

absolute india

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WhatsApp sues Indian govt over chat 'traceability', Government responds

PRIVACY VS LAW

In an official statement quoted the IT Minister Prasad as saying, that the government respects the right of privacy and has no intention to violate it when WhatsApp is required to disclose the origin of a particular message.

It however, added that as per all established judicial dictum, no fundamental right, including the right to privacy, is absolute and it is subject to reasonable restrictions.

As per the new rules, the social media platforms will have to remove offending content within 36 hours after a government directive or a legal order.

The new rules mandate that the intermediaries, including social media intermediaries, must establish a grievance redressal mechanism for receiving/resolving complaints from the users or victims.

"It would break end-to-end encryption and fundamentally undermines people's right to privacy. We have consistently joined civil society and experts around the world in opposing requirements that would violate the privacy of our users. we will also continue to engage with the Government of India on practical solutions aimed at keeping people safe, including responding to valid legal requests for the information available to us."

WhatsApp



Team Absolute | New Delhi

Taking the user privacy war to the court over new IT rules, Facebook-owned WhatsApp on Wednesday filed a law-suit against the Indian government in the Delhi High Court, saying that user privacy is in its DNA and requiring messaging apps to "trace" chats undermines people's right to privacy.

A WhatsApp spokesperson told reporter that requiring messaging apps to "trace" chats is the equivalent of asking us to keep a fingerprint of every single message sent on WhatsApp.

The tussle between Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook and the Union government has reached its nadir, with cops raiding Twitter offices in the pandemic earlier this week over the ToolKit controversy.

WhatsApp has gone to the court as the deadline to comply with the new IT (intermediary) rules meant for big social media platforms in India ended on Tuesday.

WhatsApp said that new rules infringe on users' privacy.

WhatsApp has also gone ahead with implementing its controversial user privacy

policy from May 15.

The company is currently fighting the same before the Supreme Court of Brazil on a similar matter. On the user privacy policy, the Facebook-owned platform with over 400 million users in the country has defended its position, saying that it continues to engage with the government to resolve the issue.

RESPOND 'ASAP' ON COMPLIANCE STATUS TO NEW NORMS: GOVT
"IF YOU ARE CONSIDERED AS SSMI (SIGNIFICANT SOCIAL MEDIA INTERMEDIARIES), PLEASE PROVIDE THE REASONS FOR THE SAME, INCLUDING THE REGISTERED USERS ON EACH OF THE SERVICES PROVIDED BY YOU. PLEASE CONFIRM AND SHARE YOUR RESPONSE ASAP AND PREFERABLY TODAY ITSELF."

NEW RULES NEEDED FOR FINE BALANCE BETWEEN RIGHTS, LAWS: EXPERTS

"The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 are not creating a mother blanket web for getting information of all originators of all messages sent by all users. On the contrary, it is only specifically looking at specified cases where in certain specified circumstances, some information pertaining to identification of origin of all electronic records can be obtained."

Pavan Duggal, Advocate

"Privacy is good faith principle - not to be applied to criminals. Right to privacy cannot be an impediment to fair investigation - the world over. WhatsApp cannot maintain double standards: Taking stand of privacy infringement is itself contradictory to their own provision mentioned in their own privacy policy. The new rules establishes the required fine balance between the rights of individuals, mediated by these supranational business interests, and simultaneously preventing state overreach, while preserving incentives for innovation, which is the real-life blood of the Internet."

Khushbu Jain, Advocate

"A new challenge to Rule 4(2) before the Delhi High Court may be delaying tactics to avoid the compliance with other aspects of IT rules, which talk about appointment of grievance and other officers in India. Despite judicial challenge to limited aspect of rules, WhatsApp and other significant social media companies are duty bound to comply with new IT Rules within stipulated time period."

Virag Gupta, Advocate

"Enabling a traceability option by any means, even if it is not by directly breaking end-to-end encryption, will seriously undermine the very purpose of end-to-end encryption, which is to promote and strengthen user privacy and encourage the freedom of speech. This will threaten the constitutional fundamental rights of millions of users of social media in India."

Tanmay Singh, Internet Freedom Foundation

India logs 2.08L Covid cases 4,157 deaths in 24 hrs



Team Absolute | New Delhi

tions, thus becoming world's third country after the US and Brazil to cross three-lakh deaths. In the last 15 days India has recorded over 60,000 deaths. India registered record deaths due to Covid exactly a week back 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.

INDIA REPORTS 11,717 MUCORMYCOSIS CASES

New Delhi: The Centre has allocated to states and Union Territories (UTs) 29,250 additional vials of Amphotericin-B, a key drug to treat raging mucormycosis cases in India for the 11,717 patients currently being treated at different hospitals across the country. Union Minister for Chemicals and Fertilizers DV Sadananda Gowda announced that the additional 29,250 vials of Amphotericin-B were allocated to all states and the UTs and central institutions on Wednesday. Mucormycosis is one of the rapidly spreading infections observed in patients recovering from Covid-19.

Farmers protesting farm laws in Punjab, Haryana observe 'Black Day'

Team Absolute | Chandigarh

Farmers protesting against the Centre's three farm laws across Punjab and Haryana on Wednesday observed as a 'Black Day' to mark six months of the agitation.

At most of the places, both in rural and urban areas, farmers staged protests against the controversial farm laws. They put up black flags atop their houses and burnt effigies of Central government leaders.

Farmers from Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh have been protesting since November last year on Delhi borders against the agricultural laws.

In Tamil Nadu also farmers held protests, raising black flags atop their homes in solidarity with the protesting farmers of North India who are demanding the repeal of the controversial farm laws. Heavy police presence could be seen at various places in



Haryana and Punjab to maintain law and order in view of the protests. There was no report of any untoward incident

from anywhere in the states. The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), a former ally of the BJP, participated in the protest.

BOOK RAMDEV UNDER SEDITION CHARGES: IMA

The top medical body of modern doctors has also served a defamation notice on Ramdev for his alleged disparaging remarks against allopathy and allopathic practitioners, demanding an apology from him within 15 days, failing which it said it will demand a compensation of Rs 1,000 crore from the yoga guru.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

In a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Indian Medical Association (IMA) demanded that yoga guru Ramdev be booked immediately under sedition charges for alleged misinformation campaign on vaccination and challenging government protocols for treatment of Covid-19.

In its letter to Modi, the IMA said it was gratifying to note that only 0.06 per cent of people who received both the doses of vaccine "got minimal" infection by coronavirus, and "very rarely" vaccinated people had a severe lung infection. "It is well proved that by vaccination we save our people and country from catastrophic cascades of severe

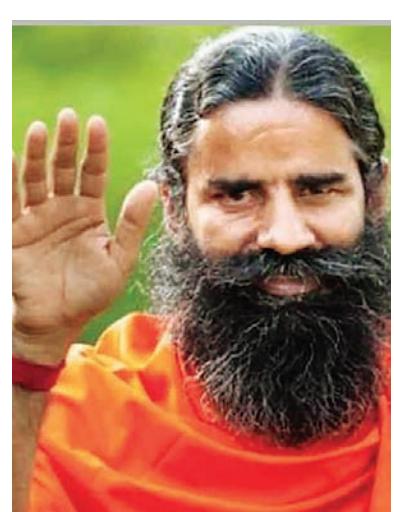
infection. At this juncture, painfully we bring to your kind notice, the video claiming 10,000 doctors have died in spite of taking both the doses of vaccine and lakhs of people have died due to allopathic medicine are circulating viral in the social media, as said by Mr. Ramdev, owner of Patanjali products," the body said in its letter. "If someone is claiming the allopathic medicine has killed people, it is an attempt to challenge the ministry which has issued the protocol for treatment to us," it stated.

The IMA pointed out that as on date

and according to its registry, 753 doctors

died in the first wave and 513 lost their lives in the second wave due to COVID-19.

None in the first wave could receive the vaccine and the majority who had



died in the second wave also couldn't take their vaccine for various reasons.

It said that "IMA, the professional organisation of modern medical doctors" respects, acknowledges and compliments all systems of medicine, especially Indian system of Ayurvedic medicine.

Yaas completes landfall, weakens into severe cyclone

"Cyclone Yaas has completed the process of landfall. Rainfall will continue till tomorrow. Fishermen are advised not to venture till tomorrow morning because the sea conditions are going to be rough."

Umashankar Das, Senior Scientist, Meteorological Centre, Bhubaneswar.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The landfall process of "very severe" cyclonic storm 'Yaas' in Bay of Bengal has completed and it has weakened into "severe cyclonic" storm.

'Yaas' is likely to move north-northwestwards and weaken gradually into a cyclonic storm. The cyclone had commenced the landfall process around 9 a.m. As per the IMD's 1.30 p.m. report, the cyclone is currently intensified near the centre and bringing in winds speeds of about 130-140 kmph gusting to 155 kmph. As per the IMD forecast, the wind speed of the storm will decrease gradually becoming 90-100 kmph gusting to 110 kmph during next three hours and 60-70 kmph gusting to 80 kmph during subsequent six hours.



The storm is bringing in light to moderate rainfall at most places in Odisha with heavy to very heavy rains at a few places with extremely heavy falls at isolated places over north interior part of the state during next 24 hours and heavy to very heavy falls at isolated places over coastal regions during next 12 hours. Light to moderate rainfall at most places with heavy to very heavy rainfall at isolated places over West Bengal's Medinipur, Jhargram, Bankura and heavy falls at isolated places over South 24 Parganas, Purulia, Nadia, Murshidabad, East Bardhaman, Howrah, Hooghly, Kolkata, North 24 Parganas, Haldia, Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts on Wednesday.

1 cr people affected by Cyclone Yaas: Mamata

Kolkata: West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said that at least one crore people have been affected by the cyclone in the state, which also damaged nearly three lakh houses. "At least one crore people have been affected and three lakh houses have been damaged in West Bengal due to the rough weather conditions arising out of cyclone Yaas. One person died after he had gone out fishing. It was a case of accident."

Odisha maintains liquid oxygen supply to nation

Bhubaneswar: Despite being hit by Cyclone Yaas, the Odisha government has ensured the uninterrupted supply of liquid medical oxygen (LMO) which is required by several states where the cases of Covid-19 are still high. State government officials said that the uninterrupted supply of LMO was due to proper planning by the government.

China announces 1 mn Covid vaccine doses as grant to Nepal

KATHMANDU | Agencies

China on Wednesday announced to provide an additional one million doses of Covid-19 vaccine to Nepal under a grant assistance policy. In a telephonic conversation with Nepal President Bidya Devi Bhandari on Wednesday, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that China would provide an additional one million vaccine doses to Nepal under grant assistance, Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, Hou Yanqi, announced on Twitter. Earlier in April, China had donated 8,00,000 Covid vaccine doses developed by Sinopharm to Nepal. President Bhandari held an almost hour-long telephonic conversation with the Chinese President on Wednesday. The



President of Nepal also requested the Chinese government to facilitate the procurement of Covid vaccines from China, the statement added. Acknowledging the

Indian vaccines preferred, buying Chinese for immediate need

Kolkata: Bangladesh has decided to buy 15 million doses of China's Sinopharm anti-Covid vaccines in sheer desperation to continue its immunisation programme, but a top official of the country's health ministry said India-made AstraZeneca vaccines are their preferred choice. "We had to look for Chinese and Russian alternatives only after we failed to get the vaccines from Pune's Serum Institute. We realise the grim situation in India and Serum's current inability to deliver on its promised supplies," said the top health ministry official, but on the condition of anonymity because he was not officially authorised to brief the media.



FIRST PHASE OF STUDY OF HERBAL COVID CURE IN ANDHRA COMPLETED

Team Absolute | Amaravati

The first phase of studies into the Covid cure devised by a Krishnapatnam-based herbal medicine practitioner was completed on Wednesday.

The studies were organised under the directions of the Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences (CCRAS). They were jointly conducted by the Regional Ayurvedic Research Centre in Vijaywada, and the SV Ayurveda College in Tirumala.

Officials said that the researchers from the two institutions have completed their retrospective studies. The researchers spoke to 570 persons who had taken the Covid medicine prepared by Anandaiah, a herbal medicine practitioner belonging to Krishnapatnam in Nellore district.

According to official sources, the feedback from these people has been transmitted online to the CCRAS.

The next phase of research will include toxicity tests, and studies on animals. The Andhra Pradesh government had decided to rope in Central agencies



to evaluate the ayurvedic remedy for Covid that a local practitioner claimed to have developed.

The medication prepared by Anandaiah has been attracting people from the surrounding areas over the last few days. However, distribution of medicine was halted after the Lok Ayukta stepped in following reports that Covid norms were being violated.

Anandiah had become a local sensation after people in search of a cure for Covid began landing in droves at his doorsteps, after visuals of his treatment went viral on social media platforms.

18, including councillors, held in Bihar for 'liquor party'

Team Absolute | Patna

Eighteen persons, including two ward councillors and husbands of four women ward councillors, were arrested in Bihar's Bhojpur district on Wednesday evening for participating in a "liquor party", police said. A team, led by Bhojpur's Superintendent of Police Rakesh Kumar Dubey, raided the house of ward number 31's councillor Himanshu Sinha, in Bhaliharpur area under town police station in district headquarters Arrah, and made the arrests. "We have seized six bottles of Indian-made Foreign Liquor (IMFL), eight empty IMFL bottles, and arms and ammunition including a rifle, 73 live rifle cartridges, 60 live pistol cartridges, 15 mobile phones and Rs 7.5 lakh cash during the raid," he said. Sinha, his



brother Kunal Sinha, councilor of ward no 4 Akhilesh Prasad, and Bajju Yadav, Sanjay Gupta, Sailendra Kumar Sinha and Om Prakash (all husbands of woman ward councillors) were arrested, along with Shabab Ahmed, Afroz Alam, Danish, Anil Kumar Suraj Kumar, Raj Kumar Yadav, Ranjan Kumar, Ajay Kumar, Prabhu Dayal, and Dilip Rajak. "We conducted the raid

at Sinha's house after a local informer gave us a tip-off about the party. We have booked them under various sections of the Bihar Liquor Prevention Act, the Epidemic Disease Act, and Arms Act against them in town police station," Dubey said. The ward councillors, on the other hand, claimed that they were assembled at Sinha's house for a meeting on corona crisis in the district.

SUBODH JAISWAL TAKES CHARGE AS NEW CBI CHIEF

New Delhi: IPS officer Subodh Kumar Jaiswal on Wednesday took charge as the new Director of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). He took charge a day after his name was cleared for the top post of the country's premiere investigative agency.



On Tuesday, in an order, the Department of Personnel and Training said: "The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet has, based on the panel recommended by the Committee, approved the appointment of Subodh Kumar Jaiswal, IPS, (Maharashtra 1985) as Director, CBI for a period of two years from the date of assumption of the charge of the office or until further orders whichever is earlier." Jaiswal was appointed as CBI Director a day after the Prime Minister Narendra Modi-headed committee including Chief Justice of India NV Ramana and Leader of Congress in Lok Sabha Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury discussed the names of the candidates for the new CBI chief. Before joining as the new director of CBI, Jaiswal was the Director General of the Central Industrial Security Force. He has also served as Maharashtra's Director General of Police and had a stint in India's external intelligence agency, R&AW.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Sri Lanka has sought help from India to contain the major fire onboard container vessel MV X-Press Pearl off Colombo. As per the directives of the government of India in response to the request of Sri Lankan authorities, Indian Coast Guard swiftly deployed its assets to provide immediate assistance.

While Indian Coast Guard ship Vaibhav on maritime patrol was diverted immediately to reach the scene of the incident, ICG ship Vajra was despatched from Tuticorin and arrived at the scene in the wee hours of Wednesday.

Presently, both the ships are fighting the intense fire onboard the container vessel using external fire fighting system, braving the

SARPANCH HELD FOR DUPING FAMILIES OF RS 1.10 LAKHS FOR GETTING KIN RELEASED

Srinagar | Agencies

A village Sarpanch was arrested on Wednesday in J&K's Anantnag district for taking Rs 1.10 lakh from two families for getting their kin released from police custody.

Police said in Anantnag on Wednesday, "A Sarpanch was arrested today for cheating two families after he took Rs 1.10 lakh from them for securing the release of two persons detained by police for questioning in a militancy related case".

Police said two persons from Kokarnag area of Anantnag district were called for questioning to establish their involvement or innocence in a militancy related incident. "Their families approached Sarpanch Nisar Ahmad Khan to secure their release.

"Sustained questioning of the two arrested persons established their innocence and they were allowed to go home." In the meantime the families paid Rs 1.10 lakhs to Sarpanch Nisar Ahmad Khan who also approached police for meeting a senior police officer in this connection. "The Sarpanch was told on phone that there was no need of meeting any police officer because if found innocent the duo would be released immediately.

"The Sarpanch has been booked for cheating and the money he took from the families has been recovered. It will be paid to the families after legal formalities are completed", police said.

ED attaches properties worth Rs 1.67 cr in money laundering case

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) said on Wednesday that it has attached properties worth Rs 1.67 crore of Seemakurthy Narasimha Rao, Managing Partner of Sri Sai Krishna Rice Industry, in connection with its probe into a money laundering case. An ED official said that the agency has attached immovable properties worth Rs 1.67 crore of Rao under the provisions of Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) in a cheating case.

The official said that the financial probe agency had registered a case under PMLA based on the FIR and charge-sheet filed by the Telangana Police against Rao for cheating the Andhra Pradesh State Civil Supplies Corporation Limited (APSC-SCL), now Telangana State Civil Supplies Corporation



Limited (TCSCL), to the tune of Rs 1.95 crore by not supplying the required quantity of rice/paddy to FCI/APSCSCL. He said that during probe, it was found that Rao had fraudulently diverted the sale proceeds of boiled rice or paddy by selling it in the open market, generating proceeds of crime to the tune of Rs 1.67 crore in cash. "Subsequently, Rao used a part of the said amount -- Rs 90 lakh -- to square off the loan taken from the State Bank of Hyderabad, Aswaraopeta (now SBI) and siphoned off the remaining proceeds of crime for the benefit of himself and his family members," the official said. He said the investigation under PMLA identified the proceeds of crime to the tune of Rs 1.67 crore in the form of three immovable properties of Rao, and the ED has attached the same.

Merchant vessel fire: Sri Lanka seeks India's help, Coast Guard pressed into service



odds of rough weather.

ICG ship Samudra Prahar, a specialised Pollution Response (PR) vessel, has also been despatched in PR configuration to augment the fire-fighting efforts and respond

to oil spill, if occurs.

"ICG Dornier aircraft has undertaken air reconnaissance of the area," Indian Coast Guard said.

Nil oil spill has been reported so far.

The distressed vessel MV

X-Press Pearl was carrying 1,486 containers with nitric acid and other hazardous IMDG code chemicals.

The extreme fire, damage to the containers and prevailing inclement weather has caused the vessel to tilt to starboard, resulting in falling of containers overboard. Concerted joint efforts are in progress by two ICG ships and four tugs of Sri Lankan authorities to douse the fire.

In addition, ICG formations at Kochi, Chennai and Tuticorin are on standby for immediate assistance towards Pollution Response. Continuous coordination is being maintained with the Sri Lankan Coast Guard and other Sri Lankan authorities for augmenting the overall response operations towards containing the fire onboard MV X-Press Pearl.

JEE ADVANCED EXAM POSTPONED DUE TO SURGE IN COVID CASES



Team Absolute | New Delhi

The prestigious Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) Advanced 2021 test has been postponed in view of the coronavirus situation in the country. Since the JEE Mains examination could not be held at the scheduled time (May 24-28), so the JEE Advanced examination, which was going to be held on July 3, has also been postponed. The Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur announced. The Union Education Ministry had decided to conduct the JEE Mains examination four times in the current year. Candidates can appear in all four examinations of which their best test scores will be considered for appearing for the JEE Advanced exam. However, only two of the four sessions of JEE Mains examination have been conducted till now. National Testing Agency's Senior Examination Director, Sadhana Parashar, said the first session of the JEE Mains examination was held in February this year and more than 6,20,000 students appeared. The second session was held in March with more than 5,56,000 students appearing. The third session of the JEE Mains examination was scheduled to be held from April 27 to 30, but had to be postponed in view of the second wave of pandemic. In the same way, the fourth session to be held on May 24-28 was also postponed. According to the Education Ministry, students will be informed 15 days in advance before the test is conducted.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Vaccines have been found to be effective in combating mutated variants and protect the vaccinated individual from severe illnesses, hospitalization, or death, reveals a study conducted by a Delhi-based hospital.

The study was conducted amid several reported cases of infections after partial or complete vaccination, occurring in a small percentage of people. Concerns have been raised on the efficacy of vaccination against the mutated variants of Covid-19. The study, conducted by Indraprastha Apollo Hospitals, that include 69 symptomatic healthcare workers working at the hospital, who were tested positive for Covid-19 after



their vaccination with the Covishield vaccine during the first 100 days of the vaccination drive earlier this year.

The study analyzed nasopharyngeal samples for genome sequencing, in collaboration with the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC).

The study was conducted between January 16 and April 24.

"Genome Sequencing is the key test to identify the nature of the virus and the variants that may emerge."

"Currently, this facility is available in only 10 select Government organizations, but such testing facilities are now being increased in the near

future by the Government of India," the hospital said in a statement.

"Amongst 69 people, 51 were fully vaccinated with two doses (73.91 per cent) and the remaining 18 (26.09 per cent) were partially immunized with a single dose, prior to acquiring the infection." The predominant infections occurred from B.1.617.2 lineage (47.83 per cent), followed by B.1 and B.1.1.7 strains. There were only two hospital admissions (2.89 per cent) for minor symptoms, but no ICU admissions and deaths, from this group," said Anupam Sibal, Group Medical Director and Senior Pediatric Gastroenterologist of Apollo

Hospitals.

Sibal claims these findings are significant because more than half of the cohort were found infected with the Variant of Concern (VoC) and still escaped from the severe illness, which could have been a severe event for them without vaccination coverage.

Variants of Concern are mutated versions of a virus that may spread more rapidly or may cause severe illness and hence notified for global monitoring by the World Health Organization and other multi-lateral health agencies.

RAPID DECLINE IN CORONA INFECTION IN THE STATE: CM CHOUHAN

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has said that the cases of corona in the state are declining rapidly. Now in 45 districts of the state, corona infection is less than 5%. The state is ranked 19th in the country in terms of infection. Efforts are being made to zero the corona infection in the state till May 31.

Chouhan said that so far 10 thousand 33 Kovid patients have been treated free of cost in allied private hospitals in the state under the Chief Minister Covid Treatment Scheme. Under the plan, 5810 patients of Corona are currently receiving treatment and 4223 patients have become healthy. Chouhan has said that 100 percent (6 crore 7 lakh 73 thousand 15) rural people survey has been completed under the Kill-Corona campaign in the state. Door-to-door cold, fever, cough patients were identified and free medical kits were distributed to them. Health tests and free medical kits were distributed in urban areas through Covid Assistance Center. Chouhan reviewed the condition and arrangements of the corona in the state through video conferencing from the residence today.

There are 2182 new cases of corona in the state. In the last 24 hours, 7486 patients have recovered. The number of active cases is 43 thousand 258. The seven-day average positivity rate of the state is 4.5% and today's positivity rate is 3.1%.

In the seven districts of the state Indore (8.6%),



Bhopal (8.4%), Sagar (7.3%), Ratlam (7%), Rewa (6.5%), Sidhi (5.2%) and Anuppur (7.3%) with 5% only Higher weekly average positivity rate. More than 100 new cases have come in three districts Indore (623), Bhopal (433) and Sagar (108).

Chouhan gave directions during the review of Indore district that additional efforts are needed to reduce corona infection rapidly there. The drop in episodes is slow now. If this remains the case, the infection can be increased if 'unlocked'. Ward committees should be activated and every effort should be made to prevent infection. Indore's

weekly positivity rate is 8.6% and today's positivity rate is 7.2%. Under the Kill-Corona Campaign Survey, the positivity rate of urban area is 8.2% and that of rural area is 3.4%. During the review of Sagar district, Chief Minister asked the collector that when the corona positivity rate is decreasing in the entire state, then why is the positivity rate of Sagar increasing? Where is the slop? Today's positivity rate of Sagar is 9.9% and new 108 cases have come here. Chouhan instructed to make every effort to prevent corona infection in the district. He directed to pay special attention to the Bina refinery sector. Chouhan instructed all the Collectors and

Superintendents of Police to take strict action to prevent corona infection, but the public should not be abused. There have been a few episodes, which are embarrassing. The public should be polite. Chouhan instructed that now there is additional availability of oxygen in the state, so make oxygen available for industries for their use. Chouhan directed that maximum testing of corona should be done in all the districts, so that the status quo can be known and efforts can be made accordingly. There should also be arrangements for treatment of other patients. The Chief Minister directed that besides the corona in hospitals of all districts, full attention should also be paid to the treatment of other diseases.

Digvijaya hoists black flag at his residence in support of farmers

■ "It has been three months to farmers' agitation. I request Modiji (Prime Minister Narendra Modi) to accept the demand of farmers and take back all three farms laws," Digvijay Singh tweeted.



Team Absolute | Bhopal

Madhya Pradesh chief minister and senior Congress leader Digvijaya Singh on Wednesday hoisted a black flag atop his official residence at Shyam Hills here to join the Black Day call given by farmers' unions.

Farmers' unions observed Black Day to mark six months of their protest against three farm laws passed by union government. Digvijaya Singh tweeted a photograph of his official residence, showing black flags and said he put black flag in support of farm-

ers. He also demanded to withdraw all three farm laws.

"It has been three months to farmers' agitation. I request Modiji (Prime Minister Narendra Modi) to accept the demand of farmers and take back all three farms laws," Singh tweeted.

Apart from Singh, some farmers in Malwa region, Mahakoshal region and central Madhya Pradesh also hoisted black flags atop their houses to support the Black Day.

While Bhartiya Kisan Sangh is not participating in the protest, Bhartiya Kisan Union is participating.

General secretary of Sangh Badri Naryan Choudhary told journalists that Bhartiya Kisan Sangh was not participating in Black Day protest.

State president of Bhartiya Kisan Union Anil Yadav said "They (Bhartiya Kisan Sangh) neither supported the farmers earlier, nor will they support now. Therefore, we don't need their support." Farmers agitating at three Delhi border points- Singhu, Ghazipur and Tikri observed black day against the central laws by raising black flags, shouting anti-government slogans, burning effigies and taking out protest marches.

VACCINATION PROGRAMME RUNNING AT SLOW PACE IN RURAL MP

Team Absolute | Bhopal

A team of health and administration officials led by a woman revenue official was attacked when they went to a village in Ujjain district of Madhya Pradesh on Monday for Covid vaccination. In Niwari, 350 km from state Bhopal, the villagers got into an argument with the district collector over the same issue. In Balaghat 435 km from Bhopal only two people got vaccinated at the two camps set up.

The rural areas of Madhya Pradesh have reported the lowest inoculation rate. Analysis of the daily vaccination data from the state's 52 districts shows vaccination bookings mostly from urban areas. Indore, Bhopal, Jabalpur, Sagar and Gwalior are the top performers in terms of vaccination.

The predominantly rural districts -- particularly the ones dominated by tribals including Agar-Malwa, Umaria, Harda, Alirajpur and Sheopur -- are at the bottom.

Health department data shows among the top performers Indore district reported 9,93,925 vaccinations followed by Bhopal with 7,30,628, Jabalpur with 5,59,320, Sagar with 4,15,266 and Gwalior with 4,20,520 vaccinations up to May 24.

Among the worst performers are the tribal dominated Agar-Malwa belt, which reported 58,994 vaccinations, Umaria with 64,152 vaccinations, Harda with 66,554, Alirajpur with 66,848 and Sheopur with 68,012 vaccinations up to May 24.

Analysis of the best performers showed the state's most populated district -- Indore, with an estimated 33 lakh present population -- had vaccinated 29 per cent of its population.

The rest includes state capital Bhopal. The city with an estimated population of 28 lakh had reported 26 per cent vaccination till May 24.

It was followed by Jabalpur -- 21 per cent of the estimated 25-lakh population have been vaccinated.

In Sagar, 18 per cent of the 24 lakh people have been vaccinated. In Gwalior, 25 per cent of the 16 lakh estimated population have been vaccinated.

Among the worst performers are Agar Malwa, where only 12 per cent of the 5 lakh people were vaccinated till May 24. In Umaria, with a population of 6 lakh, the corresponding figure is 11. In Harda, 12 per cent of the 5.5 lakh people have been vaccinated. In Alirajpur, the figure is 9 per cent and in Sheopur 10 per cent. Altogether, 100,77,852 vaccine doses have been administered in the state so far. But only 17,71,040 lakh people have received both doses.

A few days ago, former Chief Minister and senior Congress leader Kamal Nath slammed the state government over the pace of vaccination and said no one knows when the vaccines ordered by the state government would be supplied.

The government blamed the Congress, accusing it of spreading vaccine hesitancy among the people.

Medical Education Minister Vishwas Sarang said, "There is some hesitancy and the Congress is responsible for this. We are carrying out a public awareness campaign so the public can get the benefits."

MP CONSTITUTES GROUP OF MINISTERS TO COMBAT COVID-19

This group will submit its recommendations to the state government in consultation with the District Crisis Management Committee, Development Block Crisis Management Committee as well as Village and City Crisis Management Committees as and when required.

Bhopal: The Madhya Pradesh government has constituted a group of ministers to determine a strategy to control the coronavirus infection. This group would hold discussions with all committees concerned and give their advice to the state government. This group will submit its recommendations to the state government in consultation with the District Crisis Management Committee, Development Block Crisis Management Committee as well as Village and City Crisis Management Committees as and when required. To break the chain of the infection, the group of ministers will submit suggestions for the purpose of achieving 100 per cent vaccination in the state. The group of ministers has also been entrusted with the task of ending the 'Corona curfew' in the state in a phased manner and effectively implement the proposed strategy to restore life to normal. They will present necessary suggestions for promoting and publicising, supervising and spreading awareness to ensure Covid-19 appropriate behaviour is followed by citizens.

Children raise voice against MP govt to save Buxwaha forests

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Children in Madhya Pradesh have come forward to raise their voice against the proposal by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government to handover the forests of Buxwaha located in Chhatarpur district of Bundelkhand to a private company for mining diamonds.

Children have not only pointed out the impact of cutting down forests to the state government but have appealed to it not to cut them.

In the past Bundelkhand was vastly rich in terms of water and forests. Unfortunately, the area is no longer covered with greenery and has scarcity of water sources. This exploitation of the environment continues and now the last green cover left is being slowly plundered. The Buxwaha forests have been given on lease for diamond excavation but protests have also started growing against it. This is probably the first time in

Bundelkhand when public awareness to protect the environment is taking centrestage because the Covid-19 pandemic has made the people realise the importance of oxygen.

Oxygen is considered to be essential for the survival of Covid-infected patients which is emitted by trees.

To protect the forests of Buxwaha, people are raising their voices not only in Bundelkhand but in many parts of the country. The children

which are the future of the country are also not far behind.

Several videos of children have gone viral on social media where they are trying to tell the government about the significance of trees for the people.

Children have penned poems to save the Buxwaha forests and urged the government with folded hands to reconsider cutting down trees through these videos.

People of all classes and age groups

have joined the campaign to save the Buxwaha forests and are trying to give the message that they will not allow forests to be cut.

On the one hand, the forest is an important part of the environment and on the other hand, it is also a means of livelihood for thousands of families living in villages in the Buxwaha area besides being the habitat of wildlife. There are rich water sources and these forests are revered in Indian culture so everyone is coming forward in the campaign to save the forests. There is a huge stock of diamonds in the forests of Buxwaha with nearly 34.4 million carat diamonds believed to be buried here estimated to be worth several thousand crores of rupees. The private company which has shown keen interest in taking up diamond mining has demanded nearly 382 hectare of land in the area. If this happens then 2.5 lakh trees in this area will be cut down.

Congress MLA Alleges Blackmailing By Woman After Video Call

Congress MLA Neeraj Dixit alleged an unidentified woman performed obscene acts on the video call and later started blackmailing him, police said.

Team Absolute | Chhatarpur

A Congress MLA here in Madhya Pradesh has lodged a police complaint alleging that an unidentified woman made a video call to him and performed obscene acts, and later tried to blackmail him with the clip, a police official said.

Based on the complaint of legislator Neeraj Dixit, who represents the Maharaipur Assembly seat in Chhatarpur, the police have registered a case. Deputy Superintendent of Police Shashank Jain told reporters on Tuesday, "MLA Neeraj Dixit has submitted an application at GarhiMalehara police station that an unidentified woman recently made a video call on his personal number. The woman allegedly performed obscene acts and recorded the video call. Later, she started blackmailing him on the basis of the video," Mr Jain said. He said the MLA in his complaint mentioned that he received the video call from an unidentified number, but he

attended it thinking someone from his constituency had called him to share a problem.

Mr Dixit earlier also received SMSes from the number, the official said.

Asked how much money the woman demanded, the official said such details are yet to come out and an investigation into the case is underway.

Based on the complaint, a case was registered under section 385 (extortion) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and relevant provisions of the Information Technology Act, he said. The official said such cyber crimes were very common these days.

The MLA could not be contacted for his comments. However, his representative Bali Chaurasia said the legislator received the call four-five days back when he was sitting with his family. He took the call thinking it was from someone in his Assembly segment. But, when he saw the woman indulging in obscene acts, the MLA disconnected the phone immediately, Mr Chaurasia said.

MR ARRESTED FOR BLACK-MARKETING OF REMDESIVIR INJECTIONS

The accused has been identified as Alok Ranjan, a resident of Patna in Bihar. Police said he lived in a rented accommodation in Ayodhya Nagar in state capital.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

A medical representative working with a private pharmaceutical company has been arrested by police for black-marketing of Remdesivir injections here on Wednesday.

The police have recovered five vials of Remdesivir injections from his possession. He was to sell the injections to a person at a high rate. The accused has been identified as Alok Ranjan, a resident of Patna in Bihar. Police said he lived in a rented accommodation in Ayodhya Nagar in state capital. Shahpura police station had received informa-

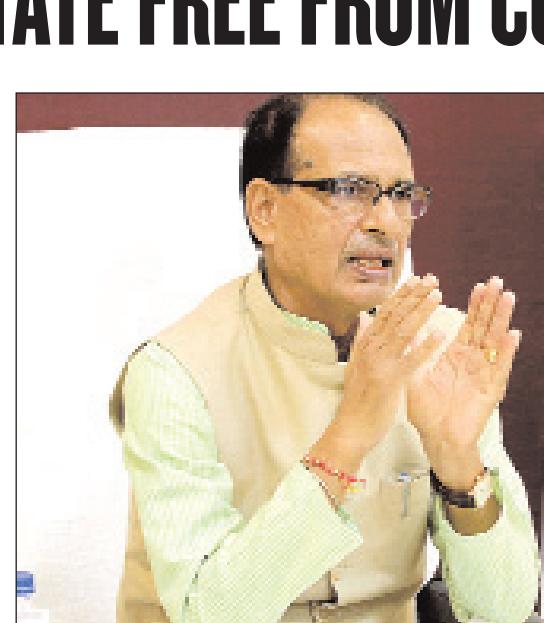
tion that a man was involved in black-marketing of Remdesivir injections. "We got information that he was to deliver the injections to a person at high prices. On the basis of information received through an informer, the accused was detained," said a police officer. Zone-II additional superintendent of police Rajesh Singh Bhaduria confirmed the arrest and said that the accused was being questioned to ascertain if he was a part of a racket. Recently, the police had busted a racket involved in black-marketing of injections with arrest of four youths in Kolar area.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has said that today is Buddha Purnima. On this day, Lord Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. Lord Buddha had said - Sarvan grieve, grief community, grief prevention and grief Gamini is the path which means sorrow, cause of sorrow and cause can also be eradicated. For this, Gautama Buddha told the Ashtanga Marg. He taught us to walk the middle way. Gautama Buddha told us the way to lead a disciplined life. Today, the Corona crisis has shaken humanity once again. The grief of the Corona virus is in front of us, there is also a reason for the virus to spread, but this cause can be prevented. We have taken some measures for this. Today I am satisfied to tell that due to everyone's efforts, the corona infection is now in a state of control in the state.

Chouhan said that the rate of infection has come down as a result of the imposition of Corona curfew. In controlling the infection, the model state has been made separate by the people by the people for the public. The government did not control the infection alone. We created the Crisis Management Group to deal with the crisis. Crisis management groups were formed at village, ward, block, city and district levels. At the district level, in-charge ministers along with MPs, MLAs, collectors, SP, public representatives of all levels, social and political activists took over the responsibility. The MLA provided leadership at the block level. This has been our innovative experiment.

Chouhan said that sarpanch-panch, socio-political workers, panchayat secretaries, employment assistants, anganwadi and ASHA workers, patels, mukadams, ANMs in village level Crisis Management Group. And Chowkidar means



village level staff. Whatever decisions we took were marketed in a manner. How the Corona curfew would be imposed at the village level, it was decided at the vil-

lage level. The villagers stopped coming and going in the village, what activity would be done in the village, how the villagers decided how the work would work. The Crisis Management team reached home with survey teams. If these teams do not go from house to house then many people get cold, cough, There is no detection of cold. This contribution is invaluable at the village level. Similarly, the Crisis Management Group of wards in the cities has handled ward level arrangements. At the district level, the Crisis Management Group took over all the responsibility of creating a micro-content area or operating the Covid Care Center. How the Corona Curfew will be implemented in entire districts.

The district hospital, the hospital associated with the medical college, the rest of the treatment arrangements were all controlled and managed by the Crisis Management Group of the district.

Chouhan said that Madhya Pradesh's model is a model of public participation and it was due to this model that success in controlling the rate of infection was achieved. But there is still a long way to go. The Corona Curfew is still in force, but it cannot remain in force for all eternity. We have decided that from June 1, we will gradually open economic activities. Corona virus will remain, so it is necessary to conduct activities carefully. We will have to avoid the crowds, fairs and organized events. If we do not do this, it will not take long for the infection to grow and we will again be in trouble.

Chouhan said that it is necessary to take a decision about the upcoming strategy before June 1. For this, a decision should be taken after taking full care after discussing it within a day or two. Committees will be made aware of the scientific method of unlock and the committees will decide according to local conditions.

DELHI TO GET SPUTNIK V VACCINE, QUANTITY TO BE DECIDED: KEJRIWAL

■ Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said, "We are in touch with the makers of Sputnik V. They assure that they will give us vaccines, but the quantity is yet to be decided. Our officials and the representatives of the vaccine manufacturers met on Tuesday too."

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Sputnik V's manufacturers have agreed to supply the Russian anti-Covid vaccine to Delhi, but the quantity is yet to be decided, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal announced on Wednesday.



"We are in touch with the makers of Sputnik V. They assure that they will give us vaccines, but the quantity is yet to be decided. Our officials and the representatives of the vaccine manufacturers met on Tuesday too," he said.

Kejriwal told the press that the vaccination process for the 18-44 age group has been suspended for the last four days as there has been no clarity when the next supply of anti-Covid jabs will be supplied to Delhi.

Covaxin stock for 45 and above age groups has also finished and only Covishield doses are being administered at government vaccination centres, he said.

The Chief Minister also said that mucormycosis infections have continued to surge in the capital and 620 cases are being treated at over 15 government and private hospitals, as of Wednesday.

Delhi logs 1,491 new Covid cases, lowest in two months

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Delhi on Wednesday reported 1,491 new Covid-19 cases, the lowest since March 25 when the national capital had reported a single-day tally of 1,515 cases, according to the health bulletin issued by the Delhi government.

Also, this is the fourth straight day when Delhi reported a single-day tally of less than 2,000 cases.

The national capital recorded a positivity rate of 1.93 per cent in the last 24 hours, remaining below the 5 per cent-mark for the fifth consecutive day.

On the other hand, fatalities are also gradually dipping in the national capital, with the city reporting 130 deaths on Wednesday, taking its overall toll to 23,695.

Delhi had reported 156 deaths on Tuesday, 207 on Monday, 189 on Sunday, 182 on Saturday, 252 on Friday and 233 on Thursday.

The number of new cases reported came out of 77,103 tests conducted in the last 24 hours. So far, a total of 1,89,39,206 tests have been conducted in the national capital.

The number of daily recoveries again outnumbered new cases by a fair margin again



on Wednesday, as a total of 3,952 patients recovered from the deadly disease, taking the total number of recoveries to 13,78,634 in the national capital. The recovery rate presently stands at 96.98 per cent. The national capital presently has 19,148 active cases, down from 21,739 on Tuesday. A total of 43,955 persons received vaccine doses in the last 24 hours, including 33,434 first timers. Out of the total 25,106 beds in the Covid hospitals, 17,878 are vacant, while the tally of people in home isolation declined to 10,079 in the last 24 hours.

WILL CONTINUE TO SERVE PEOPLE EVEN IF THOUSANDS OF PILS FILED AGAINST ME: GAMBHIR

New Delhi: Bharatiya Janata Party Lok Sabha member from East Delhi Gautam Gambhir on Wednesday said he will continue to serve the people and save lives even if thousands of PILs are filed against him. Gambhir's reaction came after a PIL was filed against him in the Delhi High Court. Hearing a PIL against the cricketer turned politician in the Delhi High Court on Monday, a division bench of Justice Vipin Sanghi and Jasmeet Singh said, "We are sure he had good intentions.... the way he has gone about it, he has actually done a disservice, unintentionally may be. This is not done." The bench took note that FabiFlu was in short supply at the time when the drug was being distributed by Gambhir. Replying to media queries during a press conference, Gambhir said, "The medicines I distributed were the need of that hour."

She said that with Delhi running short of vaccines, and Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal not making earnest efforts to buy vaccines directly from the Indian/foreign companies on time, it is unlikely that these special category of women would get their vaccine shots any time soon, as there is a severe vaccine crunch now.

"We could have started this in December itself. But we didn't," he added.

Kejriwal argued that the Centre



should have ordered vaccines from abroad when the second wave started in March, while alleging that states were told to make arrangements by themselves.

"From the past two months, every state is trying to arrange vaccines but, none of them has been able to procure an extra single shot of the vaccine from manufacturers, excluding those which have been given by the Centre. States also floated global tenders to buy vaccines on their own, but they all failed," he noted.

He appealed to Prime Minister Modi to procure vaccines from all across the world and distribute them to the states as manufacturing firms have refused to sell to states directly, saying that they would talk to the Centre only. "We (state governments) will fulfill every responsibility allotted by you (PM Modi). But how can we do something which is not under our purview. Centre has to fulfill its own responsibilities. You (Centre) provide vaccine doses as per the requirement of the states, we will inoculate our people," Kejriwal said.

Set up vaccination centres for pregnant, lactating women: Delhi Cong

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Delhi Congress has demanded that the Delhi Government immediately establish vaccination centres for pregnant and lactating women as the Central Government had made changes in the guidelines on May 19 to include these two categories of women for inoculation.

Amrita Dhawan, Delhi women Congress President addressing a press conference on Wednesday said, "Mumbai has started vaccination of pregnant and lactating women without registration, and Delhi should do likewise to boost immunity of such women."

She said that with Delhi running short of vaccines, and Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal not making earnest efforts to buy vaccines directly from the Indian/foreign companies on time, it is unlikely that these special category of women would get their vaccine shots any time soon, as there is a severe vaccine crunch now.

Dhawan said that with the next wave of the Covid-19 pandemic likely to hit



children hard, the Delhi Government should set up Covid Care Centres and make proper arrangements in the paediatric wards of hospitals.

Meanwhile the Chandni Chowk

District Congress distributed cooked food, fruits, masks, sanitizers to the poor and needy people as part of the Congress's kitchen programme at Nigambodh Ghat.

After Covid, Delhi needs to gear up against vector-borne diseases

Team Absolute | New Delhi

While the capital is already battling the deadly second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, delay in action against vector-borne diseases by the civic authorities could prove another challenge for the people of Delhi.

According to the Delhi Municipal Corporation (DMC), so far 25 dengue cases have been reported in the city, of which 2 cases of dengue were reported in February, 5 in March, 10 in April and as many as 8 cases have been registered till May 22. This is the highest number of dengue cases in the capital in the January-May period, since 2013. However, no death has been reported in the city due to dengue so far this year, civic authorities claimed.

Apart from dengue, as many as 8 cases of malaria and 4 of chikungunya have also been registered during the same period. Cases of vector-borne diseases are usually reported in Delhi between July and November. The period may stretch till mid-December. According to the data released by the South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC),

between January to May a total of 10 dengue cases were recorded in 2016, 19 cases were reported in 2017, 15 in 2018, 11 in 2019 and 18 in 2020.

With the vector-borne diseases having emerged, Delhi's civic authorities -- North, East and South -- said they have geared up for the battle against the spread of dengue and other such diseases.

Jay Prakash, Mayor of the North Delhi Municipal Corporation, said a campaign for the prevention of vector-borne diseases will be launched from May 30. "We are going to start a campaign to prevent vector-borne diseases in the jurisdiction. North DMC's employees will go door to door to check the larvae of dengue, malaria and chikungunya as well as to make the citizens aware."

He said that in the second phase, the work of releasing Gambusia fish in the reservoirs will be done so that the mosquitoes larvae can be eliminated in the biological form. In the third phase, fogging and spraying of anti-mosquito medicine in large drains will be done.

However, door-to-door visits to check mosquito larvae breeding may not be easy for civic employees at this time when the people are scared due to

the Covid-19 pandemic and are not allowing the entry of outsiders.

Dr Lallan Verma, a senior Medical Health Officer in the South Delhi Municipal Corporation, said it is proving to be a very challenging task for civic employees to check for mosquito larvae in homes as the situation is very different from last year.

"Despite various challenges, SDMC's workers are making all possible efforts to make the people aware. But the civic authorities cannot do everything alone to prevent vector-borne diseases and people's participation is very crucial. People have to ensure no water storage inside their homes," He said that 25 cases of dengue is not a big issue, but people need to be more alert and they must follow the civic authorities' advisory to protect themselves from vector-borne diseases.

A senior official in the East Delhi Municipal Corporation (EDMC) said, "Health workers have been spreading anti-mosquito chemicals in residential colonies and drains. There is also a shortage of health workers as the same workers are deployed for vaccination and other health management tasks."

14 black fungus cases reported in Gurugram in last 24 hours

GURUGRAM | Agencies

Cases of black fungus are increasing in Gurugram with every passing day.

During the past 24 hours the district health department has confirmed 14 new cases of the infection. With this the total figure has risen to 170.

These include patients living in outer districts and states apart from Gurugram. Those who are being treated in various hospitals of the district, according to the district health department. The city has recorded four suspected deaths due to black fungus in Gurugram. However, none of these have been confirmed by the district health department.

Dr Amitabh Malik, Chief, ENT department, Paras Hospital, Gurugram said, this infection is happening to many diabetes patients battling Covid-19 and those who have weak immunity.

"When a diabetic patient has Corona, he is given steroids which weakens the immunity and increases sugar levels. This is not a new form of infection. This includes people who have health problems or take medicines that reduce the body's ability to fight germs and



disease. These generally affect people with diabetes, cancer or people who have had organ transplants," Dr Malik added.

According to doctors, the common symptoms associated with the disease are headache, facial pain, nasal congestion, loss of vision or eye pain, swelling of the cheeks and eyes. However, no cases of white fungus have been reported so far in the district.

Dr Shashank Vashisth, Senior Consultant, ENT Department of Columbia Asia Hospital, said that white fungus is a fungus named Candida that is white in color. It also affects those people whose immunity is weak.

Wrestler murder case: 4 associates of Sushil Kumar arrested

Team Absolute | New Delhi

In a major breakthrough in the murder of Sagar Dhankar, Delhi Police has arrested four associates of two-time Olympic medalist Sushil Kumar. All the arrested are members of Kala Asauda and Neeraj Bawana gang.

A senior police official said that on a tip off, a team of Special Staff of Rohini under Inspector Ishwar Singh and overall supervision of Brahmjeet Singh, ACP of Operation Cell, Rohini District Delhi, has apprehended four active members of Kala Asauda - Neeraj Bawana gang from Kanjhawala area on the intervening night of Tuesday and Wednesday.

The official said that all were found to be the associates of Sushil Kumar in Dhankar murder case at Chhatrasal stadium. The arrested accused have been identified as Bhupender a.k.a. Bhupi, Mohit a.k.a. Bholi, Gulab a.k.a. Pahalwan and Manjeet a.k.a. Chunnil, residents of Haryana's Jhajjar and Rohtak. They revealed the entire conspiracy and sequence of events of the murder of Sagar. He said that non bailable warrants (NBWs) were pending against them.

Giving the details of their arrest, the official said that in the intervening night of May 4 and 5, an information was received at Model Town police station regarding firing inside Chhatrasal



Stadium. The official said that the police at Chhatrasal Stadium found five cars including a Maruti Alto, Honda city, Toyota Fortuner, Mahindra Scorpio and Maruti Brezza. The police also recovered one loaded double barrel gun and three rounds were found inside Scorpio Car and two sticks in parking area. During spot enquiry it was found that Sushil Kumar and his associates had beaten the injured persons. A case was registered under

several sections of the IPC and Arms Act. The investigation of the case was later transferred to the Crime Branch. Sushil Kumar and his aide Ajay were arrested on Sunday morning and they are on police remand with Crime Branch.

The official said that on Tuesday, an information was received that four members of Kala Asauda Gang - Neeraj Bawana gang involved in murder of Dhankar at Chhatrasal Stadium, are coming to Ghewara village to meet their associate Kala, also a resident of Jhajjar in Haryana.

"Acting upon the information, police laid a trap near Ghewara railway crossing and arrested the four accused," he said. "During questioning they disclosed that in the intervening night of May 4 and 5, they had gone to Chhatrasal stadium. They reached the stadium at around 12 night in two vehicles, a scorpio car and a Brezza car. Thereafter actively involved themselves in the crime," he said.

The police official also said that the four accused also narrated the sequence of events and details of other persons involved in the crime. "On hearing police siren, they could not escape with their vehicles but left both the cars (Scorpio and Brezza) and their weapons at the spot," he said. IANS had on Monday reported about the Mahindra Scorpio associated with the persons of Neeraj Bawana gang.

Police said that Bhupender, 38, came in contact of Rajeev a.k.a. Kala in 2000, and after committing a robbery he became close associate of Kala and committed a number of robberies and murders till 2011. The official said that in 2011, Bhupender went to jail in a double murder case and remained in jail till February 2021.

"In year 2020, his gang leader Kala was murdered by members of rival gang in court premises in Rohtak and after his release he was reviving his gang to take revenge," the official

said. Bhupender is previously involved in 9 cases. Whereas Mohit's brother Rohit was close associate of Kala and is presently lodged in jail.

In year 2016, the rival gangsters involved Mohit in conspiracy of attempt to murder of one Suresh. In 2019, Mohit was again involved in a murder conspiracy case of rival gang. He was released on bail in May 2020 and joined Bhupender to revive the gang. Gulab joined Kala Asauda gang in 2016 and two years later he was involved in an attempt to murder case and later in year 2019, was arrested for an illegal fire arm. In year 2020, the rival gang members targeted Gulab, wherein his friend Ravinder was killed and he sustained bullet injury. Since then, he left his home and spent his time with members of Kala Asauda gang to take revenge. He was previously involved in two cases. The official said that Manjeet is involved in supplying illegal fire arms. In 2011, he was arrested after a brief encounter and 32 illegal fire arms (7 pistols and 25 country made pistols) were recovered from him. In jail he came in contact with Kala Asauda and thereafter, supplied weapons to his gang members, the police official said. "He was arrested many times with associates of Kala in various cases. Now he joined Bhupender to strengthen Kala Asauda Gang. He is previously involved in four cases," the official added.



Cyclone Yaas fury: Mumbai Airport cancels 6 flights



The very severe Cyclone Yaas started landfall and is expected to cross northern Odisha-West Bengal coasts to south Balasore with wind speeds of between 130-155 kmph lashing the region accompanies by heavy rains, stormy seas and other disturbances over the next few hours.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport (CSMIA) has cancelled a total of six flights to eastern India following the threats from Cyclone Yaas which is made landfall in Odisha at 9.15 a.m., an offi-

cial said here on Wednesday.

These include cancellations of three incoming and three outgoing flights between Mumbai and Bhubaneswar and Kolkata.

However, flights to other regions are being operated as per schedules and all passengers have been requested to reconfirm schedules with their respective airlines before making travel plans.

The very severe Cyclone Yaas started landfall and is expected to cross northern Odisha-West Bengal coasts to south Balasore with wind speeds of between 130-155 kmph lashing the region accompanies by heavy rains, stormy seas and other disturbances over the next few hours.

Wadettiwar, who is the State Relief and Rehabilitation Minister, told media persons that the Maha Vikas Aghadi government is considering easing the lockdown-like restric-

State cabinet Minister Vijay Wadettiwar made it clear that the Mumbai Local Trains will not operate for general passengers anytime soon. He said that the Mumbai Local Trains will not open doors for the general public for at least next 15 days as a precautionary measure against COVID-19.

Even though there were reports that the Maharashtra government is planning to extend the lockdown in the state with some relaxations, state cabinet Minister Vijay Wadettiwar on Tuesday made it clear that the Mumbai Local Trains will not operate for general passengers anytime soon. He said that the Mumbai Local Trains will not open doors for the general public for at least next 15 days as a precautionary measure against COVID-19.

Saying that the passengers will not maintain social distancing, the minister said the trains will continue to ply for essential services staffers only at the moment.

Wadettiwar, who is the State Relief and Rehabilitation Minister, told media persons that the Maha Vikas Aghadi government is considering easing the lockdown-like restric-



tions in a phase-wise manner in districts where coronavirus cases have been declining rapidly. He informed that the Maharashtra government is contemplating relaxing some restrictions in districts outside the red zone after June 1. "Out of total 36 districts, 15 are in the red zone (high caseload) and the curbs there could be made stricter," he added.

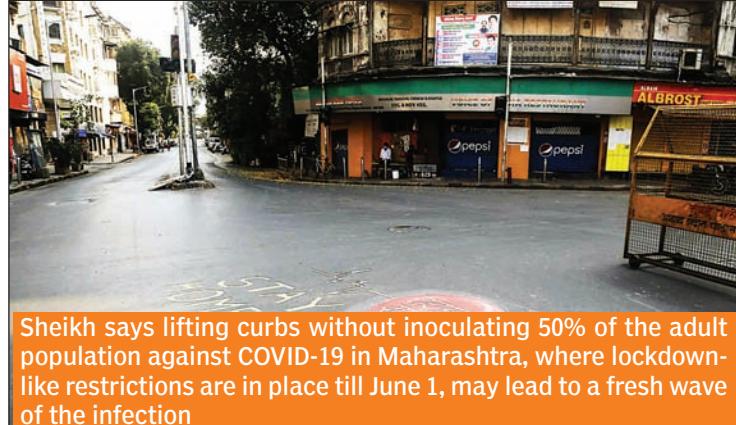
The minister further added that Buldhana, Kolhapur, Ratnagiri, Sangli, Yavatmal, Amravati, Sindhudurg, Solapur, Akola, Satara, Washim, Beed, Gadchiroli, Ahmednagar and

Osmanabad are the districts where coronavirus cases are still on the rise. Saying that the demand for easing restrictions has been increasing, the minister said the government will monitor the situation for the next four to five days before announcing a decision. Maharashtra on Tuesday recorded 24,136 new COVID-19 cases, taking the state's infection tally to 56,26,155, while 601 fatalities pushed the death toll to 90,349.

Recoveries outnumbered fresh cases, as 36,176 patients were discharged from hospi-

tals during the day, taking the tally of recoveries to 52,18,768. Out of 601 deaths, 389 occurred in the last 48 hours and 212 in the last week. The state also added another 536 deaths to the cumulative figure due to updating of COVID-19 death counts by various civic bodies and districts. Hence the overall death toll went up by 1,137 compared to Monday. State capital Mumbai saw 1,029 new COVID-19 cases and 37 deaths, taking its infection tally to 6,98,988 and the death toll to 14,650.

Maharashtra lockdown: Minister cautions against lifting Covid curbs



Sheikh says lifting curbs without inoculating 50% of the adult population against COVID-19 in Maharashtra, where lockdown-like restrictions are in place till June 1, may lead to a fresh wave of the infection

Team Absolute | Mumbai

In order to curb the spread of novel coronavirus cases in the state and enhance the vaccination drive, Maharashtra cabinet minister Aslam Shaikh on Tuesday cautioned against lifting coronavirus-induced curbs without completing vaccination of half the adult population in the state.

He said lifting curbs without inoculating 50 per cent of the adult population against COVID-19 in Maharashtra, where lockdown-like restrictions are in place till June 1, may lead to a fresh wave of the infection. Speaking to reporters, Shaikh said, "It would be an invitation for (a fresh) coronavirus outbreak if lockdown is lifted without completing the inoculation of half the population in Mumbai and the state. The state cabinet is still mulling over how to introduce relaxations to provide some relief to traders and businesspersons." The state COVID-19 task force is going to discuss all the aspects at its review meetings. The state is mulling over giving priority to certain shops to

operate...which services should be preferred over others... shops with air conditioning should be allowed or not among other issues," he said, adding that a final decision will be taken after a comprehensive assessment of the prevailing situation, the minister said.

Since last month, the state, worst-affected by the pandemic in the country, is under a slew of curbs

enforced to check the spread of coronavirus. Meanwhile, Maharashtra registered 24,136 new Covid-19 cases, 601 deaths in the last 24 hours, taking the caseload and death toll to 56,26,155 and 90,349 respectively, according to the state health department's bulletin.

This is the sixth successive day that the daily new cases of Covid-19 in Maharashtra remained below the

30,000-mark. Meanwhile, Mumbai recorded 1,037 new Covid-19 cases today that took its tally to 6,99,904, while 37 patients died of the infection and 1,427 recovered from it, an official from the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation said.

With the latest casualties, the city's toll has risen to 14,708 and the count of recoveries has reached 6,55,425, the official said. However, Amid attempts to check novel coronavirus surge in the state, Maharashtra government has shunned the option of home isolation for patients and instead made institutional quarantine must in areas that have a high Covid positivity rate. "We have decided to stop home isolation for patients of 18 districts where the positivity rate is high. The patients from these districts will have to go to a quarantine center, won't be allowed home isolation," said Maharashtra Health Minister Rajesh Tope. The 18 districts are Pune, Thane, Satara, Sindhudurg, Ratnagiri, Osmanabad, Beed, Raigad, Hingoli, Akola, Amravati, Kolhapur, Sangli, Gadchiroli, Wardha, Nasik.

Maha Covid deaths, cases again rise, toll crosses 91K-mark



Team Absolute | Mumbai

Maharashtra's daily Covid-19 deaths continued to increase while the state's fatalities zoomed above the 91,000 mark, health officials said on Wednesday.

Compared with 1,137 deaths on Tuesday, the state reported 992 fatalities, comprising 453 fresh and 539 previous fatalities, taking the toll to 91,341.

The number of fresh cases remained below the 25,000 level - but increased from 24,136 on Tuesday to 24,752, as the state tally rose to 56,50,907 now.

In Mumbai, the new infections decreased from 1,029 on Tuesday to 1,352, and the city tally shot above the 7 lakh mark to 700,340, while deaths dropped from 37 on Tuesday to 34, and the total fatalities in the country's

commercial capital went up to 14,684.

After days of dropping, the number of active cases rose from 314,368 to 315,042 now.

Also, 23,065 fully cured patients returned home, tak-

ing the total to 52,41,833

while the recovery rate

remained steady at 92.76 per

cent. The Mumbai circle - comprising Mumbai, Thane,

Palghar and Raigad districts - saw cases rise from 2,832 to 3,871, taking its tally to 15,18,079 and with 50 more deaths, the toll rose to 27,238,

in view of the reconciliation of fatalities. Meanwhile, the number of people sent to home isolation stood at 23,70,326 now, while those shunted to institutional quar-

antine were 19,943.

NGT asks Environment Ministry to provide SOPs to Maharashtra for providing environmental clearance

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has directed the State Level Environment Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA) of Maharashtra to review its workings and asked the Ministry of Environment to provide standard operating procedures (SOPs) to be adopted for dealing with clearances without hurting the environment.

A bench headed by NGT's Chairperson Justice Adarsh Kumar Goel gave the directions while hearing an appeal by one Tanaji B. Gambhire, preferred against the order of SEIAA, Maharashtra dated March 31, 2020, granting environmental clearance (EC) for the construction project "Ganga Altus" in Kharadi, Pune, to project proponent (PP) Goel Ganga India Private Limited.

The Green Court observed that there have been several cases resting in Pune Bench of NGT (now being heard regularly virtually by the Bench of Chairperson, Justice Goel) referring to construction projects having either no ECs or post-facto clearance with no environmental compensation imposed on such blatantly vio-

lating projects.

The Tribunal also directed the Ministry of Environment to review the functioning of SEIAA of Maharashtra and along with providing SOPs to be adopted for dealing with clearances without hurting environmental issues. The Tribunal asked the Ministry of Environment to act and file a compliance report. "Since we are coming across the grievance of continuous violation of environmental norms in construction projects being completed without prior EC and the SEIAA, Maharashtra is neither requiring demolition nor payment of assessed compensation to comply with the rule of law and protection of the environment, it will be appropriate to require the SEIAA, Maharashtra to review its working in the light of the judgments of the Supreme Court and violations frequently being alleged, including the present case," the tribunal said. It said a proper SOP should be laid down for grant of EC in such cases so as to address the gaps in binding law and practice that is being currently followed. NGT said the Ministry of Environment may also consider circulating such SOP to all SEIAAs across the country.

The petition said that the FIR registered shows 'it was intended to give material to opposition parties to destabilize Maharashtra government.'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The vacation bench of the Bombay High Court on Wednesday, which was hearing the petition filed by the Maharashtra government seeking to set aside the FIR registered by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) against former state home minister Anil Deshmukh and other unknown persons, adjourned the hearing to June 8.

The government plea included removing two 'unnumbered paragraphs' in the 'corruption' FIR registered by CBI on April 21.

This came after the state govern-

ment agreed to the CBI's contention that the matter should be heard by the same bench led by Chief Justice Dipankar Datta, which, on April 5, had directed it to conduct the preliminary probe into the allegations made by former Mumbai Police Commissioner Param Bir Singh against Deshmukh, provided the CBI did not press for certain documents from the state related to offences mentioned in the FIR till the next hearing. The documents sought by

the central agency from the State included the August 2020 letter and report by Rashmi Shukla, then Commissioner of state intelligence department to the state Director General of Police (DGP) regarding alleged political interference in the postings and transfers of police officials, along with the minutes of the meeting of the Police Establishment Board (PEB) about transfers and postings. One of the paragraphs in the CBI FIR challenged by the

Maharashtra government stated that "the central agency in its Preliminary Enquiry (PE) had found that former state home minister Anil Deshmukh was aware of the reinstatement of now suspended assistant police inspector (API) Sachin Waze into the police after 15 years and sensitive and sensational cases being given to Waze for investigation".

Waze is being probed by the NIA for his alleged role in the Ambani house terror scare case and the subsequent murder of businessman Mansukh Hirani. The second "unnumbered" paragraph stated that Deshmukh and others exercised "undue influence" over the transfer and postings of police officers as alleged by former Mumbai CP Param Bir Singh. The plea filed by the state government said that the registration of FIR on these two issues shows "it was intended to give material to opposition parties to destabilize Maharashtra government."

Rare sighting of rescued King Vulture thrills Maha bird-lovers

"This King Vulture was spotted going for food in the JungliJaigad Fort area of Sahyadri on May 9 morning and forest guard Santosh Chalke managed to click it in flight," ornithologist and honorary Wildlife Warden Rohan Bhave told IANS.

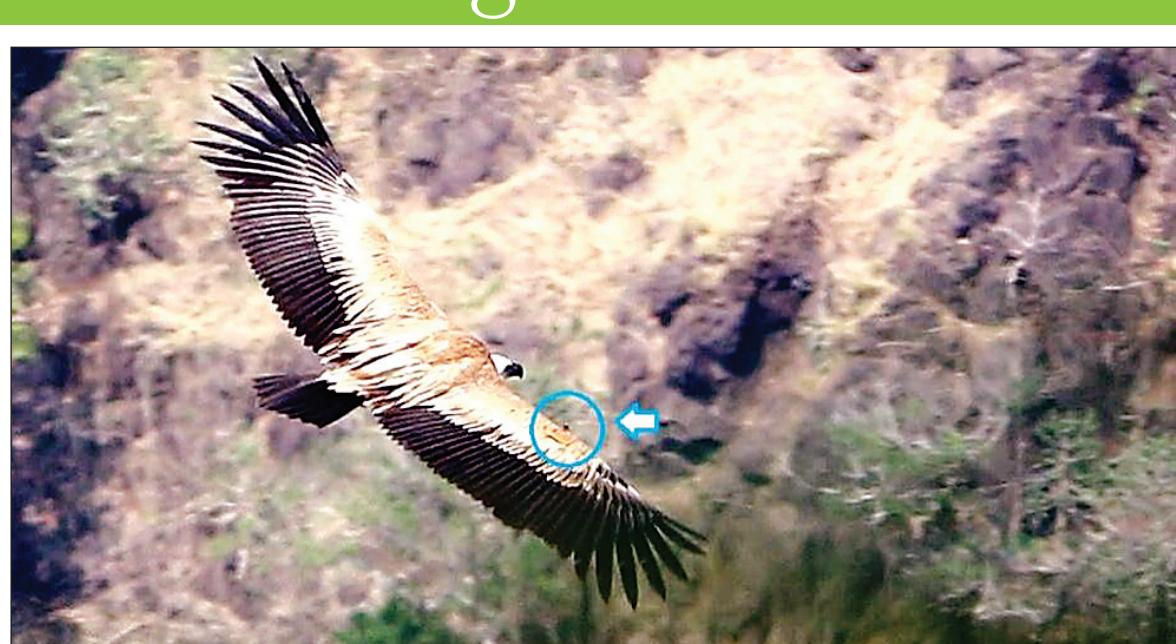
Team Absolute | Mumbai

An unexpected sighting of a majestic Himalayan Griffon Vulture, also called 'King Vulture', in the lush green Sahyadri Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra has thrilled bird-lovers in the state and the country.

More so, after it emerged that the bird sighted soaring in the skies was actually the once rescued on December 28, 2020, and spending over a month at the Malabar Awareness & Rescue Centre for Wildlife (MARC) in Kerala's Kannur.

"This King Vulture was spotted going for food in the JungliJaigad Fort area of Sahyadri on May 9 morning and forest guard Santosh Chalke managed to click it in flight," ornithologist and honorary Wildlife Warden Rohan Bhave told IANS.

Chalke provided the vulture's photos to Bhave for further studies which revealed an orange tag on its right wing which was affixed by MARC scientific and migratory studies before it was released in the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary on January 31.



After its release, the King Vulture was spotted only once on February 28, feasting over a carcass in Kerala with many other vultures, as per a MARC report, and followed by the latest sighting in Sahyadri Tiger Reserve a fortnight ago.

Later, the team of Bhave, Chalke, and others kept a vigil for over a week, but it was not seen again. "This spells good tidings.... It is a juvenile bird, around 1 year old, was rescued by a team of birdlovers including R. Roshnath and C.

Sashikumar of MARC. Its sighting is an indicator that the rescue effort was successful and it had adapted again in the wild," Deputy Director, Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and Principal Scientist of its Vulture Breeding Programme, Dr Vibhu Prakash told IANS in Mumbai.

Himalayan Griffon Vultures are usually found in Tibet, Mongolia, southwest China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, southern Europe besides the arid regions of north and northwest parts of India. Bhave said that the huge and magnificent bird stands around 125 cms tall, with a gigantic wingspan of around 3 metres (8-9 feet), average weight of male-female 8-10 kgs, with white feathers on the head, buff coloured on the back, with dark brown-black tail-feathers and a black bill. As with all vultures, it is a scavenger and relishes rotting meat, builds its nest high on cliffs or ridges and is a poor breeder with the female laying one egg a year a majority of the eggs or chicks fall prey to other predators, though the survivors can live beyond 40 years, added Dr Prakash.

To a question, Dr Prakash said that this vulture might live in the vicinity till Winter 2021-2022 before it would fly back to its regular environs north of the Himalayan range or eastern Europe, as this species can fly thousands of kms during migration. Roshnath and Sashikumar's report said that the King Vultures recorded sightings have been barely two-three in south India in the past 30 years, while Bhave spotted one in Koyna Wildlife Sanctuary, which is part of the Sahyadri Tiger Reserve.

SONAKSHI

ON SOCIAL MEDIA BAN BUZZ: LAST POST HAS TO BE A SELFIE

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Sonakshi Sinha on Wednesday reacted to speculations that Instagram and Twitter could be banned, saying the last post one shares has to be a selfie. In her new Instagram picture, the actress gives a half turn at the camera with her hair stylishly falling on one side of her face. She wears a black vest for a casual impact, and reveals a hint of a smile.

"If it's gonna be the last post... has to be a selfie," she wrote.

The deadline passed for big social media platforms Twitter, Facebook and others to enforce measures that the Centre has mandated in new guidelines.

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 with "Fallen", where she plays a cop.



AKASA: I AM FEELING VULNERABLE BUT NOT LOSING HOPE

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Her latest music video "Shola", a peppy dance number, is a hit with her fans. However, with all her upcoming projects on hold, singer Akasa says as an artiste she feels vulnerable, although she is not losing hope.

"The song 'Shola' literally happened at midnight. The lyricist Charan wrote the song in the middle of the night and then just composed the hook line, recorded it in his phone. Next day morning, with the idea and lyrics, he came to me suggesting we develop it like a happy, peppy number. We sat together and worked on it. We were not doing the song with an agenda. If it did not work for us, we would have not officially made the video or released the song. After recording the song, all of us -- the creative team, producer, everyone -- were listening to it and getting the vibe. There's an infectious energy to the song!" said Akasa.

The video, released on YouTube, is directed by Vijay Ganguly, and it stars Akasa along with actor Rohit Saraf and Charan.

"Rohit are I friends and we often talked about collaborating. He would always say I want to dance in a 'shaadi' (wedding) number! When this song happened, none other than he crossed my mind! The rest of the credit goes to the director of the video, Vijay. But Rohit is looking so happy and happening in the video!" smiled the singer, known for Bollywood songs such as "Kheechmeri photo", "Kudi Gujarat di", "Aitheey aa" and "Dilnajaaneya".

Akasa says the pandemic has created a situation where all artistes are bound to feel vulnerable.

"With no live gigs, with budget cuts on projects, and with no film or shows, I think all artistes including myself feel vulnerable. I was working on two projects, and video shooting is paused because of the second wave of the pandemic. It's more than a year now that we are going through this," she said.

"I am feeling vulnerable, but at the same time I have learned to live 'one day at a time'. I am not making a plan for the next three months, because in January I did not know this was coming in April and May. At the same time, I have also learnt to be responsible, because I am privileged. I never analysed earlier why being privileged comes with responsibility. Any artiste is a bit more emotional than others, and so am I. I know, I believe at least, sab theekhoyagega (everything will be okay), I will shoot my next music video, I will again go on stage and perform. As long as we are alive, we will unite on live gigs," she signed off.



RAKUL PREET SUGGESTS YOG NIDRA TO BEAT PANDEMIC STRESS

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Rakul Preet Singh on Wednesday shared a tip to overcome anxiety and stress in the time of Covid. The actress shared a photograph on Instagram, where she can be seen resting on the ground in a gym with her eyes closed and hands stretched. "No! I am not sleeping off. This is how I relax post workout, with a session of YogNidra, as suggested by my wellness expert @munmun.ganeriwal. If the pandemic anxiety is making you sleepless, stressed or if you are recovering post COVID, she suggests giving Yognidra a shot. And I cannot agree more! #everydaypostworkout," she wrote alongside the image. On the work front, Rakul's latest release is the digital film "SardarKa Grandson" co-starring Arjun Kapoor and Neena Gupta. The Kaashvie Nair directorial also features Kumud Mishra and Soni Razdan.



**RASHAMI
DESAI URGES
FANS TO STAY
SAFE, STAY
HEALTHY**

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress Rashami Desai took to Instagram on Tuesday to encourage fans to stay safe and healthy, as the country fights Covid-19. The actress posted a sun-kissed picture of herself surrounded by leaves. In the post, she explained to her fans about how there is a lot more that has been planned for them and it's important to stay safe during this time, to be able to achieve all that. "Life will only serve you if you give opportunities and lot more possibilities, stay safe, stay healthy, take care of yourself and loved once," she wrote. Meanwhile, the actress, who is known for her shows "Dil Se DilTak" and "Uttaran", was recently seen in the music video "Kinaasona" with "Bigg Boss 14" runner-up singer Rahul Vaidya. She is also part of the web series "Fandoor". She plays the role of an aspiring politician who marries her lover secretly in the series. She shares the screen with actor Tanuj Virwani in the series helmed by Nivedita Basu.



For Vinit Kakar, work from home is comfortable yet boring

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actor Vinit Kakar, who has joined the cast of the mythological television show "RadhaKrishna" as a voiceover artiste, says he working from home is something he enjoys although he finds it a boring option.

"I feel secured being at home as there is no Covid-19 scare. And I can wake up late in the morning and can adjust the time according to me. Also do not need to get ready and can do my job in my boxers. Work seems so comfortable and beautiful," he says. However, Vinit says though the work from home is comfortable, it is boring.

"I get bored at times. The comfort doesn't excite me and it doesn't allow me to generate my creativity as an artist. When we are at the studios and set, we are more attentive towards our work as we want to complete the scene in one take. We feel a bit insecure that for me, the shoot had to go in for a second take. And working with a team is fun and exciting." Vinit has earlier featured in shows like "Ram SiyaKe Luv Kush", "Devi AdiParashakti" and "Chandragupta Maurya".

Vitamin-rich superfoods to aid reduce anxiety, stress

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Spinach

A healthy diet, exercise, yoga, meditation, listening to music, or engaging in a hobby are all known stress-reduction strategies. Vitamins are an essential component in your quest for perfect glowing skin, as well as numerous other health benefits. It boosts the immune system and increases the body's ability to withstand stressful situations. Dietician Vidhi Chawla lists down a few vitamin-rich food items to include in our diet:

Oranges

Oranges, which are high in vitamin C, can help to lower stress hormones and strengthen the immune system. According to research on high blood pressure patients, increasing your Vitamin C intake can lower your blood pressure and levels of cortisol, or stress hormone.



Nuts
Nuts are high in nutrients, including B vitamins and omega-3 fatty acids. B vitamins are an essential part of a healthy diet and can help with stress reduction. Almonds, pistachios, and walnuts may even aid in the reduction of blood pressure. Nuts and seeds are also high in magnesium, which is beneficial because magnesium has been linked to improved anxiety management.

Avocados

B vitamins are necessary for the health of our nerves and brain cells, and a B vitamin deficiency may cause anxiety. Avocados are high in B vitamins, which are known to help with stress relief. They're also high in monounsaturated fat and potassium, both of which help to keep blood pressure down.

Blueberries

Blueberries may appear small, but they are high in antioxidants and vitamin C, making them effective stress relievers. Our bodies require vitamin C and antioxidants to repair and protect cells when we are stressed. While blueberries are delicious on their own (try freezing them for a cold berry snack), there's no better way to boost the nutrition in a serving of yoghurt or high-fibre cereal than to add them to it.

Ashwagandha

Ashwagandha is an Ayurvedic herb that can help you cope with physical and mental stress. Here's a unique way to incorporate ashwagandha into your diet. Take a 1 teaspoon of ashwagandha powder in ghee and mix in some date sugar, honey, jaggery, or coconut sugar (any one of these sweetening ingredients). Consume the mixture approximately 20 minutes before breakfast or later in the day with a cup of milk. If stress is making it difficult to sleep, it is best to take ashwagandha at night as it can help induce sleep.

Ashwagandha has also been linked to lower cortisol levels in the morning.



Charlize Theron, filmmaker Niki Caro to make movie on gender equality

Los Angeles | Agencies

Actress Charlize Theron and filmmaker Niki Caro have joined hands for a film on gender equality. Theron will produce the film, while Caro will direct.

The film will focus on four female athletes' fighting for equality in big wave surfing. It will revolve around the lives of Bianca Valenti, Andrea Moller, Paige Alms and Keala Kennelly and their journey to make a place for themselves in the sport which is predominantly male-dominated, according to contactmusic.com.

It is said to be based on Daniel

Duane's New York Times Magazine piece, "The Fight For Gender Equality In One Of The Most Dangerous Sports On Earth", reports Variety.

The film will stream on a digital platform.

A while back, Theron had said she would like to make a lesbian "Die Hard" reboot, after a fan pitched her the idea on Twitter.

She said: "Yeah, I mean, it's a great idea. That's why I replied on Twitter. Because I just thought that was kind of brilliant. I was like, 'This person needs to start pitching. That's a great idea.' And the fact that it would be two women, I was like, 'Yeah, sign me on'."

Los Angeles | Agencies

Pop star Jennifer Lopez is said to be "impressed" with the way Actor Ben Affleck has "stepped up his game" ever since they reportedly started dating again. This, even as Affleck was recently seen wearing a chain-link watch that Hollywood watchers insist is the same one he used to wear when he was dating J.Lo 17 years ago.

News of the two reuniting had started doing the rounds shortly after J.Lo split with her partner, former baseball star Alex Rodriguez, a while back, and was spotted with ex-lover Affleck in Montana, 17.

J.Lo 'impressed' as Ben Affleck makes 'huge effort' to rekindle romance

years after she and the actor had broken up.

Now, according to dailymail.co.uk, sources close to Lopez say she loves the way Affleck is "making a huge effort", giving priority to their relationship above everything. Sources added J.Lo "loves this version of him".

J.Lo, 51, and Affleck, 48, were recently seen gymming together, the website said, even as sources claimed that Affleck was recently seen wearing a watch he used to wear back in the day in 2004, when he dated J.Lo.

"They were always in contact over the years and he never missed a chance to praise her publicly," the website quoted The Sun as reporting.



HORROR FILM 'HOST' HAD ONLY A 17-PAGE SCRIPT

Los Angeles | Agencies

Filmmaker Rob Savage says his horror film "Host" only had had a 17-page outline script. "I don't know how much these guys have gone over, but yeah. We had, I think it was a 17-page outline, so every day I'd kind of turn up on Zoom with the actors, and we'd have a short paragraph to describe the scene. The actors and I would basically have to rehearse it and do take after take, and try to find what was working and what wasn't," Savage said.

He added: "We'd kind of shape it over the course of two or three takes, and get it down to what you see in the movie. We shot it chronologically, apart from some of the scare scenes, which we shot earlier on. So, it was really helpful to basically be able to see the movie happening in front of us day by day." Savage says it is nerve-wracking when you



Kim Kardashian denies violating labour laws as ex-staff members sue her

Los Angeles | Agencies

American reality TV star Kim Kardashian has denied violating California labour laws, in the wake of a legal suit filed by seven former members of staff at her Hidden Hills residence.

Andrew Ramirez, his brother Christopher Ramirez and son Andrew Ramirez Jr., along with Aron Cabrea, Rene Ernesto Flores, Jesse Fernandez and Robert Araiza were employed as gardener and maintenance staff, and had accused Kim of holding back taxes from their wages but not handing over the amounts to the government, reports latimes.com.

They further said that Kim did not pay for overtime, did not allow meal and rest breaks and had a 16-year-old on the staff surpass the 48 weekly working hours allowed for an employee of his age.

One plaintiff accused that when he raised such issues, he was fired.

Kim said in a statement: "Wage theft and other workplace violations are a widespread problem in Los Angeles. My firm is currently investigating other potential violations against these defendants, as well as other powerful families and businesses on behalf of everyday workers."

The spokesperson added: "Kim has never not paid a vendor for their services and hopes that the issue between these workers and the vendor who hired them can be amicably resolved soon."



ANGELINA JOLIE CLAIMS SHE'S BEING 'DENIED FAIR CUSTODY TRIAL' WITH BRAD PITT

Los Angeles | Agencies

Angelina Jolie claimed that she's being 'denied fair custody trial' with Brad Pitt as judge won't let kids testify about actor.

The actress, 45, hit out after Judge John Onderkirk reportedly stopped some of her "minor" children testifying about the actor. Angelina alleged that Onderkirk "refused to hear the minor teenagers testify to their wishes in regards to their custody fate".

She said she's being denied a fair trial in the process.

The star submitted documents to California's Second District Court of Appeal on Monday in a bid to disqualify Onderkirk from ruling over the case.

Her lawyers alleged that the judge has "failed to adequately consider... input as to their experiences, needs, or wishes".

They claimed this is in violation of a state legal code that allows minors from 14 to 17 to testify.

Angelina and Brad share six children - five of which are minors - including Maddox, 19, Pax, 17, Zahara, 16, Shiloh, 14 and twins Vivienne and Knox, 12.

Angelina's lawyers told the court that Onderkirk won't let her submit evidence that speaks to the safety and wellbeing of the minors.

AMAZON ACQUIRES MOVIE GIANT MGM FOR \$8.45B

San Francisco | Agencies

Amazon on Wednesday announced to acquire movie giant MGM for \$8.45 billion, at a time when the world's largest telecommunication company AT&T has announced to merge WarnerMedia with Discovery to create a new media giant that will compete with leading streaming players like Netflix. Metro Goldwyn Mayer's or MGM which has a century of filmmaking history, has a vast library of over 4,000 film titles, including 12 Angry Men, Basic Instinct, Creed, James Bond, Legally Blonde, Moonstruck, Poltergeist, Raging Bull, Robocop, Rocky, Silence of the Lambs, Stargate, Thelma & Louise, Tomb Raider, The Magnificent Seven, The Pink Panther, The Thomas Crown Affair, and many others.

"MGM has a vast catalogue with more than 4,000 films that have collectively won more than 180 Academy Awards and 100 Emmys," said Mike Hopkins, Senior Vice President of Prime Video and Amazon Studios. "The real financial value behind this deal is the treasure trove of IP in the deep catalogue that we plan to reimagine and develop together with MGM's talented team. It's very exciting and provides so many opportunities for high-quality storytelling," Hopkins said in a statement.

MGM has been up for sale since December 2020. "I am very proud that MGM's Lion, which has long evoked the Golden Age of Hollywood, will continue its storied history, and the idea born from the creation of United Artists lives on in a way the founders originally intended, driven by the talent and their vision," said Kevin Ulrich, Chairman of the Board of Directors of MGM.

Last week, AT&T and Discovery announced a definitive agreement to combine WarnerMedia's premium entertainment, sports and news assets with Discovery's leading non-fiction and international entertainment and sports businesses to create a premier, stand-alone global entertainment company. Under the terms of the agreement, AT&T would receive \$43 billion (subject to adjustment) in a combination of cash, debt securities, and WarnerMedia's retention of certain debt.



ABSOLUTE PIC OF THE DAY



Tamara Francesconi



EDITOR'S SPECS

New drugs to fight Covid-19

The two early intervention drugs target how human cells respond to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, instead of the virus itself, according to the findings published in the journal *Nature Cell Discovery*.

SCIENTISTS FROM QIMR BERGHOFER MEDICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN AUSTRALIA'S QUEENSLAND HAVE DEVELOPED TWO NEW DRUGS TO BOTH PREVENT SARS-COV-2, THE VIRUS BEHIND COVID-19 INFECTION, AND ALSO TREAT PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO THE VIRUS SO THEY DO NOT DEVELOP SEVERE DISEASE.

ACE2 receptor to bind to and invade cells. The virus then latches onto the cloaking peptides, which they mistake for human cells -- preventing infection. The lab tests have also shown that if the virus finds its way into cells, the second peptide-drug can block how the virus hijacks the host cell and replicates. It also boosts the immune system's ability to recognise the virus.

Professor Sudha Rao, head of QIMR Berghofer's Gene Regulation and Translational Medicine Group, said they were able to develop the drugs after discovering that some people have a chemical tag which acts like a padlock on the ACE2 receptor. "The tag can either keep the receptor locked or open -- controlling infection. This means people who have the 'padlock-like' tag on their ACE2 receptors will be less susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 and those without the tag are more vulnerable to infection," Rao said. "Our drugs stop the tag from being removed and also protect the untagged ACE2 receptors from being infected." The researchers also discovered that if the virus invaded the cells, it would unlock the tag from the inside -- allowing more efficient virus replication. The drugs are also stable and can be stored at room temperature, which would make them easy to distribute. The research was conducted on Covid-19 patient blood and human cells and the drugs are now being tested in hamsters at France's pre-clinical and clinical research facility, IDMIT, with promising early results showing they are not toxic and have few side effects

absolute edit

Can Boris Johnson be both Indophile and Sinophile?

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has previously described himself as a "son-in-law of India", owing to his former wife's Indian mother. According to reports, he is a self-proclaimed Indophile. While in office, he has also put on record his fervent Sinophilia. But can he really be both?

Gray Sergeant

Perhaps, I am sure it is perfectly possible for one person to have a profound attachment to the people and culture of both India and China. Although I suspect in the Johnson's case, such words are motivated by a desire to be popular and increase trade with as many countries across the world as possible. A dive into the Prime Minister's past speeches and newspaper columns would probably reveal a whole host of nations who he has declared a special affinity towards. Yet even if his love of all things Indian and all things Chinese is sincere, when it comes to diplomacy, a choice must be made. The choice must be India.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, views in the UK towards China have hardened, especially on the government's backbenches. Over the past few months prominent Conservative parliamentarians have demanded tougher measures against Beijing for its treatment of Uighurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. On several occasions these rebels have been remarkably close to defeating the government in parliamentary votes and have, they claim, in the process



exacted concessions.

In fairness, the UK government has shown some resolve too. In response to serious human rights violations in Xinjiang, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, has spoken out at the UN Human Rights Council. Subsequently, in coordination with allies, some Chinese Communist Party officials carrying out these crimes have been sanctioned. On Hong Kong, London has also rallied its allies to condemn the draconian National Security Law's imposition, whilst simultaneously offering millions of Hongkongers the opportunity to live and work in the UK.

Moreover, the pandemic has also raised wider concerns about relations with Beijing, beyond specific human rights issues. This past year revealed the UK's dependency on China for critical goods, including personal protective equipment. The problem with this situation was made even more apparent after Beijing halted and slapped sanctions on Australian grain, wine and beef imports after Canberra called for an independent inquiry into the origins of Covid-19. Given this, it is no surprise that many in government are looking to get the UK off its current trajectory of ever-increasing dependence on China.

There has also been a marked shift in British public opinion. Last summer, a Pew poll showed a record 74 per cent of Britons held an unfavourable view of China. This was up 19-points on the previous year and completed a profound reversal of the relatively positive perception of the country which existed throughout the preceding decade. This trend is not limited to Britain. A similar hardening of views occurred across the free world from Canada to South Korea, and, unsurprisingly, in Australia too.

India was not included as part of this poll. However, previous polling by Pew suggests that Indians may have been ahead of the game. In 2019, unlike many of people surveyed Indian respondents did not share the view that China's economic growth was good for their country. Concerns about Beijing's growing military might were even higher. The pandemic will have done nothing to assuage these fears, not least given the recent heightening of tensions, and actual confrontation, between both nations along their Himalayan border.

Going forward, this shared scepticism of China's growing global influence should give both the UK and India greater cause to strengthen ties with one another. The UK government's Integrated Review outlines its ambitions to tilt towards the Indo-Pacific and already highlights India as a key partner in the region. Ambitions to enhance bilateral trade and defence cooperation will be mutually beneficial in themselves and it will also make both countries more resilient to Chinese coercion.

To meet this challenge a multilateral approach should also be pursued. The UK's decision to invite India, alongside South Korea and Australia, to this year's G7 summit is a positive step forward. Pushback against the idea of turning this G7+3 into a more permanent Democratic 10 (D10), purportedly from Europeans concerned about appearing anti-China, should be resisted. Furthermore, both countries should explore how they can increase each other's involvements within existing bodies, whether that be India in the Five Eye intelligence alliance or the UK in the Quadrilateral security dialogues.

The increasing recognition,

amongst Britain and India's politicians and publics, of the challenges posed by China is something which can only enhance the case for a stronger partnership between both countries.

(*Gray Sergeant is a London-based Research Fellow. All views expressed are personal.*)

Global leaders call for commitments for clean energy by 2030



Recognising the urgent need for action, leaders from the United Nations, private sector, national and local governments, youth and other organisations issued a joint call on Wednesday for countries, businesses, cities and civil society groups to put forward their "Energy Compacts" to show how they will achieve the goal of clean, affordable energy for all by 2030 (SDG 7) and net-zero emissions by 2050.

The Energy Compacts would provide the clearest indication of how countries will ensure that all people have access to clean energy and move toward net-zero emissions.

The Compacts will be announced between June and the September UN High-level Dialogue on Energy. The leaders issued their call in a video.

"Global Champion" Ministers from over 30 countries have joined the call for urgent energy action in advance of the High-level Dialogue, along with senior UN officials, climate leaders, including the Presidency of the COP26 conference, CEOs, Mayors and youth activists.

"This year's dialogue is the best chance for governments, businesses and other partners to step up their commitments, if the world is to achieve clean, affordable energy for all by the 2030 deadline," said Liu Zhenmin, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and Secretary-General of the Dialogue.

"Ambitious and specific Energy Compacts can also help us limit temperature rise to 1.5 degrees, avoiding the worst consequences of climate change."

Urgent action is needed as global temperatures are already 1.2 degrees higher than they were in the late 1800s, with climate-related disasters displacing millions of people.

Energy use accounts for three-quarters of global emissions. Nearly 800 million people still lack access to electricity and nearly three billion lack clean cooking fuels, causing over a million deaths each year from indoor smoke pollution.

Momentum is growing for Energy Compacts, which will start to be announced at Ministerial Forums from 21-25 June, in the lead-up to the September summit-level Dialogue.

Since April, national government officials, major networks of cities and businesses, as well as civil society and youth groups, have been participating in an intensive series of planning meetings for their Energy Compact commitments. For countries, the Compacts will align with enhanced Nationally Determined Contributions and long-term climate goals under the Paris Agreement. Participating in the call to action, in addition to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Liu, are the Co-Chairs of the High-level

Dialogue, Achim Steiner, Administrator of the UNDP, and Damilola Ogunbiyi, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and CEO for Sustainable Energy for All.

"An energy transition is underway. It is our only viable way forward -- we won't succeed without it," said Steiner.

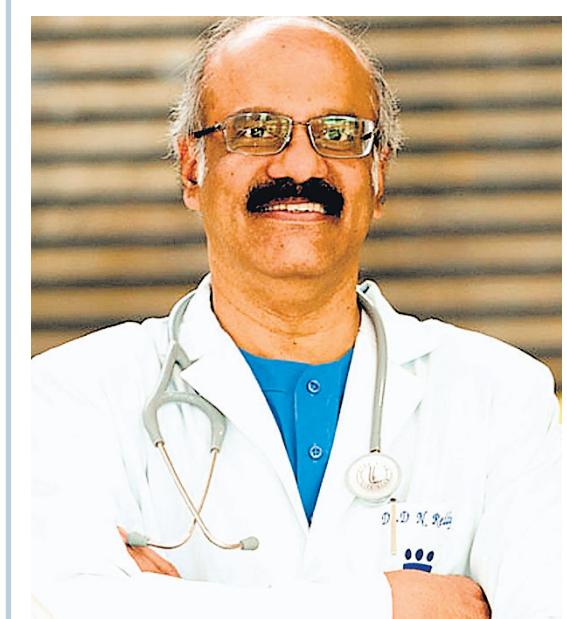
"The challenge is whether we can make it happen equitably and fast enough. It is unacceptable that almost 800 million people in the world still lack access to electricity. The transition must ensure that there is universal access to clean energy. Energy Compacts provide world leaders from governments, businesses and civil society with a timely opportunity to formalize this commitment and accelerate action through quantifiable, public pledges."

"We need bold action in the Energy Compacts, to ensure we leave no one behind and that we transition in a just manner to net zero by 2050," said his Co-Chair, Ogunbiyi. "This is an opportunity of our lifetime to provide universal energy access by exploiting new technologies, funding innovations that can create a cleaner and brighter economic future." Among those adding their voices to the call to action are leading climate officials Patricia Espinosa, Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and Alok Sharma, UK President of the COP26 climate conference. Also joining are Francesco Starace, CEO of Enel; Per Heggenes, CEO of the IKEA Foundation; Rajiv J. Shah, President of the Rockefeller Foundation; Rohey Malick Lowe, Mayor of Banjul, Gambia; Mohammed Adjei Sowah, Mayor of Accra, Ghana; Dymphna van der Lans, CEO of the Clean Cooking Alliance; and Jaff Epse Bime Marilyn Bongmo and Tien Pham, youth activists from Cameroon and Vietnam.

NAGESHWAR REDDY BECOMES FIRST INDIAN DOCTOR TO WIN RUDOLF SCHINDLER AWARD

Padma Bhushan awardee Dr D. Nageswar Reddy, who is also the chairman of AIG Hospitals here, has been bestowed with the Rudolf V. Schindler Award from The American Society of Gastrointestinal Endoscopy (ASGE), one of the apex bodies in the world of GI endoscopy, thus becoming the first Indian doctor to receive the prestigious award, AGI Hospitals said.

The award was presented to Reddy at ASGE's annual



Crystal Awards ceremony that was held virtually.

The Rudolf V. Schindler Award is the highest category in the prestigious Crystal Awards named after Dr Schindler, who is considered as the father of gastroscopy.

Reddy became the first Indian medical practitioner to get this recognition from ASGE for his exemplary work in the field of endoscopy. "ASGE's highest honour is given to a member who has accomplishments in endoscopic research, teaching, and/or service to the field of GI endoscopy which exemplifies the standards and traditions of Dr Schindler," said Klaus Mergener, President, ASGE, while presenting the award. "Reddy is one of the first to promote endoscopy in India and has led the charge of educating numerous endoscopists all over the world," added Mergener. "It is very humbling for me as an international member of the ASGE to receive the Rudolf V. Schindler Award. This is also a testament to all the endoscopists worldwide, even from the developing nations, that hard work and dedication are recognised by the society, irrespective of where they work. With this honour, I rededicate myself to the education and promotion of quality endoscopy," said Reddy. The award has come in the backdrop of another distinguished achievement of Reddy, who was recently inducted into the newly-elected fellows of the prestigious American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Reddy is the first Indian medical doctor in the last 100 years to receive the fellowship of AAAS that was founded in 1848, marking the emergence of a national scientific community in the US.

Reddy was selected under the category of medical sciences for the pioneering work in gastroenterology, particularly advancement in the therapeutic pancreatic biliary endoscopy and innovations in transgastric endoscopic surgery; and for service to international gastroenterology societies. The title recognises important contributions to STEM disciplines, including pioneering research, leadership within a given field, teaching and mentoring, fostering collaborations, and advancing public understanding of science. Reddy's main area of research interest has been in GI endoscopy, particularly in therapeutic pancreatic biliary endoscopy and innovations in transgastric endoscopic surgery. A specialist in GI endoscopy, till now, he has published over 670 papers in national and international peer review journals, contributed chapters in 20 international textbooks of gastroenterology, and has edited eight GI endoscopy textbooks. Reddy has won numerous awards including the Padma Bhushan and Padma Shri from the government of India, BC Roy Award from the Indian Medical Council, and ASGE International Leadership Award, among others.

2 METRES SOCIAL DISTANCING NOT ENOUGH AS COVID AIRBORNE

Rachel V. Thomas

Maintaining social distance of two metres is not enough as coronavirus, that spreads via aerosol, can be carried up to 10 metres through the air, experts warned on Tuesday, adding that double masks, coupled with hand hygiene and proper ventilation could be the key to curb the spread. Coronavirus was earlier deemed to be spread via droplets. But a new assessment published in the medical journal *The Lancet* last month revealed that there is consistent, and strong evidence to prove that the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes Covid-19, is predominantly transmitted through the air. On the other hand, evidence supporting large droplet transmission was almost non-existent. Earlier this month, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said that coronavirus is airborne. The Indian government also, in a recent advisory, said that aerosols can travel up to 10 metres from the infected person, and that aerosols, through the infected person, can fall within two metres but can be carried up to 10 metres through the air. "Obviously, a distance of two metres is not enough. That the virus is aerosol-borne probably explains why the disease is spreading more rapidly. What we must stress more on is Covid-appropriate behaviour," H.S. Chhabra, Medical Director of Indian Spinal Injuries Centre, told correspondent. "The virus can sustain in the air for six hours and it can travel 10 metres of distance. One should wear double masks and when someone is wearing double masks, then two metres distance is enough," added Vikas Maurya, Director and HOD, Pulmonology, Fortis Hospital, Shalimar Bagh. The Union government's Principal Scientific Advisor,

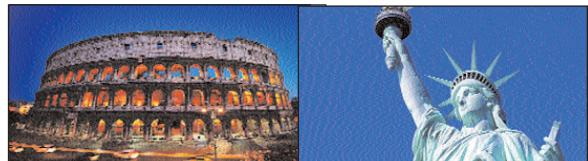


Prof K VijayRaghavan, recently released an advisory "Stop the Transmission, Crush the Pandemic - Masks, distance, sanitisation and ventilation, to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2 virus", which highlights the important role well-ventilated spaces play in diluting the viral load of infected air in poorly-ventilated houses, offices etc. Ventilation can decrease the risk of transmission from one infected person to the other. The advisory reads that just as smells can be diluted from the air through opening windows and doors and using exhaust systems, ventilating spaces with improved directional air flow decreases the accumulated viral load in the air, reducing the risk of transmission. As people have become over-dependent on ACs, 90 per cent of the air is recirculated within the building and only 5 per cent fresh air is brought in most modern buildings. "This increases the risk of cross-infection significantly as we now know that the coronavirus can be transmitted

through aerosols. Where possible in hospitals, windows must be opened on opposite walls to allow for cross ventilation and natural air exchange," Rahul Kadri, Partner and Principal Architect at Mumbai-based IMK Architects, told correspondent. "In sterile zones, air conditioning systems will need to be upgraded to incorporate a three-stage filtration process with UV treatment in the AHU (Air Handling Unit) or ducts in order to dilute and remove contaminated indoor air," he said.

If an area is well-ventilated, then there is nothing much to worry but when an area is not properly ventilated, people need to maintain proper distance and wear masks, the experts said. But for people living in congested areas, maintaining distance or ventilation is a hard task. Experts suggested that people living in smaller houses and congested areas must wear masks all the time, even when at home to avoid the spread and for ventilation, they must use air outlets or exhaust fans. Public transport, offices and malls with no ventilation poses a big risk when it comes to infection spread.

"Introducing exhaust systems to improve air flow in AC buses and metros, putting HEPA filters in AC systems wherever possible and cleaning and replacing them regularly is important. In malls and big offices, systems like roof ventilators and HEPA filters can help," Chhabra said. "It is a massive exercise but that is the answer if the virus is aerosol-borne in which case it remains suspended in the air for quite a long time -- as long as 3-4 hours," he noted. Along with double masks, hand hygiene, people must frequently clean high contact points like door handles, switches, tables, chairs, etc., regularly disinfect floors, keep doors and windows ajar even while the AC is on, health experts emphasised.



international

absoluteindia

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Bhopal, Thursday, May 27, 2021

INDIAN AMERICAN METRO TRAIN DRIVER SAVES ASIAN MAN IN HATE CRIME

New York | Agencies

A quick thinking Indian origin metro train driver saved an Asian man who was shoved onto the tracks in an apparent hate crime, according to media reports.

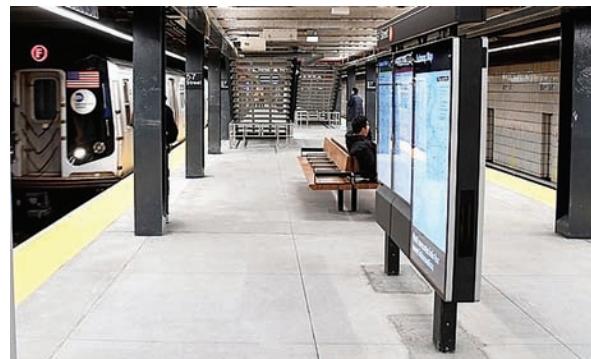
The driver, Tobin Madathil, said that he had put the train on an emergency mode after he saw the man on the tracks, managing to stop the train less than 10 metres from the victim, and went on to help him, the New York Post reported on Tuesday.

He told the newspaper, "I'm glad I was able to stop on time and didn't hit the guy, thank God!"

The Hill website, which concentrates on political coverage, called him "heroic."

Police told the newspaper that they were investigating as a possible hate crime the attack on the Asian man.

The 36-year-old man was pushed from the platform in front of the train that Madathil driving just as it was approaching the underground station on Monday.



Police described to the Post the alleged attacker they were searching for as a Black man and tweeted a picture of the suspect.

New York City has suffered an upsurge of communal violence against Asians and Jews most of them perpetrated by non-White persons. This year till the beginning of May there were 80 hate crime attacks on Asians in the city and 54 against Jews, according to police.

"Right when I was coming into the station people were waving at me, and that's when I immediately placed the train into emergency

mode," Madathil, 29, who has been a driver with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority for two years, told the Post.

"I exited the train and went to the victim. He was bleeding from the head."

The metro transit system is referred to as the "subway" in New York and the drivers as "operators".

"I just try to stay focused at all times when I operate, just watch the tracks and platform, just be alert," Madathil said.

The victim was taken to a hospital with injuries to the head.

United Nations | Agencies

India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has offered India's support to Secretary-General Antonio Guterres for his re-election during a meeting in New York at which they discussed a range of issues from Covid-19 vaccine to terrorism.

In a tweet after the meeting on Tuesday, Jaishankar said that he told Guterres that India "values" his leadership and conveyed its support for his election to a second term.

The global crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic featured prominently in their discussions.

Jaishankar tweeted that they emphasised the importance of finding "urgent and effective global vaccine solutions" and the critical need to ramp up the vaccine supply chain to "ensure greater production and fairer distribution."

With India set to assume the rotating presidency of the Security Council in August, their meeting covered a wide range of issues.

In a series of tweets on the meeting, Jaishankar said that they talked about "regional challenges in India's neighbourhood" and "shared our concerns about ensuring that the gains of the last two decades in Afghanistan are adequately protected."

US President Joe Biden is pulling out the nation's troops from Afghanistan after a 20-year deployment even as terrorist activities continue raising fears of regional instability. In his tweets Jaishankar said, "Countering terrorism and radicalisation remain priorities for the entire region."

Jaishankar said that he "highlighted India's con-



structive role" in the Security Council and "conveyed priorities of our Presidency in August."

He added, "Maritime Security and Technology for Peacekeeping address the needs of the day."

A spokesperson for India's UN Mission said that India planned to hold high-level meetings on those topics during its presidency.

Jaishankar also noted that Guterres expressed "appreciation of India's Peacekeeping operations including at Goma, DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo) recently." India peacekeepers based in Goma have been involved in rescue operations after the eruption of the Mount Nyiragongo volcano displaced several thousand people in the region last week. Several hundred people are also missing following the calamity. Climate change, a topic that Guterres gives top priority to, also was discussed, Jaishankar tweeted. "Greater resources are essential for larger ambitions (in setting goals for combatting climate change). Financing will

determine our seriousness and credibility," he added. The spokesperson for India's UN mission said that Jaishankar "apprised the Secretary General of India's efforts to meet its Paris commitments (on curbing greenhouse emissions), enhance renewable energy goals, as well as its leadership role in the International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure."

Jaishankar "underlined our strong development partnership with Africa, Small States and Small Island Developing States," the spokesperson said.

"The Secretary-General conveyed his appreciation for the consistent role played by Indian peacekeepers in support of international peace and security. Their response in aiding the people of Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo following the volcanic eruption was recognised," the diplomat added. In the discussion of fighting Covid-19, they felt that "the proposal by India and South Africa for a temporary waiver of vaccine patents" can also contribute to greater production and more equity," the spokesperson said. The US has agreed to the waiver, but it is facing opposition from several countries including Germany.

Guterres' Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said that they "discussed a number of issues relating to peace and security" but said he had no further details on those topics. He also said that they discussed the Covid situation and the development of vaccines. Guterres is running for re-election with no credible opposition and in the election India gets two votes, one in the Security Council and another in the General Assembly.

Islamabad rejects Pentagon claim of access to Pak airbases after withdrawal from Af

Islamabad | Agencies

After the Pentagon official claimed that Pakistan has allowed the US to use its airspace and ground routes as part of its Afghanistan campaign, a debate is underway in Islamabad regarding giving such an access to the US.

Pakistan officials have also categorically denied the claim made by Pentagon, pushing US to rethink its Afghan approach as its troops prepare to leave the country by September 11, this year. In Pakistan, allowing access to airspace and ground routes to the US would be a costly mistake as it would have serious repercussions on Pakistan's national security.

Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri, Pakistan foreign office spokesperson, said in a statement on Monday: "There was no US military or air base in Pakistan, nor was any such proposal envisaged," adding that any speculation on the topic was "baseless, irresponsible and should be avoided".

Since 2001, Pakistan and the US have had a framework of cooperation

for Air Lines of Communication and Ground Lines of Communication, but "no new agreement has been made in this regard", the statement added.

The pentagon claim was also echoed in the Upper House, the Senate of Pakistan, where member submitted a call for attention notice, calling on the house to discuss the Pentagon claim.

"This would be a grave and serious violation of the Parliament of Pakistan's unanimously adopted terms of engagement for American/foreign forces adopted on April 12, 2021," read the notice submitted by Senator Mushahid Hussain Syed.

Syed contested that the decision to give US forces airspace and access to airbases and ground routes would be contrary to the national security interests of Pakistan as he said "Pakistani people experienced the worst blowback from our previous entanglement after 9/11, and people of Pakistan would resolutely resist the encroachment of their sovereignty under any pretext". Experts say that Pakistan cannot afford to become party with the US again as it would increase hostility

against Pakistan in Afghanistan and would have major negative impact on Pakistan's relations with the Taliban.

US recently revealed that even though it would withdraw from Afghanistan, some troops would remain stationed in nearby neighbouring countries, adding that US was in consultation with several Central Asian neighbours of Afghanistan to survey where it can reposition troops to prevent landlocked Afghanistan from becoming a militant hub once again. Pakistan is a key role player in the ongoing Afghan peace process and is also among the prime beneficiaries of challenges, if normalcy is not restored in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal.

Experts also highlight that any deal with the US would have a negative impact on Pakistan's relations with China, especially on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

China would not like any physical US presence in Pakistan as it would affect their interests and the CPEC project.

3 DEAD AFTER JAPANESE FISHING BOAT COLLIDES WITH RUSSIAN SHIP

Tokyo: Three crew members from a Japanese fishing vessel died after the boat collided with a Russian ship off the northern island of Hokkaido on Wednesday. There were five crew members on board the 9.7-ton crab-fishing boat when it collided with the 662-ton Russian AMUR ship and capsized, Kyodo News reported, citing local authorities. A rescue mission retrieved all five, but a 64-year-old chief engineer and two crew members in their 30s were later confirmed dead, and another member was injured, Kyodo said. The incident took place about 23 kilometres north-east of Monbetsu Port on Hokkaido at around 6 am (2100 GMT Tuesday), the report said. The Japan Coast Guard is investigating what caused the incident.

Joe Biden, Putin to hold summit in Geneva in June

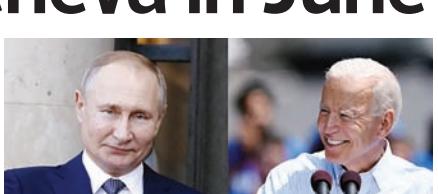
Washington/Moscow | Agencies

US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin will hold their first summit in Geneva, Switzerland on June 16, the White House said on Tuesday.

"The leaders will discuss the full range of pressing issues, as we seek to restore predictability and stability to the US-Russia relationship," the White House said in a short statement.

It will be Biden's first in-person meeting with Putin as President. Biden said earlier this month that he expected to meet with Putin during his trip to Europe in June, when he would attend the Group of Seven Summit in Britain and then the NATO Summit in Brussels, Belgium, the Xinhua news agency reported. The Kremlin also confirmed the meeting in a separate statement.

"We intend to discuss the state of and the prospects for the further development of Russian-US relations, strategic stability issues, as well as topical issues on the international agenda, including interaction in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic and the settlement of regional conflicts," said the Kremlin statement.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Iceland last week in a move that was widely perceived as part of the preparation for the summit. The two officials have expressed willingness to cooperate while admitting "serious differences" amid tense relations.

On Monday, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan held consultations with his Russian counterpart Nikolay Patrushev in Geneva. The White House said in a joint statement that their meeting was "constructive" despite "outstanding differences."

The sides agreed that a normalisation of US-Russian relations would be in the interest of both countries and contribute to global predictability and stability," according to the joint statement. Relations between Washington and Moscow have been adversarial in recent years.

Unidentified men attack scribe in Islamabad

Islamabad | Agencies

Three unidentified masked men assaulted journalist Asad Toor at his home here, Geo News reported.

Toor was later shifted to the hospital. The Islamabad police is investigating the incident.

Closed-circuit television camera footage obtained by Geo News shows the suspects fleeing after assaulting the journalist. In the video, three suspects wearing masks can be seen leaving Toor's apartment.

The video also showed an injured Toor walking out of the apartment with his hands and feet tied, calling for help.

Federal Minister for Information Fawad Chaudhry took notice of the incident and instructed the Islamabad SSP to investigate the attack. Attorney-General Khalid Javed Khan spoke to Geo News about the attack on Toor, saying that the federal capital is not a forest. "We are bringing a bill for the protection of journalists. Such incidents are intolerable," he said. He said the issue has been discussed with the home secretary and



Islamabad IG. "Anyone involved in violence against journalists should be punished," Khan said. The attack on journalist Asad Toor is reprehensible, said PML-N spokesperson Marriyum Aurangzeb. She said the government should ensure security for journalists instead of giving lectures on protection of journalists. The government has failed to bring the accused to justice, Aurangzeb said. PML-N Vice President Maryam Nawaz and PPP chairperson Bilawal Bhutto, too, condemned the attack on Toor.

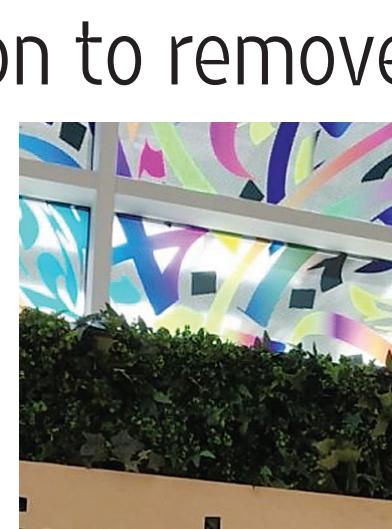
San Francisco | Agencies

The independent Oversight Board on Wednesday overturned Facebook's decision to remove a comment in which a supporter of imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny called another user a "cowardly bot."

Facebook removed the comment for using the word "cowardly" which was construed as a negative character claim.

The Board found that while Facebook's removal of the content may have been consistent with a strict application of the Community Standards, the Community Standards fail to consider the wider context and disproportionately restricted freedom of expression.

"While the removal was in line with



the Bullying and Harassment Community Standard, the current

Standard was an unnecessary and disproportionate restriction on free expression under international human rights standards. It was also not in line with Facebook's values," the Board argued.

Last week, the Board overturned Facebook's decision to remove a comment intended to criticise the Turkish government. The board, constituted by Facebook with 20 members from across the world, last month upheld Facebook's decision on January 7 to suspend then US President Donald Trump from its main platform and Instagram.

While the Board concluded that Trump should have been suspended from Facebook and Instagram, it also found that Facebook failed to impose a proper penalty.

S. KOREA'S EXPORT VOLUME POSTS DOUBLE-DIGIT GROWTH IN APRIL



Seoul: South Korea's export volume posted a double-digit growth last month due to a recovery in global demand, central bank data showed on Wednesday. The export volume index stood at 118.64 in April, up 20.3 per cent from a year ago, according to the Bank of Korea (BOK). It continued to rise for eight straight months amid the global demand recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic shock, Xinhua reported. In terms of value, the outbound shipment surged 42.0 per cent to 123.49 last month, logging the fastest increase in about 11 years since May 2010. The export value for coal and oil products almost doubled in April, with those for transport equipment, chemicals and textile products growing in double figures. The import volume index advanced 13.0 per cent over the year to 127.77 in April, keeping an upward trend for the eighth consecutive month. The import value index soared 34.1 per cent in April from a year earlier, posting the highest since June 2010.

Syria's polling stations opened for Presidential poll

Damascus | Agencies

Syria's polling stations opened on Wednesday across government-held areas in a Presidential election which is expected to give incumbent Bashar al-Assad a fourth term in office.

Syrian television showed long of queues of people at polling stations, which opened at 7:00 am (local time), DPA reported.

"We are proud to come and take part in this election as it is our national duty," a woman told Syrian television in Aleppo, the second largest city in Syria.

The broadcaster showed people dancing and waving Syrian flags as well as pictures of al-Assad in front of polling stations in various areas in Damascus and Sweida, in south-western Syria.

More than 18 million Syrians are eligible to vote in and outside the country, Interior Minister Mohammed al-Rahman said on Tuesday, adding that a total of 12,102



polling stations were set up. Al-Assad, 55, is expected to win a fourth seven-year term in office in Wednesday's vote, which the opposition has dismissed as a sham. Syria's Supreme Constitutional Court has approved three candidates to run in the presidential race, including al-Assad.

The two others are Abdulllah Salloum, a former minister, and Mahmoud Marai, an opposition figure tolerated by the regime and living in Damascus.

On the eve of the vote, the secretary of state of the United States, the foreign secretary of Britain and the foreign ministers of France, Germany, and Italy issued a joint statement condemning the "fraudulent election."

The five nations said they "support the voices of all Syrians, including civil society organizations and the Syrian opposition, who have condemned the electoral process as illegitimate."

FRENCH OPEN:

NAGAL, RAMANATHAN IN 2ND ROUND OF QUALIFIERS

Paris | Agencies

India's highest-ranked tennis player in singles, Sumit Nagal, took a step closer to securing a spot in the French Open main draw, defeating Italy's Roberto Marcora 6-3, 6-3 in the first round of qualifiers. Another Indian, Ramkumar Ramanathan, also moved into the second round of qualifiers after rallying past the higher-ranked Michael Mmoh of the USA 2-6, 7-6 (4), 6-3 on Tuesday while Prajnesh Gunneswaran failed to cross the first

hurdle. Nagal, 23 -- currently ranked 143rd in the world in singles and who competed in the main draw of the Australian Open this year -- was in good touch against his 192-ranked Italian opponent, dominating from the start. Nagal will now take on 23-year-old Chilean Alejandro Tabilo (world ranking 166) in the second round of qualifiers.

The 215th-ranked Ramanathan won his first match in six years on French clay after winning on his debut at the Roland Garros qualifiers in 2015. On Tuesday, the 26-year-old

Indian, despite the overcast conditions, kept chipping and charging against his American opponent to clinch the second set tie-break with a serve-and-volley point. He hit 26 winners past Mmoh during the rain-interrupted contest. Ramanathan will take on world No. 33 and Asian Games champion, Uzbekistan's Denis Istomin, in the next round.



Japan cuts number of visiting Games officials by more than half

Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC) said Japan's Olympic athletes would soon start getting coronavirus vaccination, despite the extremely slow pace of vaccination in the country. The inoculations for about 1,600 people, including coaches and some 600 athletes, will kick off on June 1 ahead of the scheduled July 23 start of the Games, the JOC said. Tokyo Olympics coordination commission chair John Coates told a meeting recently that the Games will be staged even under a state of emergency. His comment sparked anger on social media as 60 to 80 per cent of Japanese people oppose the Olympics amid the pandemic.

Paralympics to about 19,000 officials from 36,000.

Organising committee chief executive Toshiro Muto said they will make a final decision next month on how many spectators would be allowed to enter the venues.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Japanese organisers agreed in March to ban overseas spectators from attending the Games due to the pandemic.

The organisers also plan to cut 30 per cent of about 10,000 medical staff they had initially planned for during the Games as part of its simplification efforts, they said.

Doctors and nurses in Japan have expressed strong opposition to the Olympics with hospitals strained by rising numbers of coronavirus infections across the country, while the IOC and Japanese organisers are pressing ahead with the Games.

Also on Wednesday, the

Japanese Olympic Committee (JOC) said Japan's Olympic athletes would soon start getting coronavirus vaccination, despite the extremely slow pace of vaccination in the country. The inoculations for about 1,600 people, including coaches and some 600 athletes, will kick off on June 1 ahead of the scheduled July 23 start of the Games, the JOC said. Tokyo Olympics coordination commission chair John Coates told a meeting recently that the Games will be staged even under a state of emergency. His comment sparked anger on social media as 60 to 80 per cent of Japanese people oppose the Olympics amid the pandemic.

The first Test between England and New

Tokyo | Agencies

Japanese Olympic Games organisers have decided to reduce by more than 50 per cent the expected number of visiting officials the Olympics and Paralympics amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

The number will be cut to about 78,000 people for the events in July, August and September.

The Tokyo Olympics organising committee said it had estimated about 177,000 officials would visit the Tokyo Games and the Paralympics before the outbreak of the coronavirus last year, which delayed the events by 12 months. The committee now expects about 59,000 officials from overseas to come to the Olympics, down sharply from 141,000 it had initially planned.

The organisers also slashed the number of officials expected to attend the

IPL GETTING POSTPONED WAS HEARTBREAKING: CUMMINS



Sydney | Agencies

World No. 1 Test bowler Pat Cummins said the sudden postponement of the Indian Premier League (IPL) was heartbreaking since his team, Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) had just started to do well. The Aussie pace bowler was also upset with his own bowling performance in the tournament. "When it got cancelled, it was pretty heartbreaking. I felt like we had just started doing well. I thought the second half would be going to be huge for us, Kolkata Knight Riders. We probably had proven how good we were. Personally I felt like, my bowling didn't click, and that was upsetting," said Cummins in a YouTube chat with fans. IPL was postponed earlier this month following the emergence of Covid-19 cases in the bio-secure environment of the league. Singling out the match against Chennai Super Kings (CSK), he called it the highlight of KKR's truncated season.



Dhoni's best may come in 2nd half of IPL: Deepak Chahar



Team Absolute | New Delhi

Pace bowler Deepak Chahar has said that veteran wicketkeeper Mahendra Singh Dhoni may hit form with the bat if the 2021 Indian Premier League (IPL) season resumes. Dhoni managed only 37 runs in seven matches while CSK were dominant and placed second on the points table when the season was indefinitely suspended due to Corona pandemic. "A batsman cannot bat the same way for 15-20 years. If any batsman hasn't played regular cricket before, it is never easy to just come to a competition of the level of IPL and start performing, it takes time," Chahar was quoted as saying by Sportskeeda. "He has always played the finisher's role, which is even tougher when you haven't played regular cricket. Even in the 2018 and 2019 IPL seasons, Dhoni bhai started a bit slowly by his standards, but his stroke play became fluent as the season progressed. So, you might get to see the best of MS Dhoni in the second half of the season," he said.

Chahar himself had a good IPL season,

taking eight wickets at an economy of 8.04 in seven matches. "This has been my fourth year at CSK and Dhoni bhai has shown his trust in me as his strike bowler. This trust is so important because he has not just inspired me but also many others," he said. "His best quality as a captain is about how to utilise a player on a particular day for a particular situation. I've bowled three overs in the powerplay in pretty much every game for CSK and have learned a lot through him," he said.

Decision on IPL's remaining games on May 29, UAE likely to host

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Indian cricket board will take a decision on holding remaining Indian Premier League (IPL) 2021 matches at special general meeting on May 29, in which entire domestic cricket schedule for 2021-22 will be discussed. "As of now, nothing has been finalised (regarding IPL)," a top BCCI office-bearer told reporter.

The franchises too haven't got any intimation though they have been told that they will get to know only after May 29.

"There is nothing concrete yet. But we

are aware that the Board is likely to decide the matter on May 29 and may convey to us after that," a franchise official told reporter.

There are 31 matches remaining in IPL 2021 which was postponed, after completion of 29 matches, due to Covid-19 cases in the bio-secure environment.

Although there has been no official intimation from the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), UAE, where IPL 2020 edition was also held, appears to be the most likely venue to hold the remainder of IPL. The window being discussed is the month-long gap between the end of India's Test series in England on September 14 and start of the 2020 World Cup in mid-October. The T20 World Cup could also be held in UAE in the wake of rise of

Covid-19 cases in India.

Jay Shah, secretary of BCCI, had earlier issued a note to state associations, calling them for a special general meeting. "Notice is hereby given for a Special General Meeting of the BCCI which will be held on May 29, 2021 virtually to transact the following business: Discussion on the upcoming cricket season in view of the pandemic situation prevailing in India," BCCI secretary Jay Shah said in a note addressed to the state cricket associations.

The 2020-21 domestic season, held in India, could only witness limited overs tournaments -- Syed Mushtaq Ali T20s and Vijay Hazare one-dayers. The IPL, also a domestic event with international stars, was held in UAE.



Kohli, Sharma placed 2nd and 3rd in ICC ODI rankings

Dubai | Agencies

India skipper Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma maintained their second and third positions respectively in the International Cricket Council (ICC) ODI batting rankings. With 857 rating points, Kohli is only eight points behind Pakistan's prolific run-getter Babar Azam, who has enjoyed an extremely successful run against South Africa this year.

Only two Indians figure in the top 10 of the ODI batting rankings, with opener Shikhar Dhawan placed 18th behind New Zealand's Martin Guptill on 706 points. In the ODI bowling rankings, Jasprit Bumrah continues to maintain his fifth position with 690 points. New Zealand's left-arm pacer Trent Boult leads the charts with 737 points, followed by Bangladesh's right-arm off-spinner Mehendi Hasan who has 725 points. Only Ravindra Jadeja, at No. 9, figures in the all-rounder's top 10 for India. Bangladesh's Shakib Al Hasan top the



charts with 396 points while England all-rounder Ben Stokes sits a distant second with 295 points.

England-NZ Edgbaston Test to have 18,000 fans on first 3 days

Birmingham | Agencies

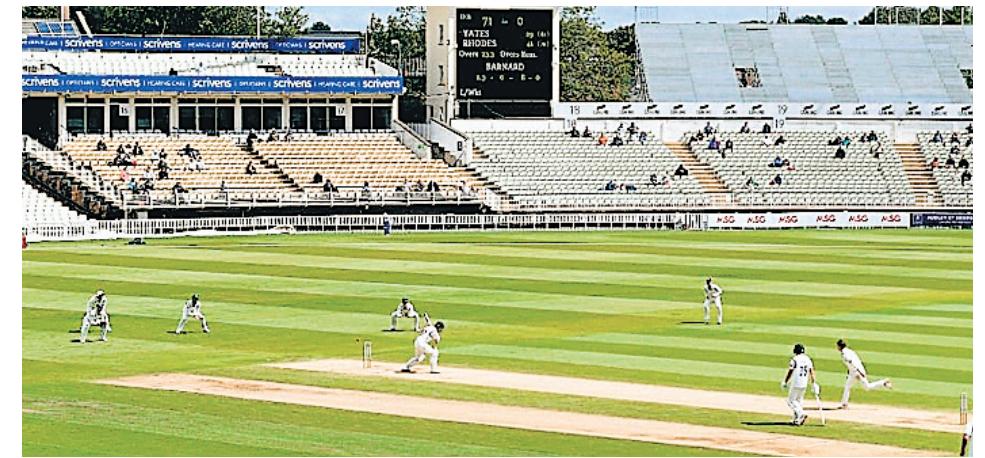
The second Test between England and New Zealand at Edgbaston will witness 18,000 fans on each of first three days giving hopes of presence of sizeable crowd at World Test Championship (WTC) final between India and New Zealand that immediately follows it.

The Edgbaston Test is being termed as pilot event by United Kingdom government.

"Edgbaston's LV=Insurance Test match named as pilot event. We will be able to host around 18,000 spectators each day. Ticket holders will be contacted via email regarding the next steps," wrote Edgbaston cricket ground administration on its Twitter handle on Wednesday afternoon.

The 18,000 fans comprises 70 percent of ground capacity. Spectators, wishing to see the game, will be contacted through email and asked to follow the next few steps. There have already been talks of having 4,000 spectators for WTC final in Southampton that begins four days after the June 10-14 Edgbaston Test is scheduled to end.

The first Test between England and New



Zealand at Lord's, due to run from June 2 to 6 will be attended by 25 percent crowd capacity.

"The UK Government's roadmap for easing of Covid-related restrictions in England means that the Test match between England v New Zealand

on 2-6 June will be limited to a reduced ground capacity of 25%. If you have purchased a ticket to this match, you will automatically receive a refund," said a statement from Lord's cricket ground administration.

Boxer Sanjeet enters semi-finals of Asian championships

Dubai | Agencies

India's Sanjeet Kumar defeated Jasur Qurbanov of Tajikistan 5-0 in quarter-finals of men's 91 kg category in Asian Boxing Championships here on Tuesday night. In another bout, India's Sakshi scored a 5-0 win over Rubafza Haqazarov of Tajikistan to set up a semi-final clash with top seed Dina

Zholaman of Kazakhstan in women's 54 kg. In women's 57 kg, Jasmine outplayed Mongolia's Oyunsetseg Yesenug 4-1 to advance to semi-finals. She will next face Vladislava Kukhta of Kazakhstan. Olympic-bound Simarjanjit Kaur too made a good start in continental competition scoring 4-1 win over Uzbekistan's Raykhona Kodirova to advance into semi-finals of women's 60 kg category. She will face Rimma Volosenko of Kazakhstan in

semis. There are no matches scheduled for women on Wednesday, but India's star male boxer Amit Panghal will be seen in action in quarter-finals of men's 52 kg on Wednesday. The world silver-medallist and defending champion will face Mongolia's Kharkhuu Enkhmandakh. The 2018 Commonwealth Games champion in men's 69 kg, Vikas Krishan will face Iran's Moslem Malamir in his opening bout of the competition on Wednesday.

RAHIM ASKS BOWLER TO OBSTRUCT SL BATSMAN

Dhaka | Agencies

Bangladesh wicketkeeper-batsman Mushfiqur Rahim, who scored 125 off 127 balls that helped his team win second ODI and series against Sri Lanka on Tuesday, saw his century get overshadowed by questionable behaviour on field. Rahim, a former skipper, asked spinner Mehidy Hasan Miraz to obstruct Sri Lanka No. 3 batsman Pathum Nissanka during running between wickets. "When he is running, come in front of him," Rahim was heard telling Miraz on stump mic. Bangladesh won the match by 103 runs through D/L method. Sri Lanka made 141 for 9 in 40 overs in response to Bangladesh's 246 all out in 48.1 overs. Rahim was elated after the performance but felt that others need to perform with the bat. "I think Tamim [Iqbal] and Shakib [Al Hasan] score regularly and as they had a bad day, players like Liton, Alif and Mousadeq should have grabbed the opportunity," he said. "If there are seven to eight performers it becomes easy. They should be more selective with their shot selection and must know when to play low risk shot and when to play high risk shot. I think they (juniors) need to contribute or else it becomes difficult for us."





Sensex ends above 51,000, IT stocks up

Team Absolute | Mumbai



The Indian stock market surged on Wednesday with the BSE Sensex closing above the 51,000 mark.

Healthy buying was witnessed

in IT stocks. However, sell-off in metal stocks capped the gains. Sensex closed at 51,017.52, higher by 379.99 points, or 0.75 per cent, from its previous close of 50,637.53.

It had opened at 50,899.58 and touched an intra-day high of 51,072.61 and a low of 50,620.45 points.

The Nifty50 on the National Stock Exchange settled at 15,301.45 points or 93.00 points, or 0.61 per cent, from its previous close. The top gainers on the Sensex were Bajaj FinServ, Bajaj Finance, and Infosys and the major losers were Power Grid, Tata Steel, and NTPC.

Retailers witness massive sales de-growth: RAI survey

Team Absolute | Mumbai

As India battles the severe second wave of Covid-19 and states undergo lockdowns, retailers across the country have witnessed a sales de-growth of 49 per cent in April compared to the same period of 2019, according to a survey by the Retailers Association of India.

In March, the nationwide sales de-growth was recorded at 12 per cent, showed the survey. Region-wise, western India was the most impacted in April with a contraction of 72 per cent, followed by 45 per cent in the north. South and eastern India witnessed a contraction of 40 per cent and 38 per cent, respectively, in retail sales last month.

Among the sectors, sales of sports goods and footwear contracted by 66 per cent and 61 per cent, respectively, followed by a 59 per cent de-growth in both jewellery and beauty, wellness and personal care categories. Other categories - food and grocery, apparel and clothing, quick service restaurants and consumer durables and electronics



-- witnessed a sales contraction of 49 per cent, 47 per cent, 45 per cent and 31 per cent, respectively.

Earlier this month, the industry body urged the government to take steps for capital infusion into the retail industry with ECLGS benefits and loan moratorium in the wake of the lockdowns, restrictions, and their impact on the retail sector.

AUM under PFRDA crosses Rs 6 trillion

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA) today announced crossing the milestone of Rs 6 lakh crore (Rs 6 trillion) of Assets Under Management (AUM) under the National Pension System (NPS) and Atal Pension Yojana (APY), after 13 years.

The AUM growth of last Rs 1 trillion has been achieved in just 7 months. PFRDA has witnessed remarkable growth in NPS subscribers over the years with 74.10 lakh government employees in the scheme and 28.37 lakh individuals joining from the non-government sector. The total subscriber base of PFRDA has increased to 4.28 crores. Supratim Bandyopadhyay, Chairman, Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA), said: "We feel immensely gratified at reaching this milestone of Rs 6 trillion AUM, and in less than seven months as we were at Rs 5 trillion in October 2020. The achievement shows the faith subscribers have in NPS and PFRDA. A growing realization during this pandemic is the priority accorded by individuals to retirement planning, for preserving their financial well-being."



REUSABLE PADS ESSENTIAL TO MAKE MENSTRUAL HYGIENE SUSTAINABLE FOR ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

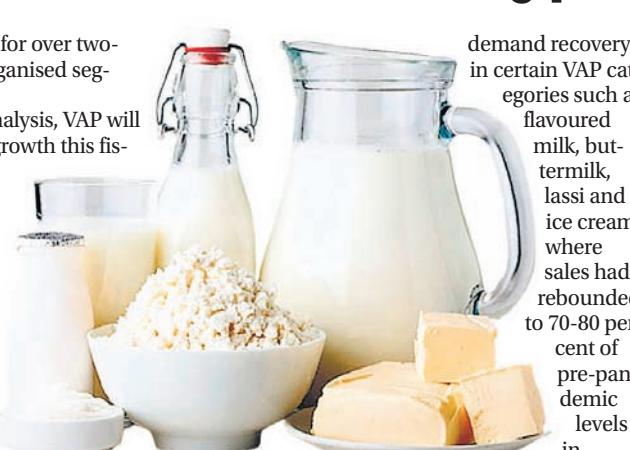
Team Absolute | New Delhi

Considering the immense non-biodegradable waste generated by disposable sanitary pads every month, sustainable menstrual hygiene in India can be achieved only with reusable pads made of organic material, said Anju Bist, Co-Director, Amrita SeRVe (Self Reliant Village) Program of Mata Amritanandamayi Math. Known as the "Pad Woman" of India for her zeal in promoting the use and reuse of sanitary pads made of cloth and banana fibre, she is the co-creator of Saukhyam Reusable Pads which have been awarded as the "Most Innovative Product" by the National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad. The pads were also lauded at the UN Climate Change Conference held in Poland in 2018. Saukhyam Reusable Pads are the first ones in the world to be made from banana fiber, which is a naturally occurring absorbent material. It absorbs six times its weight in fluid! Disposable pads, on the other hand, use cellulose fiber for absorption. Cellulose fiber is derived from cutting down billions of trees every year worldwide, unlike banana fiber which is obtained from agro-waste. All cellulose fiber used in India to make disposable pads is imported. Banana fiber is locally available. Its supply is limitless and cheap as India is the largest producer of bananas in the world.

Dairies to log 5-6% growth this fiscal, but lag pre-Covid level: Crisil

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Revenue of the organised dairy sector in India, after churning to a decadal-low growth of 1 per cent last fiscal, is expected to grow 5-6 per cent to Rs 1.5 lakh crore this fiscal, Crisil said on Wednesday. Healthy demand revival in value added products (VAP, 30-35 per cent of organized sector revenue) post pandemic effect last fiscal, lower restrictions as compared with the earlier covid wave, and steady demand for liquid milk (65-70 per cent or organized sector revenue) will help support overall growth in the current fiscal, the ratings agency said in a report on the sector. With increasing demand, milk procurement prices are expected to increase; albeit higher sale of VAP will buttress material impact on profitability. Besides, skimmed milk powder (SMP) inventory will also decline by end of this fiscal from the peak seen last fiscal, easing working capital borrowings. Almost stable profitability, controlled working capital and prudent capital spend will keep credit profiles of dairies 'stable', the report said. The report is based on an analysis of 65 CRISIL-rated dairies,



which account for over two-thirds of the organised segment revenue.

As per the analysis, VAP will see 7 per cent growth this fiscal compared with a contraction of 3 per cent last fiscal. Demand for most VAP products such as ghee, butter, cheese and milk powder is expected to remain healthy.

According to Anuj Sethi, Senior Director, CRISIL Ratings, "VAP revenue de-grew last fiscal because of the complete shutdown in the first quarter, which impacted the hotels, restaurants and cafe segment (20 per cent of organised sector revenue). This fiscal, we expect it to rebound on the back of increased home consumption and continuing food-delivery services even in regions seeing lockdowns." Crisil said, local restrictions however could delay

demand recovery in certain VAP categories such as flavoured milk, buttermilk, lassi and ice cream, where sales had rebounded to 70-80 per cent of pre-pandemic levels in March 2021. Sales of these products, which typically peak in summer, are likely to be affected if restrictions are prolonged the way it was last fiscal. Even so, the impact is unlikely to be significant on overall growth, as these comprise only 14 per cent of overall VAP sales.

Liquid milk sales is expected to grow 5 per cent this fiscal compared with 3 per cent last fiscal, backed by increased consumption by households and non-households, supporting overall growth.

As for milk procurement prices, they are expected to be 5-7 per cent higher year-on-year. Subdued demand had weighed on the prices last fiscal. Overall, operating profitability of dairies will moderate slightly to 5.25 per cent, from 5.7 per cent estimated for last fiscal. "With demand for VAP and liquid milk improving, SMP inventory, which had increased 7 per cent on-year last fiscal, is expected to moderate this fiscal. About 70-75 per cent of the working capital requirement of dairies consists of SMP inventory. As a result, we expect their working capital requirement to normalise by the end of this fiscal," said Tanvi Shah, Associate Director, CRISIL Ratings.

Capital spending by dairies is expected to be prudent, though higher than last fiscal, resulting in only a modest increase in overall debt levels. That will help keep credit profiles stable. Key debt metrics such as gearing and interest cover are estimated at 1.34 times and 5.0 times, respectively, this fiscal, compared with 1.25 times and 6.32 times last fiscal. How the pandemic and restrictions pan out, and their impact on VAP sales will bear watching in the road ahead, the ratings agency said.

GST COUNCIL SETS UP GOM ON CAPACITY BASED TAXATION, SPECIAL COMPOSITION SCHEMES

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Goods and Service Tax Council has constituted a group of ministers (GoM) to examine the possibility of levy of GST based on capacity of manufacturing units and special composition schemes in certain evasion prone sectors with reference to current legal provisions.

The Council has set five-point terms of reference for the GoM which will include examining the legal validity of such changes (manufacturing capacity based taxation and new composition scheme) and the impact of such levy on destination nature of current GST design.

"To examine the possibility of levy of GST based on capacity of manufacturing units and special composition schemes in certain evasion prone sectors like pan masala and gutka, brick kilns, sand mining etc with

reference to the current legal provisions," the terms of reference of the GoM states. The GoM will also examine any other administrative or systemic mechanism to plug leak in these sectors.

Also, the GoM will examine the impact of GST on reverse charge on me the oil and to examine if these could be other class of supplies that could be subjected to reverse charge to augment revenue.

The seven member GoM

include deputy chief minister of Delhi Manish Sisodia, Haryana deputy CM Dushyant Chautala, Kerala Finance minister K.N. Balagopal, Madhya Pradesh Finance minister



will be headed by Odisha finance minister Niranjan Pujari and will have to give its recommendations within six months to the GST Council. Other members of

Jagdish Devda, UP FM Suresh Kumar Khanna and Uttarakhand agriculture minister Subodh Uniyal. The GoM will be assisted by committee of officers from

Centre and States and secretarial assistance will be provided by joint secretary (TRUI) of Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC).

Buying support lifts equities; IT stocks' gain

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Healthy buying support for IT, realty stocks sustained India's key domestic indices at higher levels during mid-afternoon trade session on Wednesday.

Accordingly, market breadth continued to be strongly in favour of advancing counters. In terms of sectors, barring metals, all others were seen trading in the green, out of which media, realty and IT stocks showed most of the strength. At 2.05 p.m., the S&P BSE Sensex rose to 50,998.78, higher by 361.25 points, or 0.71 per cent, from its previous close. Similarly, the Nifty50 of the National Stock Exchange traded at 15,302.80, up 94.35 points, or 0.62 per cent, from its previous close.

"Currently, Nifty is showing good strength and sustaining at higher zones but facing some resistance. Buying can be seen on dips," said Jay Purohit, Technical & Derivatives Analyst, MOFSL. "Considering overall chart structure, traders are advised to trade with positive bias and use dips as buying opportunity." According to Likhita Chepa of Capitalvia Global Research: "Traders are taking a keen note on the fact that India is getting a steady flow of the foreign direct investment (FDI) and is still believed as a preferred destination for investment and this has kept the sentiments positive in the market." Market is able to regain momentum in the first half of the market and is sustaining above the 15,200 levels. Sustaining above 15,200 levels, we expect the market to gain momentum, that could lead to a upside projection till 15,350-15,400 level."

Govt looks at exit option while BPCL seeks open offer exemption

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Pivatisation bound Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd is seeking exemption for successful bidder of the company from mandatory open offer to be made to shareholders of two promoted companies - Petronet LNG and Indraprastha Gas Ltd.

Sources said, the oil refiner is looking to get the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) to give exemption for the open offers to the successful bidder of BPCL as already done when ONGC acquired a government stake in HPCL.

BPCL is one of the promoters of both PLL and IGL with a shareholding of 12.5 per cent and 22.5 per cent respectively.

The promoter status in these companies means that once BPCL changes hands to new entity post the strategic sale process, its new owners will have to make open offer for another 26 per cent stake in both the promoted companies as per SEBI



regulations. This would make BPCL's acquisition expensive by about Rs 20,000 crore for potential bidders that could further deter interest in company in the time of the pandemic. It is right for BPCL to look for exemption from open offer in case of PLL and IGL. But how this exemption is given, needs to be watched as the earlier experience in case of the ONGC-Hpcl deal, the promoters of

both the firms were the same i.e. the government of India and there was no change of ownership," said an energy sector expert not willing to be named.

Sources said that open offer exemption has been discussed by BPCL management in their meeting with disinvestment department Dipam. But the thinking in the government seems to be more inclined

towards BPCL shedding its promoter status in the two companies by selling stake before its own strategic sale. Both BPCL and Centre do not want to wane investor interest in the refiner as additional spending could make the already large sized deal further expensive. The sale of government's 52.98 per cent stake in BPCL is valued at about Rs 55,000 crore at the current share trading price. The requirement for making an open offer for additional 26 per cent to minority shareholders of the company will cost an additional Rs 27,000 crore.

In addition, if open offers has to be made for additional 26 per cent in PLL and IGL, the spending could go up by another Rs 18,000-20,000 crore. Also, IGL and PLL may not give value proposition to bidders who are mostly eyeing BPCL's oil refining assets and its large retail network. Sources said that BPCL also does not want to dilute stake in PLL and IGL as it may substantially erode its value.

Covid 2.0 interrupted auto sales momentum: Ind-Ra



Team Absolute | New Delhi

The second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic has interrupted the sales momentum recorded by the automobile industry in 3Q-4Q FY21, India Ratings and Research (Ind-Ra) said on Tuesday.

Accordingly, many original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) have advanced maintenance shutdowns to April and May on account of dampening consumer sentiments, closure of automotive dealerships, as well as supply-side constraints.

"The domestic automobile industry's sales volume (excluding CVs) declined 30 per cent month-on-month in April 2021; the year-on-year numbers are not comparable due to the nationwide lockdown in April 2020."

"The decline was mainly on account of the increasing number of Covid cases, resulting in state-wise lockdowns coming into effect during the latter part of the month," Ind-Ra said.

It noted that personal vehicle and

two-wheeler sales declined by 10 per cent and 34 per cent m-o-m, respectively, in April 2021, while three-wheeler sales declined by 57 per cent amid a further reduction in preference for shared mobility.

Nevertheless, exports volumes continued the growth trend in April 2021, up 19 per cent m-o-m, mainly led by 21 per cent m-o-m growth in two-wheeler exports.

"Personal vehicle demand remained resilient in April 2021, and witnessed the least decline, benefitting from the increased consumer preference for personal mobility. The domestic personal vehicle market continues to see an increasing shift towards utility vehicles, which accounted for 42 per cent of domestic PV sales," Ind-Ra said.

Besides, volumes in the utility vehicle segment declined by 11 per cent m-o-m, passenger car volumes also declined by 10 per cent m-o-m and by 12 per cent from April 2019, led by a 14

"Two-wheeler is a price-sensitive segment, and hence is impacted more by the increased cost of ownership amid price hikes by OEMs, coupled with historically high fuel prices in India.

"This is apparent in the 36 per cent m-o-m decline in the sales volume of the more price sensitive entry-level motorcycles under 125cc. Demand has also been adversely affected due to schools and colleges remaining closed, which typically restart during the first quarter," Ind-Ra said.

AMIDST PANDEMIC IIM SAMBALPUR ACHIEVES 100% PLACEMENT

IIM Sambalpur, witnessed close to 140 companies visiting the campus this season with prominent participants and recruiters.



IIM Sambalpur, stated, "IIM Sambalpur has yet again bettered its previous records and will continuously strive to exceed expectations of all its stakeholders. Despite the current market dynamics, we are proud of our students who have achieved this feat owing to sheer hard work and dedication. I congratulate our graduating students on receiving such coveted employment offers. These demonstrate the high value of the blended pedagogy imparted at IIM Sambalpur and our students' remarkable skills and capabilities. We would like to extend sincere gratitude to the esteemed recruiters for partnering with us and reposing faith in the quality of our talent and its distinct academic culture."



TAMANNAAH BHATIA: IDEA OF A STAR IS CHANGING RAPIDLY

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Actress Tamannaah Bhatia feels the star culture is changing rapidly after the boom in the digital space. Tamannaah has been one of the biggest names in the Tamil and Telugu industries for well over a decade, and has also acted in Bollywood and Kannada films. After tasting success on the big screen, she has now forayed into the digital space. This year, she was seen in the web series "The 11th Hour" and, more recently, "November Story".

She doesn't feel the need to choose between the two mediums, of course. "There is nothing to choose from because at least in my case I get to have both. I just feel that the fan following one could have amassed, say, 10 years ago will be tricky for the generation today, because with the situation we are in, owing to the pandemic, emotions around films are different. The way cinema is viewed is going to be different," Tamannaah told IANS.

"So, the whole idea of a star itself is changing very rapidly, and people are watching content and liking content for the content and not just for an individual actor or individual talent," she added.

Tamannaah feels fortunate that she amassed a loyal fanbase through cinema. "I think the idea of stardom I saw 10 years ago was probably the most organic way of developing a loyal fan following, which I have been fortunate to experience," she said.

Talking about her new show, the crime thriller "November Story", the actress says it's not every day when one gets a character that has a detailed emotion graph. "I have never been a part of a crime thriller before. So, the genre for me is new and it got me to explore primarily a father-daughter relationship. There were many angles to this as to why it became unique and new for me, and it was literally like keeping the tension going through the show in every scene. It was challenging and I had never done that in my career," she said, about the seven-episode whodunit that also features Pasupathy, GM Kumar, Aruldass and Vivek Prasanna, and airs on Disney+ Hotstar VIP.

ARJUN BIJLANI POSTS PICS WITH NIKKI TAMBOLI, DIVYANKA TRIPATHI

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Arjun Bijlani and Nikki Tamboli may be rival contestants on the adventure reality show "Khatron Ke Khiladi 11", but they sure seem to have struck a bond while shooting for the show in Cape Town. A series of pictures Arjun posted on Wednesday shows the two stars are having a good time together.

In three pictures that Arjun posted on Instagram, the two can be seen posing in a park. Arjun looks stylish in a sleeveless blue jacket with black jeans. He completes his look with shades and holds a black jacket in his hand. Nikki looked pretty in a white crop top, pink shorts and a black jacket. "She has a funny bone!! #kkk11 #khatronkekhiladi #capetown @colorstv," Arjun wrote on his Insta post.

Arjun has been posting pictures with the other constants of the show as well. He recently posted pictures with Divyanka, captioning them: "Always smiling!! #kkk11 #khatronkekhiladi #capetown @colorstv."



Debina Bonnerjee aims to help struggling fashion industry

Team Absolute | Mumbai



Television actor Debina Bonnerjee has come out with an unique initiative on social media to help people struggling in the fashion industry. Debina promises to create and post content on brands on a Returnable and Non chargeable basis in order to help the fashion industry survive the pandemic.

The actress has successfully cultivated an online space for herself, created her own digital family that await her content ranging from healthcare to fashion to interior design to relationship advice and even mental health tips. Debina delivers yet another unique message via her social media. Taking to her social media, she posted a video stating that, "Times are not easy for everyone, including Fashion houses and brands. Fashion, fans and social media has made me the influencer that I am today. I urge everyone out there, to send me their products and I will do my very best, conduct my own shoots and showcase it on my social media and even return it back and this is on a non chargeable basis. It is time for all of us to unite and help and motivate each other in the best way we can."

VARUN TEJ TO SHOOT WITH HOLLYWOOD ACTION DIRECTORS FOR 'GHANI'

Team Absolute | Hyderabad

Telugu actor Varun Tej will work with Hollywood action directors Larnell Stovall and Vlad Rimburg in upcoming sports drama "Ghani", which casts him as a boxer. "Seventy per cent of the shoot of 'Ghani' has been completed. The next schedule will commence once the second wave (of Covid) subsides. In the upcoming schedule, besides action portions, crucial sequences on Varun Tej and other major cast members will be canned," said producer Sidhu Mudda.

"Our art director has designed a huge stadium, and Hollywood stunt masters Larnell Stovall and Vlad Rimburg will work on the action. Once the schedule is over, we will announce the release date of 'Ghani', Mudda added. Varun has been practicing boxing during lockdown, to get into the skin of his character. The film stars Sajee M. Manjrekar opposite Varun, while Upendra, Suneil Shetty and Naveen Chandra play pivotal roles. Produced by Allu Aravind and Allu Bobby, "Ghani" marks the directorial debut of Kiran Korrapati.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Priyanka Chopra Jonas has always managed to stir a conversation around her fashion choices. The actress never fails to impress with her bold style choices made headlines at the recently held Billboard Music Awards. PeeCee's appearance at the event held at the

Priyanka Chopra Jonas is back on the red carpet

Microsoft theatre in Los Angeles, US, garnered a lot of attention, thanks to her ultra-glamorous look. She wore a custom Dolce & Gabbana dress, inspired by the brand's Fall 2007 collection. The sheer gold ensemble featured a thigh-high slit and an accentuated waistline thanks to a metallic gold belt by Dior.

Diet Sabya has called her out for wearing a brand which (Dolce & Gabbana) was boycotted in 2018 by many for being "racist" and many ditched the brand altogether as part of the 'cancel culture'. Be that as it may it doesn't take away from her turning heads on one of the rare red carpet outings that fashion addicts have had the pleasure to see this season.

Priyanka teamed the nude gown with classic jewels by Bulgari wearing a Serpenti bracelet, diamond drop earrings, and rings. Strappy metallic sandals, soft smokey eyes and silky hair extensions completed the transformation.

Also spotted at the event was Indian-American TV personality and author Padma Lakshmi, who wore a Christian Siriano pantsuit covered in crystals. Lakshmi chose to go shirtless beneath her plunging blazer. She accessorised the look with a layered, dainty silver necklace by Jacquie Aiche and added a sparkly silver clutch.

Priyanka was also on the cover of Australian fashion glossy Vogue. Feeling comfortable in her skin, Priyanka looked incredible in a black gown which showed off what she has referred to as her "now body".

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Fans have been trending the hashtag #jethalal on Twitter all through Wednesday, to celebrate the birthday of actor Dilip Joshi. The actor plays the affable Gujarati electronics store owner Jethalal Gada in the popular sitcom "Tarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah". Netizens also flooded social media with memes featuring Joshi in his avatar of Jethalal, besides wishing him on his birthday. They also shared prayers for his good health and happiness and expressed gratitude to him for making them smile every day. Fans of the actor also shared how they have grown up watching the show, and how they keep watching old episodes repeatedly, just to enjoy Jethalal's humour. Some even

called Joshi as Jethalal the "heart" and "soul" of the show. "#TMKOC : The Body, #DilipJoshi aka #jethalal : The Soul, Wishing a very Happy Birthday to @dilipjoshie ji. Thanks for Making Our Childhood the awesome," tweeted a fan. "Happy Birthday legend #jethalal #DilipJoshi Thanks for making our childhood awesome. From 0 to Hero we are Always in our heart #TMKOC," posted another fan. "Happy Birthday to The Heart of #TMKOC #DilipJoshi sir. Thank u for making me laugh when I'm not even in the mood to smile!" expressed another fan. "Happy Birthday to The King of Comedy. One of most versatile Actor @dilipjoshie. I just love watching #TMKOC episodes and you are the backbone of that show! Once again happy birthday legend! Thank You for always making us laugh! #DilipJoshi #jethalal," wrote another fan.



FANS TREND #JETHALAL TO CELEBRATE DILIP JOSHI'S BIRTHDAY



Urvashi Rautela