

absolute india

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INDIA SEES MASSIVE SPIKE OF OVER 90,000 COVID CASES IN 24 HOURS, ACTIVE CASES NEAR 3L

STEEP RISE OF COVID

India registered a single-day rise of 90,928 cases, a significant rise from the previous day's 58,097 Covid cases in a span of 24 hours. A total of 325 deaths have also been reported in the same time, said the Union ministry of health and family welfare on Thursday. With the addition of new deaths, the death toll has reached 4,82,876. Meanwhile, the active caseload has jumped to 2,85,401 which constitutes 0.81 per cent of the country's total positive cases.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Omicron infection tally has climbed to 2,630 across the nation. However, out of total Omicron positive cases, 995 have been discharged from hospitals. So far 26 states have reported Omicron cases, said the Union health ministry on Thursday. The recovery of 19,206 patients in the last 24 hours has increased the cumulative tally to 3,43,41,009. Consequently, India's recovery rate stands at 97.81 per cent.

Also in the same period, a total of 14,13,030 tests were conducted across the country. India has so far conducted over 68.53 crore cumulative tests.

Meanwhile, the weekly positivity rate has climbed to 3.47 per cent amid a sudden spike in cases. The daily positivity rate stands at 6.43 per cent.

With the administration of over 91 lakhs vaccine doses in the last 24 hours, India's Covid inoculation coverage has reached 148.76 crore as of Thursday morning.

More than 18.43 crore balance and unutilised Covid vaccine doses are still available with the states and union territories to be administered, according to the health ministry as of Thursday morning.



MUMBAI NOTCHES 20,181 COVID CASES

Mumbai: Maharashtra continued to shock as Covid-19 cases shot above the 36,000-mark though its Omicron variant dropped below 100, while fatalities again jumped to double-digit figures, health officials said here on Thursday. For the 10th consecutive day, the state reported a massive spike in Covid infections and suspect

cases, whose samples have been sent for genome sequencing. The state's Covid-19 count shot up sharply -- from 26,538 on Wednesday to 36,265 cases on Thursday -- while fatalities increased from 8 a day earlier to 13 now, with a mortality rate of 2.08 per cent. Of the 36,265 new cases, the Mumbai Metropolitan

Region alone accounted for 30,312, infections, while Mumbai city's single-day tally zoomed past the 20,000-mark to 20,181. The next is Pune Circle's 3,893 infectees, followed by Nashik Circle (766), Nagpur Circle (555), Kolhapur Circle (304), Latur Circle (154), Aurangabad Circle (143) and Akola Circle (138).

OMICRON IS NOT COMMON COLD: WHO

Geneva: Amid reports that Omicron has symptoms akin to a common cold, the World Health Organisation (WHO) on Wednesday warned that it is not a common cold and should not be taken lightly. The four most common symptoms of the Omicron variant are cough, fatigue, congestion and runny nose, according to a US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention analysis. A recent study by UK-based Zoe Covid app added nausea and loss of appetite to the category. "Omicron is not the common cold," WHO epidemiologist Dr Maria Van Kerkhove said in a tweet. "While some reports show a reduced risk of hospitalisation of Omicron compared to Delta, there are still far too many people infected, in hospital sick and dying from Omicron (and Delta)," she added.



125 AIR PASSENGERS FROM ITALY TEST POSITIVE IN AMRITSAR

Chandigarh: High drama was witnessed on Thursday after 125 of 179 international passengers, who arrived at Sri Guru Ram Das Jee International Airport Rajasansi, near here, from Italy, in an Air India flight tested positive on arrival. The Covid passengers were asked to quarantine in local hospital as per the guidelines of the government. Angered over the health protocol, passengers raised slogans against the government and demanded it to allow them to go to their homes.



SC RESERVES ORDER ON EWS QUOTA IN NEET-PG ADMISSIONS

New Delhi: After conducting a day-long hearing on petitions challenging the validity of EWS quota in postgraduate medical admissions and the Centre's argument favouring the quota, the Supreme Court on Thursday said there is a situation, where in national interest, the counselling has to begin, which was also a key demand of protesting resident doctors. A bench comprising Justices D.Y. Chandrachud and A.S. Bopanna said: "We are in a situation, where in the national interest, the counselling has to begin." In an intervention plea, the federation of doctors urged the top court to allow commencement of counselling. After hearing the parties in the matter, the top court reserved its judgment on the petitions challenging the 27 per cent reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBC) and 10 per cent reservation for EWS in all-India quota seats for postgraduate medical courses.

Modi's 'life threat' gimmick aimed at toppling government: Punjab CM

Union Home Minister Amit Shah, who was scheduled to visit Manipur on Thursday and Friday to inaugurate and lay foundation for 29 projects worth of Rs 2,450 crore, has cancelled his trip, officials said on Thursday.

'COPS TOLD PM ON THE WAY, THOUGHT THEY ARE BLUFFING': FARMER LEADER

"We were at least 10 km away from PM Modi's convoy. We didn't know that he was coming by road. The villagers told us later that it was the prime minister's convoy on the fly-over. There was no plan to stop the prime minister's convoy. We were told around 12:30-1:00 PM that we have to vacate the road. We couldn't believe. We thought they are lying to us."

Team Absolute | Chandigarh

Punjab Chief Minister Charanjit Channi on Thursday said Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'life threat' gimmick was aimed at toppling the democratically elected government in the state. Addressing a gathering in Tanda in Hoshiarpur district after laying the foundation stone of development work, the Chief Minister said there was

WILL TAKE BIG AND TOUGH DECISIONS: ANURAG THAKUR

"Yesterday (Wednesday), there was a big lapse in the security of the Prime Minister in Punjab. When such mistakes happen, whatever steps need to be taken will be taken. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has also sought a report. The home ministry is collecting every information related to the matter and will take big and tough decisions."

no threat to the life of the Prime Minister but he cancelled his programme on Wednesday because of the thin presence of people at the BJP's rally.

He said empty chairs would have greeted the Prime Minister due to which he went back to the national capital, citing the frivolous reason of a security threat.



CHEAP WAY TO GAIN PUBLIC SYMPATHY: RAKESH TIKAIT

"When PM was coming to Punjab, what arrangements did he make regarding security? The news about him saying that he survived makes it clear that it was a stunt. It was an attempt to find a cheap way to gain public sympathy."

Channi said the false pretext on which Modi cancelled his visit is a part of a larger conspiracy to defame Punjab and murder democracy in the state on the lines of what was done earlier in Jammu and Kashmir.

The Chief Minister said how can

the life of the Prime Minister be threatened if the protestors were more than a kilometre away from him.

He said at the place where Modi's cavalcade stopped not even a slogan was raised, then how was his life threatened.

SIX DEAD, 20 HOSPITALISED AFTER GAS LEAKAGE FROM FACTORY IN SURAT



Gandhinagar | Agencies

At least six people have died while 20 others have been hospitalised after inhaling toxic chemical that leaked from a printing mill in the Sachin GIDC area of Surat in the wee hours of Thursday.

The police said that the gas leaked from a tanker. Most of the affected people are daily wagers who were sleeping near the site, the police said. According to preliminary reports, the police said, most of the workers died of suffocation. The condition of at least 15 others is stated to be critical, they said.

According to sources, the accident happened when the driver of a truck was pouring the chemical in a drain. It is believed that the chemical soon spread through sewers and other drains. However, the official confirmation on the cause of the accident is awaited.

Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel has expressed grief over the incident.

RJD gives open offer of support to Nitish Kumar in Bihar Vidhan Sabha

Patna | Agencies

Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) state president Jagadanand Singh has given an open offer to chief minister Nitish Kumar to take a clear stand on a caste based census in Bihar and the RJD will support him and his party in the Vidhan Sabha. "Nitish Kumar is the chief minister of Bihar. If BJP ministers are opposing him on the issue of caste based census, sack them from the cabinet. RJD will support you in the Bihar Vidhan Sabha to prove your majority," Singh said.

"On the issue of caste based census, Nitish Kumar should not feel that he is alone. Despite RJD having some differences, on this issue RJD will stand alongside the



chief minister," Singh said.

The RJD currently has 75 MLAs in the Bihar Vidhan Sabha while Nitish Kumar's party has 45 MLAs. The latter is ruling the state with the help of 74 MLAs of the BJP, 4 MLAs of HAM and three MLAs of VIP.

BRITAIN'S 'TIGER HEADMISTRESS' SAYS, 20 MINUTES ARE ENOUGH TO TEACH CHILDREN EVERYDAY AT HOME; DON'T GIVE MOBILE TILL THE AGE OF 14

Research by the American Academy of Pediatrics claims that young children's learning and interaction with parents increases their language and IQ scores. Apart from this, the bonding with parents is also strengthened by studying together.

London | Agencies

Catherine Birbalsingh, an educationist known as the 'tiger headmistress' in Britain and chairperson of the Social Mobility Commission, says, "Parents should teach and teach their children daily even at home. Schools and teachers have their limits, they try to do better, but the power of family is amazing. Parents can talk to the children everyday, teach them something daily and get them revised before sleeping. Katherine, founder of the Michaela Community School (Free) School in Wembley, told parents, 'You may be lucky to have a great child in school.' Catherine has been emphasiz-



ing the importance of family in education. He said that just sitting with children every night, eating food and talking to them makes a big difference in their development.

According to Katherine parents should always think about

how to raise their children. Small things like asking young children to count the peas on a plate or asking older children about physics topics can be helpful for children.

For this, giving them only 20 minutes every evening is

BY THE AGE OF FIVE CHILDREN WILL HEAR 2.9 LAKH NEW WORDS

According to an Ohio State University study, children who read a book every day with their parents have heard 2.9 million new words by the time they are five years old. When he goes to school, he does not have problem in reading books.

enough. Katherine recently advised parents to motivate their children to read something daily. Don't give them mobiles before they turn 14.



CANDIDATES' EXPENDITURE LIMIT HIKE TO RS 95L FOR LS POLLS, RS 40L FOR ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Centre on Thursday hiked the maximum poll expenditure for candidates contesting both the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections, which would be applicable from the next polls. The revised limits have been notified by the Ministry of Law and Justice and the Legislative Department.

As per a government notification, for Lok Sabha polls, the maximum expenditure limit for candidates has been hiked from Rs 70 lakh to Rs 95 lakh, while for Assembly elections, it has been raised from Rs 28 lakh to Rs 40 lakh.

For the small states, the expenditure limit for Lok Sabha polls has been raised from Rs 54 lakh to Rs 75 lakh, while for Assembly elections it has been increased from Rs 20 lakh to Rs 28 lakh.

The last major revision in election expenditure limit for candidates was carried out in 2014, which was further increased by 10 per cent in 2020. The Election Commission had formed a committee comprising retired IRS officer Harish Kumar, EC Secretary General Umesh Sinha, and Chandra Bhushan Kumar, Senior Deputy Election Commissioner, to study the cost factors and other related issues, and make suitable recommendations. The committee had invited suggestions from



the political parties, chief electoral officers and election observers on the matter.

The committee found that there has been a substantial increase in the cost inflation index since 2014. It also factored in the changing modes of campaigning, which is gradually taking the virtual route.

EC REVIEWS COVID SITUATION IN POLL-BOUND STATES WITH HEALTH OFFICIALS

New Delhi: The Election Commission on Thursday reviewed the current Covid situation in the five poll-bound states with Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan, AIMS Director, Dr Randeep Guleria, and ICMR chief Dr Balram Bhargava.

Five states scheduled for Assembly polls this year are Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Goa, Punjab, and Manipur.

According to a source, the health experts have briefed the top Election Commission officials to focus majorly on virtual rallies, seeing the unprecedented rise in the Covid cases across the country. The need to ramp up the vaccination process was also emphasised.

The source said that the need to ensure complete vaccination of eligible population was stressed to the Health Secretary in the meeting.

Terror module busted in Kashmir, 4 arrested

SRINAGAR | Agencies

Two terrorists and two of their associates were arrested in Kashmir along with arms and ammunition including four pistols after a terror module was busted, officials said on Thursday.

Police said on December 22, 2021 terrorists targeted and killed a property dealer in Safakadal area in downtown Srinagar. After the incident Srinagar Police started investigation into this killing. During the course of investigation, movement of some suspects was detected in Srinagar City.

Based on further analysis and credible human intelligence, Srinagar Police detected suspicious movement of terrorists in Bhagat Barzulla area. On this, Srinagar police along with CRPF laid special Nakas and apprehended two terrorists of proscribed terrorists organization TRF/MGH offshoots of LET/JeM near Barzulla Bridge," police said.

The arrested terrorists have been identified as Suhail

Qadir Khanday, resident of Tral, Pulwama and Suhail Mushtaq, resident of Niklora. Police said during the search two pistols along with two pistol magazine and 30 pistol bullets were recovered on the spot. On further questioning of terrorists, incriminating material, arms and ammunition including two pistols, six pistol Magazines, 69 rounds, two pistol silencers have been recovered from their hideout in Srinagar City. "So far four pistols, eight pistol magazines, 99 live rounds, two pistol silencers have been recovered in the case," police said. Police said they further identified two associates namely Basit Bilal Makaya, resident of Qamar Abad Qamarwari and Naikoo Imad Nasar, resident of Kiloora Shopian who were operating with them as Underground Workers (OGWs).

Both associates have been arrested and an FIR has been registered. "During the questioning, the arrested terrorists disclosed that they were oper-

ating in Srinagar City on the direction of one person namely Asif Maqbool Dar R/O MIG Colony Bemina A/P Dhamam Saudi Arabia and Sajjad Gul R/O HMT Parimpora A/P Pakistan," police said. "Both the handlers from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were providing them weapons and money through a network of OGWs being identified. This module has also done recon of security installations like NIA office, Delhi Police Headquarters etc, and shared same with handlers in Pakistan. As per the investigation the targets in city for killings were also selected and conveyed to them by Dr Asif and Sajad Gul. Suhail Qadir Khanday was working in Saudi Arabia with Dr Asif and in August 2021 on the direction of Dr Asif he came back and started working as an operative of TRF/MGH/ for coordinating the collection of Arms/Ammunition, money and terror attack in Srinagar City," police said.

80 shops in Chandni Chowk gutted by massive fire

Team Absolute | New Delhi

At least 80 shops were gutted after a massive blaze broke out in Delhi's Chandni Chowk area on Thursday, a fire department official said.

A call about the fire at the Lajpat Rai market was received at around 4.35 a.m., the official said.

Initially, 10 fire tenders were rushed to the spot, and later six more were sent.

To reach the site, the fire officials faced a tough time due to the narrow lanes.

A team of senior police personnel was also sent to the spot to assist the fire officials. The Centralised Accident & Trauma Services



(CATS) ambulance was also called for the rescue operation.

"Luckily, no one was injured in the incident. The fire was brought under control by 8 a.m.," the fire official said. The official said that a

short circuit might have caused the fire and damage to property is being ascertained.

The Delhi Police said that the total loss due to fire can go in crores, adding that statements of all shopowners

AFTER CONG, BJP & SP CANCEL PROGRAMMES IN UP

LUCKNOW | Agencies

After the Congress cancelled its Pink Marathons and rallies in view of the surge in the cases of Covid, the BJP and the Samajwadi Party (SP) have also cancelled their election programmes.

According to official sources, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's proposed rally in Lucknow on January 9 is likely to be cancelled in view of the Covid situation and also inclement weather conditions.

"We have been informed of the cancellation through an official communication in this regard is awaited," said a party functionary.

The Samajwadi Party has also cancelled its Vijay Rath Yatra on January 7, 8 and 9 which was to be led by party chief Akhilesh.

As per the schedule, Akhilesh was to address public meetings in Gonda, Basti and Ayodhya on January 7, 8



and 9, respectively.

The SP leaders said that the deci-

sion on meetings scheduled after January 9 will be taken after assessing

the spread of Covid-19 in the next couple of days.

Akhilesh's Ayodhya visit had generated a lot of curiosity in the political circles as it was his first visit to the temple town this election season.

Recently, during his visit to Ayodhya on December 26, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had claimed that Akhilesh was planning to stop the construction of Ram Temple in Ayodhya if voted to power in the 2022 Assembly polls.

The Samajwadi Party had, however, dismissed Shah's allegations as baseless. "Ram temple in Ayodhya is being constructed in Ayodhya on the orders of the Supreme Court. No individual, party or authority in India has the guts to stop the construction. The BJP knows it will be voted out and are desperately targeting SP every day," Akhilesh had said in response to the charge.

'FARQ SAAF HAI' WAR GOES BEYOND SOCIAL MEDIA IN UP

LUCKNOW | Agencies

The 'Farq Saaf Hai' war between the BJP and Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh is now moving beyond social media and is becoming visible on hoardings and newspapers too.

Lucknow woke up on Thursday to full page advertisements in newspapers saying 'Bahut Farq Hai'. The advertisement put out by a SP leader listed the achievements of the Akhilesh Yadav regime.

In Prayagraj, another SP leader has put up a hoarding that claimed 'Farq Saaf Hai - BJP Saaf Hai'.

The hoarding, carries two pictures with the title - "2017 ke pahle and 2017 ke baad (before and after 2017)".

In the 'before 2017' segment former Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav is seen distributing laptops among 18 lakh students and the 'After 2017' segment shows 'Hathras ki beti ko kerosene se jalaya (Hathras daughter burnt alive)' and 'Mahila ka chirharan (women disrobed)'. SP leader Sandeep Yadav, who has



installed the hoarding, said: "BJP has been constantly making attempts to malign the image of SP among people of the state by levelling baseless allegations. I have installed this hoarding to give a befitting reply to the ruling

BJP." He accused the ruling party of misleading people over development and religion. BJP leader and state media co-convenor Ashish Gupta said: "People of the state are well aware about the deteriorating law

and order situation in the state before 2017. Two slogans - 'Khal plot hamara hai (empty plot is mine)' and 'Jis gadi mein laga SP ka jhanda, usme baitha hai ek gunda- were common before the 2017."

The BJP leader said the SP leaders have lost their cool after sensing defeat in the upcoming Assembly polls.

"After the BJP came to power in the state in 2017, mafia elements and goons are cooling their heels behind bars and thus we claim 'farq saaf hai'."

Earlier on Wednesday, Akhilesh had tweeted a video of former BSP MP and mafia don Dhananjay Singh playing cricket even though he carries a reward of Rs 25,000 on his head.

The 'Farq Saaf Hai' series of short films has been launched by the BJP showcasing the situation in the state before and after 2017.

The SP has taken strong exception to the fact that anti-social elements shown in the series are wearing red caps which are worn by Samajwadi leaders.

Four former J&K CMs to lose elite security cover

JAMMU | Agencies

The Jammu and Kashmir government has decided to withdraw the elite special security group (SSG) cover to four former chief ministers of the state and their immediate family members.

These former chief ministers are -- Dr Farooq Abdullah, Ghulam Nabi Azad, Mehbooba Mufti and Omar Abdullah.

The decision was taken after a security review meeting headed by J&K Lt governor Manoj Sinha held recently that the former chief ministers and their immediate family members did not need elite group protection since the normal security wing of the local police, augmented by the close protection team (CPT) drawn from the SSG, would be enough.



The SSG created by an Act of the state legislature in 2000 cannot be wound up as such since that would need a legislation by the Parliament because in the J&K Reorganisation Act 2019 it was decided to dispense with SSG cover to former chief

ministers, but not the disbanding of the SSG.

The proposal that the downsized SSG should be headed by an officer below the rank of a superintendent of police, has administrative complications, as per administrative sources.

Hair-raising: Jawed Habib creates furore by spitting on woman's head



LUCKNOW | Agencies

Well-known celebrity stylist Jawed Habib has landed in controversy after a video went viral on social media showing him spitting on a woman's hair.

The video is said to be from a training seminar in Muzaffarnagar district in which Habib could be seen spitting on a woman's head in front of a crowd, saying that her hair is dry.

He could also be heard saying jokingly that his spit is very effective! However, as of now, the authenticity of the

viral video and the date of incident could not be confirmed. In the clip, the woman is seen sitting on a chair on a stage. While giving tips to the audience present at the event, Habib casually spits on the hair of the woman, saying "Agar paani ki kami hai na... iss thook mein jaan hai (If there is no water... There is life in this spit)."

People present there could be heard laughing and clapping. After the video went viral on social media, the woman in the video has come forward to share her bad experience.

Wet spell over northwest, central India till Jan 9, fall in night temp thereafter

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) on Thursday said the wet spell over northwest and central India would continue till January 9, the same day when the night temperatures would start falling by 3 to 5 degrees Celsius over northwest India.

A fresh Western Disturbance (WD) induced cyclonic circulation is very likely to form over southwest Rajasthan and neighbourhood Friday, the IMD said, adding: "With the movement of WD, rainfall is very likely to increase from Friday with fairly widespread to widespread light/moderate rainfall/snowfall over Western Himalayan Region till January 9 and decrease significantly thereafter."

Isolated heavy rainfall/snowfall is very likely over Jammu-Kashmir-Ladakh-Gilgit-Baltistan/Muzaffarabad on Friday and isolated heavy to very heavy falls on Saturday. Isolated heavy rainfall/snowfall is also very likely over Himachal Pradesh on January 8 and 9 and over Uttarakhand on January 8. Fairly widespread to widespread light/moderate rainfall is very likely over Punjab,



Haryana, Chandigarh, and Delhi, north Rajasthan, and west Uttar Pradesh till

January 9 and decrease significantly thereafter. Isolated thunderstorms with light-

ning/hail are very likely over Uttarakhand, west Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh and Delhi during Friday, and Saturday, over west Madhya Pradesh till January 8 and over east Madhya Pradesh, Vidarbha, and Chhattisgarh from January 8 till 10. Rainfall activity over Tamil Nadu and adjoining Andhra Pradesh is likely to increase from January 10 with isolated heavy rainfall likely over Tamil Nadu.

Minimum temperatures are above normal by 3-6 degrees Celsius over most parts of northwest, central India and Gujarat and near normal over rest parts of north India. No significant change in minimum temperatures very likely over most parts of northwest India and Madhya Pradesh during next three days and (it will) fall by 3-5 degrees Celsius thereafter. No cold wave conditions are likely over north India during next five days.

There would be dense fog in isolated pockets in night/morning hours very likely over Bihar, West Bengal and Sikkim during next two days and over Odisha, Gangetic West Bengal, west Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, and Tripura during next 24 hours.



MUMBAI SEES HIGHEST-EVER SINGLE-DAY SPIKE IN INFECTIONS; POSITIVITY RATE AT 25%

THE ACTIVE COVID-19 CASES HAVE SURGED OVER 30 TIMES IN A MONTH- FROM 1,922 CASES RECORDED ON DECEMBER 1, 2021 TO 61,923 ON WEDNESDAY.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Mumbai recorded 15,014 Covid-19 cases on Wednesday, the highest single-day surge witnessed since the start of the pandemic in March 2020. The daily positivity rate, too, shot up to 25%. As the spread continues, officials at the public health department expects the city to record a further daily surge in cases over the next two weeks, which may even lead to increase in hospitalisation.



the data provided by Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), out of the 15,166 new cases recorded on Wednesday in Mumbai, 13,195 are asymptomatic (87%) whereas 1,218 patients have been admitted in hospitals. Meanwhile, all residents of sealed buildings will have to undergo compulsory rapid antigen test (RAT) for detection of Covid-19 in K-west ward, comprising the western

suburb of Andheri (west), in a first such decision by the civic body in the city. Strict action will be taken against the residents who refuse to undergo the test, reads a letter issued by the ward office on Tuesday. Also, Mumbai on Wednesday crossed a major milestone of administering over 1 crore first dose of coronavirus vaccines to eligible citizens nearly a year after

the nationwide inoculation programme was launched, the city civic body said. According to a Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) release, taking into account both first and second dose, over 1.81 crore vaccine shots have been administered to people in Mumbai since the vaccination drive was launched on January 16, 2021.

'No Lockdown in Maharashtra Unless...' Covid Task Force Doctor Says State Prepared for Even 40,000 Cases

MAHARASHTRA REPORTED 26,538 FRESH COVID-19 CASES AND EIGHT DEATHS ON WEDNESDAY. OF THE NEW CASES, MUMBAI REPORTED THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF INFECTIONS AT 15,166.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Maharashtra is unlikely to undergo a lockdown unless the situation becomes serious and a lot critical cases of Covid-19 get admitted in hospitals, said Dr Gautam Bhansali, advisor member of the Covid Task Force in Maharashtra and head of coordination committee of private hospitals in Mumbai. Speaking to reporters, Bhansali said, "There will be



no lockdown. Lockdown will be an option only if people start coming to hospitals in critical condition or get critical for longer period in hospitals... then it will affect the health infrastructure. "We have 7,000 beds in private hospitals and, if required, we will increase the bed count. In fact, 12,000 beds will be added soon. Currently, 50 per cent beds are occupied in private hospitals. Close to 30 per cent beds are occupied in government and BMC-run hospitals," he added. Hospitalisation, Dr Bhansali said, is not a problem as "most patients (in the current wave) are asymptomatic and recover in 2 to 3 days." "Even if Mumbai sees 40,000 cases, we are prepared," he said, adding, "The

number of cases is rising. On Wednesday Mumbai saw 15,000 cases and today it's 20,000. This was expected." On Wednesday, Maharashtra reported 26,538 fresh COVID-19 cases and eight deaths. Of the new cases, Mumbai reported the highest number of infections at 15,166. As per the health bulletin, 67,576,032 cases have been reported in Maharashtra so far including 87,505 active cases. A total of 144 cases of Omicron were reported in Maharashtra in the last 24 hours. Of these, Mumbai tops the chart with 100 cases, followed by Nagpur with 14 cases, Thane and Pune with seven cases each, Pimpri-Chinchwad with six cases and Kolhapur with five cases.

Mumbai cops summon BJP man for calling CM's wife 'Marathi Rabri Devi'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

A fresh row erupted between Maharashtra's ruling Maha Vikas Aghadi and opposition Bharatiya Janata Party on Thursday after a BJP activist posted an objectionable tweet calling Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray's wife as "Marathi Rabri Devi."



The tweet was posted by Jiten Gajaria, who is said to be a part of the BJP's social media cell and he has been summoned for questioning by the Mumbai Police.

Earlier on Thursday, he was summoned by the Crime Branch CID-Cyber Cell for the offensive tweet which sparked a furore in political and social media circles.

On January 4, Gajaria posted a tweet with a picture of Rashmi U. Thackeray, with the caption: "Marathi Rabri Devi", referring to the wife of Rashtriya Janata Dal President and ex-CM of Bihar Lalu Prasad.

Rabri Devi made global headlines when she was named as the Bihar CM by Lalu Prasad who was forced to quit after his involvement in the fodder scam came to the fore.

Despite facing ridicule for being a political novice, she went on to rule the state for eight

Pune court orders police probe against Baba Ramdev's 'Coronil' claims

Team Absolute | Pune

In a New Year jolt to Baba Ramdev, a Pune court has ordered the police to investigate a criminal complaint against the yoga guru and his business associate Acharya Balkrishna, who is Chairman of the consumer giant, Patanjali Ayurved, for their claims on their Covid-19 cure medicine 'Coronil'.

Junnar Court's Judicial Magistrate First Class P. V. Sapakal's order came in a private criminal plea lodged by a student-activist Madan Kurhe way back in June 2020, after the company had announced the purported cure to the deadly virus raging across the globe.

He directed the Junnar Police Station to conduct a probe under the CrPC's Section 202 and submit its report to the court by February 7,

said Kurhe's lawyer Asim Sarode.

In the complaint, Kurhe had questioned Baba Ramdev and Patanjali Ayurved's allegedly "illegal and false claims" in public about the purported medicine, 'Coronil' and trumpeting it as a cure for coronavirus.

This was the first case filed during the height of the Covid pandemic lockdown period against Baba Ramdev and Acharya Balkrishna and their company in Maharashtra, for their allegedly misleading and bizarre claims pertaining to Coronil, which was touted as a "100 per cent cure" medicine. Kurhe said that on June 24, 2020, when the country reeled under the first wave of the pandemic, he saw advertisements, reports, interviews of Baba Ramdev and Acharya Balkrishna claiming how they had developed an Ayurvedic cure for Covid-19, and contended that the Covid-19 symp-

tomatic patients reportedly become asymptomatic within 3-15 days after consuming the ayurvedic formulation, which had been tested in clinical trials in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Gujarat. The medicines were available in a corona kit priced at Rs 545, to be launched and sold all over India soon, he said.

Sarode pointed out that three months earlier, on April 21, 2020, the Centre's AYUSH Ministry had taken strong cognisance of all types of fly-by-night companies promising magical remedies for Covid-19 and banned them from publicising or selling their alleged cures to the gullible masses without proper clinical evaluations.

Following the uproar over Baba Ramdev's claims, the ICMR and the AYUSH Ministry stepped in by countering Patanjali Ayurved's claims of having conducted clinical trials on its new Ayurvedic products,

'Coronil' and 'Swasari'.

"When the country was tottering under a major health crisis and the Coronavirus pandemic, such false claims were made only with the intention to earn money from the fear-stricken people of India," argued Sarode. The magistrate said that although the media events of Baba Ramdev took place in Delhi which was out of the jurisdiction of the Junnar court, but considering the nature of the offences, the police would investigate the case before concluding if there is need to proceed further in the matter.

"After the police report is received, the Hon' Junnar Court will decide whether to issue process in the matter against the accused. It's a classic case that ensures nobody is above the law and all must use the freedom of expression with restrictions and responsibilities," said Sarode.

NCP: Probe PM security breach in Punjab by sitting HC judge

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Laying the Bharatiya Janata Party for "politicising" the serious issue of breach of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's security in Punjab, the Nationalist Congress Party on Thursday demanded a probe by a sitting high court judge into the full episode.

NCP National Spokesperson and Minorities Affairs Minister Nawab Malik said that the chink in the PM security -- handled by the SPG, IB and state police -- is indeed a matter of great concern for all.

However, different versions of the same are being given by the Centre and the state governments, even the ruling party Congress in Punjab has joined the debate while the BJP is trying to 'politicise' the issue instead of ascertaining who is responsible for the grave lapse, he pointed out.



"Under such circumstances, the matter should be thoroughly investi-

gated by a sitting high court judge to unravel the truth and affix responsibility in the matter," Malik told media persons.

The NCP leader expressed apprehensions that if the probe is conducted either by the Centre or the state governments, it could create 'suspicions' and hence it would be proper to hand it over to an incumbent high court judge to bring the facts before the people.

Malik's statement came a day after the issue came to the fore when PM had gone for some programmes in the poll-bound Punjab, but returned after his motorcade was blocked by agitating farmers. The Punjab government has contended it happened allegedly due to a route-change by the PM's motorcade and they had already informed the PMO about the farmers' agitation.

GST OFFICIAL IN MUMBAI GOES MISSING

Mumbai: A 55-year-old joint commissioner of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) has gone missing from Mumbai, a police official said on Thursday.

The matter was reported by his office's secretary on Wednesday. "He went missing from his office in Mazgaon area. After lunch, he had left for a stroll but didn't return. At first, his colleagues thought he must have gone to meet someone but got suspicious when he didn't return till evening. They then reported the matter to the police," said the official.

The name of the official has been withheld on police request. According to police, the official had left his cell phone at his office. An investigation has been launched. The police will examine the CCTV footage of nearby areas to get a clue about him.

The family of the missing official reportedly called their relatives to check whether he visited them but failed to get any information.

WOMAN KILLED BY LIVE-IN PARTNER

"Nale and Jadhav have been staying together for the last three years. Both have married more than two times before they started living together without divorcing their earlier partners," said a police officer.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

A 29-year-old woman died of multiple stab injuries after she was attacked by her live-in partner in their flat at in Mumbai's on Thursday. Accused Raju Nale (42), a TV

repair technician, was arrested before he could manage to flee after committing the offence late at night on Wednesday. During the probe, Nale said he doubted the victim Manisha Jadhav of having a relationship with another person. "Nale and Jadhav have been staying together for the last three years. Both have married more than two times before they started living together without divorcing their earlier partners," said a police officer. The police team rushed to the spot after neighbours called the cops when they heard the victim's scream. "Nale had changed his blood-stained clothes and was in the process of trying to escape when the police reached his flat and nabbed him," said Saki Naka police senior inspector Balwant Deshmukh.

Cops above 55 to work from home amid rising COVID-19 cases: Patil

"COVID-19 GUIDELINES ARE ISSUED BY THE CHIEF SECRETARY AND WE SHOULD ABIDE BY THEM TO KEEP OURSELVES SAFE FROM THE VIRUS. POLICE OFFICERS ABOVE 55 YEARS OF AGE ARE ADVISED NOT TO GO FOR DUTY, THEY CAN WORK FROM THEIR HOMES," PATIL SAID.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Maharashtra police officers above the age of 55 years have been advised not to go for duty and can work from their homes, State home minister Dilip Walse Patil informed on Thursday.

"Covid-19 guidelines are issued by the Chief Secretary and we should abide by them to keep ourselves safe from the

virus. Police officers above 55 years of age are advised not to go for duty, they can work from their homes," Patil said.

The Director General of Police (DGP) office had earlier issued a circular stating that special measures should be undertaken by all the superintendents and commissioners of police to ensure police personnel aged 55 years and above are not posed at any risk in the wake of the Omicron/Delta variant outbreak.

The order states that those policemen in the age group of 55-58 years having serious ailments, a stock of their health condition should be taken and should be deployed at the places where there is no or less contact with the general public.

According to the circular, a copy of which has been accessed by the Free Press Journal, states, "It has been noticed that those policemen who have been put on duty to stop the spread of Corona (Omicron/Delta) virus, are getting infected with Corona and Omicron viruses. Among such policemen, especially those who are 55 years and above are at more risk to get infected. All the unit commanders are requested to take special measures for those policemen who are 55 years and above for a period of 15 days starting from January 01."

Amid school closures across Maharashtra, education experts, parents bat for offline classes

Former chairman of the state education board and education expert Vasant Kalpande questioned the logic of shutting down schools at a time when all other businesses are on as usual.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

With schools in several parts of Maharashtra being ordered to shut down once again, barely a month after they reopened, amid rising Covid cases, education experts termed the decision to shut primary schools impractical and detrimental to the development of children.

Last month, the state government had allowed schools to resume offline classes for Classes I to VIII after continued demands from parents' groups and educationists.

Former chairman of the state education board and education expert Vasant Kalpande questioned the logic of shutting down schools at a time when all other businesses are on as usual. "We are not the only country affected by the new variant. In other parts of the world, where cases are much higher than us, the schools are still working as usual in the offline mode. In fact, the policy is to first shut down everything else and then close schools. However, in Maharashtra, we are seeing that schools are the first to shut down, even if a little spike is seen in cases and it is a very disturbing trend," he said.

Kalpande added, "The loss of education is colossal. Besides, the social impact of school closures like children falling out of the education system and especially the impact on young girls needs to be taken into consideration."

With children having returned to classrooms last month after a

one-and-a-half-year gap, the decision took even parents by surprise.

Nisha Singh, a resident of Nibm Road, said, "To be honest, even we are concerned about the rising Covid cases but as a parent, I can say that online education is not working out. Children don't pay attention and it has reached a burnout stage as they are not ready to sit in front of the screens."

She added, "I had sent my daughter to school in December and now that they are shut again, she is very depressed. I think we should accept the new normal that the virus is here and we need to be cautious but we can't avoid regular life. There is no guarantee that kids won't contract the virus from a park or societies or malls so why stop their schooling?"

Harishchandra Gaikwad, president, Pune District Headmaster Association, said principals are disappointed with the decision. "We will make a

representation to the Education department and the state government requesting to reconsider the decision."

Gaikwad added, "It is high time schools are reopened. There are several reasons, amongst which the biggest concern is the educational loss of students because as teachers we can tell you, students do not follow online classes and several concepts are not understood. It will anyway be difficult to cope with the gap due to the last one and half years."

He further said, "We have been repeatedly saying that the greatest loss is of students coming from low income families because they are still not joining online classes. More importantly, offline classes haven't led to a spurt in Covid cases. When the offline classes were started, except in one school in the state, we didn't see any mass reporting of Covid-19 cases. Hence, we don't agree to shutting down schools."



EDITOR'S SPECS

No lessons learnt from second wave

In a display of somewhat depressing responses, Indians seem to feel that most of them don't seem to have learnt proper lessons from the deadly and devastating second wave of the pandemic, as per IANS-C Voter Omicron Snap Poll. The snap poll had a sample size of 1,942. When asked if Indians were repeating exactly the same mistakes made before the second wave 52.2 per cent of the respondents were of the opinion that Indians were indeed making the same mistakes by holidaying, attending and throwing parties, going to weddings and other functions and participating in political rallies. Another 24.1 per cent felt that at least some of the mistakes were being repeated. Only 13.4 per cent felt that Indians were not repeating the same mistakes. In effect, more than three in four Indians are admitting that they are repeating the pre second wave mistakes. This could have serious repercussions as a massive third wave could once again overwhelm the precarious health infrastructure of the country. At the moment, perhaps swayed by scientific opinions widely reported by the media, most Indians think that the new Omicron variant is comparatively mild and benign in nature as it doesn't attack the lungs. But scientists and epidemiologists themselves admit that there is no way of knowing how and when the virus variant could mutate into something far more deadly. As the number of cases surge in India, the scientific and medical community is keeping its fingers crossed and praying that Indians do not repeat the same mistakes.

THE MUSLIM FACTOR IN UP ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

Ahead of the Uttar Pradesh polls the eyes of the non-BJP parties are on the Muslim votes. A large chunk of these votes has been with the Samajwadi Party but the BSP and the Congress have also got a small share while the AIMIM is the new contender on the block.

The Muslim are expected to vote en masse for the SP in this election but it never happens as the community is influential in 143 seats in the state.

In 2007 the community voted largely for the BSP, in 2012 it was with the SP but in 2017 it got divided between the SP, Congress and the BSP.

Independent analyst Rahul Varma says, "The Samajwadi Party has been getting a majority of the votes from the Muslims in UP. The 2022 assembly election is likely to become bipolar, ie, the main competition will be limited to BJP-led and SP-led alliances with other players including the BSP being reduced to the margins. It won't be surprising if the SP gets more than 75% of Muslim votes. In my view, both AIMIM or the Peace Party will have a marginal presence among Muslims." But AIMIM President Asaduddin



Owaisi differs as he pulls huge crowds and is quite popular among the youth of the community. He says, "Muslims now want their share in the power setup. Every community

has some share in power but Muslims have been deprived and now face discrimination." He says in his meetings attacking the SP and the Congress that there is a race between

Rahul Gandhi and Akhilesh Yadav to become a big Hindu so where are the secularists.

The Muslims are considered to be the second largest religious bloc and rough estimates are that their population is 20 percent but in the 2017 elections the Muslims were divided and the BJP riding on Hindutva consolidation backed by social engineering swept the polls.

Districts like Rampur, Farrukhabad and Bijnor are the areas where the Muslim population is around 40 per cent. As per rough estimates out of 143 seats in the state, there are about 73 seats where the Muslims are believed to be between 20 to 30 percent and about 40 seats where the Muslim population is more than 30 percent.

Analyst Verma says that in about 30 seats the Muslims can win on their own if their vote is not divided, while on 9 seats 55 percent are minority Muslims. There are at least 28 districts which have more than 20 percent Muslim votes and the rest of the districts have 10 to 15 percent with Rampur having the highest vote percentage of about 50 percent Muslim population.

Despite its huge population only 23 MLAs were elected in 2017 while the highest number was in 2002 at 64.

Pandemic fatigue, casual approach making Indians more complacent

Even after facing two devastating Covid waves that resulted in several deaths, Indians are yet to fully comprehend the dangers associated with Omicron. The pandemic fatigue, coupled with theories floating around treating Omicron as a viral fever or common cold has made them more complacent towards real dangers, health experts lamented on Thursday.

India registered a single-day rise of 90,928 cases, a significant rise from the previous day's 58,097 Covid cases in a span of 24 hours. A total of 325 deaths have also been reported in the same time, according to the Health Ministry.

The country's overall Omicron tally increased to 2,630 after 495 fresh cases were recorded in the last 24 hours, with Maharashtra and Delhi continuing to be the worst-hit.

According to Dr Navneet Sood, Pulmonary Consultant, Dharamshila Narayana Superspecialty Hospital, while the daily worries of economic constraints has overpowered the fear of infection in some sections of the population, there are people who are actually ignoring infection's possible risks and not taking required precautions.



"The reports claiming that Omicron is not causing that much severity may bring some relief but it ultimately is a variant which should be taken seriously. More awareness needs to be spread in this regard," Dr Sood said.

"One should consider that if Omicron is causing lesser severity as compared to other variants till date, then some death cases have also been reported under the same variant and every death counts especially when this

variant is new for us," he added.

Covid infection, even if mild, can trigger an immune response that lasts longer than the initial infection and recovery, according to a new study.

The study by scientists at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles, showed that the presence of elevated autoantibodies after mild or asymptomatic infection, as well as their persistence over time, Jerusalem Post

reported.

"These findings help to explain what makes Covid-19 an especially unique disease," Justyna Fert-Bober, PhD, co-senior author of the study, was quoted as saying.

"These patterns of immune dysregulation could be underlying the different types of persistent symptoms we see in people who go on to develop the condition now referred to as long Covid-19," Fert-Bober added.

According to Dr Anuja Lakra, Consultant-Internal Medicine, HCMCT Manipal Hospital, Dwarka, India has gone through two Covid waves with more severe symptoms and repercussions. "This time, people have become very casual and are treating it more like a viral fever or normal flu like symptoms. They are also refusing to get themselves tested, saying that they will wait for a few days to see if the symptoms are going away. It's a very casual approach towards something the medical fraternity is still evaluating," Lakra said.

"We request everyone to strictly follow Covid norms as the cases are spreading like a wildfire," the doctor added.

international

S KOREA TO LAUNCH TEAM TO SUPPORT N KOREAN DEFECTORS

Seoul | Agencies

The South Korean government is preparing to launch a new team to step up support for North Korean defectors suffering from economic and psychological difficulties after resettlement here, officials said on Thursday.

The team, which will comprise officials from different government agencies, including the Unification Ministry and the police, is expected to be set up by next month to provide defectors with tailored support in fields ranging from education and employment to living and psychological counselling, reports Yonhap news Agency.

According to a biannual survey conducted by the Unification Ministry last year,

1,582 defectors were found to be in need of help in addition to the general welfare package provided to all defectors upon their resettlement here.

Of the total, nearly half of them, or 47 per cent, said they had psychological difficulties. "The types of challenges facing North Korean defectors are diversifying," a Ministry official said.

Among some 33,800 North Korean defectors living in South Korea, wage workers were estimated to be earning an average 2.28 million won (\$1,900) a month last year.

The living conditions of North Korean defectors came to the spotlight after a defector who fled the North last year allegedly crossed the heavily-fortified inter-Korean border again last week to return home.

PAKISTAN RECEIVED \$39 BN FROM BEIJING'S FINANCIAL DIPLOMACY

Islamabad | Agencies

Pakistan's shipping corridors and pipelines attract nearly one-third of China's financial diplomacy across South and Central Asia (SCA) countries.

A report by AidData analyses Beijing's efforts to cultivate and deepen economic, social, and network ties with 13 countries in SCA over two decades.

These ties have the potential to both empower and constrain SCA countries, while threatening to displace or diminish regional rivals such as Russia, India, and the US, the report said.

Beijing has a deep but narrow financial diplomacy footprint, concentrating outsized investments in a small number of strategically important communities.

The report said that China targeted 62 per cent (\$78 billion) of its financial diplomacy dollars to just 25 provinces.

The largest province-level recipient was Sindh province, which Beijing bankrolled to the tune of nearly \$13 billion, approximately 10 per cent of its financial diplomacy for all of South and Central Asia. Other big ticket investment locations included Turkmenistan's Mary province (\$8 billion) and Pakistan's Punjab province (\$7 billion).

If budgets are reflective of one's real priorities, then it is notable that each of these three provinces attracted more money from Beijing between 2000-2017 than seven of the 13 countries in the SCA region.



Taking a more granular view, a privileged club of 25 district-level recipients accounted for 41 per cent (\$52 billion) of China's overall assistance across the entire region. Pakistan's Karachi division alone pocketed \$8 billion of Beijing's financial diplomacy, with Kazakhstan's Atyrau district (\$5 billion) not

far behind, the report said.

The Chinese government directed \$127 billion in financial diplomacy-the cornerstone of Beijing's efforts to sway popular opinion and leader behaviour-across 865 projects in the South and Central Asia region between 2000 and 2017. Looking across the region, there is a clear pecking order in terms of the countries that garner the lion's share of Beijing's financial diplomacy. Pakistan and Kazakhstan accounted for 56 per cent of Beijing's financial diplomacy during the period, receiving \$39 billion and \$33 billion, respectively. Much of this state-directed investment was concentrated in relatively few outsized investments such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Kazakhstan's portion of the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline.

Over a quarter (26 per cent) of Beijing's financial diplomacy was directed towards three countries: Sri Lanka (\$13 billion), Bangladesh (\$11 billion), and Turkmenistan (\$9 billion). Beijing split the remaining 18 per cent of its financial diplomacy across the remaining seven countries, the report said.

Chinese leaders were more likely to bankroll financial diplomacy investments in Pakistani communities that generated lower (rather than higher) economic output once population and petroleum deposits were taken into account. This is distinct from Beijing's approach in other countries, where there was a positive relationship between a community's economic output and its reception of China's financial diplomacy investments.

UN OFFICIAL REITERATES SUPPORT FOR LIBYA'S ELECTIONS COMMISSION

Tripoli: A senior UN official has reiterated support for Libya's elections commission following an indefinite postponement of the country's presidential polls.

During a meeting with High National Elections Commission Chairman Emad Al-Sayeh, the officials "discussed ways to consolidate and strengthen efforts to keep the electoral process moving forward", said Stephanie Williams, the special adviser to the UN Secretary-General on Libya. She reiterated the full support of the UN and international community for the commission as an independent institution in charge of the electoral process, reports Xinhua news agency.

She said the holding of inclusive, free, fair, and credible national elections is "the only possible response to the overwhelming and consistent demand of the Libyan people and the only path to peace and stability in Libya". Libya was expected to hold presidential elections on December 24, 2021. However, the elections were postponed indefinitely due to technical and legal issues.

The elections are part of a roadmap adopted by the UN-sponsored Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, with the aim of ensuring stability in the country following years of political division and insecurity.

S Korea, US, Japan postpone 3-way defence ministerial talks

Seoul | Agencies

South Korea, the US and Japan have postponed their trilateral defence ministerial talks that they had considered holding this month, Seoul's Defence Ministry said on Thursday.

Japanese media outlets reported earlier that the three countries have decided to delay the talks set to take place on January 13 in Hawaii due to the spread of the Omicron Covid-19 variant, reports Yonhap News Agency. "There were not any discussions yet as to when to rearrange the talks," Col. Moon Hong-sik, the Ministry's deputy spokesperson, told a regular press briefing.

"We have decided to have related



consultations at an appropriate time. "Earlier this week, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said that he tested positive for Covid-19.

The three countries had considered arranging the defence talks as Washington is striving to rally its allies and partner countries to

counter China's assertiveness amid an intensifying great-power rivalry.

The nations last held a trilateral defence ministerial meeting on the margins of security talks involving the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Bangkok in November 2019

U foreign policy chief reaffirms support for Ukraine

Kiev: Visiting High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell has reiterated the bloc's support for Ukraine during his visit to the conflict-hit Luhansk region.

"We are here first to reaffirm the European Union's full support of Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity," Borrell told reporters during a media briefing. The EU has been providing political, financial and economic support for Kiev, Borrell said, noting that the bloc's Association Agreement with Ukraine is "the most comprehensive agreement it has with any other third country in the world", reports Xinhua news agency.

Since 2014, the EU has provided Ukraine with over 17 billion euros (\$19 billion) in assistance, the official said. Speaking on the security situation along the Ukrainian borders, Borrell said that the EU is interested in de-escalating the tensions through negotiations and through a strong position on supporting Ukraine.

THOUSANDS OF FAMILIES RECEIVE ASSISTANCE IN AFGHANISTAN: UNICEF



Kabul: The Unicef on Thursday announced that it has distributed basic needs to over 1,700 families in Afghanistan's western province of Herat.

"To keep children and women warm and meet their basic needs during this harsh winter Unicef Afghanistan distributed 5,000 blankets, 1,700 tarpaulin and 1,700 buckets to 1,700 most vulnerable families in Herat Province," the UN agency said on Twitter.

The statement came as snow covered most parts of the mountainous Asian country in recent days, reports Xinhua news agency. Since the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in mid-August 2021, the impoverished country has faced economic woes.

Pro-govt lawmaker re-elected president of Venezuelan National Assembly



Caracas | Agencies

Pro-government Deputy Jorge Rodriguez has been re-elected President of Venezuela's National Assembly (NA), garnering the most votes in Congress, where the ruling party-led coalition, the Great Patriotic Pole, holds a majority.

Diosdado Cabello, leader of the coalition's congressional bloc, nominated Rodriguez and highlighted his "work, dedication, and patience" during his 2021-2022 mandate, reports Xinhua news agency.

His re-election and the inauguration of the new

Assembly "is a reaffirmation of the country's desire 'to live in peace'", said Cabello.

The opposition Democratic Alliance, led by Deputy Luis Augusto Romero, obtained a minority of votes.

After being re-elected, Rodriguez was sworn in by a commission comprising representatives and leaders of various social segments, including farmers, indigenous groups and unions. As congressional leader, Rodriguez pledged to "continue defending our homeland's right to freedom, sovereignty and self-determination".



NO PROPOSAL TO IMPOSE LOCKDOWN OR SHUT DOWN MARKETS

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Home Minister Narottam Mishra has said that there is no proposal with the Home Department to impose lockdown or shut down of markets in the state.

We are planning to increase the penalty amount for not wearing face masks besides setting up open jails, he added.

With Madhya Pradesh reporting 1,033 new COVID-19 cases in the past 24 hours, State Medical Education Minister Vishvas Sarang has announced that a fine of Rs 200 will be imposed for violation of COVID-19 protocols in public places.

"594 new COVID-19 cases have been reported in the last 24 hours. There are 1,544 active cases in the state at the moment. There is an increase in positive cases on a daily basis. It has been ensured that the people adhere to the COVID protocols. We are running the 'Roko Toko' programme. We have decided to impose a fine of Rs 200 for those not wearing face masks in public places. It has been instructed to ensure that the infection does not spread in



other districts as well," Sarang said.

When asked about the preparedness to deal with a possible third wave, he said that the government has made preparations for improving the infrastructure in the private as well as the government sector. He further said that the vaccination programme is going on at a good pace and children from 15 to 18 years of age are being vaccinated.

"Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has reviewed the situation. We have made preparations for the

enhancement of the infrastructure of the private as well as the government sector," Sarang said adding that no decision has been taken to impose any lockdown so far.

On Wednesday, the state government decided to cap the number of people attending weddings at 250 and those at funerals at 50 to check the spread of the infection. The CM made this announcement while reviewing the COVID-19 situation and virtually interacting with officials.

May set up 'open jails' on Covid protocol breach: Narottam Mishra

MADHYA PRADESH, LIKE MANY OTHER STATES IN INDIA, HAVE BEEN WITNESSING A HUGE SPIKE IN THE NUMBER OF COVID-19 CASES DAILY. THE STATE GOVERNMENT HAS TAKEN STEPS, INCLUDING A PENALTY OF RS 200, TO ENSURE PEOPLE FOLLOW COVID PROTOCOLS. THIS AMOUNT CAN BE INCREASED FURTHER.



Team Absolute | Bhopal

Home Minister Narottam Mishra has said that there is currently no proposal to impose a lockdown or shut down markets despite a spike in the number of coronavirus disease (Covid-19) cases.

The minister added that the Madhya Pradesh government is planning to

increase the penalty amount for not wearing face masks in markets.

"There is no proposal with the home department to impose lockdown or shut down markets in Madhya Pradesh. We are planning to increase the penalty amount for not wearing face masks and also considering to set up open jails," Mishra told media persons in Bhopal.

The Madhya Pradesh government imposed a fine of Rs 200 on those who

are found violating the Covid protocols in public places. The state government is running the 'Roko Toko' programme to ensure more and more people wear masks and follow Covid protocols.

Mishra's remarks came after Madhya Pradesh reported 1,033 new Covid-19 cases in the past 24 hours.

"This is around double the number recorded the day before which is a matter of concern. But we should not panic. We must observe all Covid-appropriate behaviour," Madhya Pradesh Medical education minister Vishvas Sarang told media persons on Thursday.

"Daily positive cases are rising rapidly. We imposed some more restrictions yesterday, including a cap of 250 people at wedding gatherings. Only 50 people are allowed to attend final rites. I instructed officials to increase beds in hospitals," he further said.

On Wednesday, the state recorded 594 new cases of Covid-19. This number was 308 on Tuesday.

A government release said 10,46,75,955 Covid-19 vaccine doses have been administered so far in the state.

Make proper arrangements TAKE RISING CORONA CASES AS A CHALLENGE: CM

Chief Minister reviews Corona control and arrangements



Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan said that the Corona cases are increasing day by day. Although most of them do not have to be admitted to the hospital, they are recovering in home isolation at home itself. Still, the rising Corona cases must be taken as a challenge. The Chief Minister said that to deal with Corona, all arrangements including home isolation, oxygen supply in hospitals, Covid Care Centers etc. should be kept up to date.

Chouhan was reviewing Corona control and related

arrangements in the state from Mantralaya on Thursday. Public Health and Family Welfare Minister Dr. Prabhuram Choudhary, Medical Education Minister Vishwas Kailash Sarang, Chief Secretary Iqbal Singh Bains and officials were present. While drawing attention to the Corona trend of different countries, states and Madhya Pradesh, Chief Minister said that the cases of Corona in Madhya Pradesh are less as compared to other states. The Corona infected are recovering in 'home isolation'. Only a few infected people need to be admitted to the hospital. Chouhan

inquired about the situation of Corona in Ujjain district and the arrangements made by the administration. Ujjain Collector said that at present 92 people are Corona infected in the district and only 4 are being treated in the hospital. Chouhan said that most of the Corona infected people do not need oxygen and advanced treatment. Arrangements should be made for them at the Covid Care Center. With this, the treatment of patients of other diseases will continue in the hospitals.

Additional Chief Secretary Mohammad Suleman informed that at present there are 16 thousand 527 isolation beds, 27 thousand 645 oxygen support beds and 11 thousand 917 ICU/HDU beds. Regular monitoring of oxygen plants is being done. All oxygen plants are functional. Citizens are being requested to follow Corona guide lines.

CM PLANTED PEEPAL AND BIJA SAPPLINGS IN SMART GARDEN



Bhopal: Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan planted Peepal and Bija saplings along with the office bearers of the social organisation Angels Welfare Society in Smart Garden today. Chouhan was presented an artistic watch prepared by the society on the theme of the emerging Madhya Pradesh. Society members told that they have worked in the fields of environment, children's education and health. Even during the Corona period, food was provided to the workers going to other states through Bhopal. The Society conducts programmes from time to time for the awareness of cleanliness among the women in the slums. Peepal is a shady tree. It purifies the environment. It has religious and Ayurvedic significance. According to natural science, the Peepal tree releases oxygen day and night, which is important for the environment. Peepal is also called Akshaya tree because it is never without leaves.

The Bija tree is rich in medicinal properties along with being environmentally important. Its wood is used for making furniture.

Helping the Needy Is the Ultimate Responsibility: Governor

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Governor Mangubhai Patel has said that timely help to the needy is param-dharam (ultimate duty). He said that most of us are aware about our duties, it is necessary that duty should be followed in our behaviour. He said that serving and protecting the dependents of martyrs and heroes who gladly accept death and the struggle of whole life in the service of the motherland, is the responsibility of the society.

Patel was addressing the 21st annual meeting of the Amalgamated Special Fund at Raj Bhavan on Thursday. In the meeting, it was unanimously decided to increase the maximum amount of various schemes of financial assistance and scholarship to ex-servicemen and military dependents from this financial year. The hike will be done on the basis of the rec-



ommendation of the committee constituted by Sainik Welfare Board.

Patel said that it is the basic responsibility of Sainik Welfare Board to cooperate in the time of needs of dependents of martyrs and brave soldiers. Special attention should be paid to the efforts made by the Board to benefit the ex-servicemen and the dependents of the martyrs. The schemes should

be publicized. He said that out of all the creatures created by nature, only human beings can help the backward, down-trodden. He said that the results of doing work depend on the spirit of the work. Only work done with sensitivity gives self-satisfaction. He has expressed hope that the Board will present a model by continuously improving the Sainik Welfare works.

INCREASE EFFORTS FOR THE WELFARE OF POOR FISHERMEN: CM

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has said that Madhya Pradesh can become a special identity in the field of fish production.

Fishermen Welfare and Fisheries Welfare Department should complete the schemes for the welfare of poor section of fishermen with quality works within the time-limit. Chief Minister Shri Chouhan, in a departmental review in Mantralaya on Thursday, directed that the use of existing fishery resources in the rivers of Madhya Pradesh in the interest of fishermen, possibilities of shrimp production and promotion of fisheries activities should be done through improved species.

Incentives are given by the Government of India for fish seed production in the private sector. The state should take full advantage of these schemes, efforts should be increased in this direction. State level fishermen conference will be organized soon.

Chouhan said that the poor fishermen have the first right on commercial use of fishery-resources available in water bodies in rural areas. In some places, influential individuals try to capture the water bodies. While controlling it completely, it is our priority to operate schemes in the interest of fishermen. Chouhan said that the work of building a chain should be done by identifying the water



bodies. By making necessary amendments in the fishermen policy, the work of welfare of fishermen should be done according to the new strategy. Fish farming is directly related to employment of the poor. Work should be carried out by making a roadmap. Madhya Pradesh can make a special place in the country by distributing Matsya Credit Card. Work should be speeded up by forming FPOs of fish farmers. Chouhan congratulated Balaghat district for being selected for the first prize under fisheries in inland water area under the

Government of India's scheme. The district was given this award on World Fisheries Day, 21 November 2021 at Bhubaneswar, Orissa. Similarly, Kailash Ramchandra Verma of Dhar district was also selected for the first prize in the fish seed production scheme of the Government of India. Verma was awarded in New Delhi on November 21, 2020. Chief Minister Chouhan said that the work of making achievements should continue.

It was informed in the meeting that the fish production in the state was 1.38 lakh metric tonnes in the year 2016-17, which has increased to 1.97 lakh metric tonnes in the nine months of the year 2021-22. Last year it had reached 2.5 lakh metric tonnes. This year also the same achievement is expected. Works are being undertaken to provide Kisan credit cards to eligible beneficiaries in the state, to send officers/employees to study fisheries activities outside the state, to provide advanced technology fisheries training to more and more fishermen, by selecting suitable ponds under MNREGA scheme, to provide support, increase fish seed culture and fisheries activities on the basis of water availability, establishment of ice plant, establishment of fish feed plant, use of new technology and demonstration of fisheries activities under intensive fisheries in ponds. New ponds have been constructed in 483.46 hectare area in the state.

Created Irrigation Potential Should Be Fully Utilised in the Interest of Farmers: Chouhan

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has said that works should be completed expeditiously for the expansion of irrigation potential in the state. Work should be done expeditiously to expand the existing irrigation area of 36 lakh hectares. The target is that the irrigation area should reach 53 lakh hectares in the state. For this, instead of year by year or half yearly, the implementation of irrigation projects should be reviewed monthly at the department level. Chouhan directed that the irrigation potential created in the state should be fully utilized for the benefit of the farmers.

Chouhan said this while reviewing the schemes of Water Resources Department in Mantralaya on Thursday.

Irrigation facility is being made available in about 36 lakh hectare area in the state. Along with the irrigation potential created in an area of 43 lakh hectares by including other means along with projects, about one crore eight lakh hectares area is being irrigated by including private sector in the state. According to the departmental long-term



target, irrigation facility is to be expanded to 40 thousand hectares by December 2023, 46 thousand hectares by December 2025 and 53 lakh hectares by December 2027. Talking about the next three years, the target is to develop new irrigation potential in 1 lakh 15 thousand hectare by 31 March 2021, 1 lakh 70 thousand hectare by 31 March 2022 and 3 lakh 15 thousand hectare by 31 December 2023. There is a plan to allocate works for new projects in the next one year to create irrigation potential in an additional area of five lakh hectares in the state. An amount of Rs 8 thousand crore will be spent on these. The target of Rabi irrigation was set in 30 lakh 96 thousand hectares in the state this year, which has been fulfilled. 74 projects were completed against a total of 70 small projects.

Officers Should Visit to See the Works of the Schemes: CM

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has said that full benefits of completed schemes should be taken for maximum utilization of Narmada water in Madhya Pradesh. The pace of work on the under-construction projects should be increased. The officers of the department should visit the project areas regularly to get information about the works. The works in progress should be completed with the goal of completing them within the time limit. If there is a delay in the implementation of any project and there is no valid reason for it, then the responsibility of the concerned agency and officers should be fixed.

Chouhan was reviewing the works of Narmada Valley Development Department in Mantralaya on Thursday. It was informed in the meeting that in the year 2020-21, the works of five projects Narmada-Malwa Gambhir, Ujjain-Dewas-Ujjain Pipeline Scheme, Upper Beda Right Bank Canal, Harsud Micro Lift Irrigation Project and Omkareshwar Canal Phase-4 have been completed. The target is to create additional irrigation potential of six lakh hectares in the next three years.

Chouhan said that Narmada Valley Development Department would get adequate budget to complete the irrigation projects. With this we will be able to complete our works in time. It should be ensured that all the projects are executed on time with quality. Chief Minister said that the irrigation facilities being provided in the state should be fully



utilized and wide publicity should be given to the farmers so that they can make full use of water. Chouhan said that the Chief Minister's Office should also be informed about the

field visits. It was informed in the meeting that in the year 2022, 11 projects which are to be completed, will make irrigation possible in one lakh 62 thousand 195 hectare area in

Khandwa, Indore, Khargone, Katni, Sehore, Barwani and Jabalpur. These works are being done at a cost of about three thousand crore rupees. Mobile app is being developed with Map IT for recovery of irrigation charges in self-reliant Madhya Pradesh. It was informed in the meeting that in the year 2020-21, the six works which are nearing completion, will irrigate about one lakh hectare area in Khandwa, Alirajpur and Khargone districts. The long term target is to complete the works of 17 projects in the year 2023-24. With this, irrigation will be possible in 11 lakh 6 thousand hectare area. It was informed in the meeting that three-fourth work of the Chipaner Micro Lift Irrigation Scheme under construction in Sehore and Dewas districts has been completed. 69 villages of both the districts will be benefitted by this scheme. Similarly, in 19 villages deprived of irrigation under Dobi-Canal feeder irrigation scheme, 5 thousand 661 hectare area will get the benefit of additional irrigation. Under the scheme, water will be lifted and flown into the right bank canal of Barna project. It was informed in the meeting that Ghats are being built on the banks of river Narmada in Sehore district at Chipaner, Anoli, Neelkanth, Jait and at Neelkund in Narsinghpur district. The work of all these Ghats is being completed soon. Chief Minister Shri Chouhan has visited all the places during Narmada Yatra. Efforts are also being made for the development of tourism facilities at picturesque places situated on the banks of river Narmada. Agencies and departments are working together for the beautification of the Ghats.



Omicron shadow over Grammys: Show postponed



Los Angeles | Agencies

The Grammy Awards have been postponed due to coronavirus-related concerns, an Academy spokesperson has confirmed to 'Variety'. No new date has been confirmed as of yet.

The 2022 show, scheduled for January 31, had been moving full speed ahead before a full audience at its traditional venue, the Crypto.com Arena (formerly known as the Staples Center) in downtown Los Angeles, but the recent Covid-19 surge has caused the postponement or cancellation of multiple events across the country.

Sources have told 'Variety' that even though the Crypto.com Arena has a basketball or hockey game

first postponed and then pared down considerably.

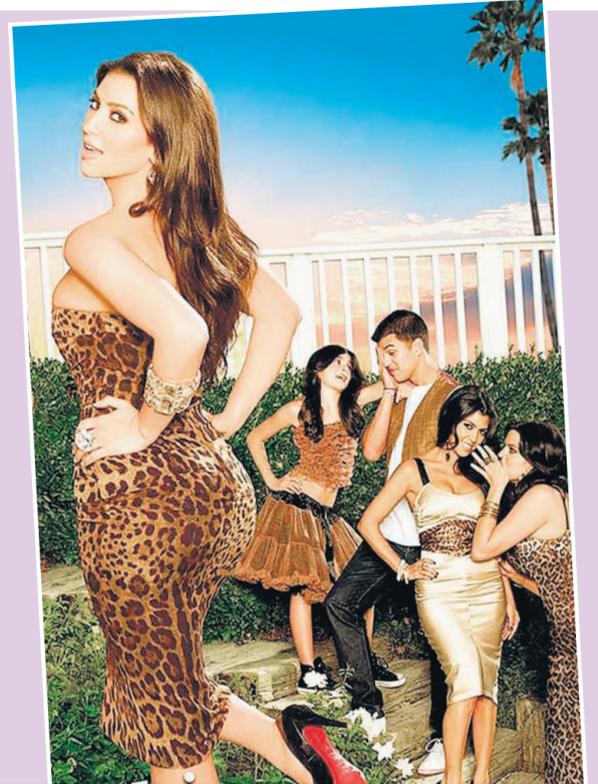
The 2022 Grammy nominees list is led by Jon Batiste with 11 nods, followed by Justin Bieber, Doja Cat and H.E.R. with eight each. Billie Eilish and Olivia Rodrigo follow with seven nominations apiece. The show will be hosted for a second consecutive year by 'Daily Show' host Trevor Noah.

Incidentally, Indian-origin entertainment executive Raj Kapoor is the showrunner for this year's Grammys.

or a concert booked nearly every night until mid-April, a number of artists and executives are said to have reservations about appearing in person. This is what has led to the postponement of the music world's most important show.

The Recording Academy and its television partner, CBS, said in a joint statement: "Given the uncertainty surrounding the Omicron variant, holding the show on January 31 simply contains too many risks. We look forward to celebrating Music's Biggest Night on a future date, which will be announced soon."

The Grammys generate millions of dollars in revenue, but they drew only a fraction of a normal year's earnings in 2021, when the event was



She is in this!

Kim Kardashian fans go wild after realising she starred in a Fall Out Boy video BEFORE finding global fame

Los Angeles | Agencies

She's barely been out of the spotlight since soaring to global fame in 2007 following the release of Keeping Up With The Kardashians. But Kim Kardashian fans were recently left stunned to discover that the star, 41, had starred in a Fall Out Boy video months before making her debut in the E! reality series. With Kim now hitting headlines once again thanks to her romance with Pete Davidson, the rock band's video Thanks Fr Th Mmrs has had a resurgence and sees Kim get up

close and personal with another Pete - the group's bassist Pete Wentz, reports dailymail.co.uk.

Fans of the star recently went wild in the comments as they'd only just clocked that the reality star was the glamorous girl leaning in for a kiss with Pete, with one viewer remarking: 'I will absolutely never get over the fact that Kim K is in this.'

The video was released in March 2007, around the same time as her infamous sex tape with ex-boyfriend Ray J, and despite people knowing of Kim, she didn't reach superstardom until she starred in Keeping Up With The Kardashians, which first aired in October of that year.

Final Cut: Chris Noth pays again for sexual assault charges



Los Angeles | Agencies

Chris Noth, who faces sexual assault allegations, has been snipped from the upcoming finale of HBO Max's 'Sex and the City' sequel series 'And Just Like That', 'Variety' has confirmed.

The series will stream its final episode of the season on February 3.

Noth's character, Mr Big, was killed off in the first episode of 'And Just Like That' after he suffered a heart attack while riding the state-of-the-art exercise bike Peloton.

Noth was reportedly set to appear in the finale in a fantasy sequence where Sarah Jessica Parker's Carrie reunites with Mr Big while visiting the Pont des Arts bridge in Paris to scatter his ashes. According to 'Variety', HBO Max had no comment to offer in response to the news, but the website quotes reports saying that the creative team behind 'And Just Like That' decided the footage of Noth intended for the season finale was not narratively significant enough to justify saving it from the cutting room floor.



James Cameron hopes to make six-hour movies for streamers

Los Angeles | Agencies

Oscar-winning director James Cameron has explained that he wants to make six-hour films for streaming platforms such as Netflix.

Cameron told Variety: "I'm not afraid. I like change. I'm a child of the 60s. I like it when things are chaotic. I think what we can see is an expanded form of cinema. I want to do a movie that's six hours long and two and a half hours long at the same time. Same movie."

"You can stream it for six hours, or you can go and have a more condensed, rollercoaster, immersive version of that experience in a movie theatre. Same movie. Just, one's the novel, and one's the movie. Why not? Let's just use these platforms in ways that haven't been done before."

The filmmaker is currently working on the sequels to his sci-fi epic 'Avatar' and explained that he has a lot of editing to do before the movies are up to scratch - although he did praise the contributions of the various cast members, reports femalefirst.co.uk. The director, who is planning to release a new 'Avatar' movie every two years until 2028, said: "I haven't gotten out of it alive yet. Part-2 is fully in the can. We have a working cut that we're filling in the visual effects within. I feel pretty confident with that film. 3 is still a bit shadowy. It's way too long."

'This was the last time'

Michelle Heaton reveals she bought vodka every morning instead of doing the school run at height of alcohol addiction which left her days away from death, reports dailymail.co.uk.



Los Angeles | Agencies

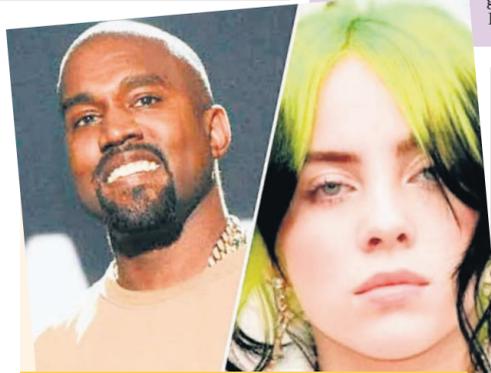
Michelle Heaton has admitted she prioritised heading straight to the off licence to buy more vodka over doing the school run for her children at the height of her battle with booze. The former Liberty X singer, 42, checked into The Priory in April last year in a bid to beat her alcohol addiction after being days away from death.

A now tee-total Michelle says her craving for drink was so strong she became consumed by her own needs rather than those of her children Faith, nine, and Aaron, seven.

The former Pop Stars contestant told The Sun: 'I would always promise myself this was the last time I was going to drink or use cocaine. But I'd wake up with the fear of it not being there and have to buy more vodka.'

'I'd manipulate friends into picking up the kids from school. I was selfish. I was exhausted.'

'I didn't want to lie, but I had to because I needed alcohol. It was relentless.'



Billie Eilish, Kanye to headline much-postponed Coachella in April

Los Angeles | Agencies

Billie Eilish and Kanye West are slated to headline the 2022 edition of North America's biggest (and four-time postponed) music festival - Coachella.

Reporting this, 'Variety' noted that Swedish House Mafia (SHM) is also on the bill, although it is unclear whether the group is the already-sold-out festival's third headliner -- the traditional "throwback" slot for the reunion of a more veteran artist. West headlined the festival in 2011 and Eilish had a breakthrough performance in 2019 (she would be the youngest artist to top the Coachella bill); SHM previously performed at Coachella in 2012.

The festival is scheduled to take place over the weekends of April 15-17 and April 22-24, 2022, at its usual location: Empire Polo Ground in Indio, California.

The alarming Omicron surge and the postponement of the Grammy Awards, however, has left many wondering whether the festival will take place in April, or be moved -- for a fifth time -- to a later date. Coachella has already sold out its 125,000 per-day tickets, and the sheer logistics of more than 100,000 people travelling to and gathering at a single location create immeasurable possibilities for disease transmission, according to 'Variety'. The original headliners of this 21st instalment of the festival -- first announced in January 2020 -- were Travis Scott, Frank Ocean and Rage Against the Machine, the festival has been postponed due to the pandemic four times. Last year, Ocean moved his appearance to 2023, and Scott was dropped from the bill in the wake of the Astroworld tragedy in November.

Rage, too, is reported to be off the bill.

ABSOLUTE PIC OF THE DAY



Amanda Clapham



SA v IND, 2nd Test

DEAN ELGAR SPEARHEADS SOUTH AFRICA'S SERIES-LEVELLING WIN OVER INDIA

Johannesburg | Agencies

Dean Elgar spearheaded a record chase of 240, helping South Africa clinch a series-levelling win over India in the second Test at the Wanderers here on Thursday.

After rain washed out on-field action of the first two sessions, rain gods relented for 34 overs of play to happen. That was enough for Elgar, unbeaten on 96, to finish off the chase of 240, which is also South Africa's highest successful chase at this venue.

South Africa's batters batted fantastically and stitched partnerships on a tricky pitch as India's bowlers had a rare off-day with the ball. The seven-wicket loss also meant that India's record of not losing a Test match to South Africa at the 'Bullring' came to an end, just a week after the tourists breached Fortress Centurion.

The hosts' were also helped by the fact that India conceded 11 wides, six leg-byes and one no-ball on day four.

Jasprit Bumrah began the proceedings with a jaffa to square up Rassie van der Dussen. But Elgar, who took



lots of body blows on day three, continued his gutsy stay at the crease by drilling Ravichandran Ashwin through left of mid-on to raise his half-century.

Bumrah and Shami got some deliveries to kick up and trouble the duo of Elgar and van der Dussen. After van der Dussen leant into an extra cover drive off Bumrah, the ball was changed. But it did little to give India respite as van der Dussen hit Shami

for successive boundaries on both sides of the wicket followed by giving the same treatment to Shardul Thakur. Eventually, it was Shami who broke the 82-run partnership off 160 balls, taking out van der Dussen with the one moving away and the right-handed batter, trying to defend and edged to Cheteshwar Pujara at first slip.

Despite losing van der Dussen, South Africa steadily marched

towards the target with Elgar being rock-solid at the crease. India almost had Temba Bavuma's wicket if Shardul Thakur hadn't dropped a return catch off his own bowling.

After drinks break, Elgar continued to deal in boundaries, hitting Shami for back-to-back fours as the tension started to ease on the hosts. Temba Bavuma joined the run-making spree by driving Bumrah twice through covers. Elgar then launched a stunning onslaught on Mohammed Siraj, smashing him for three boundaries through mid-on, point and backward point. Bavuma's splendid pull off Thakur over backward square leg before Elgar finished off the chase with a whip through mid-wicket off Ashwin to push the three-match series into a winner-takes-it-all decider at Cape Town from January 11.

Brief scores:

India 202 & 266 in 60.1 overs lost to South Africa 229 and 243/3 in 67.4 overs (Dean Elgar 96 not out, Rassie van der Dussen 40; Ravichandran Ashwin 1/26, Shardul Thakur 1/47) by seven wickets.

India name squad for Women's World Cup and NZ ODIs, Jemimah, Shikha, Punam left out

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Top-order batter Jemimah Rodrigues, fast bowler Shikha Pandey and veteran Punam Raut on Thursday were left out of India's squads for the 2022 Women's ODI World Cup and the ODIs in New Zealand in the lead-up to the showpiece event.

Mithali Raj will lead the same 15-member squad in the five ODIs against New Zealand from February 11 and 24, before opening their World Cup campaign against Pakistan on March 6 at the Bay Oval, Tauranga.

The 21-year-old Rodrigues went through a lean patch in all the five ODIs she played since coming back from the pandemic-enforced break in



women's cricket. Shafali Verma made the opening spot her own and the 21-year-old Yastika Bhatia impressed in her two outings at one-drop (35 off 51, and 64 off 69 in India's only win on tour). Meanwhile, India have overlooked Pandey, they

have included younger quicks in Meghana Singh and Renuka Singh - both of whom made their India debuts in Australia last year. Renuka Singh has featured in one T20I and remains unpaired in the 50-over format.

Squad for 5 ODIs against NZ & ICC Women's World Cup:

Mithali Raj (Captain), Harmanpreet Kaur (vice-captain), Smriti Mandhana, Shafali Verma, Yastika Bhatia, Deepti Sharma, Richa Ghosh (wicket-keeper), Sneha Rana, Jhulan Goswami, Pooja Vastrakar, Meghna Singh, Renuka Singh Thakur, Taniya Bhatia (wicket-keeper), Rajeshwari Gayakwad, Poonam Yadav.

Squad for one-off T20I:

Harmanpreet Kaur (Captain), Smriti Mandhana (vice-captain), Shafali Verma, Yastika Bhatia, Deepti Sharma, Richa Ghosh (wicket-keeper), Sneha Rana, Pooja Vastrakar, Meghna Singh, Renuka Singh Thakur, Taniya Bhatia (wicket-keeper), Rajeshwari Gayakwad, Poonam Yadav, Ekta Bisht, S. Meghna, Simran Dil Bahadur.

Adelaide International

Swiatek defeats Fernandez to face Azarenka in quarters

Adelaide | Agencies

Defending champion Iga Swiatek defeated Leylah Fernandez 6-1, 6-2 at the Adelaide International on Thursday to set up a quarter-final clash against two-times Grand Slam winner Victoria Azarenka.

The 2020 Roland Garros winner Swiatek took control of the match from 1-1 in the first set and capitalised on Fernandez's misfiring serve to wrap up the victory in 75 minutes at the Australian Open warm-up event. Ranked fifth at this year's tournament, Swiatek hit 17 winners against her 19-year-old opponent and did not face a break-point as she extended her winning streak in Adelaide to seven matches.

"I was playing against a younger girl, which is pretty new for me," Swiatek said. "She's pretty talented and she's a Grand Slam finalist, so I knew it was going to be tricky. I felt



really confident and I'm pretty happy that I could finish it really quickly and I didn't let go of focus." Swiatek will face Azarenka in the next round after she scored a 6-3, 7-5 victory over Australian wildcard Priscilla Hon. Hon had stunned Petra Kvitova in the first round on Monday and threatened a tiebreak in the second set against Azarenka but the Belarusian wrapped up the win in just under 90 minutes.

COPA DEL REY: BARCELONA ADVANCE TO ROUND OF 16 WITH TOUGH WIN

Linares (Spain) | Agencies

Barcelona began their Copa del Rey title defence with a hard-fought 2-1 win over Linares Deportivo on the road to advance to the Round of 16, here on Thursday.

Linares had already knocked Alaves out of the competition and looked to pressure Barca high up the field and they took the lead in the 19th minute when veteran striker Hugo Daiz headed home a cross from the right.

Barca coach Xavi Hernandez brought Dembele into the game for the start of the second half and the winger, who has yet to sign a new contract, was their best player.

He leveled the score with a left-foot shot in the 63rd minute, which Linares keeper, Brimah Razak could maybe have done better with, and helped stretch the Linares defense. Real Madrid avoided a repeat of



last season's exit to third-tier Alcoyano with a 3-1 win against the

same team. Eder Militao put Madrid ahead in

the first half with a header from a corner, but Alcoyano didn't give up and drew level in the 66th minute with Daniel Vega's excellent shot into the corner of the net.

Betis had few problems getting past Valladolid with a 3-0 win with goals from William Carballo, Nabil Fekir and Borja Iglesias, while Andres Martin saw Rayo Vallecano win 1-0 away to Mirandes.

Real Sociedad made hard work of their 3-2 win away to Leganes, with the game only resolved by Mikel Oyarzabal's second-half penalty, while goals in the 68th and 82nd minute from Josep Gaya and Angel Rodriguez saw Mallorca come back from a goal down to win 2-1 in Eibar.

Atletico Baleares produced the upset of the day as they beat Celta Vigo 2-1 to claim their second top-flight scalp of the tournament after knocking out Getafe 5-0 in the previous round.

ITALY'S SERIE A POSTPONES FOUR GAMES DUE TO COVID-19

Rome | Agencies

Italy's Serie A cancelled four games scheduled for Thursday due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The cancellations are the first of the current season, though the 2020-2021 season was shortened due to anti-coronavirus measures.

Serie A said that four games - Atalanta vs Torino, Bologna vs Inter-Milan, Fiorentina vs Udinese, and Salernitana vs Venezia -- would not be played as scheduled on Thursday after some players and staffers involved in the game have tested positive for Covid-19. A fifth game scheduled for today, Juventus vs Napoli, will be played as scheduled, but at least three players will sit the game out because they have not taken the required health measures to be eligible. The games could be rescheduled if they will have an impact on the championship when the season is over, Xinhua reports.



CANADA SURGE INTO ATP CUP SEMI-FINALS

Sydney | Agencies

Felix Auger-Aliassime fired Canada into the semi-finals of ATP Cup on Thursday, upsetting World No. 3 Alexander Zverev 6-4, 4-6, 6-3 to earn the first Top 5 win of his career.

Following Great Britain's 2-1 triumph against the United States earlier on Qudos Bank Arena, Canada knew victory against Germany would seal a semi-final spot.

With the pressure on, Auger-Aliassime backed up Denis Shapovalov's victory over Jan-Lennard Struff by showing great resilience against Zverev in a statement win. With his victory, Canada has clinched the Group C tie 2-0 and will play reigning champion Russia on Saturday in Sydney.

In an entertaining match, the 21-year-old recovered from squandering four break points at 3-3 in the second set, hitting with great power and depth in the third set to triumph after two hours and 32 minutes.

The World No. 12, who kept Canada's ATP Cup bid alive with his singles victory against Cameron Norrie on Tuesday,



was strong on serve throughout, winning 76 per cent (41/54) of points behind his first delivery. The 21-year-old maintained a high and consistent level in a tense deciding set, breaking in the seventh game as he reduced his ATP Head2Head series deficit to 2-4 against

the German. It is the first time Canada has reached the last four at the 16-team event. In the other semi-final, Poland will play Spain on Friday. Earlier, Shapovalov boosted Canada's ATP Cup semi-final hopes, overcoming Struff 7-6(5), 4-6, 6-3.

Messi tests negative for Covid-19, back in Paris

Paris | Agencies

Lionel Messi has tested negative for Covid-19 and will be back in training with the team in the coming days, Paris Saint-Germain confirmed on Wednesday.

The seven-time Ballon d'Or winner was contaminated by the virus last week in Argentina, which forced him to have missed PSG's 4-0 French Cup win over Vannes on January 4.

"Messi has tested negative for COVID-19. He has arrived in Paris and will rejoin the squad in the next few days," PSG said in a statement on Wednesday.

But the club didn't give details when will the



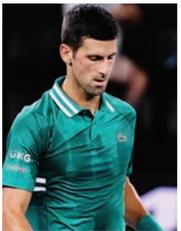
Argentine striker back to games as the Ligue 1 front-runners will travel to Lyon on Sunday to play their first league match after the winter break, Xinhua reports.

AUSTRALIA REJECTS DJOKOVIC'S VISA

Sydney | Agencies

World No. 1 tennis player Novak Djokovic's visa to enter Australia has been cancelled with authorities reportedly intending to deport the Serbian athlete later on Thursday, reports Xinhua news agency.

In a tweet on Thursday morning, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison wrote: "Mr Djokovic's visa has been cancelled. Rules are rules, especially when it comes to our borders. No one is above these rules. Our strong border policies have been critical to Australia having one of the lowest death rates in the world from COVID, we are continuing to be vigilant." The visa cancellation is the latest twist in a fast-evolving saga that has seen the 20-time grand slam winner being held at Melbourne's International Airport since his arrival late on Wednesday. Djokovic had landed in the Victorian capital to defend his Australian Open crown, with the tournament due to start on January 17. His arrival in Australia, deep within an unprecedented spike in COVID-19 cases, has sparked controversy with accusations of the star having received privileged treatment to be allowed to play in Australia. Djokovic, 34, has refused to reveal his vaccination status, but last year said he was "opposed to vaccination".



THE ASHES, 4TH TEST

Khawaja's brilliant ton put Australia on top against England on Day 2

Sydney | Agencies

Left-handed batter Usman Khawaja's brilliant ninth Test century (137) put Australia on top against England on the second day of the fourth Ashes Test, here on Thursday.

Like most other days in the ongoing Ashes series, Australia dominated once again on a challenging SCG pitch. Led by Khawaja's century on return to the side, Australia piled on 416-8 before declaring late in the day.

In reply, England had five overs to see through before stumps and they would've lost Zak Crawley who had edged to David Warner at slip had Mitchell Starc not overstepped in his delivery stride.



However, in the end, England's openers survived the required overs to finish on 13/0, still trailing by 403 runs against hosts. Haseeb Hameed

(2 not out) and Zak Crawley (2 not out) were at the crease when play ended on Day 2 at Sydney Cricket Ground. Earlier, rain caused four

interruptions in the morning session. England had the upper hand at the end of Day 1, but Australia did some good work in the opening hour to keep the visitors at bay. Although English bowlers kept the Australian batsmen in check, they couldn't make inroads. They bowled good lengths and lines, but none of the bowlers created chances or looked likely to threaten Steven Smith and Usman Khawaja, who saw through a testing phase where runs were coming at a trickle.

Brief scores:

Australia 416/8 decl in 134 overs (Marcus Harris 38, Steve Smith 67, Usman Khawaja 137, Mitchell Starc 34; Stuart Broad 5-101) lead England 13/0 by 403

CARABAO CUP: CHELSEA PROGRESS TO FINALS AFTER HARD-FOUGHT WIN

London: Five-time League Cup winners Chelsea now have an opportunity to make it six after beating Tottenham Hotspur 2-0 in the semi-finals of the annual Carabao Cup. The game was a hard-fought scrappy win with Chelsea going into half time with a two-goal cushion over Spurs, courtesy of a goal from Kai Havertz as well as an own goal by Ben Davies. The second half saw a formation shift from Spurs, who eschewed their preferred 3-4-3 set-up for a 4-2-3-1 formation with Coach Antonio Conte subbing off wingback Matt Doherty for midfielder Tanguy Ndombele.

Chelsea had come into this game with many notable absences such as first-choice wing backs Reece James and Ben Chilwell, who were out because of injury, alongside keeper Edouard Mendy, who had been called up by the Senegalese national team for the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON).



Team Absolute | Mumbai

Aclaimed actor Rajkumar Rao is all set to star in a biopic on Srikanth Bolla, the 29-year-old visually impaired industrialist who did not let his adversity come in the way of making it to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and then starting Bollant Industries with funding from Ratan Tata.

Born into a family of farmers in Machilipatnam, Andhra Pradesh,

Bolla took the state government to court when, citing his disability, he was not allowed to pursue the Science stream after he cleared his Class X exams.

He not only won the case, but also topped his school in Class XII. And though he was not admitted into IIT coaching classes, he got into MIT, becoming the first international visually impaired student to be able to do so. On his return from MIT, Bolla got involved with the Lead India 2020 campaign launched by the late

President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, set up organisations for the rehabilitation of disabled people and to pursue Sustainable Development Goals, and established Bollant Industries, which makes reusable products from waste material.

The film, tentatively titled 'Srikanth Bolla', has been written by Sumit Purohit and Jagdeep Sidhu, and will be helmed by Tushar Hiranandani, who earlier directed 'Saand Ki Aankh'.

Talking about his character, Rajkumar Rao said, "Srikanth Bolla

RAJKUMMAR RAO TO PLAY DIFFERENTLY ABLED INDUSTRIALIST IN BIOPIC

is an inspiration! It's indeed a privilege to play such an inspiring persona who has been through a lot of hardships and despite that has risen like a phoenix! I am really looking forward to playing Srikanth. I'm happy to collaborate with Bhushan sir yet again on this compelling project."

The film will be jointly produced under T-Series Films & Chalk N Cheese Films Production LLP by Bhushan Kumar, Krishan Kumar and Nidhi Parmar Hiranandani.



DUTY-BOUND TO ENTERTAIN PEOPLE: RANVEER SINGH

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Ranveer Singh, who was most recently seen in sports drama '83', considers it his duty to use his craft for entertaining people and telling stories in the most engaging way.

The actor is glad that the profession of acting allows him to explore the human being in him as well.

Ranveer says, "I am really just in the process of exploring myself as a person. To do different characters and present different films that we as people can be proud of, I feel duty-bound to entertain people." Reflecting up on his journey, he says, "It's been an amazing 10 years. I have worked with the finest filmmakers who have shaped me, taught me what it means to be an artiste. I have learnt so much but I feel hungry. My hunger is insatiable, I want to do more films like '83' that receive

this kind of unanimous love."

The actor wishes to traverse the path of experimentation in his next decade in cinema, "I intend to continue on this path and continue to explore. I am living the dream. I wake up in disbelief everyday till date that I am an actor. I still can't get over it and I am grateful for the opportunities. I say a prayer of gratitude everyday, I recognise and value my opportunities and got to play Kapil Dev in the definitive movie like '83'. It blows my mind."

Recollecting the memories of '83' screening, the superstar adds, "I cannot tell you how fulfilling it was to be in the screening of '83'. You see people laughing, crying, standing up to applaud and they are feeling this emotion together in a community viewing. They have shared an experience together and that is life. Life is a shared experience and that's what I want to continue to do."

PLAYING A FREEDOM FIGHTER ON SCREEN WOULD BE MY DREAM ROLE!': BHUMI PEDNEKAR

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Young Bollywood star Bhumi Pednekar has shown everyone that she can pull off any role with charisma. After wowing media and audiences alike with her breath-taking acting skills in numerous projects, Bhumi reveals that she would now really want to play a freedom fighter on the big screen.

"Playing a freedom fighter on screen would be my dream role! I'm fascinated by such remarkable personalities and it would be an honour for me to play someone like that on screen. I actually want to do that and I hope that the universe is listening to this. I would also like to be a part of a fan-

tasy project. There are so many different types of projects that I would love to explore and experience as an actor," says Bhumi.

Bhumi, who will be mostly seen in Anubhav Sinha's Bheed, Badhaai Do with Rajkumar Rao, Ajay Bahl's Ladykiller, Shashank Khaitan's Govinda Aala Re and Akshay Kumar and Aanand L. Rai's Raksha Bandhan in one calendar year, says she is drawn to play powerful characters on screen.

"I think one common thread in all my films or the work I have done is that I am trying to break stereotypes. I have done that right from Dum Laga Ke Haisha and I do see myself playing ambitious, vocal, beautiful, gutsy women on screen because I relate to them deeply. I'm thrilled that I'm an artiste today and that I'm living my dream every single day and creatively expressing myself freely," adds Bhumi.

ANUSHKA STARRER 'CHAKDA XPRESS' ON JHULAN GOSWAMI TO RELEASE ON NETFLIX

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Bollywood actress Anushka Sharma is all set to make her comeback after three years with the film 'Chakda Xpress' based on the life of female Indian cricketer Jhulan Goswami. The movie will have an OTT release on Netflix.

Anushka calls 'Chakda Xpress' a really special film because it "is essentially a story of tremendous sacrifice."

"Chakda Xpress is inspired by the life and times of former Indian captain Jhulan Goswami and it will be an eye-opener into the world of women's cricket. At a time when Jhulan decided to become a cricketer and make her country proud on the global stage, it was very tough for women to even think of playing the sport," she said. Anushka shared that the film is a dramatic retelling of several instances that shaped her life and also women's cricket. "From support systems, to facilities, to having a stable income from playing the game, to even having a future in cricket - very little propelled women of India to take up cricket as a profession. Jhulan had a fighting and extremely uncertain cricketering career and she stayed motivated to make her country proud. She strived to change the stereotype that women can't make a career out of playing cricket in India so that the next generation of girls had a better playing field."

Anushka added that Jhulan's life is a living testimony that passion and perseverance triumphs over any or all adversities and 'Chakda Xpress' is the most definitive look into the not so rosy world of women's cricket back then.



INSTAGRAM PIC OF THE DAY



Amy Jackson

Kriti Sanon to have five releases in 2022

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Kriti Sanon, will be seen in five films in 2022 all of which belong to different genres thereby allowing her to push the boundaries with her work.

She credits her last year's release 'Mimi' for giving her the strength to take on more risks. Reflecting on the year gone by, Kriti says, "2021 was an amazing year professionally. The kind of love that 'Mimi' got has been extremely overwhelming and has not only made me more confident as an actor to take risks but has also made me hungrier to push

the envelope further".

Looking forward to having more experimenting roles in the coming year, the actress shares, "What excites me more is the fact that all these projects belong to completely different genres and worlds. So there's a lot to look forward to in 2022!"

Next on the cards for the actress are several big-ticket releases like 'Adipurush' with Prabhas, 'Bachchan Pandey' with Akshay Kumar, 'Ganapath' with Tiger Shroff, 'Bhedhiya' with Varun Dhawan and 'Shehzada' with Kartik Aaryan.

