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SC SEEKS U'KHAND GOVT RESPONSE ON PLEA AGAINST HATE SPEECHES MADE AT DHARAM SANSAD

TO STOP HATE MONGERING

Senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing for the petitioners, contended that Dharam Sansad is going to organise another congregation at Aligarh and some direction should be passed to restrain them from making hate speeches, while the top court is seized of the matter.



THE PLEA
 "HATE SPEECHES CONSISTED OF OPEN CALLS FOR GENOCIDE OF MUSLIMS IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE ETHNIC CLEANSING. IT IS PERTINENT TO NOTE THAT THE SAID SPEECHES ARE NOT MERE HATE SPEECHES BUT AMOUNT TO AN OPEN CALL FOR MURDER OF AN ENTIRE COMMUNITY. THE SAID SPEECHES THUS, POSE A GRAVE THREAT NOT JUST TO THE UNITY AND INTEGRITY OF OUR COUNTRY BUT ALSO ENDANGER THE LIVES OF MILLIONS OF MUSLIM CITIZENS."

THE PLEA SUBMITTED THAT DESPITE THE PASSAGE OF ALMOST THREE WEEKS, NO EFFECTIVE STEPS HAVE BEEN TAKEN BY THE POLICE AUTHORITIES INCLUDING NON-APPLICATION OF SECTIONS 120B, 121A AND 153B OF THE IPC, TO THE SAID HATE SPEECHES.

SC NAMES EX-JUDGE TO PROBE PM'S SECURITY BREACH

New Delhi: The Supreme Court on Wednesday outlined the terms of reference for the enquiry committee, headed by retired top court judge Justice Indu Malhotra, to investigate the Prime Minister Narendra Modi's security breach in Punjab. "What were the causes for the security breach for the incident on 5th January 2022? Who are responsible for such a breach, and to what extent? What should be the remedial measures or safeguards necessary for the security of the Prime Minister or other protectees?" it outlined. The top court asked the committee to submit its report at the earliest, and directed all records seized, in connection with the

PM's visit, to be handed over to the Chairperson of the committee within three days. The top court also stayed the enquiries ordered by the state government and the Centre, into the PM's security breach, till the conclusion of the enquiry committee. The other members on the committee are Director General, or his nominee not below the rank of Inspector General of Police, of the National Investigation Agency, Director General of Police, Union Territory of Chandigarh, Additional Director General of Police, Security, Punjab, and the Registrar General, Punjab and Haryana High Court-Member-Cum-Coordinator.

former Patna High Court judge Anjana Prakash, seeking action against those who made hate speeches against the Muslim community at Dharam Sansad in Haridwar.

A bench headed by Chief Justice N.V. Ramana and comprising Justices Surya Kant and Hima Kohli allowed the petitioners to approach local authorities with their plea to stop a proposed Dharam Sansad scheduled at Aligarh on January 23.

Sibal emphasized that various Dharam Sansad are scheduled in states, which are going to polls soon. Citing hate speeches, he said it is contrary to the ethos and values of this country and pressed for preventive steps to stop these people from making statements against a particular community.

On Monday, the top court had agreed to hear the petition, which sought an independent, impartial and credible probe into the matter by an SIT.

Approximately 400 terrorists at launchpads in PoK: Gen Naravane

"We will continue to deal with the PLA (People's Liberation Army) in a firm, resolute and peaceful manner, while ensuring the sanctity of our claims. Necessary safeguards are in place. We hope to resolve the Patrolling Point 15 (Hot Spring) issue in the current round of talks. Once that is done, we will look at other issues which predate the current standoff."



PAKISTAN AIMS PEACE WITH INDIA IN NEW NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY

Islamabad: In an attempt to ease down continued tensions with its neighbours, especially with India, Pakistan's Imran Khan-led government is gearing up to unveil its new National Security Policy with an aim to normalise tensions with New Delhi and work towards opening gateways of economic diplomacy. The National Security Policy, a 100-page document carries with it a new change of policy Islamabad will be looking to adopt towards India, shifting its principal stance over the dispute of Jammu and Kashmir from primary to a secondary pending dispute. As per the new security policy details, Pakistan will be looking forward to having more deliberations and engagements with New Delhi over trade and economic opportunities. "We are not seeking hostility with India for the next 100 years. The new policy seeks peace with immediate neighbours. If there was a dialogue and progress in it, there would be a possibility of normalising trade and commercial ties with India as it had happened in the past," said an official with knowledge of details of the new security policy.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

As many as 350-400 terrorists are present at the launchpads and training camps in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Manoj Mukund Naravane, said on Wednesday. Addressing Indian Army's annual press conference, the COAS said that the threat at the Line of Control (LoC) from Pakistan has not receded by any means. "The threat cannot be ignored," said the army chief. Along the LoC with Pakistan, after a heightened situation for a prolonged period, the DGMOS' understanding in February last year was aimed at achieving mutually beneficial and sustainable peace, he said. "Resultantly, the situation has witnessed marked improvement," said the officer, but with a caution. "However, increase in concentration of terrorists in launch pads across the LC and repeated infiltration attempts have once again exposed their (Pakistan's) nefarious intents," the Indian Army chief said. "We, on our part, have resolved to show 'Zero Tolerance' to terror, and commit ourselves to extract dire costs, should that be forced upon us," he said.

In Jammu and Kashmir, the 'Whole of Government' approach has led to progressive improvement in the security situation, he said.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Wednesday issued notice to the Uttarakhand government on a petition by journalist Qurban Ali and

India logs nearly two lakh fresh Covid cases, 442 deaths in 24 hours

The Omicron infection tally has reached 4,868 across the nation. However, out of the total Omicron positives, 1,850 have been discharged from the hospitals. So far a total of 28 states have reported the Omicron infection

Team Absolute | New Delhi

India reported 1,94,720 fresh Covid cases, a rise of around 26,000 from the previous day. In the same time, a total of 442 deaths were also reported, said the Union Ministry of health and family welfare on Wednesday. With the addition of the new deaths, the death toll has climbed to 4,84,655. The active caseload has jumped to 9,55,329 which constitutes 2.65 per cent of the country's total positive cases. The recovery of 60,405 patients in the last 24 hours has increased the cumulative tally to 3,46,30,536. Consequently, India's recovery rate stands at 96.01 per cent. Meanwhile, the weekly positivity rate has climbed to 9.82 per cent amid the sudden spike in the cases. The daily positivity rate



stands at 11.05 per cent. primary two-dose series of Covaxin (BBV152), neutralised the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron and Delta variants", the Hyderabad-based drug maker said in a statement.

25 women among 28 held for cheating people in name of PMEGP

New Delhi: As many as 28 people, including 25 women, were arrested for cheating over 1,000 people on the pretext of providing loans under the Pradhan Mantri Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP), an official said on Wednesday. According to the official, a complaint was lodged by a woman, stating she received a phone call from a person named Satish who introduced himself as a bank employee. He offered her a loan of Rs 6 lakh under the PMEGP. As per the scheme, Rs 5 lakh were to be returned as main loan and Rs 1 lakh would be subsidy. The complainant fell into his trap and transferred Rs 21,500 into the bank account provided by the cheat. On Tuesday, on the basis of a tip-off, a raid was conducted and 28 persons, including 25 women were found working in a fake call centre. The main accused were identified as Yogesh Mishra, Sunita Sharma, Subhan Khan and Diku, among 24 other accused. The gang cheated more than 1,000 people in the last 2 years, pocketing huge amounts of money.

BATTLE FOR UP: ANOTHER YOGI MINISTER RESIGNS

SP MLA, CONGRESS LEADERS JOIN BJP

New Delhi: Congress MLA Naresh Saini, senior leader Imran Masood and SP MLA Hari Om Yadav on Wednesday joined the BJP, a day after Swami Prasad Maurya resigned from the Yogi Adityanath cabinet. Along with them, another SP leader and former MLA Dharampal Singh also joined the saffron party.

Team Absolute | Lucknow

In another jolt to the ruling BJP, UP Minister Dara Singh Chauhan also submitted his resignation from the Yogi Adityanath government on Wednesday. His resignation comes a day after Swami Prasad Maurya resigned from the council of ministers.

In his terse resignation letter to the Governor, Chauhan said that the Yogi government had failed to address the aspirations of Dalits, OBCs and problems of the youth. Chauhan, who held the Environment and Forest portfolio, is a former BSP MP who joined the BJP in 2015. Chauhan's resignation is yet another in the growing list of resignations in the UP BJP. So far, six MLAs, including Maurya, have stepped down from the party and if reports are to be believed, there are more in the line.



BJP MLA AVATAR SINGH BHADANA QUILTS, JOINS RLD

New Delhi: The Bharatiya Janata Party has got a big jolt in western Uttar Pradesh ahead of the Assembly polls in the state. BJP MLA Avtar Singh

Bhadana quit the party and joined the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) in presence of party chief Jayant Chaudhary in Delhi on Wednesday. Bhadana is currently MLA from Meerapur seat of Muzaffarnagar. In Delhi, he met Jayant Chaudhary on Wednesday, after which he formally joined the RLD.

SP MLA, CONGRESS LEADERS JOIN BJP

New Delhi: Congress MLA Naresh Saini, senior leader Imran Masood and SP MLA Hari Om Yadav on Wednesday joined the BJP, a day after Swami Prasad Maurya resigned from the Yogi Adityanath cabinet. Along with them, another SP leader and former MLA Dharampal Singh also joined the saffron party.

OMICRON NOT COMMON COLD: CENTRE

New Delhi: Omicron is not common cold and it is a misconception that is spreading, the government's top Covid adviser K Paul said, a day after the country's top epidemiologist called Omicron infections as mild as a cold and said everybody would likely catch it. Yesterday, a top epidemiologist at the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Jayaprakash Muliyil, argued that rules so far to tackle the pandemic needed a complete relook as Omicron was a far milder variant than Delta and not frightening. Dr Paul urged people to take Omicron seriously and warned it could badly hit health care systems.

COVAXIN BOOSTER CAN NEUTRALISE OMICRON: BHARAT BIOTECH

New Delhi: Covaxin's booster dose is able to neutralise the vaccine evading Omicron variant of Covid-19, according to a study conducted at US' Emory University, Bharat Biotech announced on Wednesday. Earlier studies have demonstrated the neutralising potential of Covaxin against other SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern such as Alpha, Beta, Delta, Zeta, and Kappa, it said. The new study demonstrated "sera from subjects who received a booster dose of Covaxin (BBV152) six months after getting a primary two-dose series of Covaxin (BBV152), neutralised the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron and Delta variants", the Hyderabad-based drug maker said in a statement.

HIGH FOOD PRICES LIFT INDIA'S DEC RETAIL INFLATION RATE

In terms of CPI YoY inflation rate, pulses and products' prices jumped by 2.43 per cent in December 2021. Meat and fish prices rose by 4.58 per cent and eggs were dearer by 1.48 per cent.

Similarly, the overall price of food and beverages category was up 4.47 per cent and oils and fats prices rose 24.32 per cent. On the other hand, vegetable prices declined by 2.99 per cent.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

High food prices accelerated India's December 2021 retail inflation rate on a sequential and year-on-year basis.

The macro-economic data assumes significance as retail inflation has almost reached the range limit of the Reserve Bank of India's set target of 2-6 per cent.

Region-wise, the CPI Urban rose to 5.83 per cent last month from 5.54 per



cent in November 2021 and the CPI Rural spiked to 5.36 per cent from 4.29 per cent. As per the NSO data, the

rate of rise in the Consumer Food Price Index, which measures the changes in retail prices of food products, increased to 4.05 per cent last month from 1.87 per cent in November 2021 and 3.41 per cent in December 2020.

Furthermore, as per the official data, the inflation rate for fuel and light was at 10.95 per cent. In addition, sub-group of clothing and footwear showed a price acceleration of 8.30 per cent.

Rocket scientist S Somanath appointed ISRO chief

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Eminent rocket scientist S Somanath has been appointed as the chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) as well as the Space Secretary, a Personnel Ministry order issued on Wednesday said. Somanath, who is at present Director of Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC), will succeed K Sivan who completes his extended tenure on Friday.

Sivan was in January 2018 appointed as the ISRO chief, Secretary of the Department of Space, and Chairman of Space Commission. He was in December 2020 given a one-year extension till January 14, 2022. Somanath's appointment as the Space Secretary and the Space Commission Chairman is for a combined tenure of three years from the date of joining of the post, inclusive of an extension in tenure beyond the



age of superannuation in public interest, the order said. The post of the ISRO chairman, the Space Secretary, and the Space Commission chief is usually held by one person only. He is an expert in the area of system engineering of launch vehicles, as per his official biodata.



MEKEDATU PADAYATRA: FIRS AGAINST 63 CONGRESSMEN

The Karnataka High Court has rapped the ruling BJP government and Congress in the state over the Mekedatu padayatra and issued notices. The court has also directed both to issue clarification by January 14.

RAMANAGAR | Agencies

Karnataka police on Wednesday lodged FIRs against 63 Congressmen, including KPCC President D.K. Shivakumar, Opposition leader Siddaramaiah, for defying curfew orders by taking part in Mekedatu padayatra.

According to Ramanagar SP Girish, the complaint has been lodged as per the complaint by the Tehsildar in Kanakapura police station.

This is the third FIR on Congress leaders who are going ahead with the 'padayatra' amid the Covid third



wave and curfew orders.

On the first day, an FIR was lodged at Sathanur police station against 31 people which rose to 38 on day 2 of the 'padayatra'.

Reacting to the FIRs, Siddaramaiah questioned the ground on which the complaint was filed saying there is zero ground to lodge complaints. "There should be

an action and reaction as well as omission and commission, there is nothing here," he opined.

"The government cannot threaten us by lodging FIR's This act will not deter us from our decision to complete the padayatra," he maintained.

The case has been lodged under IPC Sections 141 (by means of criminal force or show of criminal force to

compel any person to do what he is legally bound to do), 143 (unlawful assembly), 290 (public nuisance) and 336 (whoever does any act so rashly or negligently as to endanger human life or personal safety of others). They have also been booked under the Disaster Management Act.

7 COPS ON MAGH MELA DUTY TEST COVID POSITIVE

Prayagraj (UP): With just a day left for the Magh Mela to begin on 'Makar Sankranti', seven policemen on Mela duty have tested positive for Covid. They had arrived on the Mela campus from different parts of the state on duty. Health officials are now trying to trace and test the contacts of these policemen.

The Mela police has tested around 2,000 policemen from January 1 to 10 and seven of them came out positive. They have been kept in isolation camps till recovery.

Cop, JeM terrorist killed in Kashmir encounter



Srinagar | Agencies

One policeman and one terrorist have been killed while three army soldiers and two civilians have been injured in an ongoing encounter between militants and security forces at the Pariwan area in south Kashmir's Kulgam district, officials said on Wednesday.

"One police personnel SgCt Rohit Chhib attained #martyrdom, 03 Army soldiers also got minor injuries. 01 #terrorist of #terror outfit JeM killed," J&K police tweeted quoting IGP, Kashmir zone, Vijay Kumar.

The firefight between terrorists and security forces took place after a joint team

of the police and the security forces cordoned off the area and launched a search operation on the basis of specific information about the presence of terrorists.

As the security forces zeroed in on the spot where the terrorists were hiding, they came under a heavy volume of fire that triggered the encounter.

'Matter of serious concern', Dhankhar says after CS, DGP 'skip' meeting for second time

KOLKATA | Agencies

Few hours after West Bengal Chief Secretary HK Dwivedi, and DGP Manoj Malaviya skipped their meeting with the Governor -- second time in three days -- a furious Jagdeep Dhankhar criticised the two top government officials, saying it "has dealt a spinal blow to the reputation of the services they belong".

In a Twitter post on Wednesday, the Governor said: "It is a matter of very serious concern. The Chief Secretary and the DGP of the state have chosen to boycott meetings with the Governor in the last three days. This is serious inexcusable constitutional lapse and has dealt a spinal blow to the reputation of the services they belong."

"I am Constitutionally ordained 'to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution and the law' would now ensure that these officials get into constitutional groove. They have damaged the reputation of their services, reputation of the office they hold and have compromised democracy in the state of West Bengal," he added. His reaction came after the two top government officials skipped their



meeting with the Governor, scheduled at 11 a.m. in the morning where the two officers were supposed to brief him on the incident of Suvendu Adhikari where he was allegedly stopped from entering Netaji at Binpur Block in Jhargram on Friday. Earlier, the Governor had asked the duo to be present before him on Monday at 5 p.m. but they did not appear and sent a note to the head of the state that they were unable to be present because they were too busy with the Gangasagar Mela.

BSF SEIZE HEROIN, WEAPONS CLOSE TO PAKISTAN BORDER

Chandigarh: In less than 24 hours after recovering 22 kg of heroin in Punjab, the Border Security Force on Wednesday seized another haul of the drug along with arms and ammunition close to the Pakistan border in three operations in Amritsar and Ferozpur sectors, officials said. In its continuing fight against weapon and drugs, the BSF foiled three attempts to smuggle contraband items and seized approximately 7.4 kg of suspected heroin, two pistols and 55 rounds in Ferozpur and Amritsar sectors, said the paramilitary force. A day earlier, the BSF recovered 22 kg heroin smuggled from Pakistan in the Khemkaran sector in three search operations. Punjab shares a 553 km long international border with Pakistan.

JAIPUR | Agencies

A minor deaf and mute girl was gangraped in Rajasthan's Alwar and thrown on road near culvert in a profusely bleeding condition. The incident happened on Tuesday night and the condition of the girl is critical.

The girl was lying there in pain for around an hour when she was spotted by the public who informed the police.

The police then rushed the girl to a local hospital where she was admitted to the ICU. As her condition was serious, she was shifted to Jaipur hospital late at night. The gang-rape accused are yet to be identified.

Meanwhile, Superintendent of Police Tejaswini Gautam told reporter, "The kid is presently at JK Lon in



Jaipur. Our primary concern is her health and hence she was shifted there and our deputy SP Anjali is there

with her. We have formed an SIT team, including six SHOs who are searching for technical and scientific evidence to arrest the accused," she said.

The minor was thrown near the culvert, Gautam informed and said, "We came to know that the minor was missing from nearby village Malakheda at around 4 p.m. on Tuesday. We informed her parents and they identified their kid."

The police are on the lookout for the accused. CCTV footage is being checked, informed officials.

Superintendent of JK Lon Hospital, Dr Arvind Shukla said that a team of seven doctors is treating the girl. It also includes gynecologists and plastic surgeons. The girl has been badly injured by a sharp object, said the doctor.

I&B ministry Twitter account hacked, restored later

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Twitter account of the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was compromised on Wednesday.

The account, however, was restored later on. The hacker renamed the account as Elon Musk and tweeted a great job.

The account was restored and posts made by hackers were deleted. "The account @Mib_india has been restored. This is for the information of all the followers," the ministry tweeted.

Last month Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Twitter account was compromised for a brief period and a post claiming that India had officially adopted bitcoin as legal tender was tweeted from it.

"The Twitter handle of PM



@narendramodi was very briefly compromised. The matter was escalated to Twitter and the account has been immediately secured.

In the brief period that the account was compromised, any tweet shared must be ignored," PMO India had said in a tweet.

DEATHS OF OLIVE RIDLEY TURTLES LEAVE CONSERVATIONISTS IN TN WORRIED

CHENNAI | Agencies

Marine conservationists and nature lovers of Tamil Nadu are worried over the large number of deaths of endangered Olive Ridley turtles across the shores of Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu.

Sunil Chandrashekar, marine biologist and Director, Centre for Environmental Studies research group based out of Thoothukudi told IANS: "Olive Ridley turtles are an endangered species according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and efforts are on to conserve these species across the globe. In South India, a lot of conservation efforts are taking place in Kerala and Tamil Nadu but

the deaths of large number of Olive Ridley turtles across the shores of Nagapattinam is a disturbing trend."

In the past four weeks, carcasses of 150 Olive Ridley turtles have washed ashore in Nagapattinam area. This according to Sunil Chandrashekar was five times more than the number of carcasses found during the same period last year as 30 were found between January 4 and 26.

The Olive Ridley turtles are in the Red List of endangered species marked by the IUCN and the forest department and the state fisheries department, along with the environment department, are creating awareness among the fishermen of Nagapattinam on the importance of this species.

PM inaugurates National Youth Festival virtually

PUDUCHERRY | Agencies

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday virtually inaugurated the 25th National Youth Festival as part of the Swami Vivekananda birth anniversary at Puducherry. He called upon the youths to adopt the new mantra of India, Compete and Conquer, and asked them to win battles to build a stronger India.

Narendra Modi asked the youths to write about unsung heroes of the freedom movement who did not get due recognition despite extreme sacrifices.

He said that the participation of youths in large numbers in the vaccination drive against Covid-19 was clear proof of their will to win and a sense of responsibility among them. The PM said that the performance in the Olympics and Paralympics where the participants won medals was a clear example of the will of the youth of the country.

Modi said that India's demography is young and the mind of the country is also young. The National Youth Festival also coincides



with the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Aurobindo and the 100th death anniversary of Poet Subramania Bharathi, both associated closely with Puducherry.

MAHA: COVID CASES SCALE NEW 46K PEAK, TALLY CROSSES 7 MN

► -MUMBAI ACCOUNTS FOR THE BULK OF OMICRON CASES AT 627, FOLLOWED BY 445 IN PUNE, 76 IN THANE, 59 IN SANGLI, 51 IN NAGPUR, 19 IN RAIGAD, 18 IN KOLHAPUR, 13 IN SATARA, 11 IN OSMANABAD, 9 IN AMRAVATI, 6 EACH IN PALGHAR AND BULDHANA, 5 IN AKOLA, 3 EACH IN NANDED, AURANGABAD AND GONDIYA, 2 EACH IN AHMEDNAGAR, GADCHIROLI, LATUR, NANDURBAR, NASHIK AND SOLAPUR, AND 1 IN JALNA.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Covid-19 cases in Maharashtra catapulted to a new peak of 46,000-plus while deaths and Omicron cases also jumped, with the states tally crossing a staggering 7 million mark, health officials said here on Wednesday.

After recording the previous high of 44,388 Covid cases on January 9, the state's figures mounted to a new record 46,723 on Wednesday -- a spike of nearly 12,000 cases compared to Tuesday's count of 34,424.

Covid fatalities also shot up from 22 on Tuesday to 32 on Wednesday, with the mortality rate dropping marginally from 2.02 per cent to 2.01 per cent.

From the peak of 207 Omicron cases reported on Sunday, the state's single-day figures of the new variant came down to 86 on Wednesday, with Mumbai



remaining at the top with an overall tally of 627.

While Omicron has spread extensively across several districts in the state, out of the 1,367 cases detected till date, 734 have recovered. Of the 46,723 new Covid-19 cases detected on Wednesday, Mumbai Metropolitan Region alone accounted for 30,107 infections, while Mumbai city remained at a high with 16,420 fresh cases.

The next is Pune Circle's 9,277 infectees, followed by Nashik Circle at 2,230, Nagpur Circle at 2,044, Kolhapur Circle at 1,056, Latur Circle at 1,006, Aurangabad Circle at 511 and Akola Circle at 492.

The state's cumulative figures of Covid-19 since the start of the pandemic in March 2020 now stand at 70,34,661 cases and 141,701 deaths, while a total of 66,49,111 patients have fully recovered till date.

Two powerful blasts near Congress leaders' residences in Manipur

IMPHAL | Agencies

As the pre-poll violence continued in Manipur, two powerful bombs, including an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) detonated remotely, went off in front of the residences of two Congress leaders in two districts on Wednesday damaging the properties, police said.

No one was, however, injured in the blasts in Imphal West district and Imphal East district.

According to the police, the IED exploded in front of the residence of Congress leader Kh Ratankumar at Kangla Sangomshang in Imphal East district. The vehicles parked at his house were badly damaged.

The second blast, which took place near the residence of former MLA Salam Joy at

Samuroi in Imphal West district, also damaged the gate and front portion of the Congress leader's residence. Both Ratankumar and Joy are Congress ticket aspirants from the Khurai and Wangoi Assembly constituencies respectively.

The security forces reached both the sites and launched search operations to nab the attackers. People in both areas protested against the bomb blasts in front of the residences of the Congress leaders.

Wednesday's blasts are the second pre-poll violent incidents after the Election Commission on Saturday announced the schedule of the two-phase elections -- February 27 and March 3 -- to the 60-seat Manipur assembly. The counting of votes will take place on March 10.



REVISED INSTRUCTIONS ISSUED TO COLLECTOR AND CMHO REGARDING COVID-19 PATIENTS CM PERFORMED SURYA NAMASKAR AT RESIDENCE

HEALTH COMMISSIONER SUDAM KHADE INFORMED THAT THE REVISED DISCHARGE POLICY HAS BEEN PREPARED IN COMPLIANCE WITH THE REVISED MANAGEMENT FOR COVID-19, PROTOCOLS, HOME ISOLATION GUIDELINE AND COVID-19 STRATEGY.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Based on the guidelines received from the Union Health Ministry, revised guidelines have been issued to all the Collectors and CMHOs regarding the discharge of patients of Covid-19. Health Commissioner Sudam Khade informed that the revised discharge policy has been prepared in compliance with the revised management for Covid-19, protocols, home iso-

lation guideline and Covid-19 strategy. Also, it has been decided that Covid-19 patients with moderate symptoms should be admitted to the Dedicated Covid-19 Health Center.

In the issued instructions, patients with mild symptoms of Covid-19 will remain in home isolation, who will be monitored regularly. The patient will be discharged on the seventh day after being found positive and it will also be ensured that the patient does not have persistent fever in the last 3 days. Covid test will not be required before discharge.

Covid-19 patients who shows signs of improvement, his oxygen saturation is 93 percent 3 consecutive days and oxygen support is not required. Also, if there is any co-morbidity but there is no complication due to it, in that case such patients can be discharged by the medical officer providing the treatment. Testing for Covid-19 will not be required before discharge.

For patients who do not show improvement in their symptoms and continue to require oxygen, the physi-

cian treating them will give them discharge only if clinical symptoms improve, continuous oxygen saturation is maintained for 3 days without oxygen support, and there is no complication in co-morbidity.

Criteria for discharge of critical Covid-19 patients, including HIV patients, transplant therapy and cancer patients who are immune-compromised, will depend on the clinical recovery of the patient and the treating physician.

After discharge, all Covid-19 patients will monitor their health for the next 7 days and will wear masks. After discharge, if the patient develops symptoms such as fever, cough or shortness of breath and these symptoms persist, in such a situation, the patient should immediately contact the doctor and seek clinical guidance. The patient can contact the helpline of Covid-19 Control Center in the district. Khade has asked all the Collectors and CMHOs to ensure adherence to the revised guidelines regarding discharge of Covid-19 patients.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan performed Surya Namaskar and Yoga at his residence on the occasion of Youth Day, the birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda. Chouhan had also appealed to the citizens to do Surya Namaskar at home. Chief Minister does Surya Namaskar and Yoga every day since his teenage years. Keeping in view the precautions of Covid, mass Surya Namaskar has not been organised in the state this year. Chouhan has been involved in mass Surya Namaskar programmes in the past years.

Today is Youth Day. This day falls on Swami Vivekananda Jayanti. Swami Vivekananda is our role model. Swamiji used to say that "Man is not just a three-and-a-half-hand tall form of bone and flesh. He is a part of



God, the son of nectar, the storehouse of infinite powers. He is also the partaker of immortal bliss. There is no such work in the world that man cannot do. You are not lowly. Whatever you decide, you can do."

Chouhan said - "The medium of what we do is the body, if we want to do any work, we can do it only

through a healthy body. The body is the medium for following all religions. Therefore the body should be healthy, a sick or weak body cannot fulfill any great purpose. That is why it is said that the first joy is a healthy body. A healthy mind also resides in a healthy body and it is necessary to do yoga daily for a healthy body."

Chouhan thanked Prime Minister Narendra Modi ji, who has made this practice of Yoga popular world-wide. Today every country in the world performs yoga. International Yoga Day is recognised all over the world on 21st June. This is the recognition given by the world to Modi and also to our proud nation.

Chouhan has urged the people of the state to do yoga and Surya Namaskar daily to keep the body healthy. This will keep the body healthy. I myself do yoga and Pranayama every day. It increases my efficiency manifold. Chief Minister said that do Surya Namaskar and learn Pranayama not only today but every day. My best wishes. A very good form of yoga is Surya Namaskar. By doing Surya Namaskar, all our body parts get exercised. Our tradition of yoga does not belong to today. Our tradition is thousands of years old.

Minister Cites 'Ritual' As A Reason For Not Wearing Mask

In March last year, Thakur had said that adopting a 'Vedic lifestyle' would protect against coronavirus and conducting a havan with cow dung would keep her house sanitized for up to 12 hours.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and Adhyatam in the Madhya Pradesh government is often criticized for many of her remarks. She raised amusement a notch up by answering a query on not wearing a mask amidst the spike of COVID-19 cases in the country.

Thakur reasoned her action by claiming that her immunity was strong because she had been performing 'agnihotra' or 'healing fire' rituals to purify the air and her surroundings. She said that she had been serving the practice for more than 30 years. Moreover, she added that a gamcha, or a cotton towel, doubled-up as her mask.

She said, "My daily routine for the last 30 years include performing agnihotra every day at sunrise and sunset, which increases my immunity so that viral attacks don't create problems for me". Thakur was also questioned as to why she looked unwell when she came to Khandwa last; she answered that at that time, she was down with a cold and not



any viral attack. Her statements were widely shared and mocked on social media. In March last year, Thakur had said that adopting a 'Vedic lifestyle' would protect against coronavirus and conducting a havan with cow dung would keep her house sanitized for up to 12 hours. Notably, the Home Minister of Madhya Pradesh attracted a lot of criticism for saying that he does not wear a mask at any event. Later he modified his statement by saying that he could not wear a mask for long due to a medical condition.

A Seer named Baba Prakash Puri Maharaj had set on the onset of Kumbh, "It's the voice of God, who says nothing will happen. God won't let anything happen to us. I have full faith." Since the pandemic has rendered the world socially distanced, Ministers have faced flak for making irresponsible comments. However, it is time that political representatives understand and acknowledge their responsibility towards the citizens before making unscientific and illogical statements.

5 Covid Positive Passengers Stopped From Boarding Dubai-Bound Flight

The infected passengers include one each from Indore and Barwani and three from Bhopal. All the five people are asymptomatic and have been advised to isolate at home.

Team Absolute | Indore

A 37-year-old pregnant woman and four other passengers tested positive for coronavirus at the Indore airport on Wednesday following which they were prevented from boarding the Air India's Dubai-bound flight, an official said.

The woman, who was from Bhopal and six months' pregnant, had not taken a single dose of COVID-19 vaccine, while the other four infected passengers were inoculated, Dr Priyanka Kourav, medical officer of the Madhya Pradesh health department

said. "Every passenger boarding the weekly Indore-Dubai flight has to undergo a rapid RT-PCR test at the airport. On Wednesday, 76 passengers were tested and the results of two women, two men and a 17-year-old boy came out positive," she said. Four of the infected persons were vaccinated against the viral infection, she said.

"Two of these infected passengers have taken two doses each of Sinopharm and Pfizer's vaccines for coronavirus prevention, which means both of them have received a total of four doses of the vaccines," she said.

The infected passengers include one each from Indore and Barwani and three from Bhopal, the official said, adding that all the five people are asymptomatic and have been advised to isolate at home.

The administrations of Indore, Barwani and Bhopal were being informed about the infected passengers, she said.

CM PLANTED SAPLINGS IN SMART GARDEN



Bhopal: Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan planted saplings of Karanj and Keshia in Smart Garden. Youth representatives doing social works, working for environmental protection and empowerment of daughters Ashi Chouhan and Narendra Baggan also planted saplings. A Tulsi plant was presented to Chief Minister Chouhan. They told that while working for environmental protection, they are also making efforts for public awareness. The Karanj sapling is considered important in Ayurvedic medicine. Karanj plant is also used in religious works. Keshia is important due to environment and beautiful flowers.

CM PAID TRIBUTE TO SWAMI VIVEKANANDA



Bhopal: Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan paid homage to Swamiji on the occasion of Swami Vivekananda Jayanti, Youth Day. Chouhan paid floral tributes by garlanding Swami Vivekananda's picture in the auditorium of his residence.

CM TO RELEASE "SUSHASAN DIGEST"

Bhopal: Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan will release "Madhya Pradesh Good Governance and Development Report" and magazine "Sushasan Digest" at Kushabhau Thakre Hall (Minto Hall) on January 14 at 5 pm in orientation programme of Chief Minister Young Fellowship Development Programme. Chouhan will discuss with about 15 MoU partners of Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Good Governance and Policy Analysis and 52 selected candidates in orientation programme of Chief Minister Young Fellowship Development Programme.

Tribal family murders: Cong, BJP spar as girl fails to meet Guv after 11-day march

A survivor from the family had undertaken a 'nyay yatra' from Nemawar to Bhopal demanding justice and had reached Raj Bhawan on Tuesday along with senior Congress leaders Digvijaya Singh and Sajjan Singh Verma as well as party workers.

The ruling BJP and the Congress indulged in a war of words after a leader from the opposition party berated Governor Mangubhai Patel for not meeting a girl who had undertaken a 200-kilometre, 11-day foot march demanding justice for the killings of five of her kin.

Mamata Balai (45), her daughters Rupali (21) and Divya (14) as

well as relatives Puja (15) and Pawan (14) from Nemawar in Dewas district had gone missing on May 13 last year and were found murdered and buried in a field on June 29, leading to the arrest of six persons later.

The Madhya Pradesh government had recently recommended handing over the probe to the CBI.

A survivor from the family had undertaken a 'nyay yatra' from Nemawar to Bhopal demanding justice and had reached Raj Bhawan on Tuesday along with senior Congress leaders Digvijaya Singh and Sajjan Singh Verma as well as party workers.

Angry that the girl could not meet Patel, Congress leader Verma said, "We were proud that a tribal man was appointed the gov-

ernor of Madhya Pradesh. What did we know that the governor is afraid of coronavirus, and cannot give justice to his own community? Death is better than such a life." Congress workers present outside Raj Bhawan also shouted slogans against the governor.

Hitting back, Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan tweeted that Congress leaders were violating political decorum.

"Congress leaders are not only losing patience but also their conscience. Such petty remarks against a person holding a constitutional post is not only a violation of political decorum, but also an insult to the Indian tradition of wishing the welfare of all. Your remarks are a blow to the heart of the state," Chouhan said in a tweet.

Policewoman Forces Man To Clean Her Trousers

Team Absolute | Bhopal

In shocking scenes from Madhya Pradesh's Rewa, a woman police personnel forced a man to clean her trousers after he sprayed mud over it while trying to reverse his motorcycle.

While there is no video of the mud-spraying incident, a six-second clip of the man bending over to dust the policewoman's white trousers has emerged online and has been widely shared.

After the man dusts down the trousers, using a red cloth, the policewoman, whose face cannot be seen because she has wrapped a white scarf around her head, slaps him and walks away.

All this took place near Sirmour Chowk in Rewa. The policewoman has been identified as Shashi Kala, a Constable from the Home Guard who has been posed to the Collector's office.

"We have seen the video... and it does seem to show that a man was



forced to clean the pants of the officer, who the slapped him and walked away. If someone comes to us with a complaint, then we will conduct an inquiry," Shiv Kumar, Additional SP (Rewa), said.

Locals Force Hundreds of Cows Into Civic Body's Compound

According to reports, residents and farmers of Akoda town drove about 700 to 800 cows into Akoda Nagar Parishad's compound on Monday and locked them, chief municipal officer (CMO) Rambhan Singh Bhadoria said.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

In an unusual but totally believable incident, angered by the menace of stray cattle, residents of a town in Bhopal district drove hundreds of cows into the grounds of a local civic body, an official said on Tuesday.

According to reports, residents and farmers of Akoda town drove



about 700 to 800 cows into Akoda Nagar Parishad's compound on Monday and locked them, chief municipal officer (CMO) Rambhan Singh Bhadoria said.

The residents claimed that the stray cattle had been destroying their crops. They were very angry that the stray cows were not being sent to a gaushala (cow shelter), Bhadoria said. For reasons unknown, a cow shelter had

already been built, but it has not been handed over to the civic body, he added. The cows were found to be in the compound and 20 quintals of fodder had been arranged for them, the official said. He added that he will be meeting the district collector on Wednesday to inform him about the stray cattle problem. Farmers and residents also protested against the stray cattle issue.

Shop, office owners to be fined if employees seen without masks

In the last 7 days, about 6,000 people have been caught without masks. An average of 800 people have been found roaming without wearing masks.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

As corona cases are increasing rapidly in Bhopal, the authorities have decided to increase the strictness regarding masks. Till now, checking of masks was being done only in the streets and markets, but from today onwards, checking of masks will be done in hotels-restaurants, big shops and private offices as well.

If any employee or customer is seen without wearing a mask, then shop or office operators will also be fined. There will be a separate fine of Rs 200.

In the last 7 days, about

6,000 people have been caught without masks. An average of 800 people have been found roaming without wearing masks. Joint teams of the Municipal Corporation and the police are taking strict action against violators, which is limited only to the market and major roads. Since a large number of new cases of corona are increasing in the city, it has now been decided to increase the strictness regarding masks.

ADM Dilip Yadav said that the checking will be done for masks at private offices, hotel-restaurants and shops as well. If an employee is found without

a mask, not only him but the operator of the organization will also be fined.

District administration, municipal corporations and police officers are taking action against those who roam in the markets without masks.

People are seen without masks at places like Lakherapur, Chowk, Ibrahimpura, Ghoda Nakkas, Hamidia Road, Dawa Bazar, Bhopal Talkies, Ashoka Garden, Nadra Bus Stand, Halalpur Bus Stand, ISBT etc. The situation is similar in places like New Market, 10 No. Market, Bithan Market, Kolar, Bairagarh, Awadhपुरi, Raisen Road etc.

Woman staying at parent's home not illegal confinement: HC

Making his observations in the case, Madhya Pradesh High Court Justice Rohit Arya explained to the husband that he had made a mess of his married life.

Team Absolute | Indore

The Madhya Pradesh High Court has rejected a man's plea seeking reunion with his wife and used colloquialisms to explain to the petitioner the ups and downs of married life. Hearing a habeas corpus petition filed by the husband, the Madhya Pradesh High Court questioned the man over his choice to play with fireball (marriage). Making his observations in the case, Madhya Pradesh High Court Justice Rohit Arya explained to the husband that he had made a mess of his married life.

The husband had approached the court after his wife returned to her parental home after a fight over household finances. Dismissing the petition,

Justice Arya refused to give relief to the husband.

During a conversation as part of the hearing, the court asked the husband if he is still in a condition to take care of his wife. To this, the man's lawyer said that his client can take care of his wife but the woman has started demanding money after reaching her parent's home. To this, the judge remarked that these highs and lows are a part of life.

When the man said that the matter had reached a point that he had to approach the court, the judge said, "To kyun shaadi ki tumne? Why did you dare to play with this fireball? Dekho, gaye the namaaz padhne, gale pad gaye roze. (Why did you get married. Why did you dare to play with this fireball? Went to offer prayers, returned fasting).

The court also said that since the woman is living with her parents, it cannot be termed as illegal confinement. "Aap mein purusharth hai toh jaa ke le aao usko (If you have will, go bring her back)," said the judge. According to the report, the wife has filed a maintenance plea.



EDITOR'S SPECS

DISILLUSIONED WITH BJP, WHY?

Years ago, the BJP had welcomed turncoats from other parties and flaunted it as an achievement. The same turncoats are now living up to their reputation and changing loyalties when elections are round the corner. Whether it is Swami Prasad Maurya, Dara Singh Chauhan, Bhagwati Sharan Sagar or Avatar Singh Bhadana, all these leaders had hitched on to the saffron bandwagon to enter the Vidhan Sabha. What is more worrisome is the fact that almost all the deserters belong to various OBC groups and have levelled similar-sounding allegations against the party leadership. These MLAs are not from one particular areas - Bhadana is from west UP and Maurya from eastern UP while the others are from central UP. This will undoubtedly damage the BJP which has been strengthening its OBC outreach and trying to counter the resentment of Brahmmins by consolidating the OBC votes. According to sources, what has actually triggered this crisis in the BJP is a statement made by a top leader in UP that new faces would be brought in for the Assembly elections. As reports went around that almost 100 legislators would be replaced to counter the anti-incumbency factor, the sitting MLAs turned restive and started looking for greener pastures. These resignations have spoilt the picture perfect that the BJP had been painting for the Assembly elections. If sources are to be believed, the next batch of legislators - who are waiting for talks to finalise with other parties - will quit by levelling allegations of poor governance, caste dominance, bureaucratic indiscipline and apathy against the Yogi government. "The resentment had been brewing since the past two years but none of the leaders bothered to address the situation. When 150 MLAs had staged a dharna inside the Assembly in 2019, instead of resolving issues, many were actually threatened by the Chief Minister. The fear of actin made these MLAs remain quiet but there is no stopping now," said one of the disgruntled legislators.

AMAZON DECEIVED CCI, ARBITRATION WITH FUTURE GOVERNED BY INDIAN LAW CAN'T CONTINUE- EXPERTS

Ruchika Rao

A Division Bench of the Delhi High Court has stayed arbitration proceedings initiated by Amazon against the Future group in relation to a 2019 investment by Amazon in a Future group company. The High Court, after hearing the parties for over two hours, passed an order recording that a prima facie case for interim relief had been made out by the Future group. The Future group had approached the Delhi High Court after the arbitral tribunal refused to hear its application for termination of arbitral proceedings as a preliminary issue. The Future group argued that because the CCI has found that Amazon had committed fraud, deception, and misrepresentation while seeking approval for its investment in Future Coupons Private Limited, has directed Amazon to file a proper notification, and kept its earlier approval for the investment in abeyance, the agreements between Amazon and Future Coupons had become unenforceable. The CCI's order contains several strongly worded observations against Amazon. The CCI stated that it "has no hesitation to hold that such conducts of Amazon amount to suppression and misrepresentation of the purpose of the Combination, which is a material particular". After listing various instances of misrepresentation and suppression, the CCI noted that "the requirement to disclose these material facts and particulars is paramount as they enable the Commission to appreciate the commercial and economic contours of the combination" and that approvals obtained by suppression and misrepresentation "would effectively amount to approval/consent having been obtained by way of fraud" and a "breach of trust" of the CCI. The CCI's order comes in the backdrop of an arbitral dispute between Amazon and Future Coupons, in which Amazon has sought to join Future Retail Limited (the retail arm of the Future group). Future Retail has maintained that it has no contractual relationship with Amazon and therefore cannot be dragged into an arbitration through which Amazon seeks to block a transaction between Future Retail and Reliance. According to the Future group, the transaction with Reliance was necessary to save Future Retail from insolvency. Amazon on the other hand contends that Future Retail and its retail assets were central to its decision to invest in Future Coupons and there exists a 'single integrated transaction' which binds not just Amazon and Future Coupons but also Future Retail. In the arbitral proceedings,



Future Retail had relied on a Delhi High Court judgment which contained a prima facie finding that Amazon's attempt at creating a 'single integrated transaction' encompassing Future Retail would be in violation of foreign exchange rules which prohibit foreign direct investment in multi-brand retail trade without government approval. Future Retail also relied on Amazon's filings before the CCI at the time of investing in Future Coupons, which did not allude to any such 'single integrated transaction' and represented Amazon's interests as lying solely in Future Coupons. Based on this, Future Retail had argued that it should not be treated as a party to the arbitral proceedings. However, this contention was rejected by the arbitral tribunal, which found that Amazon's CCI filings adequately disclosed Future Retail's role in the combination between Amazon and Future Coupons. The tribunal also allowed Amazon's request for an interim injunction on Future Retail proceeding with its transaction with Reliance. The CCI's order of 17 December 2021 undercuts Amazon's stance that its investment in Future Coupons included within its scope rights against Future Retail. It also directly assails the tribunal's conclusion that Amazon's interest in Future Retail was disclosed to the CCI and that the CCI had granted approval for the investment knowing that Amazon would be acquiring certain rights in Future Retail. As the CCI's order went to the very root of the tribunal's jurisdiction over Future Retail, it had preferred an application for termination of the arbitral proceedings. Future Retail argued before the tribunal that its application for termination of proceedings must be heard and decided before the tribunal could continue with the proceedings. It contended that as the CCI had kept its approval for the transaction between Amazon and Future Coupons in abeyance, the underlying transaction documents had become inoperative and could not be enforced through arbitral proceedings.

However, the arbitral tribunal did not agree to rule on the application for termination as a preliminary issue and instead insisted on completing the evidentiary hearings. It was in this context that the Future group approached a Single Judge of the Delhi High Court, seeking a stay of the arbitral proceedings. The Future group also argued that the tribunal's refusal to defer evidentiary proceedings despite several members of the Future legal team having contracted COVID-19 was a denial of natural justice and equal and full opportunity to present one's case. After the Single Judge dismissed the petition seeking stay of arbitral proceedings, the Future group approached the Division Bench of the High Court. The Division Bench has issued notice to Amazon and fixed the matter for further hearing on 1 February 2022. Taking note of the CCI's observations, the High Court has found that a prima facie case has been made out by the Future group that the agreements forming the basis of the arbitral proceedings have become unenforceable and applications for termination of the proceedings ought to have been decided by the tribunal on a priority. The High Court also found that the balance of convenience lay in favour of not continuing the arbitral proceedings as "irreparable loss" would be caused to the Future group if the proceedings are allowed to continue. Taking into account these factors, as an interim measure, the High Court has stayed the arbitral proceedings. While there has been some discussion that the Delhi High Court's orders may pose 'conflict of laws' issues, experts familiar with the dispute and the arbitration regime in India say that no such concerns arise in this case. This is indeed not the first instance of Amazon and the Future group having taken their disputes to court. In March last year, Amazon had approached the Delhi High Court for enforcement of an

interim order obtained by it from an emergency arbitrator. The Future group had disputed that orders of emergency arbitrators are enforceable under Indian law. The matter had travelled up to the Supreme Court, where a bench headed by Justice RF Nariman had ruled, without going into the merits of the matter, that an order of an emergency arbitrator is enforceable. The interim order passed by the emergency arbitrator (and later confirmed by the arbitral tribunal) is now the subject matter of an appeal preferred by the Future group before the Delhi High Court. Abhilaksh Grover, a lawyer practicing in Delhi and Chandigarh, also considers the Delhi High Court order to be a balanced one, and one which leaves open all questions for more detailed consideration. "At this stage, the High Court has only passed an interim order, that too after hearing all parties at considerable length. Amazon has been given an opportunity to file a reply and the High Court will, in due course, consider all issues, including whether the appeal before the Division Bench was maintainable." The exercise of writ jurisdiction in arbitral proceedings is rare. However, Ajay Marwah, a practicing Advocate on Record in the Supreme Court, says that it is not unheard of, and exceptional circumstances may justify the exercise of such jurisdiction. Jurisdiction under Articles 226 and 227 of the Constitution may be exercised by the High Court when a court or tribunal acts in flagrant disregard of law or rules of procedure or in violation of principles of natural justice. In this case, a combination of factors exists, which could justify such an exceptional exercise of power. The tribunal's refusal to consider the impact of the CCI's order on the maintainability of the proceedings before it, its refusal to defer hearings despite one party's legal team being afflicted with COVID - these factors point to an arguable case of perversity and violation of natural justice. Further, considering that the tribunal's had already granted injunctive relief to Amazon, there was no urgency behind concluding the proceedings before examining the effect of the CCI order, particularly when failure to do so could lead to multiplicity of proceedings later on.

(Prof Ruchika Rao is a Litigator & Associate Professor, OP Jindal Law University)

international

AID TO AFGHANISTAN, SYRIA, VACCINE EQUITY TOP UNSC AGENDA IN 2021

United Nations | Agencies

Aid to Afghanistan and Syria, as well as vaccine equity demands were high on the 2021 agenda of the UN Security Council (UNSC), which was grappling with more issues as the Covid-19 pandemic caused various problems including an economic fallout, the UNSC said. Convening a total of 246 public meetings, the 15-member council has adopted 57 resolutions and 24 presidential statements in 2021, an UNSC statement said on Tuesday, adding that members have shown solidarity and unity on several fraught issues such as reauthorising Syria's cross-border aid delivery mechanism in July, and exempting humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan from an asset freeze against designated leaders of the Taliban and associated entities. The exemption was aimed at



pulling the war-torn country back from the brink of economic collapse, the UNSC said. "Perhaps no single nation's trajectory was as dramatic in 2021 as that of Afghanistan," the statement added. Xinhua news agency reported. As the country was likely to see another round of chaos, UN Secretary

General Antonio Guterres, in an emergency meeting, told the council that the world body would not abandon the Afghan people, and its personnel would "stay and deliver" critically needed services during their time of need. In 2021, Syria saw a largely calm year on the military front, despite

large spikes in hunger, chronic malnutrition, and other grave humanitarian challenges, the statement said. According to figures from humanitarian institutes, around 13.4 million people across the country required humanitarian assistance, 20 percent more than in 2020. Special envoy Geir O. Pedersen expressed profound regret that the Council had not yet been able to broker an end to the fighting and urged more creative diplomacy, stressing that Syrians had endured unspeakable horrors, the statement added. In addition, delegates widely cautioned against what was becoming a "lopsided" recovery from the pandemic, with safe and effective vaccines available in only some exclusive parts of the globe, the UNSC said. Guterres has called for efforts of the council to address the rollout of vaccines, which he termed the "biggest moral test before the global community", it added.

S Korean, US diplomats discuss alliance, regional security over phone



Seoul | Agencies

Senior diplomats of South Korea and the US held talks over the phone on Wednesday and discussed the bilateral alliance and other issues on the Korean Peninsula, according to officials. Yeo Seung-bae, deputy foreign minister for political affairs, and his US counter-

part Daniel Kritenbrink had comprehensive discussions on regional and global issues, a foreign ministry official said without elaborating. Yonhap news agency reported. "I had a great conversation with Deputy Foreign Minister Yeo on the US-ROK relationship and our close collaboration on shared regional and global challenges," Kritenbrink tweeted, using

the acronym for South Korea's official name, the Republic of Korea. As for whether North Korea was discussed during the talks, the official said the allies are in close consultations over various matters, including the Korean Peninsula issue. Earlier this week, the North once again test-fired what it claims to be a hypersonic missile.

IRAN CALLS FOR CLOSER COOPERATION WITH CUBA TO COUNTER US SANCTIONS

Tehran: Iran's Vice President for Economic Affairs Mohsen Rezaei on Wednesday called for closer cooperation with Cuba to counter sanction pressures of the US against the two nations. "By expanding cooperation, we must neutralise the sanctions and pressure," Rezaei made the remarks when meeting with Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel on Tuesday in Nicaraguan capital Managua, Xinhua news agency reported citing Iran's state TV. Iran respects Cuba's resistance against the "excessive demands of the oppressors" and is determined to strengthen relations with Cuba, said Rezaei, who is on a visit to Managua to attend the inauguration ceremony of the country's President Daniel Ortega, according to the report. He referred to "good" cooperation between the two countries in the production of a joint Covid vaccine, stressing the importance of efforts to further enhance bilateral ties in various sectors, especially in science, technology and trade. "We can establish a joint trade union to facilitate and boost Iran's trade with Latin American states, particularly Cuba," he noted. For his part, Diaz-Canel praised the resistance of the Iranian government and people against the excessive demands of oppressive powers, "particularly the US," and voiced his support for Iran's right to peaceful use of nuclear energy. He urged for the development of comprehensive ties between the two countries, particularly in trade, science and technology, adding that "the joint cooperation to counter Covid disease and the development of a vaccine is a great success in the fight against sanctions and the conspiracy of the common enemy of the two nations."

President Moon to use Middle East trip to expand business opportunities

Seoul | Agencies

President Moon Jae-in will use his trip to the Middle East later this week to explore opportunities for South Korean businesses in hydrogen, defence and other industries, a Cheong Wa Dae official said on Wednesday. Moon is set to depart on Saturday for an eight-day trip to the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Yonhap news agency reported. "The three nations are our traditional friendly states in the Middle East and Arab world and strategically important countries that play a key role for stable global energy supply chains and maritime logistics," the senior official told reporters. On the first leg of the trip, Moon will visit the UAE from Sunday and attend a bilateral business roundtable on cooperation in the hydrogen industry before meeting with



the country's Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, according to the official. During the talks, Moon plans to discuss cooperation in hydrogen, climate change and space. The same day, the president is scheduled to attend a "Day of Korea" ceremony at the Expo 2020 Dubai and campaign to bring the international event to South

Korea's southeastern city of Busan in 2030. On Monday, Moon plans to deliver a keynote address on carbon neutrality at the Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week and hold a summit meeting with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan on ways to deepen bilateral cooperation on climate change, national security, defence and public health.

South Korea has previously said it is pushing to sell its mid-range surface-to-air missiles known as M-SAM to the UAE. After the UAE, Moon will visit Saudi Arabia on January 18-19 to hold talks with Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and to attend a business forum. In Riyadh, Moon plans to announce the start of free trade agreement negotiations with the Gulf Cooperation Council. The six countries that comprise the GCC supply 68 per cent of South Korea's crude oil imports. On January 20-21, Moon will visit Egypt for summit talks with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and attend a roundtable on eco-friendly businesses. The two sides plan to agree to launch joint research into a bilateral free trade agreement, South Korea's first with an African state.

UKRAINIAN LEADER SEEKS FRESH NORMANDY TALKS TO END DONBAS CONFLICT

Kiev: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has said that Kiev is willing to restart the negotiations in the Normandy format to find ways out of the conflict in Ukraine's eastern region of Donbas, the presidential press service said. "It is time to agree in a substantive manner for ending the conflict, and we are ready for the necessary decisions during the new summit of the leaders of the four countries," Zelensky said on Tuesday during his meeting with the political advisers to the heads of Normandy format countries. The foreign policy adviser to the German chancellor Jens Plotner, the diplomatic adviser to the president of France Emmanuel Bonne and the head of the Ukrainian President's Office Andriy Yermak participated in the meeting. Xinhua news agency reported. During the talks, Yermak reaffirmed that the Ukrainian side remains committed to the political and diplomatic settlement of the conflict, stressing the need for a complete ceasefire, the release of hostages and the opening of the crossing points in Donbas. Yermak, Plotner and Bonne agreed to continue contacts within the Normandy format at the level of advisers to agree on modalities for organising the next summit of the Normandy Four leaders. At the summit of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine, known as the Normandy Four, in Paris on December 9, 2019, the parties issued a joint declaration and agreed to meet four months later in Berlin in order to continue work on resolving the situation in eastern Ukraine. The declaration envisaged an updated demining plan, a ceasefire in the region by the end of the year and a separation of forces by the end of March 2020, a withdrawal of heavy weaponry from the demarcation line, a prisoner exchange and local elections, among other measures. The ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine, which has claimed the lives of some 14,000 people and left as many as 40,000 wounded, began in April 2014.



2 MEN TEST 'POSITIVE' AND 'NEGATIVE' IN 24 HRS, AAROGYA SETU UNMOVED

In these panicky times of the pandemic, two persons from Mumbai and Thane this week got bizarre shockers on their Covid-19 infection status from a government lab, two private labs of a single company, and their status on the Centre's Aarogya Setu portal.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Within hours after they underwent RTPCR tests, the two men were declared as both Covid-19 "Negative" and "Positive", playing havoc with their lives, families, neighbourhood, offices and travel plans. In a strange further development, for one of the two persons who tested negative, the Aarogya Setu team threw up its hands and said that his positive status on the app will change only after he tests negative! On Monday, a realtor named Vijay P. Agarwal (58) from Malad, who had to step out for some meetings, routinely checked his status on the Aarogya Setu portal and was aghast to find himself mentioned as Covid positive. "I immediately went into self-isolation, and underwent an RTPCR test from a BrihanMumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) centre nearby to confirm my infection status. Yesterday (January 11), the BMC test returned negative, creating further confusion," Agarwal

said. After facing flak for the mega-scare on all fronts, a peeved Agarwal shot off an email to Aarogya Setu authorities seeking an explanation for the misleading status against his name. In its reply on Wednesday, the Aarogya Setu team said: "COVID-19 positive status will change automatically in the application within 14 days, from the date the user is declared Covid negative." "This is even more ridiculous. They are forcing me to remain positive. How can I get a negative report on an existing negative report? They should honour the BMC RTPCR test report and immediately change my status on Aarogya Setu so that I don't face any hassles," Agarwal said. A Thane resident, KG (40), who was due to fly to the Gulf last week, had a similar harrowing experience. He underwent the pre-flight mandatory RTPCR test at a reputed private lab and was relieved to find him as negative. Accordingly, he made preparations for his flight the next day (January 3). "When I went to the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport (CSMIA), I was asked to do

another RTPCR test. Shockingly, that report came positive and I could not board the flight," rued K.G., declining to reveal his full identity, apprehending reprisals. Ironically, both his tests, received within a gap of barely 24 hours, were conducted by the same lab at its Thane branch and at the CSMIA. While Agarwal who has several heart-related comorbidities - recently took the first jab of Covid-19 vaccine and is awaiting the second dose after around 45 days, K.G. was fully vaccinated a few months ago on account of his frequent foreign travels. As far as KG is concerned, he cooled his heels under home isolation for a week, underwent another RT-PCR test, which again came positive on Tuesday, nixing his foreign travel plans further. Demanding action, the duo slammed the lab authorities for the "sheer negligence" leading to such contradictory RT-PCR reports, which caused turmoil for the unsuspecting victims, with their scared families, neighbours and others shunning or boycotting them completely.

Maharashtra Board clarifies exams to be conducted offline, as planned

Maharashtra State Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education, MSBSHSE has decided to conduct the Maharashtra SSC, HSC Exams 2022 as per the schedule released earlier. The written exams will be conducted offline in February and March. Check below for more details.



Team Absolute | Mumbai

Maharashtra State Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education, MSBSHSE has decided to conduct the Maharashtra SSC, HSC Exams 2022 as per the schedule released earlier. The state board conducted a review in lieu of the present situation, however, decided to not postpone the board exams for Classes 10 and 12. The exams will be conducted in February and March as per the time table released MSBSHSE. Schools and colleges have been given freedom to conduct oral and practical exams as per the schedule, but the offline exams will be conducted as planned, Chairman Sharad Gosavi told TOI. "Schools and colleges can conduct their internal examinations as per their schedule and what is suitable but the written exams will be conducted offline as per the schedule

released earlier. However, based on the situation before the exams, a decision will be made," added Gosavi. According to the State Board timetable, Class 12 HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate) oral exams are to be held between February 14 to March 3, 2022, and written exams will be held starting March 4, 2022. Similarly, for Class 10 SSC (Secondary School Certificate) oral and practical exams are to be held between February 25 to March 14, 2022, and written examinations will be held from March 15, 2022. Last year, both HSC and SSC exams were cancelled due to days of uncertainty. The results for both the exams were declared based on internal evaluation. The syllabus for the exams has been reduced by 25% as per the demands made by students to reduce the difficulty of the exam considering the present situation. Nearly 32 lakh students will be appearing for the Maharashtra State Board Examinations 2022.

HATE SPEECH CASE

Wardha police arrest Kalicharan for remarks against Mahatma Gandhi

Wardha | Agencies

The Wardha police arrested Hindu religious leader Kalicharan Maharaj on January 12 in connection with a case registered against him in Wardha, in Maharashtra, for allegedly making derogatory remarks against Mahatma Gandhi.



The seer was brought here around 5 a.m. from Raipur in Chhattisgarh, where he was lodged in a jail in connection with a similar case registered against him there, sub-divisional officer of police Piyush Jagtap said. He was produced before the court of a local magistrate who remanded him in judicial custody. The case against the religious leader was registered at Wardha city police station on December 29, 2021. Earlier,

Kalicharan Maharaj had been arrested by the Raipur police for allegedly making derogatory comments about Mahatma Gandhi at an event in the Chhattisgarh capital city on December 26 last year. A similar case was also registered against him by Akola police in Maharashtra. Last week, the Pune police had arrested him for allegedly making inflammatory speeches during the 'Shiv Pratap Din' programme there

on December 19, 2021, organised to celebrate the killing of Adilshahi commander Afzal Khan by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj in 1659. A court in Pune last Friday granted bail to him in that case following which he was sent to jail in Raipur in the case of his comments against Mahatma Gandhi. The Wardha police arrested him on Wednesday from there after submitting a production warrant, an official said.

State tree authority set up, to decide on projects that need felling of 200 or more trees

The tree authority will look into projects that would need the felling of more than 200 trees of five years old or more, among others.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Almost seven months after amending the Maharashtra (Urban Areas) Protection and Preservation of Trees Act, 1975, the state government on Monday constituted the Maharashtra State Tree Authority and appointed a chairman and three members. The tree authority will look into projects that would need the felling of more than 200 trees of five years old or more, among others. As per the notification issued by the government on Monday, it has named the secretary (Environment and Climate Change) as the ex-officio



chairman of the Maharashtra State Tree Authority. Secretaries of the urban development and forest departments have been appointed as ex-officio members. The director (Environment and Climate Change) will be the ex-officio member-secretary of the authority. Besides, Vishal H Raje has been nominated to the authority as a tree expert for one year. The constitution of the state-level tree authority comes after the legislature last July passed an amendment to the Maharashtra (Urban Areas)

Protection and Preservation of Trees Act, 1975, which was tabled by Environment Minister Aaditya Thackeray. Earlier, there was no such tree authority at the state level. As per the new amendment, for any project that plans to fell at least 200 trees of five years old or more, the state authority is responsible for deciding on the applications referred to it by the local municipal tree authorities. Only after its sanction, the project will move forward. The state tree authority is also tasked with monitoring the functioning of local tree authorities, protection and conservation of heritage trees (trees with estimated age of 50 years or more) and felling of heritage trees. Officials said that the state authority will decide on holding a meeting soon. "The BMC tree authority has referred three proposals, which require permission for felling and transplant for Metro rail projects, to the state tree authority for approval," said an official.

COVID-19

SCHOOL BUSES EXEMPT FROM PAYING VEHICLE TAX THIS YEAR

In view of COVID-19, all school buses in Maharashtra will get a 100% exemption from annual vehicle tax this year, the state government announced on Wednesday



Team Absolute | Mumbai

In view of COVID-19, all school buses in Maharashtra will get a 100% exemption from annual vehicle tax this year, the state government announced on Wednesday. Maharashtra was the worst affected state in terms of COVID-19 pandemic. Even in the current COVID

wave, the state has been witnessing a massive surge in cases. On Tuesday, the state reported a total of 34,424 cases. Today, the Centre notified that a total of 300 districts in India are reporting weekly Covid case positivity of more than 5%. It urged people not to treat infection due to Omicron variant as common cold and get vaccinated. It said Maharashtra, West Bengal, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala and Gujarat are emerging as states of concern due to the rise in Covid cases there. The government also informed that Marathi signboards will be mandatory for all establishments including establishments having less than 10 workers.

THREE HELD FOR TRYING TO SELL AMBERGRIS

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Raided local crime branch (LCB) on Monday evening arrested three men 5kg of ambergris (whale vomit) worth Rs 5 crore. The trio was identified as Darpan Gund (39), Rajendra Thakur (50), both from Mazgaon and Nandkumar Thorve (41), a resident of Nandgaon. The crime branch team had laid a trap near a guest house at Kashid village along Alibaug Murud road. "Constable Akshay Jadhav of LCB had received a tip-off that three men on two bikes will be coming to Kashid village for selling ambergris. Around 8pm, the three suspects arrived on two bikes at the Murud village junction. A pillion rider was carrying a gunny bag. As they loitered suspiciously, our team cornered them. They attempted to escape, but our constables overpowered them," police said. "Prima facie, it was ambergris as we have previously seized similar substance. Still, for confirmation, we will be sending a sample of the seized substance to the laboratory in



Kolkata, as there is no laboratory in Maharashtra to conduct forensic analysis of Ambergris," they added. "A first information report (FIR) has been registered against the three accused. They have been booked under sections 39, 44, 49b, 51 57 of Indian Wildlife Protection Act, 1972," they added. Senior inspector of Murud said, "The three accused were produced before the Murud JMFC court on Tuesday and the magistrate has remanded them to police custody till January 13, as we have to interrogate them for finding their source of ambergris."

Two die after overdosing on toddy

Swapnil Chalke (32) and Sachin Padmukh (27) died after consuming excessive toddy at a local shop in Dombivli town of Maharashtra's Thane district.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

In a shocking incident, two people died after allegedly consuming excessive toddy in Dombivli town of Maharashtra's Thane district on Monday, police said. The incident happened on Monday evening when Swapnil Chalke (32) and Sachin Padmukh (27) consumed toddy, a liquor made from the sap of palm trees, at a local shop in Dombivli's Kopar village. They both suffered health problems and were rushed to a nearby hospital where the doctors declared them dead, a Hindustan Times report quoted the Vishnu Nagar police as saying. As per media reports it was found that the deceased consumed an overdose of toddy. Chalke was a Dombivli traffic police warden and was on

leave for the last couple of months. Following the incident, police registered a case under Section 304 (culpable homicide not amounting to murder) of the IPC against the toddy shop owner, Ravi Bhatni. Police detained Bhatni after the deceased's kin demanded action against him. Police are now waiting for the medical report and investigating if the toddy was adulterated. Meanwhile, in a similar incident of death due to toddy consumption, five persons were detained in Vadodara, Gujarat for their alleged role in the murder of a 40-year-old man in Sherkhi village last year. The accused allegedly poisoned the man in November last year at a 'toddy party.' The accused allegedly wanted to take revenge from the 40-year-

old man who had an affair with one of their wives. The body of the deceased was recovered on November 15 last year from a local dhaba in Sherkhi village. The accused allegedly invited the man for a toddy party. The police received the autopsy report of the deceased on the next day and learned that the death was caused due to poisoning. Following this, the cops registered a case of accidental death. While the chances of foul play were high, the cops did not have any evidence to prove the same. A week after the body was found, the accused allegedly narrated the story to a common acquaintance and the same led the police forward in the probe. The deceased allegedly had an affair with an accused woman, who worked with him at a private company in Vadodara.

HOW NFTS ARE REVOLUTIONISING THE MOVIE-MAKING BUSINESS

Team Absolute | Mumbai

After making massive strides in revolutionising the art industry, Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) are seemingly set to overhaul how movies are being funded and decentralize it to enable NFT holders to partake in the process. Usually, the preserve of certain oligarchs who have created a well-established moat by concentrating power into their hands, a slew of NFT projects are now introducing a global audience to a new way of funding movies and allowing its holders to get an equitable share in the box office revenues. Arabian Camels, an NFT community that is creating a \$50 million Hollywood movie 'Antara' based on the life of ancient Arabian knight Antarah Ibn Shaddad, has announced its NFT drop on January 12, with the integration of cryptocurrency exchange MoonPay. The Antara Movie NFT is the first NFT that allows a buyer to digitally part-own rights of the Hollywood Movie, enabling holders to partake in the box office and streaming revenues. "The impact that Arabian Camels will have on Hollywood is immense. This is an exciting and revolutionary move that will inject a whole new lease of life into the movie business," said Josef Brandmaier, Producer of 'ntara'. Unlike many other NFT projects that may have little real-world value, these Movie NFTs are a powerful reminder of the seemingly unlimited potential that NFTs have to offer and is proof of what can be achieved when crypto communities join forces to bring about positive change in how businesses



function. While the basic tenets of these Movie NFTs are like other NFTs, the marriage of both digital and real worlds is what sets these NFTs apart from the crowd. Not only do NFT holders enjoy part-ownership of the content being represented through the token or of the movie rights itself, but they can also stake these NFTs to earn yields while the movie is still in production. This enhances the overall appeal as NFT holders can choose to remain invested throughout the movie's journey while also employing their capital to earn market-beating returns on their digital tokens. Moreover, members of such NFT communities can even get roles in the movie being produced, be given credit as producers, and even join the production team for exclusive gatherings on the real movie set with the cast and crew.

Raj Kapoor, Founder - India Blockchain Alliance and Chief Growth Officer at Chainsense LTD said, NFTs are emerging as a viable option for funding. "For producers their biggest frustration is finance. Funding for independent films are tougher than franchises and corporate-backed films. It's hard getting investors for films and productions, especially at the development stage, with the present system. NFTs are a great option to democratize it," he said. This kind of real-world utility has never been possible before due to the traditional ways of film financing and rigid ownership structures prevalent across the major film studios. Movie NFTs are sure to disrupt the global movie-making industry by granting the audience the ability to not only enjoy their favorite content but also empower the new breed of actors, writers, and directors with access to funds from the same movie aficionado community and bring their movie ideas to life. Aliasgar Merchant, Developer Relations Engineer at Tendermint says NFTs are potentially game-changing blueprints for independent films to be self-funded and can tap into the creative utility of NFTs by offering the ability to weigh in on creative decisions. "In my opinion, the inclusion of NFTs is both a technological manifestation and a vital tool for dismantling the financial barriers that keep films by marginalized groups from reaching the screen. NFTs will not just change the way movies are made in the future but will also tap into communities who would like to be part of mainstream media which hitherto they would never have had access to," Merchant says.



KENDALL JENNER IS GRANTED TEMPORARY RESTRAINING ORDER AGAINST ALLEGED TRESPASSER

Los Angeles | Agencies

Kendall Jenner has been granted a temporary restraining order against a male trespasser after he allegedly tried to get onto her Los Angeles property. According to TMZ, the 26-year-old model headed to court on Tuesday to make the filing that was, eventually, signed off by a judge. The court-ordered protection requires a man by the name of Arnold Babcock, 31, to stay away from Jenner until his hearing on February 1. TMZ reported earlier this week that Babcock was stopped by security inside her gated community asking to see the reality star. Kendall has been subject to several stalker ordeals and has previously had trespassers try to access her home and enter her land without permission. The online news outlet claimed that the man was walking around looking for Kendall and it wasn't the first time he had been stopped for doing so. The security officer detained Babcock until police arrived to arrest him for trespassing, however he was released just a short time later. Los Angeles County district attorney George Gascon's office rarely file charges for trespassing, which is proving frustrating to police forces, according to TMZ. They said that they feel suspects have more of an incentive to commit crimes again.

'The King's Man' reminded Daniel Bruhl of 'Inglourious Basterds'

Los Angeles | Agencies

For actor Daniel Bruhl, who essays the character of Erik Jan Hanussen in 'The King's Man', the film somewhat reminded him of 'Inglourious Basterds' in which he performed under the direction of Quentin Tarantino.

The actor drew parallels between the two films owing to how they tell an alternate version of history.

He said, "I was blown away by the script. It was a real page-turner. It reminded me of doing 'Inglourious Basterds' with Quentin Tarantino. It's similar in a way, in that it reinvents history and combines fictional characters with so many real characters - fascinating ones - and puts them together in a way that makes perfect sense."

The actor believes that there's an educational element to the feature. He said, "Yes, it's an entertaining action film, with comedy and all the other elements, but it's also a highly entertaining history lesson," comments the actor. "So, although history is reinvented, the conflicts are real and some of the characters are real, and it really intrigues you because you learn something or it reminds you of a certain chapter in history."

'The King's Man' written, directed and produced by Matthew Vaughn, introduces a brand-new cast and characters to the franchise like Ralph Fiennes, Djimon Hounsou, Harris Dickinson, Gemma Arterton and Aaron Taylor-Johnson.

The film will hit the screens on January 14, 2022 in English and Hindi in India.



'The Witcher' Season 2 garners 462.5 million hours of view-time

Los Angeles | Agencies

The 'Witcher', the fantasy epic based on the fictional universe created by the Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski, has joined for the second time the Top 10 list of Netflix's most-viewed TV shows of all time, amassing 462.5 million hours of view-time in the last 28 hours in its second season.

Starring Henry Cavill, who played Superman in three DC Extended Universe movies ending with 'Justice League', Freya Allan, Anya Chalotra (whose father is Indian and mother British) and Joey Batey, 'The Witcher' Season 2 is at No. 8 on the list, according to 'Variety'.

Season 1, which is at No. 3, garnered 541.01 million hours of viewership during its first 28 days on the streamer. The series blends the genres of horror, action, romance, drama and occasionally comedy. The Netflix list is topped by the re-imagined period drama, 'Bridgerton', which notched up 625.49 million viewership hours.

'Dunkirk' aerial stunts coordinator pilots WWII action-thriller 'Wolf Hound'

Los Angeles | Agencies

Grindstone Entertainment Group, a division of Lionsgate, has acquired the North American rights to the upcoming World War II action-thriller 'Wolf Hound'. The movie will see a multi-platform release this summer, 'Variety' reports.

'Wolf Hound', which marks the feature film directorial debut of Michael B. Chait, is inspired by the real-life Nazi special operations unit KG 200, which shot down, repaired and flew Allied aircraft as Trojan horses.

For the film's extensive aerial scenes and dogfights, according to 'Variety', Chait used authentic, rare WWII aircraft and shot as much as possible in-camera. Craig Hosking, who previously served as aerial coordinator and lead pilot for Christopher Nolan's 'Dunkirk', performed the same roles for 'Wolf Hound'. Set in 1944 Nazi-occupied France,



'Wolf Hound' stars James Maslow, who had previously starred in the Nickelodeon musical comedy 'Big Time Rush'. He plays Captain David Holden, a Jewish American fighter pilot, opposite Australian-English actor Trevor Donovan, who's best known for his character in the television series

'Neighbours'. In the film, Donovan will play Nazi Major Erich Roth. Ambushed behind enemy lines, Holden must rescue a captured B-17 Flying Fortress bomber crew, evade the enemy stalking him at every turn, and foil a plot that could completely alter the outcome of World War II.

After 3 years, Oscars to have a host; network doesn't reveal name

Los Angeles | Agencies

Los Angeles: Three years after late-night TV talk show host Jimmy Kimmel emceed the Oscars, the world's greatest movie awards show will finally have a face when the event airs on March 27 on the American TV network, ABC.

Craig Erwich, President, Hulu Originals & ABC Entertainment, according to 'Variety', made this announcement during ABC's segment of the Television Critics Association virtual press tour. But he didn't elaborate on who it might be. "It might be me," Erwich quipped, before touting his confidence in Oscars executive producer Will Packer.

"Will really has his pulse on popular culture and entertainment," Erwich said. "I know he has a lot in store and we'll have more details to share soon."

Jimmy Kimmel served as the last host of the Academy Awards, having emceed the ceremony in 2017 and 2018, notes 'Variety'. Other hosts over the past decade included Chris Rock (2016), Neil Patrick Harris (2015), Ellen DeGeneres (2014), Seth MacFarlane (2013), Billy Crystal (2012) and James Franco/Anne Hathaway (2011).

The MacFarlane and Franco/Hathaway stints were seen as a bid by ABC and the Academy to attract a younger audience, but critics were not impressed. Being the Oscars host was at one time considered one of the most coveted gigs in Hollywood (particularly in the age of Bob Hope and Johnny Carson), according to 'Variety', but the job became regarded as more thankless in the age of social media and the non-stop critiques of whomever is on stage.



ABSOLUTE PIC OF THE DAY



Elle Fanning



BERLIN FILM FESTIVAL TO BE AN IN-PERSON EVENT WITH VIRTUAL MARKET

Los Angeles | Agencies

The Berlin Film Festival, whose jury is headed by Indian American director M. Night Shyamalan, will go ahead as an in-person event in February, 'Variety' has confirmed.

Although the European Film Market (EFM), which normally runs alongside the Berlinale, will be fully virtual, the organisers have said the festival will continue as planned, albeit with strict Covid protocols in place for delegates who decide to attend. The protocol will be revealed in the coming days.

A spokesperson for the festival told 'Variety': "We are very pleased with the positive signal from the authorities so far and feel encouraged to continue with the planning. We hope to be able to announce the final concept for the 2022 Berlinale very soon."

The update comes amid days of discussions between organisers and various levels of the German government. More details on how exactly the festival will unfold will be released later in the day on Wednesday, once the final details about the shape of the event have been ironed out with local authorities.



SA v IND, 3rd Test

KOHLI, PUJARA MAKE IT TO STUMPS AFTER BUMRAH'S FIFER GIVES INDIA 13-RUN

Cape Town | Agencies

Virat Kohli and Cheteshwar Pujara made it to stumps on day two of third Test against South Africa at Newlands Cricket Ground here on Wednesday. At stumps, India are 57/2 in 17 overs, leading by 70 runs. India took a narrow 13-run lead as the pace attack shot out South Africa for 210, with Jasprit Bumrah taking 5/42, his seventh five-wicket haul in Test cricket on a pitch which was aiding fast bowlers. Mohammed Shami (2/39), Umesh Yadav (2/64) and Shardul Thakur (1/37) were among the other wicket-takers for the tourists. With a lead of 13, India almost lost Mayank Agarwal in the third over of the second innings. Agarwal was rapped on pads by a nip-backer from Kagiso Rabada but got to overturn the decision as replays showed the ball missing the stumps.

Agarwal then played a gorgeous straight drive down the ground but Rabada had the last laugh as he dragged the length back and with some away movement, forced Agarwal to play at it and the outside edge went to Dean Elgar at first slip. KL Rahul, who took two classy off-side boundaries off

Duanne Olivier, was stuck at the crease and edged straight to Aiden Markram at second slip off Marco Jansen. Kohli and Pujara dugged their heels in to put up an unbeaten stand of 33 to ensure India didn't lose any other wicket till stumps arrived. Earlier, with South Africa starting from 167/7, Jasprit Bumrah took his fourth wicket of the innings, getting one to nip into Keegan Petersen, forcing the batter to play at it but the extra bounce on the ball took the shoulder edge to Pujara at first slip. Kagiso Rabada threatened to reduce the deficit but holed out to Bumrah at long-off off Shardul Thakur. Bumrah completed his second five-wicket haul against South Africa by getting a leading edge off Lungi Ngidi to Ravichandran Ashwin at extra cover, thus setting the match into an innings shootout.

Brief scores :

Brief scores: India 223 in 77.3 overs and 57/2 in 17 overs (Virat Kohli 79, KL Rahul 10; Kagiso Rabada 4/73) lead South Africa 210 all out in 76.3 overs (Keegan Petersen 72, Temba Bavuma 28; Jasprit Bumrah 5/42, Mohammed Shami 2/39) by 70 runs

BUMRAH GETS 7TH 5-WICKET HAUL

Jasprit Bumrah bagged his seventh five-wicket haul - the joint-most for an Indian seamer after 27 Tests alongside Kapil Dev and Irfan Pathan. Harbhajan Singh (7/120 in 2010/11), S Sreesanth (5/114 in 2010/11) and J Bumrah (5/42 in 2021/22 *) are three bowlers for India who have picked fivers in Cape Town. The 28-year-old Bumrah along with Mohammed Shami (2/39), Umesh Yadav (2/64) and Shardul Thakur (1/37) helped India bowl out South Africa for 210 in their 1st innings to take a slender 13-run lead on day two of third Test at the Newlands Cricket Ground.



JAYANT, SAINI ADDED TO ODI SQUAD; WASHINGTON RULED OUT

Mumbai: Indian off-spinner Washington Sundar has been ruled out of the upcoming three-match ODI series against South Africa after testing positive for Covid-19 and selectors have named Jayant Yadav as his replacement, the BCCI announced on Wednesday. The All-India Senior Selection Committee also added fast bowler Navdeep Saini to the ODI squad as a back-up for Mohammed Siraj, who is still recovering from his hamstring injury that he sustained in the second Test against South Africa in Johannesburg and was subsequently ruled out of the third game.



KOHLI COMPLETES 100 CATCHES IN TESTS

Adding another feather to his cap, India skipper Virat Kohli on Wednesday completed 100 catches in Test cricket during the ongoing third and final Test match. He achieved the milestone by taking a spectacular low catch of Temba Bavuma in the slip cordon off the bowling of Mohammed Shami. With this, Kohli also became the sixth Indian fielder, who isn't a wicket-keeper, to pick 100 or more catches in the longest format of the game. The India skipper brought up the landmark in his 99th Test.



INDIA OPEN 2022

Saina Nehwal starts campaign with win; Lakshya, Prannoy advance to second round

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Former champion Saina Nehwal, men's singles contender HS Prannoy, World Championships bronze medallist Lakshya Sen and Malvika Bansod registered convincing victories in their respective matches to reach the second round of the Yonex-Sunrise India Open, here on Wednesday.

Saina advanced into the second round after Czech Republic's Tereza Svabikova retired at the start of the second game with the Indian leading 22-20, 1-0. In the men's singles match, Prannoy eased past into the next round after defeating Spaniard Pablo Abian by 21-14, 21-7 in 33 minutes. He will next face Mithun Manjunath who got the better of France's Arnaud Merkle 21-16, 15-21, 21-10.

Mithun needed time to get used to Merkle's style of play in the opening game but his willingness to play long rallies allowed him to get into a rhythm and take control. The 20-year-old Sen was



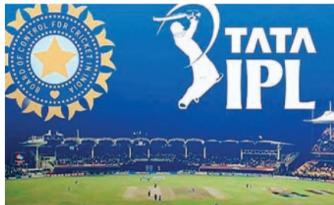
pushed to the distance in the opening game by Adham Hatem Elgamal but he emerged victorious by 21-15. The Egyptian player in the second game proved no match for the third-seed as the 20-year-old closed the match in just 25 minutes by winning 21-7. In women's singles clash, youngster Malvika Bansod got the better of Samiya Imad Farooqui 21-18, 21-9 after Aakarshi Kashyap had packed off Anura Prabhudesai 21-14, 21-14 in the opening round. The main attraction of the second day's play was obviously how fourth seed Saina would perform against Svabikova as she was returning from an injury lay-off. Just when the match was nicely warming up, Svabikova suffered a back injury on the very first point of the second game and retired.

IPL: Ahmedabad, Lucknow given Jan 22 deadline to submit draft picks

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The new IPL franchises -- Lucknow and Ahmedabad have been given time till January 22 by the BCCI to submit their list of draft picks, ahead of the mega auction in February. After finally giving the clearance to the CVC Capital to own the Ahmedabad franchise, the board formally authorised the two new teams to sign players. The go-ahead was given to them through a letter on Wednesday, a Cricbuzz report said.

The development comes a day after the meeting of the Indian Premier League (IPL) Governing Council. "They have time till 5 pm on January 22 to complete their signings," a BCCI official confirmed about the letter to the new teams. The January 22 deadline to complete the recruitment process also means the mega auction is on course to be completed on February 12 and 13 as originally planned, as there is sufficient time for the BCCI to complete player enrolments for the auction register. Notably, both Lucknow and Ahmedabad can pick a maximum of three players with not more than one overseas player.



As per the general advisory, the new teams will forfeit Rs 33 crore -- Rs 15 crore, Rs 11 crore and Rs 7 crore being the stipulated fee slab for the players -- if they sign three capped players, Rs 24 crore -- Rs 14 crore and Rs 10 crore -- for two players and only Rs 14 crore for one player. An uncapped player would cost them only Rs 4 crore, as much as for the eight original teams who had the right to sign a maximum of four players. However, the new teams cannot sign more than one uncapped player and they are permitted to pay more than the stipulated fee on the condition that they would lose that much money from the salary cap of Rs 90 crore.

JABEUR SEALS FIRST WIN AGAINST KVITOVA IN SYDNEY

Sydney | Agencies

Ons Jabeur defeated two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova 6-4, 6-4 to cruise into the second round of the Sydney Tennis Classic, here on Wednesday.

The 27-year-old Tunisian, seeded seventh in Sydney, came from behind in both sets to defeat Kvitova for the first time to set up a quarter-final against Estonia's Anett Kontaveit. The fourth-seeded Kontaveit had a comfortable 6-3, 6-1 win over Romanian qualifier Elena-Gabriela Ruse.

Playing her first match of 2022, Garbine Muguruza started the new year as she ended the last -- with a straight-sets win. But she had to find her best tennis to earn it. Saving five set points in a thrilling second set, Muguruza beat Ekaterina Alexandrova, 6-1, 7-6(4) to book a place in the quarterfinals.

Muguruza will face Daria Kasatkina, who took out Elise Mertens, 6-3, 6-4 in 71 minutes, for a



spot in the semifinals. Muguruza holds a slim 3-2 head-to-head advantage, and all but one of the pair's all-time matches have stretched to three sets.

MURRAY SINKS BASILASHVILI

Sydney: Andy Murray showed his fighting qualities once again, edging second seed Nikoloz Basilashvili 6-7(4), 7-6(3), 6-3 to advance to the quarter-finals of the Sydney Tennis Classic, here on Wednesday.

The former World No. 1 recovered from three set points on serve at 5-4 in the second set to overcome Basilashvili in an encounter that lasted three hours and 15 minutes on Ken Rosewall Arena. It is the third time Murray has advanced to the quarter-finals at a tour-level event since the start of last season, having enjoyed runs to the last eight in Metz and Stockholm in 2021.



Savita to lead women's team in Asia Cup hockey

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Experienced goalkeeper Savita will lead the Indian women's hockey team in regular skipper Rani Rampal's absence, while Deep Grace Ekka will be the vice-captain for the Women's Hockey Asia Cup, scheduled to be held in Muscat from January 21-28.

The 18-member Indian team for the tournament, to be played at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Muscat, looks formidable with 16 players from the side that was part of the historic fourth-place finish at the Tokyo Olympic Games 2020.

Defending champions India will battle it out against China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand for the title. The top-four teams from this tournament will qualify for the 2022 FIH Women's Hockey World Cup to be held in



Spain and the Netherlands. India are grouped in Pool A along with Japan, Malaysia and Singapore. They will begin their campaign on the opening day against Malaysia and

will play Japan on January 23. India will take on Singapore in their last pool match on January 24. The semi-finals will be played on January 26 and the final match on January 28.

THE SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Savita (Capt), Rajani Etimarpur. Defenders: Deep Grace Ekka, Gurjit Kaur, Nikki Pradhan, Uditia. Midfielders: Nisha, Sushila Chanu Pukhrambam, Monika, Neha, Salima Tete, Jyoti, Navjot Kaur. Forwards: Navneet Kaur, Lalremsiami, Vandana Katariya, Mariana Kujur, Sharmila Devi. Replacement Athletes: Deepika (Junior), Ishika Chaudhary.

U-19 WORLD CUP

Harnoor slams century as India thump Australia by 9 wickets in warm-up

Guyana Agencies

India got a huge morale-booster ahead of the U-19 Men's Cricket World Cup, defeating Australia by nine wickets in a warm-up match here on Wednesday (IST).

Australia won the toss and posted 268 runs, with 18-year-old captain Cooper Connolly taking centre stage. The all-rounder made a superb century which included 18 boundaries at a strike rate of 93.60, which finally ended after an excellent delivery from Raj Bawa in the 46th over. The other Australian batters were, however, were less impressive, with only Tobias Snell (35 off 35 balls) managing a



decent score. India's response was sublime, with

Harnoor Singh leading the way with a century (100) which included 16 fours. He was supported by Shaik Rasheed's 72. Both players unfortunately retired hurt, but captain Yash Dhull was able to lead his team comfortably over the line, with 15 deliveries to spare. Bangladesh and Pakistan also recorded impressive victories in the warm-up matches. Pakistan eased past Canada, while Bangladesh impressed against Zimbabwe.

Brief scores :

Brief scores: Australia U-19 268 in 49.2 overs (Cooper Connolly 117, Tobias Snell 35; Rajvardhan Hangargekar 3/53, Ravi Kumar 4/34) lost to India 269/1 in 47.3 overs (Harnoor Singh 100 ret'd hurt, Shaik Rasheed 72 ret'd hurt, Yash Dhull 50 not out) by nine wickets.

PKL 8: Haryana Steelers, UP Yoddha share points

Bengaluru | Agencies

UP Yoddha shared points with Haryana Steelers after playing a 36-36 draw in the vivo Pro Kabaddi League Season 8 at the Sheraton Grand, Whitefield, here on Wednesday.

Yoddha had the lead for most parts of the match, but Haryana staged a late comeback to win crucial 3 points in the race for a playoff spot. Their captain Vikash Kandola starred in the raiding department with 17 points and would have won the match for the Steelers, had it not been for Surender Gill's heroics at the other end. Gill scored 14 points for Yoddha who will be upset with the tie after having an 8-point lead in the second half. Haryana coach Rakesh Kumar started the match with just two raiders in Meetu and Vikash Kandola. The defen-



sive strategy didn't seem to work out in the initial stages however with UP Yoddha's Pardeep Narwal inducing errors. The 'record breaker' was ably supported by his defence with Anshu Singh and Nitesh Kumar looking impressive. Yoddha got their first ALL OUT with 7 minutes

remaining to open a 5-point lead. But Haryana were in no mood to let the match slip as Vikash Kandola helped them stay in touching distance from Yoddha. Their defender Jaideep was looking in good form as well, as the half ended 14-13 with Yoddha in the lead.

ISL 2021-22: KERALA BLASTERS BEAT ODISHA FC 2-0

Vasco da Gama (Goa) | Agencies

Kerala Blasters FC registered a comfortable 2-0 victory over Odisha FC at the Tilak Maidan Stadium in Vasco, here on Wednesday.

Nishu Kumar (28th) and Harmanjot Khabra (40th) netted first-half goals to keep the Kerala Blasters' juggernaut rolling. Kerala now have 20 points from 11 games while Odisha, who remain in eighth place, have 13 in their kitty from 10 matches.

Odisha got a chance to take the lead in the 26th minute when against the run of play Javi Hernandez forced Prabhshukhan Gill into a good save from a snapshot. Two minutes later, Kerala nosed ahead. It was a piece of individual brilliance from Nishu Kumar who sent a curling effort into the top right corner from just outside the box after Adrian Luna set him up beautifully.

Kerala doubled their lead five minutes to half-time, Luna was involved again as he swung in a delectable corner for Khabra to head in.

Odisha tried to up the ante in the second half but Gill was in top form as he pulled off a brilliant save to deny Jonathas Cristian after the hour-mark. Jonathas got another chance to pull one back when Jerry Mawimhingthanga sent a crisp ball for him in the box but his header fizzed over the bar. Javi also got a free-kick from a good position but his effort sailed over.





'BIGG BOSS 15'

Shamita Shetty is the new captain of the house

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Shamita Shetty has been chosen as the captain of the 'Bigg Boss 15' house. She is also the new VIP contestant. Tejaswi no longer carries VIP status. But it will be clear once the episode goes on air.

It all started with the task to choose a new captain of the house. The non-VIP contestants Pratik Sehajpal, Abhijeet

Bichukale, Nishant Bhat, Rashami Desai and Devoleena Bhattacharjee have to decide the new captain of the house.

Though it is not easy for them, they discuss who can be a better option from VIPs which includes Rakhi Sawant, Karan Kundrra, Shamita Shetty and Tejaswi Prakash.

Nishant tells Pratik: "I can choose anyone except Rakhi."

Shamita promises to be a 'fair captain' in the game, Rakhi

shows her disagreement. Abhijeet and Nishant lock horns while trying to decide a name, and Nishant says that if the task gets cancelled, it will be all because of Abhijeet.

Rakhi comes in support of Abhijeet and helps him to play against Shamita. On the other hand, Shamita feels that Rakhi has taken the game in her own hands and is going against the house.

'Bigg Boss 15' airs on Colors.



Chennai | Agencies

Actor Siddharth, whose response to a tweet by badminton player Saina Nehwal has stirred up a controversy, tendered an apology to the badminton star for what he called a 'rude joke'. In a letter posted on his Twitter timeline, Siddharth said: "Dear Saina, I want to apologise to you for my rude joke that I wrote as a response to a tweet of yours a few days ago."

"I may disagree with you on many things, but even my disappointment or anger when I read your tweet cannot justify my tone and words. I know I have more

grace in me than that.

"As for the joke... If a joke needs to be explained, then it wasn't a very good joke to begin with. Sorry about a joke that didn't land."

"I, however, must insist my word play and humour had none of the malicious intent that so many people from all quarters have attributed to me. I am a staunch feminist ally and I assure you there was no gender implied in my tweet and certainly no intent to attack you as a woman."

"I hope we can put this behind us and that you will accept my letter. You will always be my champion. Honestly, Siddharth."

Siddharth's letter of apology comes in the wake of the National Commission of Women taking suo motu cognisance of the actor's tweet in response to the badminton star.



'GREY HAIR' IS BEAUTIFUL, TROLLS DON'T HAVE VISION: CHAHHAT KHANNA

Team Absolute | Mumbai

'Qubool Hai' actress Chahhat Khanna says it's easy for trolls and mockers to sit back behind the screen and put out their so-called opinion on anything. Trolls have been hitting out at Chahhat for her grey hair and her single mother status.

Chahhat says: "I am a single mother and it takes guts of steel to be a mother let alone a single mother who is fending for herself and her family. That exactly was not grey hair and it looked like that as it was a mirror image and at an angle but even if it was, there is nothing bad in having grey hair. It's natural and it has to be beautiful that way. The trolls won't be able to say it on the face."

"It's only behind the screen that they hide and put out their filthy opinion out there. I have developed a thick skin to these. But the heart goes out to the young and the vulnerable who might get affected due to these. There has to be a measure where we nab these individuals and make the internet a safe and happier place for all individuals. And as for the grey hair, it's damn beautiful which the trolls might not have the vision to see. Tell me what's the novelty of being a troll," she adds.

"AIN'T NO PLACE FOR SHADY RUMOURS"

Arjun Kapoor and Malaika Arora respond to rumours about break-up

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Malaika Arora and Arjun Kapoor surely know how to shut rumours and so they did in style. After several media reports stated that the couple have broken-up, they started trending on Twitter on Wednesday afternoon. However, Arjun Kapoor and Malaika Arora decided to shut the rumours and how. Arjun, on his Instagram profile, posted a picture with Malaika Arora and he captioned it: "Ain't no place for shady rumours. Stay safe. Stay blessed. Wish well for people. Love y'all." In the comments section, Malaika Arora dropped a heart emoji. Malaika and Arjun reportedly started dating in 2018. Malaika Arora was previously married to actor-filmmaker Arbaaz Khan. They were married for over 19 years and got divorced in 2017. They are parents to 18-year-old Arhaan. He went abroad for higher studies last year.



Artistes should keep their personal politics, worldview aside: Prakash Jha

Team Absolute | Mumbai

National Award-winning filmmaker Prakash Jha, who is known for helming films like 'Damul', 'Gangaajal' and 'Raajneeti' among many others, has been exploring the craft of acting of late, and has churned out riveting performances that click with the audience.

One reason behind his impeccable work is his monumental experience of directing a

broad range of actors. He

reveals what it has been like to venture into the craft of acting in parallel to filmmaking. "The journey for

me of finding an actor in me has been very special. I have learnt from my peers, my associates and the actors, whom I work with."

Ask him how important it is for art to be political, he says, "I believe whenever an artist sits down to create art, they should keep their personal politics or worldview aside. As an actor you have to adapt to a particular character's psychology, its politics and its perspectives. An artist should be able to welcome every ideology in their scope of work."

In the modern world, the relationships are governed by market forces, the warmth in relationships has slowly vanished over the years, making them very mechanical. And as per him, the same reflects in stories as well. "The writing and sketching of characters automatically exhibits the nature of market forces in a story."



Shweta Tiwari