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GAP BETWEEN 2 DOSES OF COVISHIELD VACCINE EXTENDED TO 12-16 WEEKS

NEW STRATEGY

Ironically, the recommendation comes when there is deep shortage of vaccine doses across the country and states have floated global tenders to fulfill the demand of vaccine. The Union government had announced to provide jabs to below 45 years age group from 1st May. States started vaccinating 18 + citizens but suspended the drive due to unavailability of jabs. Some states are continuing it symbolically. The recommendation is for Covishield which is easily available in compare to Covaxin.

■ The working group, based on the available real-life evidences, particularly from the UK, agreed on increasing the interval to 12-16 weeks between two doses of Covishield vaccine. However, there is no change in interval of Covaxin doses.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Covid Working Group chaired by N.K. Arora has recommended extension of the gap between the first and second doses of Covishield vaccine to 12-16 weeks. The gap between the two doses of the same vaccine is 6-8 weeks at present.

The Covid Working Group comprises Dr N.K. Arora, Director, INCLEN Trust; Dr Rakesh Agarwal, Dr Gagandeep Kang, Dr J.P. Mulliyal, Dr Naveen Khanna, Group Leader; Dr Amulya Panda, Director, National Institute of Immunology, New Delhi and Dr V.G. Somani, Drugs Controller General of India.

The recommendation of the COVID Working Group was accepted by the National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration for Covid-19 (NEGVAC), headed by Dr V K Paul, Member (Health) Niti Aayog in its meeting on May 12.

The Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has also accepted this recommendation of the COVID Working Group for extension of the gap between the first and second doses of Covishield vaccine to 12 -16 weeks.

CLINICAL TRIAL OF COVAXIN ON 2 TO 18-YEARS ALLOWED

New Delhi: The Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) has accorded permission to conduct the Phase II-III clinical trial of Covaxin (Covid vaccine) in the age group of two to 18-years-old to its manufacturer Bharat Biotech Ltd, Union Health Ministry said on Thursday."The trial will be conducted in 525 healthy volunteers," said the Ministry.In the trial, the Ministry said, the vaccine will be given by intramuscular route in two doses at day 0 and day 28.After careful examination, the DCGI accepted the recommendation of Subject Expert Committee (SEC). The national drug regulator of the country on Wednesday gave the approval to conduct the clinical trial in the age group of youngest age group till now paving way for them to be saved from the deadly pandemic outbreak.

INDIA CLOCKS 3.62L FRESH CASES, 4,120 COVID DEATHS

New Delhi: India on Thursday reported 3,62,727 new Covid cases and 4,120 fatalities, the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare said. On Wednesday, India recorded 4,205 fresh Covid deaths, while on Friday last, the country had recorded its highest ever cases of 4,14,188. In the past 21 days India's daily Covid tally has plateaued over the three-lakh-mark and over 3,000 casualties for a fortnight. India's total tally of Covid-19 cases now stands at 2,37,03,665 with 37,10,525 active cases and 2,58,317 deaths so far. According to the Health Ministry, a total of 3,52,181 people have been discharged in the last 24 hours, with 1,97,34,823 being cured from Covid till date.

SPUTNIK V TO BE AVAILABLE IN MARKET FROM NEXT WEEK

New Delhi: The Union Health Ministry on Thursday announced that Russia's Sputnik V, the vaccine against the Covid-19 pandemic, will be available in markets across the country early next week. The announcement comes 12 days after the first consignment of 150,000 doses of the Sputnik V vaccine landed in Hyderabad from Russia. It will be the third vaccine to be cleared for use in India at a time when the country is in the grip of an intense second wave and demand for vaccines has shot up.Dr Reddy's top executives recently hinted that Sputnik V is likely to be sold at $10 (around Rs 750) a dose in India. With an efficacy of 91.6 per cent, Sputnik V is reportedly the first vaccine against Covid-19 in the world. On August 11 last year, Russia gave approval to the Sputnik V. It is reported in the Lancet Medical Journal that the vaccine has been cleared and approved for mass use in more than 50 countries. The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) has signed a deal to produce 750 million doses of Sputnik V in India.

Actively considering live telecast of SC proceedings: CJI

Team Absolute | New Delhi

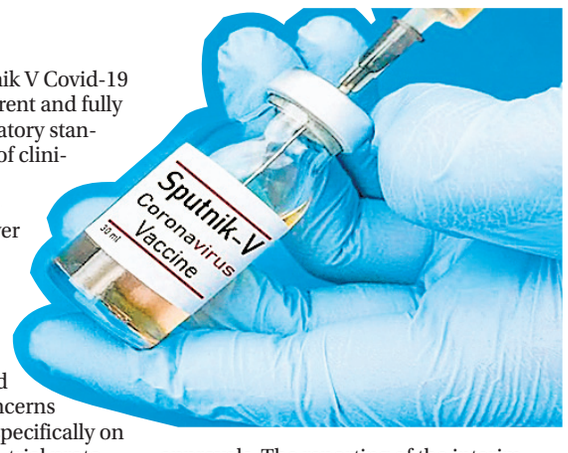
Chief Justice of India N V Ramana on Thursday said he was "actively" considering the proposal to live telecast the proceedings of the Supreme Court.

However, Justice Ramana emphasized that before initiating concrete steps to live telecast the court proceedings, he plans to seek a general consensus among his colleagues in the top court. He was speaking at the launch of a mobile application to grant access of virtual proceedings of the top court to the media persons. "Transparency is a time-honoured principle when it comes to the judicial process in our country. Hearing of cases have always taken place in public courtrooms, with access being allowed not only to the lawyers and the litigants in a particular case, but also to the general public", said Justice Ramana.

He emphasized that access to the public is important, as court rulings, and more particularly the Supreme Court, have a bearing on the lives of people throughout this country. "The role of the media assumes importance in the process of disseminating information. Unfortunately, when COVID-19 struck, the systems which were earlier in place could no longer be relied upon. The judicial system has had to adapt quickly in order to ensure that justice dispensation does not stop in the country", added Justice Ramana.

Sputnik V Phase 3 trial clear, transparent: Russian scientists

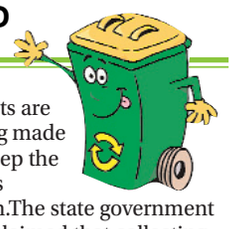
Team Absolute | New Delhi



The Phase 3 trial of Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccine is clear, transparent and fully complies with the regulatory standards that exist for provision of clinical trial data, Russian scientists said, after concerns were raised by various scientists over data discrepancies and substandard reporting of interim data of the Coronavirus jab.

A team of scientists from universities in the US, the Netherlands, Italy, France and Russia had earlier flagged concerns over Sputnik V Phase 3 trial, specifically on discrepancies in data sharing, trial protocols, inconsistencies in data reported and numerical results."Clear and transparent regulatory standards exist for provision of clinical trial data, including data reported in clinical study reports that are considered sufficient for regulatory review and approvals. The reporting of the interim analysis in the Phase 3 Sputnik V clinical trial fully complies with those standards," said scientists from the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation in Moscow. Their reply was also published in the Lancet's 'online first' section.

DOOR-TO-DOOR GARBAGE COLLECTION TO CONTAIN COVID IN MP



Team Absolute | Bhopal

In an effort to curb the spread of the Covid pandemic, the Madhya Pradesh government has been emphasising on door-to-door garbage collection across the state.Urban Development and Housing Minister Bhupendra Singh said the initiative of collecting garbage door-to-door has arrested the spread of infection in the cities.

More than 4,500 garbage collection vehicles have been pressed into service. Efforts are being made to keep the cities clean.The state government has claimed that collecting garbage from the doorsteps of people has proved effective in checking the pandemic.Most of the Covid patients are in home isolation and so the collection of solid waste generated from these houses has been started by the urban bodies. The waste from these houses has been segregated in yellow polythene bags.

AFTER BUXAR, BODIES NOW FOUND FLOATING IN GANGA IN PATNA

Patna: After Bihar's Buxar, several decomposed dead bodies were now found floating in the Ganga near Patna's Gulabi Ghat on Thursday, officials said.

District Magistrate Chandrasheker Singh has directed municipal authorities to retrieve the dead bodies and cremate them properly.According to eyewitnesses, the majority of the dead bodies are partially burnt."After the emergence of dead bodies in Gulabi Ghat, we have asked police and civil administration to intensify vigil along the river in a bid to ensure no one dumps dead bodies in the waters. We have also asked municipal corporation officers to take out the bodies and cremate them properly," the District Magistrate said. The counting of dead bodies is underway in Gulabi Ghat, a cremation ground located at Mahendru area of the state capital.

Oli to continue as Nepal PM as opposition fails to form government

Kathmandu | Agencies

Nepal's opposition parties have failed to form a new coalition government by the 9 p.m. Thursday deadline set by President Bidhya Devi Bhandari.

After Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli lost the vote of confidence on Monday, the President, on the same day, called on political parties to form an alternative government. However, they were unable to muster a majority. "We, the opposition parties, have failed to garner the required votes to form the new government," Prakash Sharan Mahat, Joint Secretary General of the Nepali Congress, the primary opposition in the house, said after a party meeting.

With the Nepali Congress failing to form the new government with the support of opposition parties, Oli will continue as the Prime Minister as the leader of the largest political party or will form a coalition government with the Janata Samajbadi Party.

Centre should have floated global tender for vaccines: Gehlot

Team Absolute | Jaipur

Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot on Thursday said that it would have been better had the Central government floated global tenders which could have ensured availability of Covid vaccines in planned manner in states.

"A total of 11 states have floated global tenders to import vaccines for their states due to lack of vaccine availability in the country. This will provide the vaccines at different costs in the states. It would have been better had the Indian government taken out global tenders and made vaccines available to the states in a planned manner because vaccination of the entire people only could prevent the third wave of corona," he said.

INDIA COVID CASES WILL DECLINE BY MAY 23

▸ CASES WILL CONTINUE TO INCREASE OVER THE NEXT TWO WEEKS IN ASSAM, HIMACHAL PRADESH, JAMMU AND KASHMIR, MANIPUR, MEGHALAYA, MIZORAM, NAGALAND, ODISHA, PUDUCHERRY, PUNJAB, TAMIL NADU AND TRIPURA.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

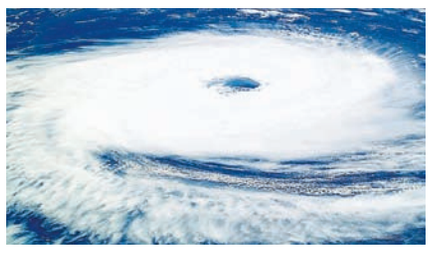
A new tracker by Cambridge Judge Business School forecasts that the number of new Covid cases in India has peaked, and will see a declining trend over the two-week forecast period to 23 May.

The tracker said but there is substantial variation among States and Union Territories in their trajectories. A new CJBS COVID-19 Tracker for India, developed by Cambridge Judge Business School and the National Institute of Economic and Social Research in India working with Health Systems Transformation Platform in India, provides forecasts of the pandemic's trajectory based on a recently developed model.

These forecasts are based on a structural time series model that uses historical data in estimation, but adapts to the trend emerging in the most recent period. The model is described in a paper in Harvard Data Science Review by Andrew Harvey, Emeritus Professor of Econometrics at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Cambridge, and Paul Kattuman, Reader in Economics at Cambridge Judge Business School, entitled "Time series models based on growth curves with applications to forecasting coronavirus".

Cyclone Tauktae: Efforts on to alert TN fishers

Team Absolute | Chennai



Tamil Nadu fisheries department is trying to alert around 2,500 fishers out in the Arabian sea about a depression which may intensify into Cyclone Tauktae.

The Tamil Nadu fisheries department state Commissioner J. Jayakanthan told IANS: "Most of the fishermen are from the western coast of Kanyakumari since the annual fishing ban is in effect in eastern coast."

Fishing officials said that while only 84 vessels have gone into the sea from Thengapattanam coast, 150 fishing boats of Kanyakumari have ventured into the sea from Kerala coast.The fisheries officials said that the fishermen have been advised to touch base at the nearest coast and the department has already coordinated with these coastal belts of various state governments to accommodate the fishermen who reach their shores.

The Indian Meteorological Department(IMD) has forecast the depression is likely to intensify into a cyclone about 100 nautical miles (185km) from the North Kerala coast and move northward till Karachi in Pakistan.The southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu are witnessing heavy rains and thunder storms following a depression in the Arabian Sea.

CENTRE CHALLENGES SC INTERPRETATION OF 102ND CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

New Delhi: The Centre has filed a review petition in the Supreme Court in connection with its judgment conferring the President with the sole power for identification of a community as backward and its eligibility for reservation benefits.

The Centre has challenged the top court's interpretation of 102nd Constitutional Amendment in the Maratha reservation judgment delivered on May 5. According to sources, the Centre's petition has contended that state governments cannot be stripped their powers to identify socially and educationally backward classes (SEBC). The top court had upheld the 102nd Constitutional Amendment while denuding the power of states in this regard.

"By introduction of Articles 366 (26C) and 342A through the 102nd Constitution of India, the President alone, to the exclusion of all other authorities, is empowered to identify SEBCs and include them in a list to be published under Article 342A (1), which shall be deemed to include SEBCs in relation to each state and union territory for the purposes of the Constitution," the top court had held.

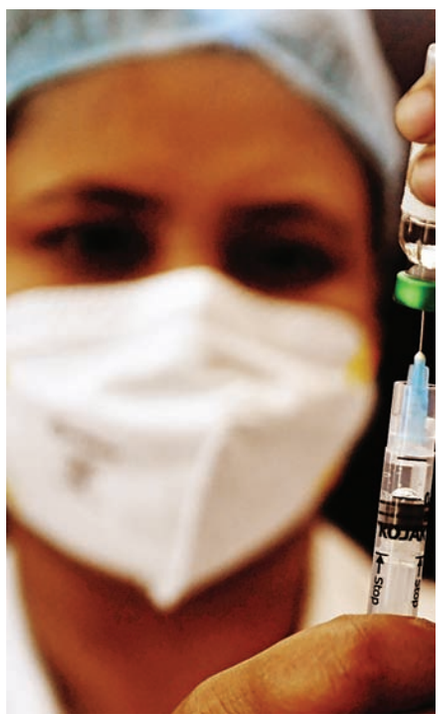
Three of the five judges on the bench had held that 102nd Amendment has taken away the power of states to decide on SEBCs and only the President can take a decision in this matter.

However, the other judges have said that state governments can also identify SEBCs and there would be two lists - Central and state - of backward communities, which has been the practice for over six decades.

The top court had ruled that after the insertion of Article 342A in the Constitution through the 102nd Amendment, the Centre is empowered to identify SEBCs and include them in a list to be published under Article 342A (1), specifying SEBCs in relation to each state and Union Territory.The Centre, through Attorney General K.K. Venugopal, had contended that 102nd Amendment does not take away states' powers to identify SEBCs.The top court verdict on May 5 had meant state governments will be restricted from making recommendations to the Centre favouring aspiring backwards.

Proactively working to secure availability of Covid vaccines: Govt

Team Absolute | New Delhi



The Union Government on Thursday emphasized that it is consistently and proactively working to secure and enhance the availability of vaccines.

In a statement the Union Health Ministry said, "Government of India, as part of its policy to augment the domestic production of Covid-19 vaccine, has proactively encouraged Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) as well as private companies to enter into technology transfer agreements with Indian vaccine manufacturers."

The statement pointed out that two Central Government PSUs, namely, Indian Immunologicals Ltd (IIL) and BIBCOL have entered into a technology transfer agreement with Bharat Biotech. In addition one state government undertaking, Haffkine Institute, has also entered into a technology transfer agreement with Bharat Biotech.As a result of this proactive intervention of the Central Government, Indian Immunologicals Limited will be in a position to start production of Covaxin from September 2021, while Haffkine Institute and BIBCOL will start production of Covaxin from November 2021. Under the new policy, doses of imported and ready to use foreign vaccines will be available for state governments, private hospitals and hospitals of industrial establishments. The new Liberalized Pricing and Accelerated National Covid-19 Vaccination Strategy also incentivizes, in terms of prices, to attract private manufacturers including offshore vaccine manufacturers to enter the country.The Government is proactively engaging with foreign vaccine manufacturers like Moderna, Pfizer etc., to apply for Emergency Use Authorization in India so that these vaccines can be easily imported and made available in the country. Simultaneously, the Government along with other like-minded countries is also stressing on IPR waiver for the Covid-19 vaccines.

COVID STRATEGY REMAINS SAME IRRESPECTIVE OF VARIANTS: HARSH VARDHAN

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan on Thursday said that the strategy against coronavirus remains the same, irrespective of its variants.

Reviewing the public health response to Covid-19 and progress of vaccination with the Health Ministers of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, and Delhi in a virtual meeting, he noted that the "B.1.617" variant of Covid-19 has contributed to the rise of cases in Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Delhi and advised all the states to regularly send samples to INSACOG labs for tracking of emerging variants of Covid.

Suggesting steps taken by the experts to curb the spread, he said: "The strategy remains the same irrespective of the variants."

NHRC NOTICE TO BIHAR, UP OVER BODIES FLOATING DOWN THE GANGA

Patna: The National Human Rights Commission on Thursday served notice to Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and the Union Water Resource Ministry after hundreds of dead bodies were found in the Ganga river in Bihar's Buxar, and Uttar Pradesh's Ghazipur and Ballia districts.

The commission has asked them to submit their response in four weeks.

As many as 71 dead bodies were found in several places on the banks of the Ganga in Buxar, and over 100 dead bodies in Uttar Pradesh's Ghazipur and Ballia district in the last three days. On Thursday, several partially cremated dead bodies were found near Patna's Gulabi Ghat Patna as well.

The NHRC said that throwing dead bodies in rivers is against humanity, and is also a health hazard for people living on the banks of the river and a threat to the environment.

Gujarat orders mass promotion for Class 10 board students

GANDHINAGAR | Agencies

The Gujarat government on Thursday announced that the Board examinations for Class 10, slated this month, have been cancelled in view of the prevailing coronavirus situation and all regular students will be promoted to Class 11. The state Education Department will review the situation at a later time and decide on the fate of the repeat students.

Informing the media of the decision taken in the core committee meeting chaired by the Chief Minister Vijay Rupani, Education Minister Bhupendrasinh Chudasama said: "The Board examinations for Class 10, which had been scheduled from May 10 to 25, have been cancelled considering the prevailing crisis of the corona outbreak. All the regular students who were to appear for the exams in 1,276 government schools, 5,325 grant-in-aid schools, 4,331 self-financed schools and 45 other schools will now be mass promoted to Class 11.

"We have taken this decision, despite the number of corona cases coming down and rising number of recovery cases in the past two weeks, looking at the prevailing situation in the country and the safety of the students."The minister also said: "The government will once again review the situation after a considerable reduction in infection, regard the repeat students and then come out with a schedule. The students appearing for these examinations will be provided an adequate time of at least 15 days prior to the exam schedule."In an earlier decision, the Education Department had announced mass promotion for students of Classes 1 to 9 as well as those of Class 11 to the next class.

PRESIDENT, VP GREET PEOPLE ON EID-UL-FITR

New Delhi: On the eve of Eid-ul-Fitr President Ram Nath Kovind and Vice President M Venkaiah Naidu have greeted the people of India. In his message the President said, "On the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr, I extend my best wishes and greetings to all the fellow citizens, especially to the Muslim brothers and sisters. Let us all resolve to deal with this pandemic of Covid-19 by following all the rules and guidelines and work for the well-being of society and the country."

Vice President M. Venkaiah Naidu also greeted the nation on the eve of Eid-ul-Fitr (May 14). "I convey my heartiest greetings and good wishes to the people of our country on the joyous occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr," he said.

Andhra reports high Covid numbers despite low testing for 2nd day

AMARAVATI | Agencies

For the second day in a row, Andhra Pradesh on Thursday reported high Covid numbers despite testing relatively lower number of people.

Compared to around 1.15 lakh tests that were conducted per day earlier, only 96,446 samples were tested in the 24 hours ending 10 am onThursday. However, the daily Covid count stood at 22,399 during this period.

On Thursday, one district reported above 3,000 cases, while four districts reported Covid numbers in excess of 2,000, and five districts reported above 1,000 cases each. The remaining three districts had three-digit tallies.

East Godavari reported the highest tally of 3,372 cases, followed by Chittoor (2,646), Guntur (2,141), Anantapur (2,080), and Visakhpatnam (2,064). Meanwhile, 90 persons succumbed to the disease during this period.

BIHAR GOVERNMENT EXTENDS LOCKDOWN BY 10 MORE DAYS

Patna: Keeping in view the 'positive impact' of its imposition, the Nitish Kumar government has decided to extend the state-wide lockdown in Bihar by 10 days.

The decision was taken after a meeting of the review committee and senior officials of the health department.

Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Thursday tweeted about the development. "The infection rate has reduced during the lockdown period in Bihar with cases falling below the 10,000 mark in one day. It is helping break the chain of Corona in Bihar. Hence we have decided to extend the lockdown till May 25," Kumar said in a tweet.

Initially the lockdown in Bihar was imposed on May 5 for 10 days.

Now Lalu compares Bihar govt with Corona

PATNA | Agencies

Rashtriya Janata Dal chief and former Bihar chief minister Lalu Prasad Yadav on Thursday compared the state's government with Corona.

In a tweet he said both of them are dangerous to human life and both are not visible.

The tweet comes at a time when the health infrastructure in the state is struggling to cope with a resurgence of the infection.

Earlier in the day, Yadav had attacked the Nitish government over reports of bodies of Corona victims found floating in the Ganga river in Buxar.

"While they were alive they did not get medicine, oxygen, beds and treatment. Now after death, no shrouds, wood, and the ground where they could be cremated. Dead bodies were thrown into the Ganges. Dogs are eating corpses...Where are you taking this country and humanity?" Tej Pratap Yadav, the elder son of Lalu Prasad Yadav also attacked the CM . He appreciated the extension the lockdown by 10 days. At the same time, he also asked the government to provide food to the poor, proper treatment for patients in hospitals and check the sprialling prices of items of daily necessity such as fruits, vegetables and medicines.

Assam coordinator moves SC seeking re-verification of NRC list

GUWAHATI | Agencies

The Assam coordinator of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) has urged the Supreme Court for a "comprehensive and time-bound re-verification of the citizens list", highlighting "major irregularities" in the process, officials said on Thursday.

The officials said that Assam NRC coordinator Hitesh Dev Sarma in his interlocutory application also prayed for the deletion of illegal voters from Assam's electoral rolls besides the revision of the draft NRC and a supplementary list under a relevant clause of the Schedule of Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003.

An official said on condition of anonymity that Dev Sarma filed the application on May 8, two days before Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma after assuming office on Monday said that the state government would undertake 20 per cent scrutiny of the NRC list in the bordering areas and 10 per cent inside Assam.

The case was accepted by the apex court on May 11.Dev Sarma said in his application to the Supreme Court: "Pass appropriate directions that the re-verification be done under the supervision of a monitoring committee in the respective districts and such committee may be preferably represented by the respective district judge, district magistrate and superintendent of police."

"Pass such other or further directions as your lordships may deem fit and proper in the facts and circumstances of the case," the application added.

To update the 1951 NRC in Assam, the statutory notification for starting the apex court-monitored exercise was issued in December 2013.The draft list was published in August 2019, excluding 19.06 lakh out of 3.3 crore applications for lack of adequate documents for establishing their Indian citizenship.Each of the 19.06 lakh people left out of the draft NRC are eligible to approach the Foreigners' Tribunal within 120 days of receiving a rejection slip for weighing their citizenship claims.

Around a 100 tribunals have been tasked to scrutinise the documents of the excluded people and to decide if they would remain debarred or make it to the NRC.

The tribunals can declare a man foreigner, based on the Assam Accord of 1985, according to which immigrants, who entered the state after March 24, 1971, are to be detected and deported.

The National Register of Citizens in Assam is being updated based on this cut-off date.

Modi to release 8th instalment of Rs 19,000 cr for PM-KISAN scheme on Friday

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will release the 8th instalment of financial benefits worth Rs 19,000 crore under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) scheme on Friday to benefit more than 9.5 crore farmers.

The Prime Minister will release the instalment through video conferencing at 11 a.m. "The instalment will enable the transfer of more than Rs 19,000 crore to more than 9.5 crore beneficiary farmer families," said a statement issued from the Prime Minister's Office.

The Prime Minister will also interact with farmer beneficiaries during the event. The Union Agriculture Minister will also be present on the occasion.

Under the PM-KISAN scheme, a financial benefit of Rs 6,000 per year is provided to the eligible beneficiary farmer families, payable in three equal 4-monthly instalments of Rs 2,000 each.

The fund is transferred directly to the bank accounts of the beneficiaries. In this scheme, Samman Rashi of over Rs 1.15 lakh crore has been transferred to farmers' families so far.

DELHI URGES CENTRE TO SUPPLY SURPLUS O2 FROM IT'S QUOTA TO OTHER STATE

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Arvind Kejriwal government on Thursday wrote a letter to the Centre to inform that Delhi's daily oxygen requirement has fallen from 700 MT to 582 MT per day and hence, the additional oxygen quota of the national capital should be supplied to other states needing oxygen.

For the last few days, the Center has fixed Delhi's daily quota of oxygen to 590 MT.

As Delhi has witnessed a sharp decline in daily Covid positive cases its hospitals in the last few days, the capital's daily demand for oxygen has also reduced.

"During the peak period, we were getting regular SOS calls from the hospitals. Now, we receive hardly one or two SOS calls daily which are fulfilled without any delay.

"Delhi government is a responsible government and hence it is requesting the Central government to reduce the daily oxygen allocation of Delhi to

582 MT. This way the other states in the need of oxygen can get the surplus oxygen from Delhi," said Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia.Sisodia, who is also Delhi's nodal minister for Covid management, stated that the Covid cases were at their peak in the last week of April and first week of May. On a daily basis, more than 80,000 tests were being done out of which around 28,000 (highest on April 20) were testing positive.

The daily positivity rate had risen to 36 per cent (April 22) during that period, which on Thursday reduced to around 14 per cent and daily new cases were reported 10,400 in the last 24 hours.Sisodia emphasised that the oxygen demand was directly proportional to the increase in cases. During the peak time, Delhi needed 700 MT of oxygen daily. He highlighted that as the cases have reduced, Delhi's requirement of oxygen has dropped to 582 MT, as per the formula determined by the Centre.

Sisodia expressed his gratitude to the Supreme Court, Delhi High Court and Central Government for their timely intervention and providing much needed oxygen supply to Delhi.

Covid recovery rate in Gurugram improves to 79.64%

"To combat the virus, around 138 teams of the health department are working in a planned manner in seven high-risk rural areas of the district. Also, a dedicated team of the health department is monitoring the condition of home isolation patients," said Gurugram Deputy Commissioner Yash Garg.

Team Absolute | Gurugram

The Covid recovery rate in Gurugram has reached 79.64 per cent as against 75.71 per cent in the previous week, according to a statement issued by the district administration on Thursday.The officials said that to prevent the spread of Covid infections, an action plan has been prepared by the district administration which focuses on testing, tracing and treatment.

"To combat the virus, around 138 teams of the health department are working in a planned manner in seven high-risk rural areas of the district. Also, a dedicated team of the health department is monitoring the condition of home isolation patients," said Gurugram Deputy Commissioner Yash Garg.Garg said that due to the awareness generated among the residents, administration and the health department, the recovery rate is constantly improving in the district. He also said that isolation centers will have to be built in the villages to separate Corona infected patients and suspicious persons from the healthy people.

100-bed Covid facility to become functional soon in Gurugram

Team Absolute | Gurugram

A 100-bed Covid care hospital set up by the Gurugram district administration in collaboration with the Vedanta Group will soon become functional at Tau Devi Lal stadium in Sector 38.

Deputy Commissioner Yash Garg took stock of the makeshift hospital on Wednesday and gave necessary directions to the authorities.Although in the last few days, Covid cases have dropped in Gurugam, but the district officials are prepared to deal with the third Covid wave.

"This temporary hospital is being set up with a capacity of 100 beds, where the patients will be provided with all the possible healthcare facilities," Garg said.Anil Aggarwal, Chairman of the

Vedanta Group, informed that the company is mulling to arrange 1,000 beds for Covid patients through its Anil Aggarwal Foundation, which was being started from the Gurugam district.

"All the preparations have been completed by the district administration and the company to set up this temporary hospital in Gurugam. While, establishing this Covid care centre, a technology called 'HEPA Filter' is being used which is effective in preventing the infection of the virus. There will be arrangements for 80 oxygen bad and 20 ICU beds in the initial phase,'" Aggarwal added.

Navneet Kalra denied anticipatory bail in O2 concentrator case

Team Absolute | New Delhi

A Delhi court on Thursday declined to grant anticipatory bail to businessman Navneet Kalra in connection with the oxygen concentrator black marketing case registered by Delhi Police.

Additional sessions judge, Saket court, Sandeep Garg passed the order rejecting anticipatory bail to Kalra.

Senior advocate Vikas Pahwa, representing Kalra, had argued that his client had only carried out a legitimate transaction of import and customs authorities were activated, and the customs was aware of the transaction. "The GST was deposited with the government. Invoices were given and returns were filed," Pahwa had contended before the court.

However, according to the prosecution, Kalra, along with other co-accused, hatched a conspiracy to wrongfully make money by inducing the public to buy oxygen concentrators from him at an "exorbitant rate". Delhi police had opposed his anticipatory bail plea stating that the investigation was at a very early stage, and it required Kalra's custodial

interrogation to unearth his relationship with other parties.Kalra's counsel had argued that all rules were complied and the transactions of sale were through banking channels. He further added that oxygen concentrators are not cosmetic, not luxury, instead it was used when somebody is medically unfit. "When selling through banking channels, where is the offence", Kalra's counsel had submitted. The prosecution had argued that no anticipatory bail could be granted to "influential persons" who could tamper with evidence. The prosecution further argued Kalra made a lot of money by inducing the needy public to believe that his oxygen concentrators were premium, and also cited a report from Sri Ram laboratory, that the sample of oxygen concentrator was of poor quality.

Kalra's counsel had pointed out that there was no MRP fixed by the government till date, therefore the prosecution assertion that the price at which his client sold oxygen concentrator was exorbitant, was not correct. "We could not find a single notification, which fixes the price of oxygen concentrators", said Kalra's counsel.

He further added that his client was being "framed" based on social media content and he was being made a scapegoat to divert attention from more pressing issues. "It is being deliberately done. A campaign is going on against me", added Kalra's counsel. Police have also alleged that through social media posts, it has come to notice that Kalra had collected advance payments from several persons who required oxygen concentrators, but he kept postponing the supply and increased the price.

O2 demand cut to save AAP minister, MLA involved in hoarding: BJP

Taking a dig at the AAP government, the BJP on Thursday said that the Delhi Government has reduced the requirement of medical oxygen to save its minister and MLA involved in hoarding oxygen cylinders.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Amid the sudden fall in oxygen demand in the city, BJP MP from West Delhi Parvesh Verma said, "It's surprising that all of a sudden oxygen demand has fallen drastically since news from different quarters doing the rounds of audit of oxygen requirement. Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal must be ashamed for doing politics at this crucial time of crisis." Verma pointed out that since May 1, there has been a reduction of 14,022 active cases in the city and oxygen requirement has reduced by

394 MT. "Is 394 MT of oxygen required for 14,022 patients," he asked. Verma said, "To save Delhi ministers and AAP MLAs found hoarding oxygen cylinders, the Kejriwal government has reduced oxygen requirements. Even courts have questioned how the Delhi government minister got the oxygen cylinders. Only to save its minister and MLAs, Kejriwal government has started talking about reduced requirements of medical oxygen."

On Thursday, Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia said, "As the positivity rate and hospitalized cases reduce across Delhi, the oxygen requirement has fallen from 700 MT to 582 MT per day." Sisodia urged the Centre to provide the surplus oxygen from Delhi's allocated quota to other states who need that surplus.

Demanding an audit, Verma said he will be writing to Lieutenant Governor Anil Baijal. "I am writing a letter to the Lieutenant Governor to request an audit of oxygen requirement and utilization in the national capital. A proper audit will find out the actual requirement of oxygen and point out wrong usage," Verma said.Earlier, Verma had demanded dismissal of Imran Hussain from the Delhi Cabinet and a CBI inquiry into how he hoarded 650 oxygen cylinders.

Delhi's positivity rate falls to 14%, O2 demand also down

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The national capital has reported 10,400 new Covid cases in the last 24 hours, the lowest since April 20, when the city had reported 28,395 cases, health officials said here on Thursday.

More importantly, Delhi's daily Covid positivity rate has also come down to 14 per cent, the lowest since April 22, when the positivity rate was at its peak at 36 per cent.

Meanwhile, the capital's daily oxygen demand which had gone up to 700 metric tonnes per day, now has reduced to 582 MT as number of critical Covid patients has decreased in many hospitals.

Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia said on Thursday that two weeks back with a surge in daily positive cases there has been a crisis for beds and oxygen, for which the Centre gave enough support and oxygen supply for hospitals was resumed.

"The Centre has fixed Delhi's daily oxygen quota - 590 metric tonnes, however, as of

now Delhi has only 582 metric tonnes of oxygen. And therefore, being the responsible state government, I would urge the Centre to allocate Delhi's extra oxygen to other states that are facing oxygen shortage to save the lives of people," Sisodia said while addressing a digital press conference on Thursday.

Delhi has been witnessing a decrease in the number of daily cases and the positivity rate since last one week. The daily positivity rate gradually declined from 36 per cent on April 22 to 14 per cent on Thursday.

Kandahar-Kashmir drug racket busted in Delhi, over 54 kg heroin seized

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Delhi Police's Special Cell on Thursday said that it has busted an international drug racket with its links to (Afghanistan's) Kandahar and Kashmir with the arrest of five persons with over 54 kg of heroin valued at Rs 250 crore.

Deputy Commissioner of Police, Special Cell, Pramod Singh Kushwah said that Altaf aka Mehrajuddin Darji, Abid Hussain Sultan, Hashmat Mohammadi, Tifal Nau Khez aka Tifley, and Abdullah Najibullah aka Nabi were arrested, and a narcotic reconstitution factory set up by the cartel in the area of Batla House has been unearthed.

Kushwah said that during an operation, the name of Altaf aka Mehrajuddin Darji had figured as being a senior conduit of a Kashmir-based narco-module who was frequently visiting Delhi-NCR under the cover of carpet trade.

"Persistent efforts to develop this intel bore fruit when on May 2, specific human intelligence was received that Altaf was somewhere in the area of Ashoka Road in Delhi seeking to deliver a consignment," he said.

The official said that a trap was laid and Altaf, 45, a resident of Srinagar, arrested from south Delhi's Zakir Nagar area and 4.5 kg contraband recovered from his possession. A case was registered against him under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act.

"Based upon disclosures made by Altaf, a raid was conducted and second accused, namely Abid Hussain Sultan, 40, arrested and a total of 12 kg of contraband was recovered from his home situated in Vinoba Puri," he said. Sultan is also a permanent resident of Srinagar.

Kushwah said that with the arrestes, the ambit of investigation was widened.

He said that on sustained confrontations of both the arrested accused with evidence led to the disclosure that someone named 'Haji', was sending the contraband which was being further refined and reconstituted using chemicals being supplied by Lakha of Amritsar.

"The first concrete involvement of Afghani presence in this module surfaced in the name of Hashmat Mohammadi, an Afghan national residing in Zakir Nagar," he said, adding that after making meticulous ground work, Mohammadi, 31, a permanent resident of Kabul, was arrested while he was driving a Scooty which belonged to Sultan.

On checking the glove-box of the two-wheeler, another five kg of contraband was recovered and Mohammadi arrested. On interrogation, he revealed that the contraband was being sourced from Kasim and aji, both based in Afghanistan.

Mohammadi also disclosed that a reconstitution factory, similar to the one busted in 2019 by the Special Cell, was running in Zakir Nagar.

A raid was thus conducted at a house situated in Okhla's Batla House area and a clandestine facility, being run under a residential cover, was unearthed, the DCP said, adding that another 29.5 kg contraband along with articles used for reconstitution i.e. large aluminum containers, buckets, gunny bags soaked in chemicals, distillers etc were recovered.

He said that the residential premises being used belonged to Tifal Nau Khez, who was in jail for being the mastermind behind one of the biggest haul of heroin in 2019. He was formally arrested in the present case also and subjected to interrogation.

"Khez revealed that of late, several new poppy to heroin processing modules have become highly active in Afghanistan and seasoned chemical experts under the garb of medical and other visa categories are being sent to India to execute complex heroin reconstitution operations at scattered locations within Delhi NCR," the DCP said.He said that Khez also revealed that the margins of profit being huge, he used his earlier and newer contacts made while in jail to resume his earlier illicit trade.

"Following the revelations, the Special Cell carried another raid in the area of Wazirabad and the fifth accused of this case, namely Najibullah, 40, residing in Ballimaran in Delhi was arrested," he said, adding another 3.2 kg of contraband was recovered from Najibullah, a permanent resident of Afghanistan's Akakhel.

With this arrest, the total recovery of contraband, fine quality heroin, presently stands at 54.2 kg, Kushwah added.

From the continuing interrogation of the arrested accused and examination of their digital footprints, several African and European, especially Italian, nodes of this narco-peddling network have surfaced, he said.

"Efforts are being made to establish the true identities of Afghan-based Kasim and Haji, who appear to be the major source of heroin which is then peddled through gunny sacks with absorbed heroin for further extraction and reconstitution in India," he said.

The DCP also said that the involvement of Kashmir Valley-based operatives in the network and sourcing of industry-grade chemicals used for reconstitution from yet unidentified Punjab-based operatives gives this module a significant importance that adds to their conventional understanding of the Golden Crescent, known as world's leading poppy/opium/heroin production areas.

absoluteindia

NEW DELHI, FRIDAY, MAY 14 2021

madhya pradesh

GUV, CM OTHERS CONGRATULATES PEOPLE ON EID-UL-FITR

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Governor AnandibenPatel, Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan and other leaders of the state have extended heartfelt greetings and best wishes to the people of the state on Eid-ul-Fitr. She has wished for the prosperity, progress of the state and for everyone's welfare.

Governor Patel has said that the festival of Eid carries the message of strengthening the spirit of peace, unity and brotherhood. In her message, she has said that celebrate the festival of Eid by following the rules made by the government during the Corona infection crisis. She said that celebrate the joys of the festival by helping the poor and the needy during times of crisis. At the same time pray that we all come out of the present difficulty very soon and that such a situation may never arise again.

Chief Minister Chouhan has greeted and congratulated all the people on the occasion of the Eid-ul-Fitr festival. Chouhan said that this festival enhances the spirit of brotherhood, love, peace, harmony, sacrifice, and compassion. We are all motivated to build a harmonious, and inclusive society. Chouhan also appealed to follow all rules, measures, precautions, and guidelines for battling against the Covid-19 epidemic.Former state chief minister and leader of opposition in the state assembly Kamal Nath has extended greetings and best wishes to state's people on Eid-ul-Fitr. In his message on the occasion Nath said that this festival following holy month of Ramazan gives the message of mutual harmony, fraternity and affection.

Nath said that festival of Eid gives the message of serving the humanity. He wished for peace in the state and country. The state and India should continue to progress. He also wished welfare and health of all. He urged people of the state to celebrate Eid with traditional gaiety and enthusiasm.

Madhya Pradesh gearing up for third wave of COVID-19

In order to deal with the threat of the third wave of the pandemic, the government is fully alert. We are trying to enhance the availability of medical oxygen, Remdesivir injections and other necessary material for the purpose," said Madhya Pradesh, state minister Dr Prabhu Ram Choudhary

Team Absolute | Indore

Claiming that the second wave of COVID-19 has slowed down in Madhya Pradesh, state minister Dr Prabhu Ram Choudhary on Wednesday said that in view of the threat of the third wave, the government has started enhancing its basic infrastructure in the medical field.The health and family welfare minister was speaking to reporters after reviewing the coronavirus situation in Indore district. "In the last few days, the second wave of COVID-19 has slowed down in the state. The infection rate, which had climbed to 25 per cent in April, has now gone down to 13.87 per cent," he said.

"In order to deal with the threat of the third wave of the pandemic, the government is fully alert. We are trying to enhance the availability of medical oxygen, Remdesivir injections and other necessary material for the purpose," the minister said.More than 100 oxygen plants have been sanctioned in the state and some of these units have even started functioning in eight districts, he added.

On the slow pace of vaccination especially for the age group of 18-44, Choudhary said, "About 3.5 crore people fall under this category. We are ensuring availability of vaccines with the help of manufacturers and the central government to speed up the inoculation of this age group." The minister said that around May 20, the state is likely to get a fresh stock of vaccines. However, despite repeated queries about how many variants of the virus were active in the state, he was unable to reply. "There is no laboratory available in Madhya Pradesh for the examination of the types of coronavirus. We have sent the samples to the labs outside the state for knowing about the virus variants," he added.

Strict action will be taken against those spreading rumors: Home Minister

- Mishra informed that the video was released by Shri Shashank Bhargava, MLA Vidisha, in connection with the irregularities at the Vidisha Medical College in the WhatsApp group (Vidisha Today Kalam ka Hamla).

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Home Minister Narottam Mishra has said that during the global disaster, strict action will be taken against those who mislead people and spread rumours. He said that in a case of releasing a video for misleading people and spreading rumours, a case has been registered against Vidisha MLA Shashank Bhargava.

Mishra has said that no matter how influential the person spreading the confusion and rumour is, no concession will be provided. Mishra informed that the video was released by Shashank Bhargava, MLA Vidisha, in connection with the irregularities at the Vidisha Medical College in the WhatsApp group (Vidisha Today Kalam ka Hamla). During investigation, it was found that the picture was not of Medical College Vidisha. He said that on the complaint of Shri Surendra Chauhan, a case was registered at police station, Vidisha on May 12, 2021 under Crime Number 350/2021, Sections 188, 505 IPC and 54 Disaster Act 2005 and investigation has been launched.

State government to give Rs 5,000 monthly pension to poor Corona-affected families: CM

MP Government Announces Free Education For Kids Orphaned Due To COVID

- Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Thursday announced that children who lost their parents or guardians to COVID will be provided free education.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

The wake of an increasing number of children being orphaned amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic, Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Thursday announced that children who lost their parents or guardians to COVID will be provided free education and Rs 5,000 monthly pension. Besides, the chief minister also said that the state will grant loans on government guarantee to people who want to work. "We will give Rs 5000 per month pension to children who have lost their parents/guardians in this COVID pandemic. We'll also arrange free education for these children and free ration for these families," Chouhan said. "We will grant loans to these families on govt guarantee to people who want to work," the chief minister added. Chouhan has said that several families have lost their earning members and bread earners due to Corona pandemic. Such families are facing severe financial crisis. Children have lost their fathers and guardians, old parents have lost their sons and earning members of the family. The state government will provide Rs 5 thousand per month pension to such families. Chouhan said that orphans, elderly and families will not have any problem in livelihood. The state government will take full care of this. Free education will be arranged for orphaned children, so that they can continue their education without hindrance. Orphans, elderly and families will be provided free ration with or without eligibility. The problem of their food will be solved. Chouhan said that interest-free loan will be provided on the guarantee of the state government to members of families of orphaned children and senior citizens who want to set up their own business. State government will provide support to families who have no support. Orphans childrens are of our state. They will be taken care of by the state and the state government. The state government cannot leave any child in the lurch. Chouhan said that the Corona pandemic has destroyed many families. Many children have lost their parents, guardians and family members. With no bread winner in the families, such children have no means of livelihood.

NSA slapped against 75 in MP for black-marketing Remdesivir

Team Absolute | Bhopal

The Madhya Pradesh government has invoked stringent National Security Act (NSA) against 75 persons for allegedly indulging in illegal sale of Remdesivir medicine in different parts of the state, a senior official said on Thursday.

These 75 persons have already been sent to jails by the district collectors concerned, he said. "As per the procedure, we have confirmed the NSA against 37 persons for black-marketing Remdesivir. We will also confirm the proposal against 38 others under the same Act by Friday," Additional Chief Secretary (ACS) Home, Dr Rajesh Rajora, said.

They were arrested under the NSA as well as the Prevention of Black-marketing and Maintenance of Supplies of Essential Commodities Act, 1980, he said. Of the 37 accused against whom the district administration's order was confirmed by the state government, nine each are from Indore and Ujjain, four each from Gwalior, Jabalpur and Shahdol, two each from Bhopal and Dhar and one each from Mandsaur, Chhindwara and Ratlam, the ACS said. The approval in 30 other cases in Indore and eight cases in Bhopal will be given by Friday, he added. Earlier, similar action was taken under these two stringent Acts against two persons each in Jabalpur and Ujjain and one each in Sagar and Satna for the black-marketing of oxygen. All six of them were sent to jails by the district authorities.

UNITS BEING SET UP AT 2 GOVT MEDICAL COLLEGES FOR MUCORMYCOSIS CASES

Bhopal: Two units are being set up at the government medical colleges at Bhopal and Jabalpur to treat cases of mucormycosis or black fungus, an infection affecting COVID-19 patients, in Madhya Pradesh, a state minister said on Thursday.State Medical Education Minister Vishwas Sarang while talking to media persons said these units with 10 beds each will be set up at Gandhi Medical College, Bhopal and Netaji Subhash Chandra Medical College in Jabalpur. Equipments are being procured from the Centre and the facilities will become operational in a week's time, the minister said. "These are going to be the first two units in the country with separate operation theatres to treat cases of the fungal infection," Sarang said. The Minister said he was in talks with US-based infectious disease expert Manoj Jain, who has given the know-how about establishing these treatment units. The facilities are coming up days after the Centre issued an advisory to the states citing that mucormycosis or black fungus may turn fatal if left untreated. According to experts, the fungal infection mainly affects people who are on medication that reduce their ability to fight environmental pathogens. The symptoms of the infection include headache, fever, pain under the eyes, nasal or sinus congestion and partial loss of vision.

Better implementation of Deendayal Antyodaya Rasoi Yojana must due to Covid-19

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Urban Development and Housing Minister Bhupendra Singh has directed all the Municipal Commissioners and Chief Municipal Officers to implement the Deendayal AntyodayaRasoi Yojana in a much better manner due to the Covid-19 infection. As many as 100 Deendayal RasoiKendras are being operated at various places in the state. Shri Singh has said that although the RasoiKendras are working satisfactorily, but under the present circumstances they need to be further strengthened.

Singh said that due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the district administration has imposed Corona curfew in the cities. This has adversely affected the livelihood of poor families, who depend on daily wages and are roadside vendors. Therefore, the utility of RasoiKendras has increased even more. He said that Deendayal RasoiKendras should continue to be operated. This system should be strengthened further. Arrangements should be made to provide food to poor families who have difficulty in arranging food, at affordable rates fixed by the district level committees. In the present situation, the bodies may consider providing packets of cooked food along with packets of dry ration. To enable increased public participation in Deendayal Rasoi Yojana, a system of online donation has also been started on the portal of the scheme. By publicizing it, support can be sought from common citizens, social institutions and corporate organizations. Grants are also provided by the state government for running the centers. Details of food packets / dry ration packets being distributed in this way and details of cooperation received should also be registered on the portal of Deendayal Rasoi Kendra regularly.

CM reviews Covid-19 control measures of divisional districts in Rewa

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan reviewed measures to control Covid-19 in Satna, Sidhi and Singrauli districts of the division from Rewa NIC Center. He took information about the Corona infection control from the collector of the respective districts and obtained suggestions by communicating with the members of the Crisis Management Committee, the public representatives.

Chouhan said in his address that an action plan should be made to increase ICU beds with oxygenated beds in rural health centers including Sidhi, Satna and Singrauli district hospitals, so that at the time of disaster, the corona infected should be adequately treated at nearby health centers. Arrangements can be ensured. He said that the work of breaking the chain of corona infection should be done by activating the Crisis Management Committee of rural areas. Villagers should automatically follow the Corona curfew, so that the epidemic can be quickly resolved. The Chief Minister said that the residents of Vindhya region will strongly support the administration in the fight against the corona infection, only then we will be able to come down to a positive rate of less than 5 percent in the month of May and will be successful in removing the corona.

Chouhan said that the condition of corona infection has improved in the districts of the division and the positivity rate has come down. What is needed is that the corona curfew be strictly followed with the cooperation of the public. Under the Kill Corona campaign, patients of cold, cough, cold and cold should be given door-to-door treatment kits in the villages. Take proper information about proper care and health of patients living in home isolation. He also gave instructions to speed up the vaccination work. Chouhan talked about setting up of infant ICUs in the districts so that the infection of children can be treated better. Chouhan gave instructions to the concerned collectors to chalk out an action plan to set up a total of 50 additional ICU beds at Satna district hospital, including 20 additional ICU beds at Sidhi and 30 at Singrauli in the first phase. He got detailed information about the availability of oxygen beds in the districts and the condition of the Covid Care Center. Chouhan expected that all the public representatives and members of the Council of Christ should actively work to break the chain of corona infection and ensure timely treatment to the infected. Suggested the availability of adequate medicines in rural areas and establishment of a hospital in the under construction medical college. Collector Satna Ajay Katesaria said that the positivity rate in the district has come down to 10 percent. All measures of corona control are being ensured. During the review of Sidhi district, Chouhan took detailed information from Collector Ravindra Kumar Chaudhary about Positiveness Rate and Kill Corona Campaign. He was told that the positivity rate in the district has come down to 17 percent. MLA Kedar Shukla suggested to supply 300 additional oxygen cylinders. Chouhan met the workers associated with the campaign "I Corona Volunteer" before the Corona Control Meeting held at Mohan Auditorium Rewa and discussed the work being done by them. The District Coordinator of the Jan Abhiyan Parishad, Pravin Pathak informed the Chief Minister about the community service activities and total registered volunteers under the campaign in the district.

Efforts to eradicate corona infection will be successful in the month of May with the cooperation of all - Chief Minister

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan held a virtual discussion with the members of the development block and village level disaster management committee of all the districts of the division from Rewa headquarters. Chouhan said that the residents of Vindhya region, who are determined to keep in mind, pass on it. Now everyone has resolved to break the corona chain. With the cooperation of all, we will get success in breaking the chain of corona infection in the month of May itself. Control of corona infection can be found in Vindhya region very soon. After centuries one has to face odd situations like the Corona Crisis. This is a difficult test for all of us. With all our efforts, we will definitely get success in this exam.

Chouhan said that the only way to break the Corona transition chain is to strictly follow the curfew instructions. Do not let the crowd gather nor go to the crowd. Disaster Management Committee of every locality and every village of the city should make efforts to break the chain of corona infection. Survey every house during the Kill Corona campaign. Do not hide the symptoms of cold or cough or corona. Take the appropriate medicines by conducting an immediate test. Corona is completely cured by timely medication. Due to everyone's efforts, the positivity rate in Madhya Pradesh has come down from 23 percent to 13 percent in a month.

MAHARASHTRA LOCKDOWN RESTRICTIONS EXTENDED TILL JUNE 1

The move by the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government comes amid rising Covid-19 cases and fatalities in many districts in the state, though Mumbai and parts of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region are currently in a better shape.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

On anticipated lines, the Maharashtra government on Thursday announced that ithas decided to extend the ongoing stringent lockdown-type restrictions across the state till June 1.

The move by the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government comes amid rising Covid-19 cases and fatalities in many districts in the state, though Mumbai and parts of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region are currently in a better shape.

As per the new directives, Mumbai suburban trains will not permit regular commuters but only those engaged in essential services and other pre-notified categories.

At the cabinet meeting presided over by Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray on Wednesday, all ministers belonging to Shiv Sena-Nationalist Congress Party-Congress supported the need to extend the lockdown.

Following the cabinet nod, Chief Secretary Sitaram Kunte issued the official notification this afternoon extending the lockdown provisions from 7 a.m. on May 15, till 7 a.m. on June 1.

The state also made it mandatory for any persons entering the state by any mode of transport to carry a Covid-19 negative report which is issued within 48 hours prior to his/her arrival.

The government has directed the local Disaster Management Authorities to keep tight vigils over rural markets and APMCs to ensure covid appropriate behavior and if rules are not complied, they can shut these down or impose further restrictions on a case-to-case basis.

Is Moderna vaccine allowed, Maha minister asks Centre

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Senior Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader and Maharashtra minister Nawab Malik on Thursday asked Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan whether the Moderna vaccine has been cleared for inoculation in India.

He said that presently Covishield and Covaxin are being administered while Sputnik V has just been permitted in India by the Central government."According to the information I have received, the French Embassy in India has procured Moderna vaccine and it is being administered to the French citizens and their relatives in Navi Mumbai with the help of Apollo Hospital in Mumbai," Malik said in a statement.

"The question arises how a 'non-permitted' vaccine can be allowed to be administered? If they can get it, why can't the Indian government get it for its citizens? The government and Health Minister Harsh Vardhan must clarify," demanded Malik, who is the national spokesperson of the NCP.Disputing Malik's contentions, BJP's Leader of Opposition Pravin Darekar said that the exact details of his allegations on the Moderna vaccine are not available.

"As per our information, every Embassy has made provisions for Covid-19 vaccines for their own staffers. Instead of taking care of its own citizens in the state, the Maharashtra government is wasting time over such non-issues," Darekar said.Owing to the shortage of the vaccines in the state, the Maharashtra government had on Wednesday decided to postpone the inoculation drive for the 18-44 age group till the month-end and divert the existing stocks for the 45-plus age group and those due for the second jab.

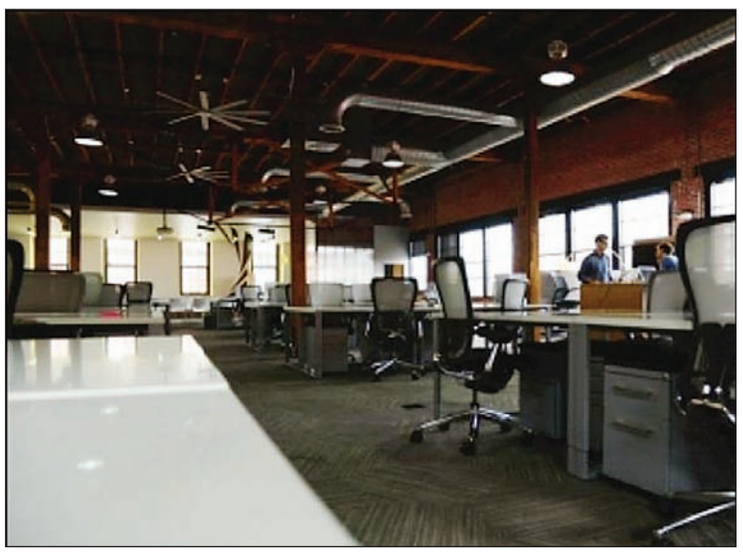
Besides, the BrihanMumbai Municipal Corporation on Wednesday floated global tenders to procure one crore doses from the international markets after Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray's nod.

Presently, Maharashtra has inoculated a total of 1,89,66,476 people in all categories, including 1,51,54,480 first timers and 38,11,996 who were administered their second dose, the highest in the country.

The state has so far notched a total of 52,26,710 Covid-19 cases and 78,007 deaths, both most in the country.

Prime office rentals in NCR, Mumbai stable despite Covid crisis

Team Absolute | Mumbai



The prime office space rentals in the key cities of Delhi-NCR, Mumbai and Bengaluru are expected to remain stable over the next 12-months despite the ongoing Covid crisis, according to a Knight Frank report.

The 'Asia-Pacific Prime Office Rental Index Q1 2021' said that Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC) in Mumbai witnessed a meaningful recovery in office rents to 0.8 per cent QoQ during the January-March 2021 quarter, compared to -5.5 per cent in the previous quarter.

This robust recovery can be attributed to improved transaction activity in the Q1, 2021 period, it said.

Knight Frank forecasts that the decline in rents will decelerate this year, with overall rents expected to decline by 3 per cent in the APAC region, compared to the 4.8 per cent decline seen in 2020.

Central Business District (CBD) of Bengaluru, comprising areas such as MG Road, Infantry Road, and Residency Road, has registered a decline of 3.0 per cent QoQ in Q1, 2021 against a decline of 4.0 per cent in Q4 2020. In Connaught Place in National Capital Region (NCR), office rents saw a flat 0.0 per cent QoQ price change in Q1, 2021 compared to -1.0 per cent in Q4, 2020.

According to the index, Taipei is the only city expected to witness an increase in office rental values across the APAC region in next 12 months. Of the 22 cities tracked by the index, eight recorded either stable or increased rents in the past quarter compared to 10 in the previous quarter. For Q1, 2021, Knight Frank's AsiaPacific Prime Office Rental Index fell -1.2 per cent quarter-on-quarter, led by large office markets such as Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Bengaluru recorded rental decline between -3.0 per cent and -2.8 per cent during the same period. On an annual basis, the overall index was down -5.5 per cent year-on-year.

Shishir Baijal, Chairman and Managing Director of Knight Frank India said: "The second wave of pandemic and associated regional lockdowns have temporarily delayed occupiers' office re-occupancy plans.""However, control on infection case count with graded regional lockdowns and progress on vaccination drive will act as a market stabiliser in near future. Given the strong fundamentals of India office market, despite the near-term uncertainty, occupiers will positively react to any improvement in the pandemic scenario in the country," Baijal said.

'Water-filled' Remdesivir, Tocilizumab drugs racket busted

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Maharashtra Cyber Police have busted an online fraud of illegal sales of fake Remdesivir and Tocilizumab drugs filled with plain water that targeted gullible customers desperate for treatment of Covid-19, an official said here on Thursday.

On Wednesday, a leading pharmaceutical company had approached the Cyber Police Cell to file a case after it received many complaints that its distributors had sold these drugs by soliciting customers online or through social media.

The complainants had stated that some mobile numbers were posted on various WhatsApp groups or other social media platforms claiming they were authorised dealers of the complainant pharmaceutical company.

They offered to deliver the drugs on advance payment of 50 per cent amount through online transactions, and rest on delivery. Though the company had been getting these complaints since April 27, the numbers kept increasing daily compelling it to approach the police, and the people also started posting their grievances on the social media targeting the company on various public platforms.

Adar Poonawalla Promises To Deliver 1.5 Crore Covishield Doses To Maharashtra After May 20: Tope

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Institute of India CEO Adar Poonawalla has promised Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray to deliver 1.5 crore doses of COVID-19 vaccine Covishield to Maharashtra after May 20, said health minister Rajesh Tope on Wednesday.

The Maharashtra state cabinet held a meeting on Wednesday to discuss the Covid management.

Interacting with reporters, Maharashtra Health Minister Rajesh Tope said, "Serum Institute of India CEO Adar Poonawalla has promised the Chief Minister to deliver 1.5 crore doses of Covishield to Maharashtra after May 20. We will start the vaccination for the 18-44 years age group after we receive the vaccine."

As Maharashtra has suspended the Covid vaccination for the 18-44 years age group temporarily due to the unavailability of vaccines, the health minister stated: "Vaccination for 18-44 age group has been suspended for the time being due to shortage of vaccines. All the doses purchased by the state government for the age group will now be diverted for the 45 category."Asked about the extension of lockdown, Rajesh Tope said, "At the Cabinet meeting, the health department and other ministers proposed to extend the lockdown for 15 days. The Chief Minister will take a final decision on this matter."

Aslam Sheikh, Minister in Maharashtra Cabinet, said the Central government should relax norms for buying vaccines. "If the Centre eases its import laws a bit, we will be able to vaccinate the people in 3-4 months. More rights need to be given to States so that we can purchase vaccines from the market and vaccinate people."

Maharashtra reported 46,781 fresh COVID-19 cases and 816 deaths in the last 24 hours, said the state health department on Wednesday. The new cases pushed the case tally in the state to 52,26,710.As many as 58,805 patients have recovered from the disease in the last 24 hours, taking the total recoveries to 46,00,196. Meanwhile, the active number of COVID cases in Maharashtra stands at 5,46,129. With the new fatalities, the COVID death count in Maharashtra has mounted to 78,007.

Maharashtra allots Rs 6 crore for Dy CM AjitPawar's social media handling,cancels order after backlash

The Maharashtra government earmarked nearly Rs 6 crore for the handling of social media accounts of Deputy Chief Minister AjitPawar, inviting criticism from opposition BJP. Later, Pawar cancelled the hiring of an external agency.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Maharashtra government had earmarked nearly Rs 6 crore for the handling of social media accounts of Deputy Chief Minister AjitPawar, however, later cancelled the order after facing backlash and opposition attacks.

As per an order issued on Wednesday, an external agency was to be appointed for the handling of social media accounts of NCP leader AjitPawar. The agency was also to be tasked to ensure that the common people are informed of the decisions taken by AjitPawar, who holds the finance and planning portfolio.

The order for appointing an external agency and allotting it a budget of Rs 5.98 crores was issued by RN Musale, under-secretary at the General Administration Department for the year 2021-22.

BJP MLA, Ram Kadam criticised the move and said, "People have died in the pandemic due to the negligence of the Maharashtra government. On one hand, the government is saying that they don't have enough money to purchase vaccines and on the other hand, to pat their backs on social media a team is hired for the deputy chief minister at a budget of Rs 6 crore." He added, "If this budget is for one minister, what is the budget for all the ministers? During the pandemic, new vehicles were purchased and houses of ministers were renovated on government expense. Ministers should pay for social media from their own pockets."

The order mentioned that DGIPR lacks professional and technical competence to deal with social media and hence an external agency is being hired. Maharashtra's DGIPR department has a staff of nearly 1,200 and with an annual budget of Rs 150 crore.As per the order, the external agency was to handle AjitPawar's Twitter, Facebook, blogger, YouTube and Instagram accounts. The order also mentioned the handling of Soundcloud, a WhatsApp bulletin, Telegram channel and SMS.

The agency was to be appointed in consultation with the deputy chief minister, secretariat and directorate general of information and public relations.

The agency will be selected from among those which are already on the panel of DGIPR. The order also said that it will be ensured that there will be no duplication of messages generated from the CMO and DCM office. The CMO had already appointed an external agency in July 2020 for the handling of its social media accounts.

Deputy Chief Minister AjitPawar later cancelled the decision to appoint an external agency to manage his social media accounts.

"There is no need to appoint an external agency to handle the social media of the Deputy Chief Minister's Office, the order in this regard should be cancelled immediately," Deputy Chief Minister AjitPawar has instructed.

In a statement, it was further said that the Deputy Chief Minister's Office does not feel the need to work independently on social media.

Deputy Chief Minister AjitPawar has also clarified that communication with the citizens and media will be maintained only through the existing public relations system.

Mumbai Special Court slaps notices to 'confiscate' Nirav Modi's properties

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Fresh legal troubles are brewing in Mumbai for fugitive diamantaire Nirav D. Modi, currently battling for bail and against extradition proceedings in a UK court, officials said here on Thursday.

A Special Court under the Fugitive Economic Offenders Act, 2018, has slapped a series of notices to Nirav Modi and his sister Purvi Mehta -- who turned approver five months ago -- besides his group companies, ordering them to appear before Special Judge V.C. Barde on in Mumbai June 11.

Barde has also ordered them to explain why the Special Court should not "confiscate" the properties and assets of the two siblings and the other group companies as per the law, in a money-laundering case filed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in early 2018. The notices have served to their known residences in Mumbai -- four flats in the famed Samudra Mahal building on Dr. Annie Besant Road, and the Grosvenor House on Pedder Road. The development comes exactly three-and-half-a-year after Nirav Modi, several of his family members, his maternal uncle Mehul C. Choksi and others were accused of perpetrating a stunning fraud of around Rs 14,000 crore in the Punjab National Bank (PNB).

Even before the PNB admitted the fraud and lodged a formal police complaint in January 2018, it emerged that Nirav Modi, Mehul Choksi and others had already fled the country as the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and ED launched their independent probes.

Besides the 'Mama-Bhanja' duo, Nirav Modi's group companies like Stellar Diamonds, Firestar International Ltd, RadashirJewelery Co. Pvt. Ltd., Firestar Trading Pvt. Ltd., Solar Exports, Diamonds R Us, Firestar Diamond International Ltd., Mac Business Enterprises Pvt. Ltd., Bentley Properties Pvt. Ltd. and Nirav Modi Trust, which were under the scanner of the CBI-ED sleuths, have been named in the Special Court's latest notices. Shortly after the scam hit the Indian banking sector, a Mumbai Magistrate in February 2018 had issued a non-bailable warrant against Nirav Modi in June 2018, the InterPol issued a Red Corner Notice, followed by India's request in August 2018 to the UK authorities seeking his extradition back home.It was in March 2019 that a massive furore erupted in India after Nirav Modi was found sauntering on a London street with the Indian authorities going after him with renewed vigour, resulting in his arrest that same month.

As he remains in jail, a UK court in February 2021 cleared his extradition to India to face charges of bank frauds, money-laundering etc., even as Purvi and her husband Maiank Mehta turned approvers in the case in January 2021. Incidentally, in the past couple of years, the ED and the CBI have managed to recover small sums by auctioning off Nirav Modi's assets like half-a-dozen luxury vehicles, designer bags, high-value wristwatches, rare paintings, artworks and other stuff, while his deluxe bungalow in Alibaug was attached and demolished in March 2019.

Maharashtra SSC Result 2021: Marks will be given on assessment basis

Maharashtra State Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education is going to release the Maharashtra SSC Result 2021 assessment criteria.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Maharashtra State Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education is going to release the Maharashtra SSC Result 2021 assessment criteria soon. FYJC admission process is going to be based on the SSC Result 2021.

The Maharashtra education minister made it clear that the Maharashtra SSC marking will be done on the basis of internal assessment.

The Maharashtra board has not yet taken any decision on the SSC Result 2021 assessment criteria. However, the state government is under discussion with various experts and stakeholders on the same issue.So, the Class 10 result criteria are expected to be announced soon. Maharashtra's government had earlier cancelled the class 10 exam and postponed the class 12 exam. It was announced that the decision on HSC exams will be taken in June after considering the Covid situation in the state. The State Education Minister, Varsha Gaikwad, called for two meetings, one with an educational research organisation and the other with principals and vice-principals. She assured that a 'fair and accurate' assessment criterion roadmap for Maharashtra SSC Result 2021 will be prepared soon. This will also help to begin the FYJC admissions.

A NOBLE CAUSE

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Huma Qureshi, who will soon be seen in Army of the Dead directed by Zack Snyder, has partnered with Save the Children, with a 100-year legacy of responding to children in crisis. This time geared up to help Delhi fight the pandemic by raising funds for a 100-bed hospital to reduce the burden on the national capital's health infrastructure.

Huma, a native of New Delhi, has been working on this initiative with Save the Children for an all-encompassing solution that will provide much needed hope amid the death and despair caused by COVID-19. The emergency medical facility equipped with skilled health professionals, medical equipment (including its own oxygen plant) will provide crucial, equitable and life-saving care and treatment to Delhi's most disadvantaged children and communities,

Many of Huma's friends from the film fraternity have come out in support including Sonakshi Sinha, Mudassar Aziz, Jay Shewakramani, Arjun Kapoor, Monisha Advani, Rohit Dhawan, Hansal Mehta, Ramesh Taurani, Dia Mirza, Anisha Padukone, Shweta Nanda, and Saqib Saleem.

Speaking about the initiative Huma Qureshi said, "I was pained and horrified by what was happening around me. It was despairing to see New Delhi, also my home, crumbling under the second wave, with mounting cases, rising death tolls and an overburdened health system. I had to do something to help. Save the Children were already in touch with the authorities and it all fell into place. This is just a start. We are starting with Delhi, but I plan to keep this drive going taking it to other cities. And we will need many more us coming together to win the battle against the deadly virus." `Save the Children, with their experience in responding to humanitarian crisis, have provided critical care and services to the most disadvantaged children and their families since the pandemic hit in 2020 reaching 5.57L children. In their response to second covid wave, Save the Children, has launched a mission to #ProtectAMillion and their commitment to reach an additional 1 million (10 Lakh) children and their families in 57 districts across 14 states and 2 UTs. The collaboration with Huma will help Save the Children get closer to their mission to protect a million.

ANUPAM KHER TO CONDUCT RELIEF ACTIVITIES FOR THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN INDIA

"Project Heal India"

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The present situation of India battling the pandemic is very grim as help pours in from all corners. Established personalities and celebrities have also come forward in their own way to help. Anupam Kher Foundation in collaboration with Dr Ashutosh Tewari (Global Cancer Foundation, USA) and Baba Kalyani

(Bharat Forge, India), recently started an initiative called "Project Heal India". Through this initiative, the aim is to aid in the current fight against COVID-19 across India by providing medical aid and other relief during these unprecedented times. Its a worthy initiative to help people in need during such worrisome times. Through the project, the organizations will provide critical equipment and other life supporting devices to needy institutions and hospitals across India. The first consignment of CrossVent Ventilators (ICU Critical Care), Medtronic Ventilators, ResMed non-invasive ventilation devices and oxygen concentrators are expected to arrive in India within the week.

Anupam Kher, said, "At the time of an ongoing world crisis, we human beings have always collectively come together to respond and provide help in any way possible. As India is reeling under a huge crisis, it is our moral responsibility to pick up the mantle and do our bit. Numerous people from around the globe reached out asking of ways to be of help but as Dr Ashutosh Tewari was one of the first to come up with a concrete plan. This gave me the needed impetus to take this forward and be of service to our nation. It is people and humanitarians like Baba Kalyani and Dr Ashutosh Tewari that help make the world a better place and restore our faith time and again in humanity. I am honoured and pleased to be joining hands with them."

Project Heal India will also continue to raise funds, medicines, and other necessary relief material to help our people and our community at large. The need of the hour is to come together, join hands and unitedly fight this global enemy. Every step counts, every gesture is valued, and every help and aid will bring us one step closer to our goal of eradicating this virus. Nothing is too much or too less when the intention is pure and there is a common goal of humanity.

HIMANSHI KHURANA CHANNELS INNER 'BLACK ROSE' IN NEW PIC

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Punjabi star and "Bigg Boss 13" contestant Himanshi Khurana strikes a killer black pose in a new photo she posted on Wednesday.

In the black and white picture she shared on Instagram, Himanshi is dressed in embellished Indian wear. She completes her look with thick lashes and chooses to leave her long tresses open, as she gives a smoldering glance to the camera.

For the caption, she dropped two black circle emojis and wrote: "Black Rose".

Himanshi made her debut in the Punjabi Music industry with the song "Jodi: Big day party" in 2010. She later made her debut in acting with the hit film "Sadda Haq". In 2018 she made her debut as a singer with the song "High standard".

She gained greater fandom in Bigg Boss 13. Her chemistry with fellow contestant Asim Riaz was loved by the audience. Asim and Himanshi have appeared in a few songs together like "Kalla sohna nai" and "Khyaal rakhya kar" among others.

Urvashi to donate "Versace baby" proceeds towards Covid relief in India, Palestine

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Urvashi Rautela has said that all proceeds and her earnings from her debut international music album "Versace Baby", with Egyptian actor Mohamed Ramadan, will be donated towards Indias fight against Covid-19 and to Palestine Red Crescent Society.

"I'm well pleased to be a part of this noble dynamism, to lend our hand towards the nation's fight against Covid-19. Since last year, we have endeavoured in our efforts towards fighting Covid-19, since this unprecedented catastrophe struck our country and the world. The contemporaneous situation has empowered us to bestow more in these arduous times," Urvashi told reporter.

Urvashi added that the country is "going through a formidable situation". Mohamed and I are committed to taking all the requisite steps to invigorate the fight against Covid-19. We are also donating to the Palestine Red Crescent Society to help amplify the resources to provide vital relief efforts to people affected by the pandemic," she concluded.

Urvashi also took to social media on Thursday to share the news about the donations. She shared a video with Ramzan on Instagram.

Alongside the clip, she wrote: "With my fav Hindi student Mohamed Ramadan.#EidMubarak to you and your family! May this bring nothing

but joy for all. Have a safe and happy Eid to all my Muslim fans & loved ones worldwide."

She added: "All proceeds and my earnings from this video will be donated towards the nation's fight against Covid-19 and to Palestine Red Crescent Society."

Kirti Kulhari's 'fantasy' comes true

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Bollywood actress Kirti Kulhari's fantasy has finally come true, going by what she has shared on her social media on Thursday.

Kirti posted two clips on Instagram from her camping trip in Garhwal, Uttarakhand. The first video shows Kirti touring her camping area.

"My first camp site ever ... #day1 camp site ... #garhwal #uttarakhand," Kirti wrote as the caption.

The actress then gave a tour inside her tent and mentioned that her fantasy of sleeping under the stars has finally come true.

Kirti wrote on Thursday: "Sleeping in these little camping tents under the stars has been a fantasy forever... And finally it comes true.."

Kirti announced separation from Saahil Sehgal last month. On the work front, the actress will next be seen in the medical thriller web series "Human".

Prasoon Joshi reacts after Big B credits him for poem

Team Absolute | Mumbai

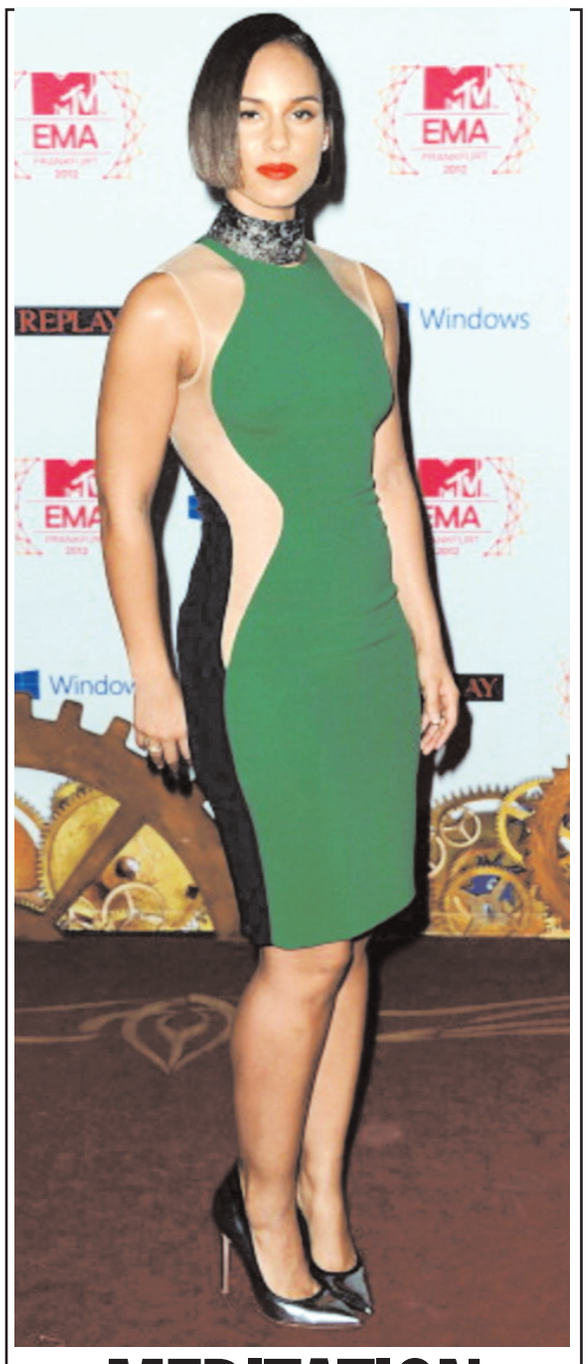
Poet-lyricist Prasoon Joshi has reacted after veteran Bollywood star Amitabh Bachchan rectified his error and credited Joshi for the poem which he had recited on social media.

"I feel humbled if my poem 'Ruke na tu' can provide support in these difficult times, which has been recited by respected Amit ji with all his heart, as always. Several sites in the internet consider it as a creation of respected late poet Harivansh Rai Bachchan. It is an honour that his craft is reflected in my work. My respect to Ma Saraswati," Joshi tweeted in Hindi late on Wednesday.

It all began with Amitabh Bachchan reciting the poem "Ruke na tu" on social media on Tuesday and erroneously claiming it as the creation of his father, late poet Harivansh Rai Bachchan.

Bachchan took to social media on Wednesday to rectify the mistake he made the day before and acknowledged in a tweet that the poem is actually written by poet-lyricist Prasoon Joshi.

Bachchan had recited Joshi's poem in an attempt to encourage frontline workers amid India's battle with a raging second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.



MEDITATION HELPED ALICIA KEYS TO BE GOOD

Los Angeles | Agencies

Singer Alicia Keys said that meditation helped her a lot after she became a mom. "Like so many new moms I was exhausted, but the depletion was more than physiological; my spirit was shot. I needed to do something so I could continue to be a good mother to my children, partner to my husband, and friend to myself," she said, according to a report in femalefirst.co.uk.

Since she was so tired during those days, she slept off the first time she meditated but got better with time.

"I have to be honest: The first time I tried the meditation, I was so tired that I fell asleep. But the second time, I felt a little spark. I really liked the mixture of chanting, singing and movement. Between the chanting and the singing and the rhythm and the meaning of these ancient words, I discovered a sense of peace and comfort," she said. She added that she was able to connect with herself better, too.

"I started to notice a richer connection with myself, an ability to go deeper. After years of silence I could hear myself, trust my instincts, know what I wanted, know what I needed and not feel so insecure." Keys has two kids -- Egypt, 10, and Genesis, six.

50 CENT HAILS TOM CRUISE FOR BACKING PROTEST AGAINST GOLDEN GLOBES

Los Angeles | Agencies

Rapper 50 Cent has lauded Tom Cruise after the Hollywood star returned his three Golden Globes to join the protest against the Hollywood Free Press Association (HFPA), organisers of the awards.

The rapper shared a screenshot of a tweet about the news of the "Mission Impossible" star returning his Golden Globe trophies on Instagram in the late hours of Wednesday night according to India time.

"For the first time since 1996 NBC won't be airing the Golden Globes, no diversity, no show. @tomcruise is the man for sending his trophy's back. #bransoncognac #lecheminduroi," the rapper, whose real name is Curtis James Jackson III, wrote as caption.

According to Deadline, Cruise returned his three awards at the HFPA headquarters this week because he feels the organisation is not doing enough to ensure diversity and inclusivity.

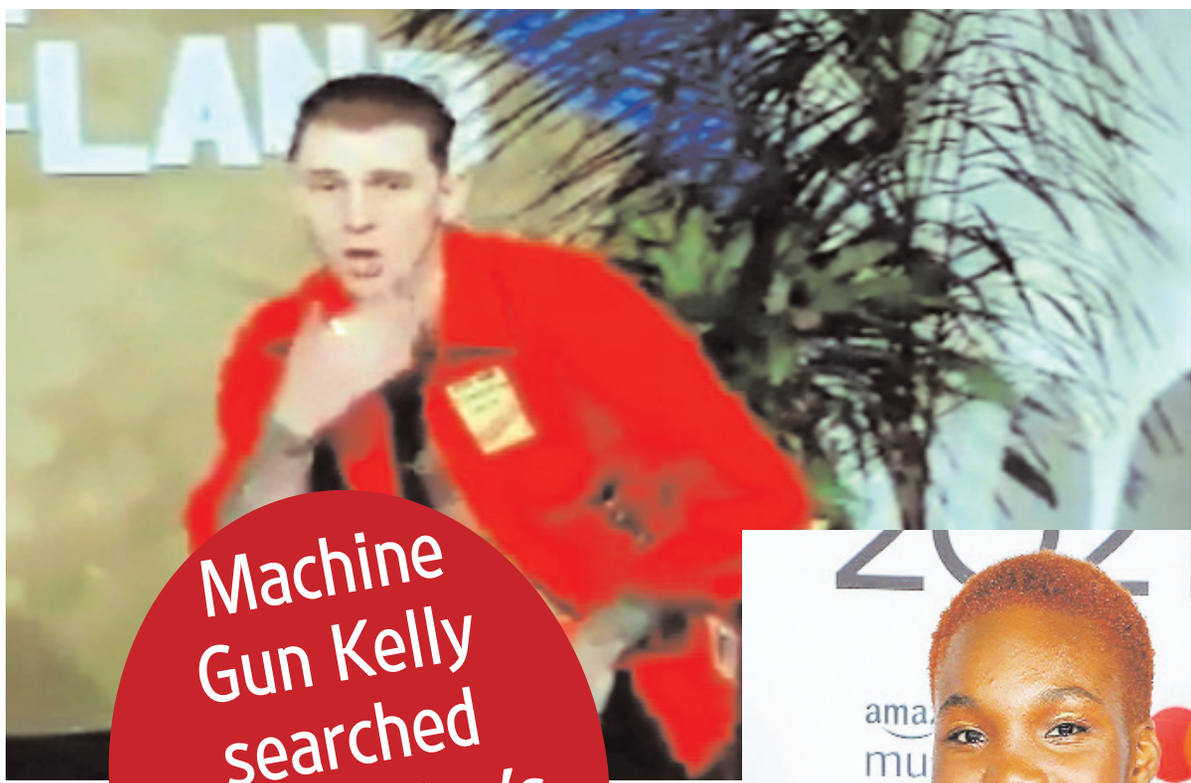
Cruise had won Best Actor awards at the Globes for his roles in "Jerry Maguire" and "Born On The Fourth Of July", and Best Supporting Actor award for "Magnolia".

His decision came on the same day that NBC announced they won't broadcast the awards in 2022. The network has aired the awards since 1996.

BEYONCE SLAYS IN ALL-BLACK ENSEMBLE

Los Angeles | Agencies

American pop star Beyonce Knowles looks like a million bucks on social media, dressed in an all-black thigh-high slit ensemble. In her latest Instagram photo-op, Beyonce poses for the camera in a long black dress with a slit. She completes her look with a belt, small sunglasses, a choker, and dangle earrings. "B ain't playin wit y'all," she captioned, underlining her diva vibes. Beyonce's picture currently has 2.3 million on the photo-sharing website. In March, Beyonce's storage units in LA were broken into, and burglars made off with more than $1 million worth of valuables.



Machine Gun Kelly searched Megan Fox's home for ghosts

Los Angeles | Agencies

Rapper Machine Gun Kelly searched his girlfriend Megan Fox's house with a weapon to search for an intruder, though he felt he needed to call a "ghostbuster" because there was no one there. "I'll be in bed with her and the door would just like (open) but no one is there. And wind doesn't go through eight hallways to make it to the master bedroom hallway to flip it open," Kelly said, reports femalefirst.co.uk.

He added: "That's when I started going, 'This is disturbing', minus the part when she first moved into the house and the outside doors were doing that. She called me, she locked herself in the bedroom one time, I came through. I had a weapon to make sure everyone was safe and I went through the house with the weapon and then we realised we needed ghostbusters. What I had was not going to defeat whatever enemy was in the house. That realisation came later, that we were looking for a culprit that doesn't exist." The rapper, whose real name is Colson Baker, feels his home is haunted.

Arlo Parks on coming out to family: Knew I'd be loved, accepted

Los Angeles | Agencies

Singer-songwriter Arlo Parks said she was always sure her family would love and accept her when she told them she was bisexual at the age of 17. "I am kinda lucky because I've always been comfortable and I grew up in a place, in terms of my family, where I was very much approached with love. I knew no matter what, I would always be loved and accepted. For most people, that's not how it goes," Parks said in an interview with the Metro newspaper's Guilty Pleasures column, according to a report in contactmusic.com.

She added everything went off well.

"It felt very kind of natural. Of course, it's always a bit nerve-wracking but I felt I was coming into myself. My parents and friends were all very accepting. It didn't even feel like a massive explosive moment. Everyone was like, 'okay', which I am really grateful for," she said.

THE BEST ACTION CONTENT TO WATCH ON OTT

Team Absolute | Mumbai

You may not be experiencing much action or adventure right now, so it's the perfect time to live vicariously through the world of films and web-series. Trying to define "action movie" can yield several different answers, but we like to think of the genre as run-and-gun, fist-to-fist escapism that stands the test of time and occasionally comes with tinges of comedy or sci-fi. The best of the best are fairly available on OTT platforms, offering plenty of reliably diverting high-octane action sequences and spine chilling musical beats. Some of them that you can't miss out on are:

1. TENET

"Tenet" is reportedly one of Christopher Nolan's most expensive undertakings to date. It is a testament to Nolan's critical and commercial pull that he's one of the only filmmakers in Hollywood that a major studio like Warner Bros. is willing to give a giant budget to direct an original film. 'Tenet' sees a secret agent embarks on a dangerous, time-bending mission to prevent the start of World War III. Like the director's previous smash hits - Inception, and to a lesser degree, Interstellar - Tenet demands repeat viewings to understand the plot. The movie is now streaming on Amazon Prime Video in India in English, Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu.

2. WITHOUT REMORSE

Recently released Without Remorse opened up to a huge applause from the viewers, and is also streaming on Amazon Prime Video, in over 240 countries. The web film is an adaptation on the novel 'Without Remorse', written by Tom Clancy and published in 1993. Set during the Vietnam War, it serves as an origin story of John Clark, one of the recurring characters in the Ryanverse. Without Remorse introduces Clark as former Navy SEAL John Kelly and explains how he changed his name. It establishes, in its opening scene, not only his formidable physicality, but also his ideology. The film has garnered appreciation all across and this is your perfect dose of action! The film's action sequences are hailed by the audience, which will keep you hooked to your seats till the end.

4. THE MANDALORIAN

The Mandalorian is an American space Western television series created by Jon Favreau, streaming on the service Disney+ Hotstar. It is the first live-action series in the Star Wars franchise. It stars Pedro Pascal as the title character, a lone bounty hunter who goes on the run after being hired to retrieve 'The Child'.

3. THE FALCON AND THE WINTER SOLDIER

Following the events of "Avengers: Endgame," Sam Wilson/Falcon (Anthony Mackie) and Bucky Barnes/Winter Soldier (Sebastian Stan) team up in a global adventure that tests their abilities-and their patience-in Marvel Studios' "The Falcon and The Winter Soldier." The all-new series is directed by Kari Skogland; streaming on Disney+ Hotstar Premium.

ABSOLUTE PIC OF THE DAY

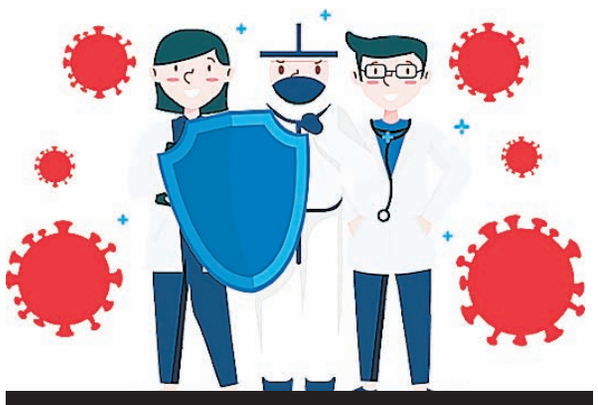
Natalya Wright

EDITOR'S SPECS

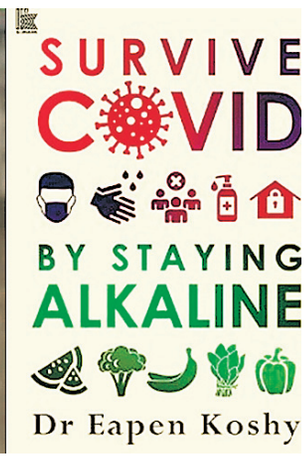
MASS GATHERING CAUSED INDIA'S COVID RESURGENCE

The World Health Organization (WHO) has blamed several religious and political mass gathering events for fuelling India's dramatic surge in new cases and deaths. The spread of B1617 and other variants (B117), coupled with low adherence to public health and social measures were other factors for the resurgence of Coronavirus cases in India. "A recent risk assessment of the situation in India conducted by WHO found that resurgence and acceleration of Covid-19 transmission in India had several potential contributing factors, including increase in the proportion of cases of SARS-CoV-2 variants with potentially increased transmissibility; several religious and political mass gathering events which increased social mixing," the global health agency said in its weekly epidemiological update on the pandemic on Tuesday. The exact contributions of each of these factors on increased transmission in India are not well understood, the WHO said. The WHO's SARS-CoV-2 Virus Evolution Working Group on Tuesday determined that viruses within the lineage B1617, first reported in India in October 2020, are a variant of concern. The B1617 variant was, till now, deemed a 'variant of interest' by the WHO. It now has been added to the list of other Covid-19 "variants of concern" -- UK (B117), South African (B1351) and Brazilian (P1) variants. The B1617 variant was declared as a variant of concern based on early evidence of higher rates of transmission, including its observed rapid increases in prevalence in 44 countries, the WHO said. "The prevalence of several VOCs (variant of concern) including B117 and B1617 sublineages increased concurrent to the surge in Covid-19 cases reported in India," the WHO update stated. According to the update, approximately 0.1 per cent of positive samples in India have been sequenced and uploaded to open-access database GISAID (Global Initiative on Sharing Avian Influenza Data) to identify SARS-CoV-2 variants. While B117 and B16171 variants have begun to wane in recent weeks, a marked increase in the proportion of viruses sequenced as B16172 has been observed over the same period. It added that preliminary analyses using sequences submitted to GISAID suggest that B16171 and B16172 have a substantially higher growth rate than other circulating variants in India. India on Thursday reported 3,62,727 new Covid cases and 4,120 fatalities, the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare said. In the past 21 days India's daily Covid tally has plateaued over the three-lakh-mark and over 3,000 casualties for a fortnight. India's total tally of Covid-19 cases now stands at 2,37,03,665 with 37,10,525 active cases and 2,58,317 deaths so far.

FIGHTING COVID THE ALKALINE WAY, A DOCTOR SHOWS HOW



In the midst of Covid-19, when the world is at a loss over how to tackle the pandemic unleashed by the coronavirus, with millions infected and hundreds of thousands dead and dying, an expert says keeping the body alkaline is a sure way to fight not just Covid but all illnesses.



Dr Eapen Koshy, in "Survive Covid: By Staying Alkaline" (Konark Publishers), says that "acidic food intake, electromagnetic radiation and an immune-lowering lifestyle" has led to a weakening of the immune system, making humans vulnerable to diseases like Covid and cancer.

"Only a strong immune system can save us. The answers to the current pandemic and to future pandemics lie in alkalinizing our body to boost our immune system and maintain this with an immune friendly lifestyle," Koshy in the book, a sequel to his popular book, "Beyond Modern Medicine".

An alkaline body will "nurture a calm, inclusive and tolerant alkaline mind", says Koshy, a renowned plastic surgeon who lives in Lagos, Nigeria, where he is working with the Vedic Group of Hospitals (affiliated with Manipal Hospitals, Bengaluru).

Besides maintaining an alkaline way of living, the author urges readers to follow "a higher shift in thinking, and the need to move to a simpler earth-synchronous ways of life".

According to Koshy, the pH balance of our body "determines our health status more than any other parameter". In a body with an acidic pH balance, the "white blood cells, which are on the frontline of our immune system and protect us from illnesses, become lethargic and weakened". An alkaline pH of 7.4 is the perfect balance that a human body should maintain to be free of all illnesses.

"A well-oxygenated alkaline balanced body has adequate immunity to successfully fight diseases. Diseases occur in a body that has low-oxygenated, acidic cells as its immunity becomes weak. This happens because of nutrient-deficient toxic diet, toxic emotions and a toxic lifestyle," he writes.

Modern lifestyles with their burden of stress, constantly being exposed to electromagnetic radiation of the mobile phone and laptop, keeping late hours and waking up much after sunrise, also contribute to an "acidic overload" in our bodies.

"The current pandemic experience has hit us really hard, and it has now become urgent that every citizen of the world is aware of ways to boost immunity and practice a healthy, immunity-friendly lifestyle. It is important to learn to maintain an alkaline body and follow an alkaline diet. Every school curriculum should have this subject incorporated," Koshy states. He says that one should be aware of the nature of the food that we eat and "by taking care of our diet and choosing wisely what to eat, we can maintain our body's pH balance and improve our immunity".

Giving an example, he writes: "A bottle of Coke has a pH value of 2.5, with around 10 teaspoons or more equivalent of refined sugar. To neutralize the acidic pH produced by one bottle of Coke, our body requires 32 glasses of alkaline water with a pH of 10."

"No one with an alkaline body balance would succumb to the Covid-19 virus as in an alkaline body there is no inflammatory hyper response, and innate and adaptive immunity would be working smoothly."

All vegetables and fruits and all soil produce are alkaline, says the author. "They result in alkalization of the body. In addition, these earth products provide antioxidant effect, adaptogen effect, positivity, and pure energy. They are nature's alkaline pharmacy." Animal milk is a perfect example of how some foods of daily intake while not being very acidic outside the body "leave a large acidic residue when processed in the body".

Lemons and tomatoes are examples of foods that, while being acidic, turn "alkaline once ingested". "Ginger, lemon, turmeric, aloe vera, ginseng root, etc. are foods that have more alkalinity and antioxidants packed in them. They could be called tonics. It is the alkalinity that gives the tonic effect. urmeric, further, has a large content of zinc which is needed in all steps of the immune antibody response."

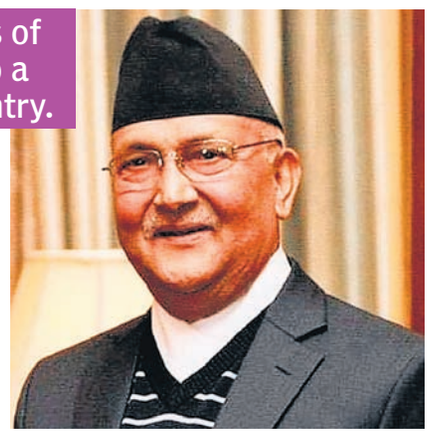
Other foods that have alkalinity as well as nutrients densely packed in them are gooseberry, moringa leaves, avocado, berries, leafy greens, quinoa, olives, and nuts, among others.An acidic body, besides inviting diseases, will also "harbour an acidic mind, which is a mind in pre-anger, filled with suspicions, selfishness, feelings of superiority, forgetting earth synchronicity, and nurturing a false ego and pride. An acidic mind is incapable of listening to what Mother Earth is telling us", Koshy writes.

"An alkaline body is disease-free, with no lifestyle diseases. No cancerous changes can occur in an alkaline body. Alkalinity enables the body to follow the circadian rhythm of life. It also nurtures an alkaline mind which is a calm, all-inclusive mind, capable of listening to Mother Earth, and appreciates her magnificence," says the author.

Dr Eapen Koshy completed his MBBS and MS in General Surgery from Christian Medical College, Vellore, India; Dip NB in General Surgery and FRCS fellowship from the prestigious Royal College of Surgeons, Dublin. He has also published numerous papers on plastic surgery in a number of publications. He advocates living with nature and believes in a drugless world. He is also a marathon runner, yogi, and an ardent bridge player.

NEPAL PLUNGES INTO POLITICAL CRISIS AS CHINA'S GAMBIT FLOPS

Chinas desperate attempts to bring about a patch-up between the two warring factions of the Nepal Communist Party have come a cropper, plunging the Himalayan country into a political crisis at a time when the deadly Covid-19 pandemic has also peaked in the country.



Mrityunjoy Kumar Jha

After the fall of the KP Sharma Oli government on Monday, Nepal President Bidya Devi Bhandari has called the country's political parties to form a new government by Thursday. She has asked Oli to be the caretaker prime minister till then.

According to sources, during the past couple of weeks, Chinese ambassador to Nepal, Hou Yanqi, had lobbied with senior Nepalese MPs to gather support for Oli to ensure his victory in the vote of confidence on the floor of Parliament.China wants someone loyal to Beijing as PM and it was concerned over the weakening communist influence in South Asia with the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) splitting into two factions - one led by prime minister Oli, and the second by former prime minister Prachanda, who is also the executive chairman of the party.

Chinese ambassador Hou Yanqi's efforts to settle the differences between Oli and Prachanda proved futile and last week, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) ï¿½ a key faction led by Pushpakamal Dahal "Prachanda" withdrew support to the government. Consequently, Oli lost the vote of confidence in Parliament on Monday.

Many analysts believe that Oli is down but he still has a chance to regain power.

Nepal President Bidya Devi Bhandari has initiated the process to form a new government under Article 76 (2) of the constitution and in cases where no party has a clear majority in the House of Representatives, the President shall appoint as prime minister a member of the House of Representatives who can command majority with the support of two or more parties, according to the Nepalese constitution.If the opposition parties fail to form a new government, the President, as per the constitution, has to invoke Article 76 (3), which says " in cases where the prime minister cannot be appointed under Clause (2)... or the prime minister so appointed fails to secure a vote of confidence within 30 days from the date of appointment, the President shall appoint as prime minister the parliamentary party leader of the party which has the highest number of members in the House of Representatives."Advantage Oli?In the current equation, Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxistï¿½Leninist) popularly known as CPN-UML, with 121 representatives, is the party with the largest number of members in the House but the Madhav Nepal-led faction of CPN-UML with 32 lawmakers abstained from the voting process. The Nepal-Khanal faction for the last few days had been saying that its lawmakers would resign.However, they did not. And instead, on Monday morning, they decided to remain absent. A UML Standing Committee member close to Oli said the party has no plans to initiate action against the Nepal-Khanal faction lawmakers as that could make it easier for the opposition parties to form a new government. In fact now Oli is trying to "pacify" them.

There are currently 271 MPs in the parliament and for any faction would need 136 votes to form the government. Nepal's political situation is such that no single party now can form a government without the support of at least one other party.

"Given the voting pattern, it looks like things are moving the way Oli wants them to move. Now the onus to form a new government and unseat him lies with the opposition parties, but they cannot do so because of their own differences," says Sharad Singh Bhandari of NCP.According to observers, if the opposition parties fail to form a government under Article 76 (2) and if Oli gets re-appointed as per Article 76 (3), he needs to win the vote of confidence within 30 days from the date of the appointment and failure to do so would lead to House dissolution and fresh elections and China is preparing for that too.

China's Covid cardMeanwhile, Nepal's Covid-19 tally crossed the 400,000 mark and reached 403,794 on Monday with the addition of 9,127 fresh cases and PM Oli has asked for help."I have appealed to the international community to help us with vaccines, diagnostic tools, oxygen kits, critical care medicines and equipment, to support our efforts to save lives. Our urgent goal is to stop preventable deaths," Oli said.China has said that it will continue to do its best to offer support to Nepal in its fight against Covid-19. "We believe the Nepalese people will defeat the virus at an early date," Chinese ambassador in Nepal, Hou Yanqi said in a tweet. "The first batch of oxygen cylinders and ventilators donated by the Chinese government will arrive in Kathmandu tomorrow! We wish friendly Nepali people an early victory over the pandemic! China will continue to do its best to offer support to Nepal in its fight against #COVID19," she added.

Jaipur schools block students over fees even as parents fight Covid

Archana Sharma

Even though it has been just two months to the start of the new academic session, the private schools in Jaipur are ruling the roost, blocking students from attending online classes due to non-payment of fees, flouting the order of the Supreme Court and the state government.

Surprising, the hapless students are being tormented even at a time when their parents are fighting for life in hospitals.

Jaswant Choudhary, whose kid studies in Jaishri Preriwal school told IANS, "I tested Covid positive on April 28 and two days later got a call for fee payment from the school. I told them that I have paid half the fees for last academic year and shall pay remainder till August in instalments as per SC guidelines issued recently. For this year, will pay the fee once I turn ok. However my kid was barred from attending online classes on May 3."

Similar is the story of many parents who are battling Covid in hospitals but the school is dropping their wards due to non-payment of fees.

Sudhir Sharma, a doctor by profession was hospitalised due to Covid on May 1 after he tested Covid positive on April 28. His son and wife tested positive on April 29. The class teacher was informed about the illness but despite showing any courtesy or help, the school blocked his son from attending online class on May 4. He said, "I was in hospital till May 12 and have been discharged on Thursday, surprisingly, the government officials are also not lending their ears to the complaint and are asking us to shift our wards to government schools," he alleged.

Meanwhile, DEO Ramchandra Pilaniya, speaking to IANS, said, "We have already slapped a notice to the school concerned and asked them to take the students back into classes who have been blocked since this comprises Supreme Court guidelines."

The order copy says that the department has received a complaint that many students are blocked even after paying the fees and it said that the schools can't drop students for non-payment of fees.

Correspondent tried to contact Madhu Maini, principal of Jaishri Preriwal school, but she did not take the call. However, even after receiving the notice, she asked parents to pay the fees and then only their wards will be allowed to join classes. Many schools in Jaipur are following the same trend and have blocked the students.

Warren Academy has blocked students who have not paid fees for the running quarter which include April, May and June.

Says Meena Goyal, "My daughter has been blocked from attending classes as we did not pay fees for the last two months. Since then, she has stopped talking to us going under depression. Can schools act so cruel in these testing times? She questioned adding that they have a shop which remains closed since last one month and hence there is no income but we still have been paying fees regularly and non-payment of fees for two months should not be an issue, she added. Meena is also under home isolation with symptoms of cough, cold and fever.

Pilaniya, when asked how schools are flouting SC order, told correspondent, "As such our offices are closed due to lockdown and we have announced summer holidays. But some schools are running classes on their own. We are yet to receive SC order and then can work accordingly," he added.

Meanwhile, education officers informed that they are trying to call Jaishree Periwal school but no one is taking the call.

In fact, there are many schools who have increased the school fee in the current session and are also charging annual fees of Rs 30,000 even at a time when the schools remain closed. Will someone listen or act, says Mukta Agrawal, another hapless parent.

School education minister Govind Singh Dotasara was attending a meeting and hence was unavailable for his comment.

SC, in its recent verdict, had asked schools to slash 15 per cent fees for the last session and said it cannot drop kids for non payment of fees and allowed parents to pay fees for last session in 6 instalments till August 2021.

Political machinations, deadly resistance over 2 centuries of Indian history

From multi-award-winning and best-selling historian William Dalrymple comes a four-book collection chronicling the thrilling rise and fall of the East India Company.

We still talk about the British conquering India, but that phrase disguises a much more sinister reality. For it was not the British government that began seizing chunks of India in the mid-eighteenth century, but a dangerously unregulated private company headquartered in one small office, five windows wide, in the city of London.

Bringing together two decades of meticulous research and masterful narration, "The Company Quartet" (Bloomsbury) tells the remarkable story of how the magnificent Mughal empire, which then generated just under half the world's wealth, disintegrated and came to be replaced by the first global corporate power: the East India Company.

William Dalrymple's epic, bestselling and multi-award-winning histories are now available in this magnificent paperback box set, presented in a stylish slipcase. Comprised of four individual books - "The Anarchy", "White Mughals", "Return of a King" and "The Last Mughal" - this essential collection spans over two hundred years of tumultuous colonial history, covert political machinations and bloody resistance.

William Dalrymple is one of Britain's great historians and the bestselling author of the Wolfson Prize-winning "White Mughals", "The Last Mughal", which won the Duff Cooper Prize, and the Hemingway and Kapuscinski Prize-winning "Return of a King".

A frequent broadcaster, he has written and presented three television series, one of which won the Grierson Award for Best Documentary Series at BAFTA. He has also won the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award, the Sunday Times Young British Writer of the Year Award, the Foreign Correspondent of the Year at the FPA Media Awards, and been awarded five honorary doctorates.

He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the Royal Asiatic Society and the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and has held visiting fellowships at Princeton and Brown.

He writes regularly for the New York Review of Books, the New Yorker and the Guardian. In 2018 he was presented with the prestigious President's Medal by the British Academy for his outstanding literary achievement and for co-founding the Jaipur Literature Festival. Dalrymple lives with his wife and three children on a farm outside Delhi.

BLINKEN, LAVROV TO MEET IN ICELAND ON MAY 20

- Blinken reiterated President (Joe) Biden's resolve to protect US citizens and act firmly in defence of US interests in response to actions by Russia that harm us or our allies

Washington | Agencies

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will meet his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov during the Arctic Council Ministerial ated to take place in Iceland on May 20.

During a phone call on Wednesday, the top US and Russian diplomats discussed the upcoming Arctic Council Ministerial meeting, where they will meet next week, and the potential to cooperate during Russia's subsequent Arctic Council Chairmanship, said a State Department statement.

"Secretary Blinken reiterated President (Joe) Biden's resolve to protect US citizens and act firmly in defence of US interests in response to actions by Russia that harm us or our allies," Xinhua news agency quoted the

Department statement as saying.

Blinken called on Moscow to release two former US Marines Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed, who are serving prison sentences in Russia.

He also provided Lavrov with an overview of the American policy towards North Korea, according to the statement.The upcoming meeting between Blinken and Lavrov in Iceland would be the highest-level in-person talks between Washington and Moscow since President Joe Biden took office.

Biden said last week that he expected to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin during the trip to Europe in June, when he will attend the G7 Summit in Britain and then the NATO Summit in Belgium.Lavrov said on Tuesday that Russia welcomes the initiative by the US for holding a summit in June.

Relations between Washington and Moscow have been adversarial in recent years. The countries are bitterly divided over Ukraine, human rights, cybersecurity issues, and they mutually accused the other of domestic political interference.

1,600 rockets fired from Gaza, 7 Israeli deaths: Military

- During the ongoing attacks overnight, there was a direct hit on the town of Petah Tikva near Tel Aviv and five people were taken to hospital with minor injuries, a police spokesman said.

Tel Aviv | Agencies

Palestinian militants have now fired more than 1,600 rockets from Gaza at Israel since the latest flare-up of fighting began earlier this week, Israel's military said on Thursday.

Around 400 went down over Gaza, dpa news agency quoted military spokesman Jonathan Conricus as saying.

The success rate of Israel's Iron Dome aerial defence system continues to average around 90 per cent at intercepting rockets, he added.

Seven people have died in Israel since the rocket launches began on Monday - six civilians and one soldier.Israel's military has attacked around 600 targets in the Gaza Strip, including rocket production and storage facilities. A tunnel was also targeted that Conricus said was used partially to hide fighters and was built under a school in a populated area.Conricus did not give concrete answers on how much arsenal the Palestinian militants have.

They had a very large amount and still have a considerable quantity, he said.

Israel blames Islamist Hamas, the de facto rulers of the Gaza Strip, for any attacks from Gaza.

The group is classified as a terrorist organization by Israel and the European Union.During the ongoing attacks overnight, there was a direct hit on the town of Petah Tikva near Tel Aviv and five people were taken to hospital with minor injuries, a police spokesman said.

The Israeli military said its fighter jets struck Hamas' main bank, one of its naval force squads and counter-intelligence infrastructure overnight.Dozens have died in the latest flare-up of violence, most of them in Gaza, which has put Hamas and Israel on the brink of an all-out war.

The airstrikes and rocket attacks followed violent clashes in recent days at the Jerusalem holy site known as the Temple Mount to Jews and the Noble Sanctuary to Muslims.The international community has called for a halt to the fighting.

US President Joe Biden condemned the rocket attacks by Hamas and other groups in a call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday and conveyed support for "Israel's legitimate right to defend itself and its people, while protecting civilians".

Blinken stresses de-escalation in call with Palestinian Prez

- Blinken and Abbas on Wednesday "discussed the violence in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, and the Secretary expressed his condolences for the lives lost as a result" Xinhua news agency quoted the State Department as saying in a readout.

Washington | Agencies

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken emphasized the need to de-escalate tensions and end the ongoing violence in Jerusalem, the West Bank

and Gaza during a phone conversation with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

Blinken and Abbas on Wednesday "discussed the violence in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, and the Secretary expressed his condolences for the lives lost as a result" Xinhua news agency quoted the State Department as saying in a readout.

"The Secretary also expressed his belief that Palestinians and Israelis deserve equal measures of freedom, dignity, security and prosperity," the readout added. Also on Wednesday, Blinken spoke to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, voicing support for the country's right to defend itself and urging all parties to de-escalate tensions and bring a halt to the violence. Since Monday, hundreds of rockets have been fired at southern and central Israel while Israel has carried out deadly airstrikes throughout Gaza.

At least 65 people in Gaza and seven in Israel have been killed by airstrikes and rocket attacks, according to official reports from both sides.The current wave of violence between Israel and Gaza militant groups has been the first of its kind since the last large-scale air and ground offensive that Israel waged on the Palestinian enclave for 50 days in 2014.

CDC PANEL ENDORSES USE OF PFIZER COVID VAX FOR KIDS

Washington: A panel of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has endorsed using the Pfizer's Covid-19 vaccine for children as young as 12 years. In a tweet on Wednesday, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said that the Cetre now recommends the Pfizer-BioNTech's Covid-19 vaccine be used for vaccinating children from 12-15 year age group, reports Xinhua news agency.

"Getting your adolescent vaccinated means they can return to social activities faster. It also gives you peace of mind knowing your family is protected," she said.

The Pfizer vaccine has been in use in the US for months for people 16 years and older. The US Food and Drug Administration authorised its use for those as young as 12 earlier this week.

Nepal heading towards India-like Covid disaster

Kathmandu | Agencies

Amid an ongoing second wave of the pandemic, Nepal is heading towards an India-like Covid disaster as at least 14 infected patients died in hospitals due to lack in oxygen supply.

The second wave in Nepal has led to under serious oxygen shortages, as well as an unabated spike in the number of daily Covid cases. The mortality rate is also high like in India.

According to the Kathmandu Post, of the 14 patients, 11 died at the Corona Special Hospital in Butwal, while three others passed away in the Bhairahawa-based Bhim Hospital.

At least a dozen hospitals in Kathmandu have stopped taking in new Covid patients due to shortage of oxygen. "The required oxygen supply is running out, we tried to sustain it yesterday but we are now helpless, we do not have more stock now," Santosh Poudel, Director at Bir Hospital Trauma Center wrote on Facebook. The hospital is treating over 105 Covid patients.

After failing to provide oxygen supply, the government has now fixed a quota system to the hospitals. The Nepal Medical Association (NMA) on

Wednesday warned that the Himalayan nation's health system is on the brink of collapse and asked the government to issue a "red alert" across the country. "Several patients are unable to come hospitals, those who have reached hospitals are not getting treatment, we are forced to return them back due to lack of bed, ICUs, ventilators and many are dying in hospitals due to the lack of oxygen and other medical facilities," the NMA said in a letter sent to President Bidhya Devi Bhandari, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli and other high-government officials. Like in India, now people are seeking help and support for bed, ICU, ventilators, oxygen, plasma, medicine on social media platforms.

Nepal has so far reported 422,349 coronavirus cases and 4,252 deaths.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Oli wrote an article for the Guardian, seeking help for Nepal's fight against Covid.

"As I write this, my country is battling a new and brutal wave of the Covid-19 pandemic... The rise in the number of infections poses a serious challenge to our brave doctors, nurses, other care providers, citizen volunteers and the entire health service system."

EU economy rebounds, 4.2% growth projected

- The higher economic forecasts come as the vaccination rollout speeds up across the EU, resulting in a more ambitious easing of restrictions on business operations, Xinhua news agency quoted the Commission as saying on Wednesday.

Brussels | Agencies

The economy of the 27-member European Union (EU) will grow by 4.2 per cent in 2021 and 4.4 per cent in 2022, higher than previous estimates, the European Commission said in its Spring Forecast.

The higher economic forecasts come as the vaccination rollout speeds up across the EU, resulting in a more ambitious easing of restrictions on business operations, Xinhua news agency quoted the Commission as saying on Wednesday.

The rebound in Europe's economy that began last summer stalled in the fourth quarter of 2020 and in the first quarter of 2021, but "the EU and euro area economies are expected to rebound strongly as vaccination rates increase and restrictions are eased", it said.

The resumed growth will be driven by private consumption, investment and a rising demand for EU exports from a strengthening global economy, it added.

A forecast by the Commission made in February had projected that the EU economy would grow by 3.7 per cent in 2021 and 3.9 per cent in 2022.The Covid-19 pandemic has dealt a historic blow to the bloc, with its economy contracting by 6.1 per cent in 2020."Recovery is no longer a mirage: it is underway. We must avoid mistakes that could undermine it: namely, a premature withdrawal of policy support," European Commissioner for Economy Paolo Gentiloni told a press conference. "The quality, strength and duration of the recovery could still be influenced by the pandemic, but our economic fate is primarily in our own hands. And that is why we need to roll up our sleeves," he said.Gentiloni said the faster pace of vaccinations in recent months should allow restrictions to be eased further in the second half of the year, and "for the first time since the pandemic hit, we see some optimism prevailing over uncertainty".

Noting that "the EU economy is set to grow robustly this year and next," he cautioned that "the risk of scarring, with a worsening of poverty, social exclusion and inequality, is very real".Gentiloni said that the massive recovery package would help the EU recover to its pre-crisis level in the fourth quarter of 2021, and the eurozone would reach that point in the first quarter of 2022. Out of the major EU economies, Spain and France, which were particularly hard hit in 2020, will have the highest growth rates in 2021, both approaching 6 per cent, according to the Commission's estimates.Growth will be more modest in Germany at 3.4 per cent, and the Netherlands at 2.3 per cent, as they were slightly less affected last year.The Spring Forecast also released predictions for some other European countries.It noted that Romania's economy will grow by 5.1 per cent in 2021 and 4.9 per cent in 2022, both improved from previous estimates in February of 3.8 per cent and 4 per cent, respectively.Cyprus' economy is expected to record a 3.1 per cent growth in 2021, compared with a previous forecast of 3.2 per cent growth, it said.

'Iran to implement Additional Protocol if sanctions lifted'

Tehran | Agencies

Iran will implement the Additional Protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty again if sanctions imposed by the US against the country are lifted, Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi said.

"Resuming the voluntary implementation of Additional Protocol is predicated on sanctions being lifted. If possible, we would like to get to it before May 21," Araqchi, who is leading the Iranian delegation in the ongoing Vienna nuclear talks, wrote on Twitter on Wednesday.

Iran stopped implementing the Additional Protocol on February 23, as mandated by a law ratified by Parliament in December 2020.In his tweet, Araqchi added that Iran is "serious and determined" in current negotiations, and ready to return to full implementation of the 2015 nuclear agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), "even tomorrow" once sanctions are "verifiably lifted". The JCPOA was reached in 2015 between

Iran and the P5+1 -- US, Britain, Russia, France, China, plus Germany together with the EU. Tehran agreed to roll back parts of its nuclear weapons program in exchange for decreased economic sanctions. Iran gradually stopped implementing parts of its commitments in May 2019, one year after the previous US administration led by Donald Trump unilaterally abandoned the agreement and re-imposed sanctions on Tehran.The JCPOA Joint Commission started meetings in the Austrian capital on April 6, aiming at getting the US to return to the deal and Iran to resume full compliance with it.

US engaging with India on protecting minorities: Official

New York | Agencies

A senior State Department official dealing with religious freedom, said the US is regularly engaging with Indian officials on protecting the rights of minorities and the government has opportunities to address the concerns of civil society groups.

Briefing reporters about the 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom on Wednesday, Daniel Nadel said: "With respect to India, I think there's genuine opportunities there for the government to address some of the concerns they hear from Indian civil society through greater dialogue and engagement.

"We do regularly engage with Indian government officials at all levels, encouraging them to uphold human rights obligations and commitments, including the protection of minorities, in keeping with India's long tradition of democratic values and its history of tolerance."

The report said that among the issues discussed with officials "were the Muslim community's concerns about the CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act), difficulties faced by faith-based (religious) NGOs in the wake of amendments to the FCRA (Foreign Contributions Regulation Act), and allegations that Muslims spread Covid-19".

Nadel, the senior official in the State

Department's Office of International Religious Freedom, said that the US encourages the Indian government to consult "religious communities, these outside actors" on passing laws to avoid alienating them.

"When laws are passed, when initiatives are undertaken that are done without effective consultation with these communities, it creates a sense of disempowerment; at times, of alienation. And the best way to address that is to engage in that direct dialogue between government and civil society, including religious communities."

The annual report, which is mandated by Congress, did not grade India or deliver an overall verdict on the state of religious freedom in the country. It listed incidents involving attacks on minorities taken from reports by the media and religious and civil society groups, and legislative actions.

Releasing the report, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said: "Our promise to the world is that the Biden-Harris administration will protect and defend religious freedom around the world. We will maintain America's longstanding leadership on this issue."He acknowledged that "anti-Muslim hatred is still widespread in many countries, and this, too, is a serious problem for the US".Among the incidents it lists were the protests in February 2020 against the CAA, which it said "became violent in New Delhi after counter-protesters attacked demonstrators. According to reports, religiously motivated attacks resulted in the deaths of 53 persons, most of whom were Muslim, and two security officials".

Another incident it mentions is the Islamic Tablighi Jamaat organisation's conference last year in New Delhi, which the report said the government and media initially blamed for some of the spread of the novel coronavirus.

But the report also said that "in an online address to the nation on April 26, Mohan Bhagwat, the leader of the RSS, called on Indians not to discriminate against anyone in the fight against Covid-19. In a reference to the March Tablighi Jamaat conference, he asked people not to target members of a 'particular community' (i.e., Muslims) 'just because of the actions of a few'".

Some of the incidents listed in the report relate to actions taken against Muslim and Christian groups over alleged violation of Covid regulations in holding religious services.

However, the report also listed the deaths of two Christians, P. Jayaraj and his son Bennicks, in police custody after they were arrested for allegedly keeping their shop open in violation of a curfew as if those were religious violence.

The report mentions two cases of Hindu women being killed for refusing to convert to Islam and of Christian women "forcibly" converted.It said, "Priya Soni, a Hindu, was beheaded for refusing to convert to Islam after marrying Muslim Ajaz Ahmed in a civil ceremony" and "Nikita Tomar, a Hindu, was killed by a Muslim outside her college in Faridabad, Haryana. Tomar's family said that she had resisted pressure by her killer to convert to Islam and marry him"."The Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala issued a statement that 12 Christian women had been forcibly converted to Islam and taken to Syria to join the IS and that some may have been killed," the report said.It noted Amnesty International India ending operations in the country "after the government froze its bank accounts in response to a FCRA investigation that the NGO says was motivated by its critical reporting against the government".

INDIA RETAIN TOP SPOT IN ICC TEST RANKINGS

Team Absolute | New Delhi

India have retained the top spot in the International Cricket Council's (ICC) annual update of the Test rankings. India are on 121 rating points while second-placed New Zealand are on 120. England overtook Australia to take third place with 109 rating points. Australia currently have 108. The West Indies, who beat Bangladesh 2-0 and drew 0-0 with Sri Lanka in series played this year, have moved from eighth to sixth with 84 points, their best position since 2013.

The ICC said that the latest update eliminates the results of 2017/18. It rates all matches played since May 2020 at 100 per cent and those of the previous two years at 50 per cent

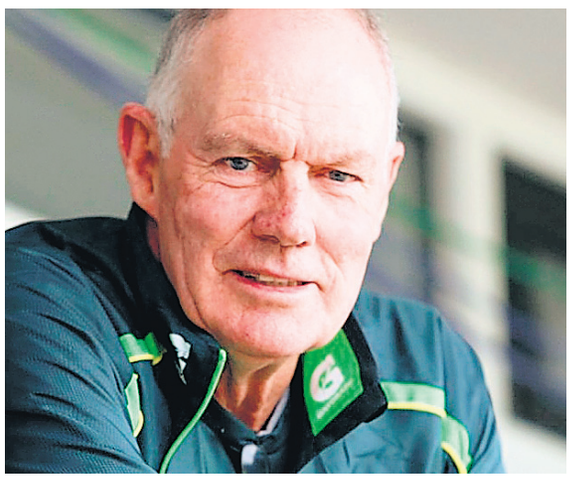
"India's 2-1 win over Australia and 3-1 win over England over the past year and New Zealand's 2-0 series wins over the West Indies and Pakistan have helped them keep ahead of the pack," said the ICC. Pakistan have gained three points but remain in fifth position.

South Africa are in seventh position, equaling their lowest in Test ranking history, while Sri Lanka are next on the list. Bangladesh have lost five points but remain in ninth position while Zimbabwe have gained eight points but are still nine points behind Bangladesh.

India better than Aussies at identifying talent: Chappell

Australia is no more the best country at identifying cricket talent, an aspect that India have mastered after taking inputs from the Aussie structure, former Aussie captain Greg Chappell has said.

Sydney | Agencies



Chappell said that both England and India are ahead of Australia in grooming young talent. He has proposed a radical overhaul of Australia's domestic programme.

"India have got their act together and that's largely because [India's National Cricket Academy chief and former Test captain] Rahul Dravid has picked our brains, seen what we're doing and replicated it in India and with their much larger [population] base," Chappell told cricket.com.au

"I think we've already lost our position as the best at identifying talent and bringing it through. I think England are doing it better than us now and India are doing it better than us."

The former batsman warned that Australia face slipping further behind India and England unless major structural changes in domestic cricket are considered."Historically, we've been one of the best at developing young players and keeping them in the system, but I think that's changed in the last couple of years," the 72-year-old cricketer said.

"I'm seeing a bunch of young players with great potential who are in limbo. That's unacceptable. We cannot afford to lose one player," he said.

Chappell wants the Sheffield Shield - Australia's premier domestic competition -- to start as early as August or September each year to fit in a full 10-match season before the Big Bash League (BBL) T20 tournament gets underway.

The post-BBL period should be reserved for Australia A matches to provide a stronger level of first-class cricket beyond the Sheffield Shield, added Chappell.

TOKYO OLYMPICS: DESSERT OFF-LIMITS FOR INDIAN ROWERS

Navneet Singh | New Delhi

Will not be on the menu of Olympic-bound Indian rowers as they look to manage their weight during training over the next 70 days.

"Weight control is the trickiest part of training. That's why dessert will be strictly banned in the final camp which starts next week in Pune. As per rules, the average weight of the team should be 140 kg. The upper weight limit for an individual is 72.5kg. If one athlete is in the upper limit category the other should then weigh 67.5 kg. If the team weighs more than 140 kg, it will be disqualified," rowing coach Ismail Baig told reporter.The camp will start on May 18 at Army Sports Institute in Pune.

Earlier this month, Arvind Singh, 24, and Arjun Lal Jat, 25, qualified for the Olympic Games in men's lightweight double scull during the Asian Oceania Olympic qualifying event in Tokyo. "The national team didn't take ice cream and sweets from February to April to prepare for the Asia Oceania Olympic qualifying competition in May. Both Singh from Uttar Pradesh and Jat of Rajasthan have sweet tooth. It was a tough time for these guys," added the coach. Since rowing is strenuous, there has to be intake of enough calories, the coach added.

POLLARD WAS STUNNED BY 1ST CONTRACT OFFERED BY MI: BRAVO

New Delhi: Dwayne Bravo revealed the role he played in Mumbai Indians (MI) signing Kieron Pollard in 2010. Bravo played for MI between 2008 and 2010 and the team was searching for a replacement after the Trinidadian left for Chennai Super Kings.

"When Mumbai Indians needed a replacement for me, I gave them Kieron Pollard's name. When they tried contacting him, he was playing for a club, so I recommended Dwayne Smith and he became my replacement," Bravo told Cricbuzz. "The following year, when it was the Champions League, I called Rahul (Sanghvi) and said, 'Pollard, he's here. Come and sign him now before the tournament starts.' Rahul and Robin Singh left Mumbai and came to Hyderabad, I'll never forget they came with a contract which at that time was 200,000 USD. I called Pollard, who came downstairs and met them both in the lobby. He saw the contract. Now for someone coming from Trinidad, as a 19-year-old, that was wow. He said, 'Dwayne are you serious?" said Bravo. Pollard has turned out to be one of the most important signings in MI's history, playing an integral role in the team's five Indian Premier League (IPL) victories. He has scored 3,191 runs for MI at a strike rate of 150.87 and taken 63 wickets as well.

Powar named head coach of Indian women's cricket team

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Former India cricketer Ramesh Powar has been appointed head coach of India women's team, the Indian cricket board announced on Thursday.

Powar, in his second stint as national women's coach, replaces another former India cricketer, WV Raman.

"The three-member Cricket Advisory Committee comprising Sulakshana Naik, Madan Lal and Rudra Pratap Singh [junior] interviewed the applicants and unanimously agreed on Powar's candidature," said a Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) statement.Powar, a former off-spinner, will be in charge of the senior women's team. The BCCI received over 35 applications for the post. Powar played two Test matches and 31 ODIs for India. After his playing career, Powar took up cricket coaching and is an ECB level 2 certified coach, and has also attended BCCI- National Cricket Academy (NCA) level 2 coaching course. Powar previously served as coach of Indian women's team from July-November 2018.

India qualified for the semi-final of the ICC T20 Women's World Cup in 2018 and also won 14 T20 matches in a row.

Powar recently coached the Mumbai senior men's team that won the Vijay Hazare Trophy. He has also worked at the NCA as a bowling coach. Raman was appointed as coach in December 2018.

FORMER MANCHESTER UNITED DEFENDER VALENCIA RETIRES

Quito (Ecuador): Former Manchester United and Ecuador player Antonio Valencia on Thursday announced his retirement from football because of chronic knee problems.

The 35-year-old Valencia made the decision after playing just 15 matches in almost six months for Mexican side Queretaro."It is a tough decision. I feel mentally strong, I feel good, but there is something that is not right with my body, and that's my knee," he told a virtual news conference, Xinhua reports."It is time to say thanks to this beautiful sport. If I've let anybody down, I apologise. I've always tried to give my all for my country."

Valencia was capped 99 times for Ecuador's national team in a career that included a decade at Manchester United as well as spells with Villarreal, Wigan Athletic and LDU Quito, among other clubs.

Olympic-bound race-walkers test positive for Covid

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Seven elite athletes, including Olympic-bound race-walkers Sandeep Kumar and KT Irfan, have tested positive for Covid-19.

"Reports of weekly Covid-19 tests conducted last weekend by SAI have revealed that seven athletes tested positive for coronavirus. Since it is mandatory for Covid-19 patients to undergo 15 days of quarantine and stay inside their rooms, the athletes can't train outdoors," a coach told IANS from Bengaluru where the affected athletes are attending a camp.

Kumar, 35, qualified for Tokyo Olympics in February at the National Race Walk Championships in Ranchi, Jharkhand. His gold medal-winning time of 1 hour 20.16 seconds was better than the Olympic qualification time of 1 hour 21 seconds.

Irfan, 31, was the first Indian race-walker to win ticket to Japan when he finished fourth in 2019 Asian Race Walking Championships held in Nomi, Japan.

His time was 1 hour 57 seconds.

Last month, Priyanka Goswami, who has also qualified for Olympics in women's 20 km race walk, was out of action for 15 days as she tested positive for Covid-19. "Priyanka has recovered and she is back to normal training," said the coach. Five Indian race-walkers, including two in the women's category, have qualified in the 20 km event for the Tokyo Olympic Games starting July 23.

IPL'S AUSSIE GROUP MAY RETURN HOME FROM MALDIVES ON SUNDAY: REPORT

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Australian cricketers, coaches and commentators who were part of the 2021 Indian Premier League (IPL) and are currently in the Maldives could return home this Sunday.

The Australian government's ban on travellers from India due to Covid-19 pandemic is set to end on Saturday, and Cricket Australia (CA), Australia Cricketers' Association (ACA) and the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) are awaiting confirmation on whether the contingent can go back home after that, ESPNCricinfo reported .

If the contingent is allowed to return after the end of the ban, a group of 38 would be able to take a charter flight out of the Maldives via Malaysia to Sydney on May 16, where they would then serve their mandatory 14-day quarantine period.The 2021 IPL was postponed indefinitely after multiple cases of Covid-19 came up within the four of the eight franchises' bio-bubble.

PICK THAKUR AS THIRD SEAMER IN WTC FINAL: MANJREKAR

Team Absolute | New Delhi

India should play Shardul Thakur as the third seamer behind Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Shami in the World Test Championship (WTC) final against New Zealand next month, former India batsman Sanjay Manjrekar has said. Manjrekar feels Thakur will be more useful than the likes of Mohammad Siraj and Ishant Sharma in the first half of English summer as he can swing the ball.

"When India play New Zealand in the first half of the English summer in the World Test Championship final, I would prefer Shardul Thakur -- being a swing bowler -- to be the third seamer behind Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Shami," Manjrekar told ESPNcricinfo.com

"Let me elaborate: when India were in New Zealand, one of the things that India missed was a proper swing bowler. I know Indians didn't bat well but one of the reasons why New Zealand won was because they had proper swing bowlers who could exploit the conditions in New Zealand," he said.

Manjrekar explained the reason behind the conditions in England being helpful. "Now the first half of the English summer, the sun doesn't come out as much. So the condition will be similar to what we had in New Zealand," he added.

Suffered mentally after being dropped from Oly squad: Chinki

Navneet Singh | New Delhi

Pistol shooter Chinki Yadav had to endure mental agony after she was excluded from the Tokyo Olympic Games squad despite winning a quota place in 2019. "It is difficult to explain the mental suffering I went through on being dropped from the squad for the Olympics. My gold medal winning performance in the New Delhi World Cup in March [2021] was overlooked. But support from parents has helped me come out of depression," Chinki told IANS from Bhopal.

Last month, National Rifle Association of India (NRAI) excluded the pistol shooter from the Tokyo-bound squad and handed her spot to rifle shooter Anjum Moudgil since the quota is for the country and not individual shooter. NRAI didn't consider Chinki among the best two shooters in 25 metre pistol event, and picked Manu Baker and Rahi Sarnobat ahead of her.

A country can field only two shooters in a discipline. Moudgil will compete in women's 50m rifle 3 positions.Chinki said she will not debate NRAI's policy, but feels there should have been room for current performance. "I was excited to compete in Japan after winning an Olympic berth in the 2019 Asian Shooting Championships in Doha. But 17 months later, my enthusiasm died as I was dropped from the Tokyo Olympic Games team. I should have been told earlier that I'm not eligible to compete in the Olympics," she said.Chinki, who seems to have overcome disappointment, said she can silence her critics with steady performances in domestic as well as international competitions in future.

"Hard work is the only way out," she said. "Despite lockdown in Bhopal, elite shooters have been allowed to train at the local shooting ranges. I'm also back to training and working hard," added the international shooter.

RETAIL INFLATION EASES TO 4.29% IN APRIL AS FOOD PRICES FALL

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Lower food prices sequentially eased India's retail inflation in April as the Consumer Price Index (CPI) decreased to 4.29 per cent from 5.52 per cent in March.

According to the data furnished by the National Statistical Office (NSO), the CPI Urban rose by 4.77 per cent last month from 6.52 per cent in March.

Similarly, the CPI Rural climbed by 3.82 per cent in April from 4.61 per cent in March.

As per the NSO data, the Consumer Food Price Index increased to 2.02 per cent last month from a rise of 4.87 per cent in March.

The CFPI readings measure the changes in retail prices of food products.In terms of CPI YoY inflation rate, pulses and products' prices jumped by 7.51 per cent, respectively, in April 2021.

Furthermore, meat and fish prices rose by 16.68 per cent, eggs became dearer by 10.55 per cent and the overall price of food and beverages category was up 2.66 per cent.

However, vegetable prices declined by 14.18 per cent.

Besides, as per the official data, the inflation rate for fuel and light was at 7.91 per cent.

"The sharp correction largely owes to the favourable base effect owing to last year's pandemic-related lockdown. Some select food items or perishables have seen unseasonal fall in April," said Madhavi Arora, Lead Economist, Emkay.

"Besides, supply chains are not much disrupted this year despite soft lockdowns vs 2020 during same period. However, local lockdowns, if persist, could impact services demand negatively, will put downward pressure on Q1FY22 core inflation and act as a balancing factor to emerging upside risks to inflation."

Suman Chowdhury, Chief Analytical Officer, Acuite Ratings & Research, said: "Expectedly, the CPI print for April 2021 has benefited from the base effect given the national lockdown in the same period of the previous year and the elevated prices therein driven by supply constraints."

"However, we note that some categories in the food basket such as meat and fish, edible oil, fruits and pulses continue to show high inflation both on a YoY and sequential basis, reflecting structural supply bottlenecks that might have got further aggravated by the fresh disruption brought in by the second Covid wave."

Job scenario worsens, unemployment rate shoots up to 8% in April

Team Absolute | New Delhi

As the severe second wave of Covid-19 and the resultant lockdowns bring economic activities to a halt, India's job scenario worsened in April 2021.

As per data published by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), India's unemployment rate rose 8 per cent in April, against 6.5 per cent in March.

"April 2021 turned out to be worse than expectations. We had expected labour participation rate to stabilise at its March 2021 level. The LPR had dropped sharply in March already after a modest fall in February. But, the LPR fell for a third consecutive month in April," CMIE's CEO Mahesh Vyas said.

It fell to 39.98 per cent -- the lowest LPR since May 2020, the month of a stringent nation-wide lockdown. The LPR in April 2021 is therefore the worst since the national lockdown, the CMIE said.

It attributed this fall is the result of the local lockdowns in several states. In Maharashtra, a state that imposed partial lockdowns, saw its LPR fall sharply from 44.2 per cent in March to 40.6 per cent in April.

The labour force shrank by 1.1 million in April 2021 to 424.6 million compared to 425.8 million in March. In spite of this smaller labour force looking for employment, a greater proportion failed to find employment.

The employment rate fell from 37.6 per cent in March to 36.8 per cent in April.

Vyas noted that the lockdowns could have denied people from seeking employment and caused a fall in labour participation, but, the economy also could not provide adequate jobs to those who sought jobs.

"So, the strain in the labour markets was not entirely because of the partial lockdowns. It was largely because the economy simply could not provide employment to large numbers who sought work," he added.

While the labour force shrank by 1.1 million in April, the count of the employed fell by a much larger 7.35 million, as per CMIE data.

It noted that salaried job losses were disproportionately located in rural India. While urban salaried jobs accounted for 58 per cent of total salaried jobs in 2019-20, they accounted for only 32 per cent of the job losses till April 2021.

Rural salaried jobs that accounted for 42 per cent of the total, on the other hand, accounted for 68 per cent of losses.

Covid Resurgence: Monthly output loss widened in mid-April

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Resurgence of Covid-19 has changed India's macroeconomic narrative from being a linear V-shaped recovery in FY22 to being a story of a lost quarter, says Emkay Global in a report.Accordingly, the report cited that amid increasing geographical spread of virus, the bottom-up projections now suggest that for every month of current localised lockdowns, the output loss would now be Rs 1.25 lakh crore from Rs 75,000 crore as per the restrictions seen in mid-Apr 2021."The fall in secondary and tertiary sector capacity utilisation varies between 10 per cent and 40 per cent among states," said Madhavi Arora, Lead Economist, Emkay.

She said the estimates imply a monthly loss of GVA growth by 90 basis points compared with loss of more than 40 basis points in output growth per month during Covid-I lockdown."Clearly, factors such as better adapted firms and policy response, stable financial conditions, vaccine drive, pent-up demand release and robust global growth spillovers create growth buffers," she said.

"Assuming Covid-II peaks in May'21 and restrictions ease by Q2FY22, we mark down our FY22 GDP forecast to 9.9 per cent from 11 per cent earlier."However, she pointed out that the situation is still in a flux, but as per current dynamics the expected Q1FY22 annualised growth is seen at 16.5 per cent from more than 22 per cent estimated before the second wave.Their estimated monthly loss of output of 0.9-1 per cent of GDP is much higher than the estimated welfare cost of universal vaccination at 0.6-0.7 per cent of GDP, thus making a successful vaccine strategy the cheapest policy path to economic normalisation.Lately, India reported record new daily increases in coronavirus infections, prompting new lockdowns and restrictive measures to curb the spread of the pandemic.

The exponential rise in new coronavirus cases in India is a humanitarian crisis. It also raises concerns about the country's economic recovery and currency fluctuations.

FUEL PRICES UNCHANGED ON THURSDAY

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Fuel retailers spared consumers of any further increase in fuel prices by keeping retail prices of petrol and diesel unchanged on Thursday. Accordingly, petrol continues to cost Rs 92.05 per litre and diesel Rs 82.61 up in Delhi.

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

In Mumbai, regular petrol now comes for Rs 98.36 a litre just few days away from crossing the historic level of Rs 100 per litre.

Petrol prices in some states including Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and in some places in Maharastra have breached the Rs 100 per litre mark while premium petrol has been hovering above that level for some time now.

Before Thursday's price hold, fuel prices increased for three consecutive days this week up to Wednesday. Petrol and diesel prices also increased on four consecutive days last week

Petrol prices have increased by Rs 1.50 a litre Delhi in May in the seven increases so far. Similarly, diesel prices have risen by Rs 1.88 per litre in capital this month.

IANS had written earlier that OMCs may begin increasing the retail price of petrol and diesel post state elections as they were incurring losses to the tune of Rs 2-3 per litre by holding the price line despite higher global crude and product prices.

OMCs benchmark retail fuel prices to a 15-day rolling average of global refined products' prices and dollar exchange rate. In the last fortnight global oil prices have hovered in $66-67 a barrel range higher than the levels when petrol and diesel prices were last revised. Crude prices have jumped around $ 69 a barrel now.

With global crude prices at around $ 69 a barrel mark, OMCs may have revise fuel prices upwards again if there is any further firming up.

RENAULT INDIA EXTENDS FREE SERVICE & WARRANTY PERIOD FOR ITS CUSTOMERS

Team Absolute | New Delhi

In line with its commitment to customer satisfaction and in order to mitigate the challenges faced by customers in current times, Renault India has announced extension on Warranty and Periodic Free Service schedules for its customers.

The extension would be applicable to free service and warranty period expiring between April 1, 2021 and May 31, 2021. These services will be extended up to 31st July 2021. Renault India's 24X7 roadside assistance continues to ensure support for its customers in case of an emergency.COVID-19 is a challenge unlike any other faced by humanity in recent times. In the interest of all Renault employees, dealers and other partners, their families, and the community at large, Renault India has implemented multiple preventive measures across its offices, dealerships and continues to communicate and create awareness among all stakeholders. Renault India has also been sharing regular advisories with its dealer partners as well as directives to comply with the guidelines issued by the local authorities and regulatory bodies.

Renault is fully committed to offer a safe and hygienic experience to its customers. In order to maintain utmost safety, Renault has significantly enhanced its digital capabilities and portfolios with online booking options and other interventions, providing the best of the services in these challenging times.

INSURANCEDEKHO LAUNCHES COVID-19 VACCINATION SLOT FINDER

New Delhi: InsuranceDekho, has launched 'COVID-19 Vaccination Slot Finder' - a platform to help citizens across the country to check the availability of COVID-19 vaccination slots near them, as part of the company's effort to fight the coronavirus pandemic.

Commenting on the launch Ankit Agrawal, Co-Founder and CEO of InsuranceDekho, said: "With the COVID-19 Vaccination Slot Finder, we hope to reduce the hassle and ordeal of refreshing the present platform for new slots repeatedly. The Slot Finder shall help users get notified about the next availability of the vaccine if no slot is available."

To check slot availability, one has to simply visit www.InsuranceDekho.com and click on the 'COVID-19 Vaccination Slot Finder' option on the top right corner of the page. The user will then have to click on 'Search by Pincode' or 'Search by District' option to find his/ her nearby vaccination centres; select the age group and click on 'Find Vaccine Centres'. The available vaccination slots at nearby centres will be displayed to the user with the required information. In case a slot is not available, the user can request for notification whenever slots are available next. InsuranceDekho sources data from CO-WIN, managed and operated by the Center Government's Health Ministry.

Blue Dart forms Blue Dart Med-Express Consortium

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Blue Dart, India's leading express logistics service provider and part of the Deutsche Post DHL Group (DPDHL) formed Blue Dart Med-Express Consortium with the mission of revolutionizing the delivery of vaccines and emergency medical supplies to the remotest parts of India with Drones. Blue Dart Med-Express Consortium is part of the 'Medicine from the Sky' project in collaboration with the Government of Telangana, World Economic Forum, Niti Aayog and Healthnet Global.Commenting on Blue Dart's experiment with Drone flights for Beyond Visual Line of Sight delivery of vaccines Ketan Kulkarni, CMO & Head - Business Development, Blue Dart says, "The consortium aims at enabling safer, efficient and cost-effective Drone delivery flights. With efficient systems in place, it can help reduce the current logistics cost, making the healthcare logistics faster and efficient. Mankind is witnessing the worst time and Blue Dart is committed to giving back to the society in which it operates and will always be ready to take one step forward."Rama Devi Lanka, Director of Emerging Technologies and Officer on Special Duty (OSD), ITE&C Department, Government of Telangana, says, "The project would generate real and actionable insights to drive future adoption policies and integration with the existing healthcare supply chain. With covid-19 pandemic wrecking existing supply chains, adopting such disruptive technologies is the need of the hour."Jayesh Ranjan, IAS, Principal Secretary, ITE&C Department, Government of Telangana, says, "Telangana is one of the most proactive states looking to adopt emerging technologies, and the 'Medicine from the Sky' project using drones is in line with the same principles. This project is one of the first such programs in the country where multiple drones would fly BVLOS to establish their value proposition for the healthcare supply chain.

CAIT asks Piyush Goyal to stop delivery of non-essential items by e-commerce cos

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) in a communication sent to Union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has said that going one step further, various e-commerce entities even in the ongoing COVID-19 induced national emergency are delivering non-essential goods in blatant contravention of lockdown guidelines imposed by various State Governments.

The CAIT has also sent similar communications to Chief Ministers of all States urging them to take immediate cognisance of this violation by e-commerce portals.

The CAIT said that the sole purpose of the lockdown is to limit human-to-human interaction and reduce exposure of the general population to the COVID-19 virus and thereby break the chain of the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, all non-essential activities, including the sale and delivery of non-essential items, are prohibited during the lockdown by ordering the shops to close in all such States.

It said that as a part of "break the chain", the State Governments have banned the sale and delivery of non-essential goods and services. The business community across the country has implemented these orders in letter and spirit even though it has caused severe economic hardship to the traders. It is a matter of great astonishment that some multinational behemoths, in blatant violation of Government instructions/orders, are selling non-essential goods under the garb of essential goods

and are putting at risk, the lives of a large number of people engaged in selling, warehousing, transportation, last mile delivery and of customers to whom deliveries are being made.

Such e-commerce sale and delivery defeats the very purpose of the lockdown and increases exposure to the virus multifold only because of the lust of these companies to increase their market share by selling non-essential items.

CAIT said that sale of non-essential items through e-commerce does not reduce the risk of exposure and spread of virus to the public but only shifts that risk from one set of people to the other set of people who generally belong to more vulnerable sections of the society and have to risk their lives to earn their living.

The multinational behemoths cannot be allowed to put the life of Indian citizens at risk to earn a few bucks and to further their businesses which are already riled up in several illegalities and are being investigated by the Competition Commission of India (CCI) for predatory pricing and deep discounting and by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) for violation of Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), 1999.

The traders across the Country are highly perturbed to see that since a past long time these e-commerce companies are continuing their malpractices and violation of rules and policy without any fear of law and it is further regretted that so far no action has been taken by any Government agency to nail them in spite of your clear directions reiterated several times at different forums. Such a situation has compelled the traders to believe that complying rules and policy are applicable for traders only and these companies have been given free hand to violate the rules and control and dominate not only the e-commerce but also the retail trade of India.

EVOLUTION OF IVERMECTIN AS A DRUG OF CHOICE FOR PREVENTION & TREATMENT OF COVID-19: DR. SURYA KANT

New Delhi: Covid-19 has emerged as an elusive foe, threatening mankind. Currently India is placed second in terms of number of reported cases which warrants newer therapeutic treatment options that are widely available, affordable, effective and safe. There are newer drugs on the horizon which have been recommended though with very limited experience & devoid of enough data about safety and efficacy. These newer options are neither easily available nor affordable. "We have revisited some of the old molecules and have found ivermectin, originally introduced as an antihelminthic to be an effective, safe and affordable therapeutic option in Indian settings for prevention and treatment of COVID-19," said Dr. Surya Kant, Professor and Head Department of Respiratory Medicine, at King George Medical University, Lucknow. Dr Surya Kant, cited several studies in support of the effectiveness of Ivermectin in cases of SARs-CoV2 infection. Another research by Bangladesh Medical College Hospital, published last year, has shed a ray of light in portraying ivermectin's astounding effectiveness as pre-exposure prophylaxis for COVID-19 among healthcare workers. As per the recent findings from the results of 18 large-scale clinical trials on ivermectin in COVID-19 published by American Journal of Therapeutics, have found large, statistically significant reductions in death, time to clinical recovery, and time to viral clearance.

THE FILM TAKES ALL PLATFORMS BY STORM, AUDIENCE THRONG ZEE5 PLATFORM, FORCING SERVERS TO CRASH

RADHE: YOUR MOST WANTED BHAI

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Merely a few hours after Salman Khan's Radhe: Your Most Wanted Bhai released, the fans of the megastar and the audiences, in general, gave a resoundingly grand response to the film's arrival. Judging by all the scales, the response has been tremendously spectacular and mass, which led to the servers of Zee5, the official release platform of the film, to crash.

In what can only be defined as the mega-pull of the megastar, the virtual release platforms have been inundated by the colossal fanbase of Salman Khan. The trends are inclined towards the fact that this particular film has surfaced as the much-needed relief that people wanted and needed in these extraordinarily gloomy times. The country has been dealing with an unprecedented situation since last year and needed a sense of respite from the daily happenings. And that's precisely what the film provided.

The kind of response that the film has received in just a few hours stands as a testament to the popularity and cult-like fan following Salman Khan has in the industry and worldwide.

Alongside Salman Khan, Radhe also stars Disha Patani, Randeep Hooda and Jackie Shroff in pivotal roles. The movie is presented by Salman Khan films in association with ZEE Studios, produced By Salma Khan, Sohail Khan and Reel Life Production Pvt. limited. The movie will release in over 40 countries, including a theatrical release in major overseas markets on May 13 2021, on the occasion of Eid. The film will be available on ZEE5 with ZEE's pay per view service ZEEPlex on the Zee5 OTT platform and all leading DTH operators.

Priyanka Chopra: Over 14,000 good Samaritans helped us raise $1mn

PRIYANKA SHARED A VIDEO ON INSTAGRAM LATE ON WEDNESDAY NIGHT ACCORDING TO INDIA TIME, FEATURING A WORLD MAP AND THE COUNTRIES FROM WHERE DONATIONS HAVE POURED IN TO HELP INDIA.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress Priyanka Chopra Jonas shared that over 14,000 contributors have helped raise $1 million, to help India amid the second wave of Covid-19. "Through some of the darkest days in our history, humanity has once again proven that we are better together. @nickjonas and I are so humbled by your support and by the outpouring of help for India from so many parts of the world," she wrote alongside the video. Priyanka added: "Over 14,000 good Samaritans opened their hearts and helped us raise $1 Million in these trying times. Countless others helped us spread the world to expedite the process. All the money raised is already being deployed across the country in the form of Oxygen Concentrators, Vaccine Support and so much more." Priyanka shared that the fundraising target is now $3 million.

Mrunal Thakur: 'Most important thing is patience'

Anjuri Nayar Singh | Mumbai

Actress Mrunal Thakur says uncertainty is a natural trait if one belongs to the film industry. "I think the most important thing is patience. As an artiste, you are always curious to perform but the big question is content. You have to choose the right script. I feel pressured (and think) should I choose this script? I feel internally that I can do better but then I feel if I let this script go, will I get more films? This thought keeps bothering me all the time," she told reporter.

Mrunal has interesting films such as "Toofan", "Jersey" and "Aankh Micholi" coming up, and says it is important to not take up films just for the sake of having work. She talks of patience again, while noting that the Covid outbreak has delayed her releases, just like all other films. Like everyone else in the industry, Mrunal wants to be part of cinema that is meaningful.

JUHI CHAWLA: WHAT ARE YOU GRATEFUL FOR TODAY?

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress Juhi Chawla on Wednesday inspired netizens to count their blessings at a time when the nation is battling a deadly second wave of Covid-19. "I read this today morning... Once you carry your own water; you will learn the value of every drop! This quote embodies a mindset of gratitude. By carrying the weight of the task, and experiencing for yourself the effort required to produce the result, you'll develop a new level of respect for everything that goes into it. Now read that again. What are you grateful for today? #BreakTheChain #Covidpositivity #PositiveMindset," Juhi shared in an Instagram post.

Juhi recently took to social media to encourage people to plant more trees at a time when the nation is battling Covid-19 and a huge number of people are dying due to oxygen shortage among other problems caused by the virus.

INSTAGRAM PIC OF THE DAY

Sana Saeed

KRYSTLE D'SOUZA BELIEVES IN 'TRUST AND SOME PIXIE DUST'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

When it comes to basic diktat in life, actress Krystle D'souza banks on trust and some pixie dust. The actress revealed the notion with an Instagram photo she posted on Thursday. In the photo, Krystle wears a yellow ribbed tank-top and black shorts. She completes her look with hoop earrings and sunglasses. The image captures her throwing sand at the camera.

"Trust and some pixie dust," Krystle wrote alongside the image.

The actress was recently seen in the recreated version of "Ek bewafaa" by Bharat Goel. The number is originally sung by Sonu Nigam in the 2005 Akshay Kumar-Kareena Kapoor film "Bewafaa", and also features Siddharthh Gupta and Akshay Kharodia.

Karan Vohra joins cast of 'Pinjara Khubsurti Ka' as cop

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actor Karan Vohra has joined the cast of the show "Pinjara Khubsurti Ka", as a cop named Raghav Shastri. The actor says Raghav is different from police officers as they are normally portrayed on television. "I am excited to play Raghav Shastri, who is not your normal cop. He has a very gruff, 'Dabangg' personality, but also has a fun side to him. I like such characters. Raghav is madly in love with Mayura and he will do all that he can to win her trust and ultimately her affection," Karan says.

He adds: "I'm sure that fans will see a refreshing change in the character that I am playing this time around and I hope they will appreciate how I take this role ahead. I can assure them that Raghav will definitely bring a lot of drama in Omkar and Mayura's life." "Pinjara Khubsurti Ka" airs on Colors.

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