the city," said 45-year-old Kushwaha."Keeping in mind our customers' concerns for safety, the parcels are verified twice by provider partners at the pickup and drop points. We also offer easy payment options - both online and offline mode as well as the flexibility of making payment at either point. The app also allows users to schedule their orders 24 hours in advance," she added.

Initially started to help family members suffering from the deadly virus, the start-up is now a full-fledged automated, app-based service. Like its competitors in other cities, it aims to make local pick and drop services quick, easy and accessible for all through a user-friendly and hassle-free app. Efforts are on to make Delivery Pigeon a key player in the hyperlocal delivery space in Kolkata.

Elaborating on India's logistics-tech industry, Kushwaha said: "The potential for small, medium and big companies is huge. Following the advent of Covid-19, people are looking for contactless deliveries more than ever now.

'ISRO set to transfer technology for oxygen concentrator soon'

Chennai | Agencies

The Indian space agency will soon transfer the technology for making the 'Shwaas', the oxygen concentrator developed by it at a cost of about Rs 60,000 to industries, said a top official of Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC).On Friday officials of VSSC had a video meeting of interested companies and explained about 'Shwaas' and its systems."It was a first round meeting and about 50 industries participated. I had interacted with them. My team and I answered their queries," S. Somanath, Director, VSSC told IANS."We are entering into an agreement with each of them who are meeting the criteria on technical capability. The technology sharing/transfer will take place in the next two days. The technology transfer will be free," Somanath added.According to him, medical equipment, space equipment, electronics and product manufacturing companies are selected now and more could be based on their credentials.Somanath said VSSC spent about Rs 60,000 to build its prototype."The cost can go down by 30 per cent if production is done on a large basis. All the components are currently available in India. Some items are imported by Indian companies but they can also be made here," Somanath emarked. Couple of days back, ISRO had announced its decision to transfer the technology to make portable medical oxygen concentrators developed by VSSC.The medical oxygen concentrator 'Shwaas', can deliver an enriched level (over 95 per cent) of oxygen than in air to support patients with respiratory illness or who are on oxygen therapy.The device enhances the oxygen gas content by selectively separating the nitrogen gas from ambient air through Pressure Swing Adsorption (PSA), ISRO said.'Shwaas' is capable of supplying enriched oxygen continuously at 10 litres per minute (LPM) adequate for two patients at a time.According to the ISRO, the 600 W device operates at a voltage of 220 V/50 Hz, has a controllable oxygen flow of 0.5-10 LPM, has two oxygen outlets, oxygen concentration of 82 per cent and 95 per cent normal at a pressure of 50-80 kPa.'Shwaas' has an audible alarm for low purity, low & high levels of pressure and flow rate of oxygen. The device, which weighs 42-44 kg, is 600 mm high, 500 mm long and 400 mm wide and has a LCD display showing oxygen concentration, flow rate, and pressure.

THE GREAT INDIAN CRYPTO CIRCUS

In India, traditional physical assets like real estate and gold still account for most money laundering operations and financing mal-actors. Real estate is still not covered under the Money Laundering Act while purchasing gold does not even require KYC.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Amongst all its Indian stakeholders, there are strong undercurrents, deafening official-silence and unofficial-posturing, all around. Over the past few months, the government has had its varying views & intent about crypto. The RBI has been silent about Crypto. The crypto investor community has been euphoric about the instrument and equally miffed with the Indian officialdoms behaviour. All this, when the topic of Crypto was purportedly solved last year with the Supreme Court of India lifting the RBIs crypto ban of 2018.Is it the common-man who buys Bitcoin? Or HNIs, or someone who understands technology and/or has surplus funds to invest in it? Should we blame Crypto-investing for lack of other attractive-investment instruments currently? Moral-placarders even compare crypto to gambling! Statistically, capital markets volatility has wiped out larger proportion of retail investors wealth in the past and could continue to do so in the future in free-markets scenario.

Another narrative fears that cryptos could be used for money laundering and terror financing. A mal-actor would have to be naive to try terror financing on an immutable ledger which can be seen and must be authenticated by all nodes on a blockchain! According to a report by Chainalysis, a company that specialises in cryptocurrency investigations for governments, exchanges and financial institutions, in 2020, the criminal share' of all cryptocurrency activity globally fell to just 0.34 per cent ($10.0 billion value). The report also mentions that most cryptocurrency-related crimes are ransom-ware, darknet market deals, etc.In India, traditional physical assets like real estate and gold still account for most money laundering operations and financing mal-actors. Real estate is still not covered under the Money Laundering Act while purchasing gold does not even require KYC.Of late, the banks have not been allowing crypto transactions on their gateways. The media reports speculate that the RBI "nudged" the banks to give them "cold-shoulder" treatment.

The RBI has been reportedly working on building a central bank digital currency (CBDC), using many of the properties of cryptocurrencies including the blockchain technology. A good start is that the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) had recently made it mandatory for companies to disclose crypto trading/investments during the financial year. Whenever the clarity comes through, if Cryptos were to-be treated under Law as "securities", then the regulatory control will be in SEBI's court. If it's treated as currency (doubtfully so!!), then it would fall in RBI domain. (Technically Cryptocurrencies are unviable as a currency as of now, due to the massive changes in corrections and the time it takes for a transaction to get authenticated by the various nodes on the blockchain.)

Are the current "predatory" actions of the banks against the crypto-players to be seen as "appeasing their regulator"?Is it a dereliction of commercial agreement between banks and the crypto players?Can the affected crypto players seek redressal from the consumer grievance committees of the bank boards (chaired by independent directors)?Can the crypto players seek SEBI's help, as most of these banks are listed-entities and the consumers as a stakeholder, have right-to-recourse for detailed disclosures, with their securities-regulator?Can they seek help and advice of the concerned ministries under #EaseofDoingBusiness?

Ostrich-head-in-the-sand syndrome of ignoring the development of digital currencies globally will be at our own (un)doing. Economically & business sentiment-wise, the price of arbitrariness of any policy or regulatory indecision is too high. A healthier policy discussion on this topic can start with sharing the draft "The Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill of 2021" in public domain.

SHUBHANGI ATRE RESUMES SHOOT IN SURAT

Team Absolute | Surat

Actress ShubhangiAtre is happy to resume shoots for her television show, "BhabijiGhar Par Hain" here after recovering from Covid-19.

The actress, who plays the lead role of ofAngooribhabhi in the show, said, "We are in Surat and back to work. I feel blessed to resume my shoots. And we are actually taking care of us and are following every Covid-19 guidelines. I feel secured as our team is also like a family to me. We are spending long hours in a day together from so many years. So, now when I came back I realised how much I missed this family."

However, she does miss her daughter Ashi and husband PiyushPoorey.

"I miss my family here, so much. But we are virtually connected. I take updates about the meals and other important stuff," she says.

After a month, like several other shows, makers of "Bhabhi Ji Ghar Par Hai" took a call and moved the unit to other states after shoots in Maharashtra had come to a grinding halt owing to a surge in Covid-19 cases.

PiyaValecha: Do not wish to play roles that require me to age on screen

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress PiyaValecha, who has been seen in shows such as BahuHamariRajni Kant and DilliWali Thakur Gurls, says she would love to return to work, but is looking for characters that suit her age.

She says that actors are often typecast on the small screen and she wants to be very particular of the roles she takes up. "I do not wish to play roles that require me to age on screen. I want to play characters who are as old as me. I understand that as an actor, all roles can be challenging. But in our TV industry, there exists a culture of typecasting. So, if once I age on screen, then it will be difficult to get roles of my actual age," she says.

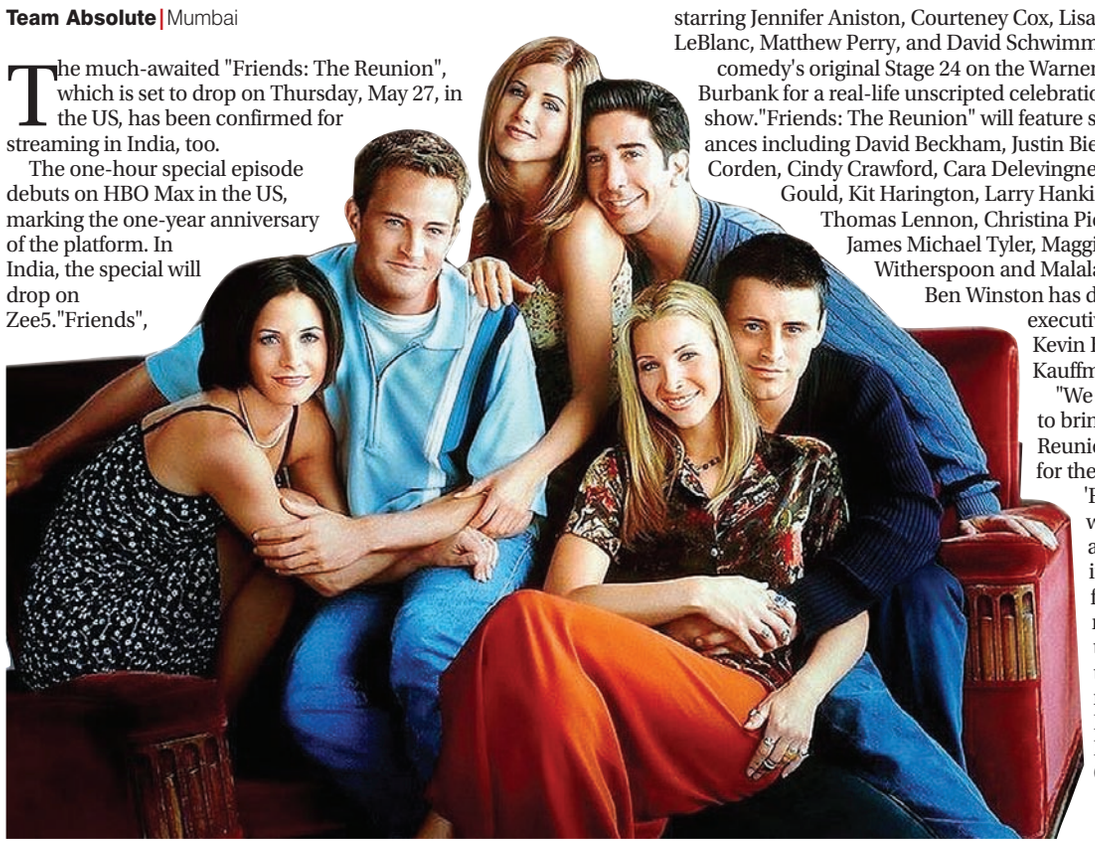
The actress is also keen to work on an OTT platform. "I feel web shows are really being loved these days. The platform is giving work to many talented TV actors. It is as significant as Bollywood and television. So, I'm also keen to take up a web show next," she says.

'Friends: The Reunion' to stream in India as well

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The much-awaited "Friends: The Reunion", which is set to drop on Thursday, May 27, in the US, has been confirmed for streaming in India, too.

The one-hour special episode debuts on HBO Max in the US, marking the one-year anniversary of the platform. In India, the special will drop on Zee5."Friends", starring Jennifer Aniston, Courteney Cox, Lisa Kudrow, Matt LeBlanc, Matthew Perry, and David Schwimmer, returns to the iconic comedy's original Stage 24 on the Warner Bros. Studio lot in Burbank for a real-life unscripted celebration of the show."Friends: The Reunion" will feature special guest appearances including David Beckham, Justin Bieber, BTS, James Corden, Cindy Crawford, Cara Delevingne, Lady Gaga, Elliott Gould, Kit Harington, Larry Hankin, Mindy Kaling, Thomas Lennon, Christina Pickles, Tom Selleck, James Michael Tyler, Maggie Wheeler, Reese Witherspoon and Malala Yousafzai.



Ben Winston has directed the special and executive produced along with Kevin Bright, Marta Kauffman, and David Crane.

"We are extremely excited to bring 'Friends: The Reunion' exclusively on Zee5 for the Indian market. 'Friends' is amongst the world's most-watched and loved sitcoms and it is a great opportunity for us to present their reunion, something that the world has been talking about, on Zee5 for 'Friends' fans in India," said Manish Kalra, Chief Business Officer, Zee5 India.

SUNIL GROVER: WHILE CHOOSING A PROJECT I CHOOSE STUFF THAT WON'T LET ME SLEEP

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actor Sunil Grover shed almost 8.1 kilos for his role in "Sunflower", a thriller series that drops soon.

"It will be very different than what I have done with 'Tandav' or anything prior," he promises about his new project, adding: "While choosing a project, I make it a point to choose stuff that will blow me and not let me sleep a couple of days before we shoot, and this is bang on."

Describing his character Sonu as "exciting", Sunil said about the rest of the cast: "We got some tremendous actors in the cast like RanvirShorey, Girish Kulkarni, Ashish Vidyarthi, Mukul Chadha, and ShonaliNagrani -- all of the cast, in fact. VikasBahl, my director, has done an absolutely tremendous job."

The show also features Radha Bhatt, Ashish Kaushal, ShonaliNagrani, and Saloni Khanna, among others. The series tells the story of a middle-class housing society in Mumbai called Sunflower, which houses quirky characters.

Produced by Reliance Entertainment and Good Co., the series is written by VikasBahl and co-directed by Rahul Sengupta and Bahl. It streams from June 11 on Zee5.

Huma Qureshi shares funny stills from 'Army Of The Dead' set

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Bollywood actress Huma Qureshi on Saturday posted a couple of funny pictures from the set of her international release "Army Of The Dead". Huma plays Geeta, a single mother in the new Zack Snyder directorial, which has dropped digitally.

Taking to Instagram, Huma shared a couple of funny photos with co-star Richard Cetrone who is dressed in character as the Zombie King. In one of the pictures, Huma makes a mock gesture as if teaching the Zombie King how to scare people.

"Me and the super talented @stunt_batman aka Zombie King seen in happier times ... Slide to see me teaching him some scary moves. Chalodarrakardikaosabko !!! Shabaash !! #shoot #tbs #armyofthedead #aotd #zombie #zombies #shootshenanigans #zacksnyder #scary," Huma wrote as caption.

Huma's upcoming roster includes the Akshay Kumar-starrer spy thriller "Bell Bottom". She will also be seen in the political drama web series "Maharani", which is slated to release on May 28 on an OTT platform. The series directed by Karan Sharma, also stars Sohum Shah, Amit Sial, KaniKusruti and Inaamulhaq.

NIKKI TAMBOLI STARS IN JASSZAILDAR'S NEW VIDEO 'GAT GAT'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

"Bigg Boss 14" star Nikki Tamboli on Saturday uploaded the first look poster of her new music video. Nikki features in "Kallarehjayenga", the new song of JassZaildar who sang the superhit dance number "Gat gat" in the 2019 AyushmannKhurrana-starrer "Dream Girl". "Here's presenting the first poster of my latest music video #KallaRehJayenga which is beautiful sung by @jasszaildar_official and releasing soon on @lyftym_studios YouTube channel! @desiroutzofficial @maninderkailey @teamlastpage," Nikki wrote on Instagram, along with a sunflower and a yellow heart emoji. The song has been composed by Desi Routz and the lyrics are by Maninder Kailey. Nikki is currently in Cape Town, South Africa, shooting for the adventure reality show "KhatronKeKhiladi 11". Recently her snapshots in a black bikini from the beach, which she posted on Instagram, went viral on social media.

INSTAGRAM PIC OF THE DAY

Radhika Madan

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