

## OPINION 6

IT ALL BOILS DOWN TO  
APPETITE FOR CONFLICT

## WORLD 8

RECORD WEEKLY COVID CASES LAST  
WEEK BUT DEATHS STABLE: WHO

## MONEY 9

INDIA'S ANNUAL BUDGET  
AGAIN GOES GREEN

NEW DELHI, THURSDAY JANUARY 27, 2022; PAGES 12 ₹3

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BRAZIL'S  
VINÍCIUS JÚNIOR  
12 SPORT

# Railway job aspirants' ire erupts, train set on fire

Students accuse Rly of 'cheating' by altering selection process midway

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Massive protests have erupted in several parts of the country against the Railways' decision to hold the exams for non-technical posts in Indian Railways in two stages, claiming that the second stage for final selection tantamount to "cheating" those who appeared and cleared the first stage of the RRB-NTPC for computer-based test (CBT).

With protest shaping up in large-scale violence, the Ministry of Railways decided to suspend its Non-Technical Popular Categories (NTPC) and Level 1 tests conducted by the Railway Recruitment Board.

The Railways formed a high-level committee to examine the grievances of those who have passed the exams under different railway recruitment boards (RRBs) and those who have failed the same.

The job aspirants set a train on fire in Gaya in Bihar, engaged in stone pelting, and resorted to violence at several



Railway Protection Force personnel try to douse the fire in a train set ablaze by aspirants, during their protest over alleged erroneous results of Railway Recruitment Boards-Non Technical Popular Categories (RRB-NTPC) exams, at Gaya Junction railway station on Wednesday

PTI

places in Bihar, Jharkhand, UP prompting the Centre to promise to address their grievances within three weeks.

The protest reached Prayagraj in the poll-bound Uttar Pradesh late in the evening and the Centre's appeal for calm did not douse the angry candidates. Several students were injured in lathi-charge. The Yogi Adityanath Government immediately suspended six police personnel and ordered an enquiry into police action on the protesting job aspirants.

Several protesters squatted on rail tracks in various cities,

which has led to the hampering of train movement.

Protesters claimed only one examination was mentioned in a notification issued in 2019 and accused the government of "playing with their future". The Railways Ministry had earlier clarified that the second stage exam was clearly mentioned in the notification.

The immediate provocation for the aspirants on Republic Day came after the Ministry of Railways issued a warning notice for the general public that whosoever indulges in damaging rail property will forever be banned

from taking the exams conducted by Indian Railways.

A passenger train was set on fire and another was attacked with stones in Gaya in violent protests by students against the railway jobs exam on a day when the country was celebrating Republic Day.

Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw appealed to the students to not break the law and assured them that their grievances would be addressed. Vaishnaw said the Railways is in touch with Chief Ministers and the issue is being handled "sensitive".

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi caresses an elite horse guard "Virat" after the Republic Day Parade 2022

Ranjan Dimri | Pioneer

## Spectacular aerial show on R-Day

Largest fly-past with more than 75 aircraft

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Viewers at the Rajpath and those watching the Republic Day parade on their television sets on Wednesday were treated to a thrilling fly past. This was the largest R-day fly past with more than 75 aircraft and helicopters taking part in the aerial show to mark 75 years of Independence.

For the first time, the aerobatic display was captured

live by cameras fitted in the cockpit of the planes performing the daring sorties. These images were directly beamed on television screens all over the country and giant screens erected at the Rajpath.

In another first, the first woman fighter pilot Flight Lieutenant Shivangi Singh took part in the parade by saluting the President from the IAF tableau.

Giving details of the coverage of the fly-past, officials said more than 59 cameras and 160 personnel were engaged for the cockpit coverage of the

Indian Air Force fly-past. Also, cameramen were deployed onboard to shoot images of the other aircraft.

Capturing the stunning visuals from the cockpit far above the clouds was the joint effort of Doordarshan and the IAF. Mesmerising footage from cameras fitted onboard aircraft that took part in the fly-past gave a glimpse of what the pilots saw from their cockpit. This was a whole new experience for the viewers.

The fly-past commenced with the "Dhwaj" formation with four Mi-17 aircraft, fol-

lowed by "Rudra" and "Rahat" formations with four and five Advanced Light Helicopters, respectively.

The highlight of the fly-past was the finale in which 17 Jaguar flew in the "Amrit" formation to commemorate 75 years of Independence. Among the other aircraft that displayed their might at the parade were Rafale, Indian Navy's MiG29K, P-8I surveillance aircraft and Jaguar fighter jets. The Tangail formation saw one Dakota and two Dornier flying in Vic formation.

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## CAPSULE

## TICKET TO RAWAT: STATE CONGRESS CHIEF MIFFED

**Dehradun:** Uttarakhand Congress working president Ranjit Rawat has expressed displeasure of the candidature of former CM Harish Rawat from Nainital's Ramnagar, a seat from where he was hopeful of getting the party ticket.

## VILLAGE HEAD KILLED IN UP'S BHADOHI

**Bhadohi (UP):** A village head was allegedly hacked to death purportedly over the recent panchayat election, police said on Wednesday.

## AP TO GET 13 MORE NEW DISTRICTS

**Amaravati:** The Andhra Pradesh Government issued draft notifications on Wednesday for carving out 13 new districts out of the existing 13, taking the total to 26.

## ACTIVE COVID-19 CASES IN COUNTRY DECLINE

**New Delhi:** India logged 2,85,914 new coronavirus infections, taking the total tally of Covid-19 cases to 4,00,85,116, according to the Union Health Ministry data updated on Wednesday.

## PLA to hand over missing Arunachal youth to India after weather improves

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India and China on Wednesday held talks on the hotline regarding a teenager from Arunachal Pradesh now in the custody of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). He is likely to be handed over to the Indian Army after the weather improves.

17-year-old boy Miram Taron was reported missing on Tuesday last week. One version claimed he was abducted by the PLA, while the other version said he lost his way in the thick jungle while collecting herbs and hunting. The Indian Army contacted the PLA the next day and the Chinese informed the boy was in their custody.

Union Minister of Law and Justice Kiren Rijiju said on Wednesday China has indicated the release of the boy and will soon share the date and time. He said China has also suggested a place of release and said the delay was due to bad weather conditions on their side. "Hotline exchanged on Republic Day by Indian Army with Chinese PLA. The PLA

responded positively indicating handing over of our national and suggested a place of release. They are likely to intimate date and time soon. Delay attributed to bad weather conditions on their side," Rijiju said. The Minister, who hails from Arunachal Pradesh, also said earlier China intimated that they had found a boy on their side and requested for further details to establish the identity. To assist the Chinese side in further corroborating the identity, personal details and photos of the individual have been shared with the Chinese side by the Indian Army.

"Appeal to everyone to be cautious in making statements which are not based on facts because the safety and safe return of our Young Arunachal Pradesh youth is a priority," Rijiju said.

Taron's friend Johnny Yaiping, who was with him in the forest, told the authorities that PLA had abducted his friend, State MP Tapir Gao had said last week.

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## Shah meets Jat leaders to woo community away from SP-RLD

DEEPAK UPRETI ■ NEW DELHI

Top BJP leader and Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday reached out to the Jat leaders and sought to send feelers to the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) which has struck an alliance with the rival Samajwadi Party (SP).

Shah met 250 Jat leaders here and understood to have conveyed that the BJP was a natural ally of theirs and RLD leader Jayant Choudhary has "chosen a wrong house".

The BJP leader apparently indicated "many possibilities of a post-poll alliance" with the RLD.

Jats which form 17 per cent of the western UP population may influence around 120 Assembly seats.

Union Minister Sanjiv Balyan and BJP MP Praveesh attended the discussion. Balyan and Verma are both jats.

After the meeting with the Jat community with the Union Home Minister, Verma quoted Shah as saying that there are "many possibilities".

He also indicated post-poll alliance with the RLD even as the latter has chosen the



SP in the UP polls and referred to the "Kisan legacy" of late Jat leader and former Prime Minister Charan Singh.

Verma quoted Shah saying that the Jat community always supported the BJP and voted for the saffron party in 2007, 2012 or 2017.

Balyan said, "Talks were held in a good atmosphere and holds out the promise of cooperation between the Jats and the party".

Balyan had recently held a "peace talk" with the brother of the anti-Central farm laws leader and Bharatiya Kisan Union head Rakesh Tikait and tried to rope him in the BJP fold. Tikait had undertaken an anti-Government stance on the farm laws with Jat farmers leaning against the BJP.

The western UP is going to polls in the first two phases of the State elections on February 10 and February 14.

## Tricolour unfurled at Lal Chowk 30 years after Joshi did it



Social activists hold national flags during Republic Day functions at Lal Chowk in Srinagar on Wednesday

PTI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

National flag was hoisted atop the historic Clock tower in Srinagar's Lal Chowk on Wednesday, 30 years after veteran BJP leader Murlu Manohar Joshi did it for the first time.

Social activists Sajid Yousuf Shah and Sahil Bashir Bhat, along with dozens of supporters, had organised the flag unfurling ceremony at Clock Tower, locally known as Ghanta Ghar, to mark the Republic Day.

The activist used a hydraulic crane elevator to install the national flag on top of the clock tower amid rendition of the national anthem.

Young players from Kashmir Martial Arts Academy also participated in the function. The participants danced to patriotic songs as hundreds of Police and paramilitary personnel stood guard around the clock tower.

Senior BJP leader had unfurled the national flag at Lal Chowk in 1992 at the peak of militancy in the valley.

## Covishield, Covaxin prices to be capped at ₹275/dose

Service charge to cost ₹150 additionally

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The price of Covishield and Covaxin, the Covid vaccines which are expected to soon get regular market approval from India's drug regulator, is likely to be capped at ₹275 per dose plus an additional service charge of ₹150, official sources said, according to a news agency.

According to them, the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) has been directed to start working towards capping the price to make the vaccines affordable.

As of now, Covaxin is priced at ₹1,200 per dose while Covishield costs ₹780 in private facilities. The prices include ₹150 service charge. Both the



vaccines are only authorised for emergency use in the country.

A Subject Expert Committee on Covid-19 of the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation on January 19 recommended granting regular market approval to Covid vaccines Covishield and Covaxin for use in the adult population subject to certain conditions.

"The NPPA has been asked to work towards capping the price of the vaccines. The price is likely to be capped at ₹275 per dose along with an additional service charge of ₹150," an official source said.

Prakash Kumar Singh, the director (Government and regulatory affairs) at Serum Institute of India, had submitted an application to the Drugs Controller General of India on October 25 seeking regular market approval for its Covishield vaccine.

A couple of weeks ago, V Krishna Mohan, the whole-time director at Bharat Biotech, submitted complete information on the chemistry, manufacturing and controls, along with the pre-clinical and clinical data while seeking regular market authorisation for Covaxin.

Covaxin and Covishield, which got Emergency Use Authorisation on January 3 last year, have been the mainstay of India's coronavirus immunisation programme launched on January 16, 2021.

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## Omicron can live for 21 hrs on skin, 8 days on plastic

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

A new study has found that Omicron, the highly contagious variant of Covid-19, can survive up to 21 hours on skin and eight days on plastic — much longer than any other variants of concern like Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta, as well as the original strain.

"The Omicron variant has the highest environmental stability among variants of concern (VOCs)," said researchers from the Kyoto Prefectural University of Medicine in Japan in their findings. The research showed that that on plastic and skin surfaces, Alpha, Beta, Delta, and Omicron variants exhibited more than two-fold longer survival times than those of the Wuhan strain and maintained infectivity for more than 16 hours on the skin surfaces.

Omicron survived 21.1 hours on skin models from

cadavers, followed by the Wuhan virus (8.6 hours), the Gamma (11 hours) and Delta (16.8 hours) variant.

The survival of Alpha (19.6 hours) and Beta (19.1 hours) was found to be similar.

"The Omicron variant has the highest environmental stability among VOCs," said researchers from the Kyoto Prefectural University of Medicine in Japan.

"This high stability might also be one of the factors that have allowed the Omicron variant to replace the Delta variant and spread rapidly," they said.

Further, the team found that Omicron can survive 193.5 hours (about 8 days) on a plastic (polystyrene) surface, plus three times that of the original strain (56 hours) and of the Gamma variant (59.3 hours), and significantly more than Delta (114 hours) and Beta (156.6 hours).

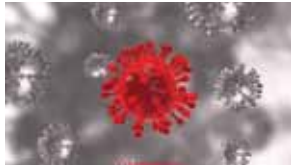
## Omicron-induced antibodies protective against all variants

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Antibodies generated by Omicron, a Covid-19 strain, are not only effective against it but also against other variants of concern (VOCs), including Delta, according to the latest study conducted by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

"The individuals infected with Omicron have significant immune responses which could neutralise not only the Omicron but also the other VOCs, including the most prevalent Delta variant," it said.

"This suggests that the immune response induced by the Omicron could effectively neutralise the Delta variant making the re-infection with Delta less likely, thereby displacing the Delta as dominant strain. This emphasises the need for the Omicron-specif-



ic vaccine strategy," it further said.

In this study, the ICMR has analysed the IgG and neutralising antibodies (NABs) against B.1, Alpha, Beta, Delta and Omicron variants with the sera of individuals infected with the Omicron variant (B.1.1529 and BA.1).

ICMR has said within a short span of time, the variant has shown high transmissibility and capability of evading the immune response generated against natural infection and vaccination. The immune escape potential of Omicron is a serious concern and further needs to be explored.

The study, where antibodies response was assessed in those who are infected by Omicron, is pre-print not peer-reviewed.

It also stated, "In the present study, we have assessed the IgG and neutralising antibody (NAB) response in breakthrough individuals vaccinated with two doses ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 vaccine (n=25), breakthrough individuals vaccinated with two doses of BNT162b2 mRNA vaccine (n=8) and unvaccinated individuals (n=6). All these individuals were infected with the Omicron variant."

Also, 28 of these 39 were mainly foreign returnees from the UAE, South/West/East Africa, Middle East, the US and the UK, and 11 people were their high-risk contacts. All these individuals were infected with the Omicron variant.



# We are supporting India’s vax drive: UN spokesperson

PTI ■ UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations is supporting India's vaccination drive, which is the largest in the world, and the global body and its partners have reached some 600 million people in the country with COVID prevention and mitigation messages, spokesperson for UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has said.

Stephane Dujarric, Spokesman for the Secretary-General, at the daily press briefing on Tuesday said the UN team in India led by Resident Coordinator Shombi Sharp continues to support authorities to curb the spread of the virus.

"To date, we and our partners have reached some 600 million people in India with COVID prevention and mitigation messages. We are supporting India's vaccination

drive, which is the world's largest," Dujarric said. "This includes developing robust surveillance and monitoring measures, boosting lab capacity, developing response plans, procuring and distributing personal protective equipment, training health care workers, and disseminating life-saving information," Dujarric said.

He said the UN team has worked to develop a comprehensive Risk Communication and Community Engagement strategy, training over 1.3 million healthcare workers in risk communications.

The cumulative COVID-19 vaccine doses administered in India crossed 163.49 crore on Tuesday, the Union Health Ministry said.

Over 93 lakh precaution doses have been given to healthcare workers, frontline workers and citizens aged 60 and above with comorbidities

so far. The countrywide vaccination drive, the largest in the world, was rolled out on January 16 last year with healthcare workers getting inoculated in the first phase.

The vaccination of front-line workers started from February 2021.

The country launched vaccination for all people aged 45 years and above from April. From January 3 this year, COVID-19 vaccination for adolescents in the age group of 15-18 years in India commenced.

India began administering precaution dose of COVID-19 vaccine to healthcare workers, frontline workers including personnel deployed for election duty and those aged 60 and above with comorbidities from January 10 amid the country witnessing a spike in COVID-19 cases fuelled by Omicron variant.

# British PM flags vaccine bond with India in Republic Day message

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has extended greetings to the people of India on the Republic Day as he focussed his message on the launch of free trade agreement (FTA) talks and the India-UK vaccine partnership.

Johnson said he is proud of the friendship shared by the two "diverse democracies" and looked forward to fortifying the strong bond over the next 75 years and beyond. He said: "The UK and India are tied by deep bonds that span through the generations and across some of the greatest modern day challenges we have faced.

That is why I want to send my best wishes on behalf of the United Kingdom to the people of India, and to all the British Indians in the UK, on India's Republic Day.

"As two diverse democracies, I am proud of our strong friendship, demonstrated by



the launch of free trade negotiations this month and our partnership manufacturing the Oxford-Astra Zeneca vaccine. I look forward to fortifying those bonds as we bring our ambitions, people and economies together to prosper for the next 75 years and beyond."

Anglo-Swedish biopharma major AstraZeneca is in a manufacturing tie-up with Serum Institute India (SII) for the production of Oxford University's COVID-19 vaccine, known in India as Covishield. Earlier this month, the UK's

Department of Trade (DIT) confirmed the first round of FTA talks are being held virtually and expected to last into this week.

An India-UK FTA is billed in the UK as creating huge benefits for both countries, with the potential to boost bilateral trade by up to GBP 28 billion a year by 2035 and increase wages by up to GBP 3 billion across the UK.

A deal with India is also pegged as a "big step forward" in the UK's post-Brexit strategy to refocus trade on the Indo-Pacific, home to half of the world's population and 50 per cent of global economic growth.

The DIT has said the UK wants an agreement that slashes barriers to doing business and trading with India's GBP 2.7 trillion economy and market of 1.4 billion consumers, including cutting tariffs on exports of British-made cars and Scotch whisky.

# Bangladesh keen to work with India to realise shared vision of building peaceful and prosperous region: PM Hasina

PTI ■ DHAKA

Bangladesh is keen to work with India towards realising the shared vision of building a peaceful and prosperous region, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said on Wednesday as she extended greetings to her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi and the people of India on the country's 73rd Republic Day.

In a letter written to Modi, Hasina said the year 2021 was a "historic one" for the Bangladesh-India relationship, marked by celebrations of "epochal" events and engagements at the highest levels.

"On behalf of the Government and the people of Bangladesh and on my own behalf, I extend the warmest wishes and heartiest felicitations to you and the People of India on the auspicious occasion of the Republic Day of India," she said.

Hasina said the unique ties of close friendship, cooperation and trust between the two countries have flourished and grown from strength to strength in recent years.

Many new frontiers of cooperation alongside all traditional areas have been identified, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, she said.

"We look forward to working with India in the next fifty years and beyond, towards realising the shared vision of building a peaceful and prosperous region," she said. Hasina said she "thankfully" recalled

Modi's visit to Dhaka in March last year to join the celebrations of the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence, the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and 50 years of establishment of diplomatic ties between Bangladesh and India.

"Your gracious presence on these occasions has added extra enthusiasm to the celebrations and allowed us to further consolidate our excellent bilateral relations, which so happily exist between our two countries," she wrote in the letter.

Hasina said she recalled with gratitude the support rendered by the government and the people of India during Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971 and said this set the foundation of "our unique relationship."

"The joint celebration of 'Moitri Dibosh' held across the globe on December 6, the day when India recognised Bangladesh as a sovereign and independent country in 1971, projected this special relationship," wrote Hasina.

The High Commission of India in Dhaka, meanwhile, celebrated the Republic Day at Chancery premises with Indians living in the Bangladeshi capital.

High Commissioner Shri Vikram K Dioraiswami unfurled the national flag and read out the President's address to the Nation at a ceremony following Covid-19 protocols.

# Punjab polls: SAD fields Majithia against Sidhu from Amritsar East, ex-CM Badal from Lambi

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

The Shiromani Akali Dal on Wednesday fielded senior party leader Bikram Singh Majithia against Punjab Congress chief Navjot Singh Sidhu from Amritsar East and former CM Parkash Singh Badal from Lambi constituency.

Parkash Singh Badal will be the oldest candidate in the fray for the February 20 Assembly elections. Declaring Majithia's candidature, party chief Sukhbir Singh Badal attacked Sidhu, saying his political life is "coming to an end". Meanwhile, Majithia expressed his gratitude to the SAD chief for fielding him from Amritsar East and tweeted, "Akalis have a brave history of fighting to safeguard the rights of Punjabis & protecting them from the anti-Punjab elements like @sherryontopp." Amritsar East will be the second seat from where Bikram Singh Majithia will be contest-

ing. The other seat from where he will be in the fray is the Majithia Assembly segment. "Navjot Sidhu, be ready," Sukhbir Badal told the Punjab Congress chief.

The SAD president said his party's Amritsar leadership and workers told him that Sidhu's "arrogance" has to be shattered. "Our warrior will fight from the Amritsar East seat," he said. Sukhbir Badal said rival political parties are targeting Majithia as he raises the voice of people. He accused the Charanjit Singh Channi government, especially Sidhu of getting a false drug case registered against Majithia.

Booked under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act last month, Majithia has been trying to secure an anticipatory bail from courts.

Majithia was denied relief by the Punjab and Haryana High Court early this week but was given three-day protection

from arrest to move the Supreme Court for reprieve.

"You (Sidhu) used to make false allegations and now the people of Punjab and people of your constituency will dispense justice," said Badal after declaring Majithia's candidature.

Targeting Sidhu for "doing nothing" for the Amritsar East constituency, Badal said the cricketer-turned-politician has been harping on his Punjab Model but completely neglected his own constituency.

"A leader who does not go to his constituency and meet workers talks about the Punjab Model," the SAD chief said.

"His political life is coming to an end and it is going to be his last election," Badal asserted. On the Lambi seat, Badal said his father and former CM Parkash Singh Badal will be contesting. "Badal sahab fought for Punjab and the community throughout his life. He told me that he will not retire," he said.

"Badal Sahab has always been in the forefront to offer his services for the welfare of Punjab and Punjabis and he is doing so again," he added.

Badal has been winning from the Lambi assembly seat since 1997. With the announcement of candidates on the two seats, the SAD has now declared candidates on all 97 seats on which it is going to contest the February 20 state Assembly polls.

The party, meanwhile, announced the candidature of Satinder Singh Chajjwalwadi from the Jandiala seat, replacing Malkit Singh, who has expressed inability to fight polls on health grounds.

The SAD has tied up with the BSP for the coming elections. According to the seat-sharing arrangement between the two parties, the BSP will field candidates on 20 of the 117 Assembly seats in Punjab, while the rest will be contested by the Shiromani Akali Dal.

# Maha: 3 minor sisters killed as truck falls on them while unloading coal; 4 arrested

PTI ■ THANE

Three minor sisters were killed when a container truck tilted and fell on them while unloading coal in Bhiwandi tehsil in Thane district of Maharashtra, police said on Wednesday.

Their two-year-old sister escaped unhurt in the accident which occurred at Tembivili village on Tuesday night at a brick kiln, where their parents were employed as workers, a Bhiwandi taluka police station official said.

Four persons, including the brick kiln owner, were arrested in connection with the incident, police said.

A container truck was unloading coal at the brick kiln when its hydraulic system developed a snag due to which the truck tilted on one side and fell on the three sisters who were sleeping near the spot, he

said. The deceased girls, aged between three to seven years, were daughters of a brick kiln worker-couple, the official said.

Police registered a case under section 304 A (causing death by negligence) of the Indian Penal Code against the arrested persons, who were later produced before a local court which remanded them in police custody for two days.

The mother of the four girls had allowed the three deceased siblings to sleep in a thatched hut in the brick kiln and placed the toddler in a cradle made of clothes and hung it to a tree by the side of their hut, villagers said.

Since the two-year-old child was some distance away from the hut, she escaped unhurt, they said. The police said the father of the victims had gone out to answer nature's call at the time of the incident.

# Railway job aspirants' ire erupts, train set on fire

From Page 1

"I request students not to take the law into their hands. We will seriously address the grievances and concerns raised by them," the Minister said and added that all RRB chairmen have been asked to listen to the concerns of students, compile them and send them to the committee.

"An email address has been set up for this purpose. The committee will go to different parts of the country and listen to grievances," he said at a hurriedly called Press conference.

"I am telling the aspirants that this is their own property. Why are they destroying something that is their own? However, authorities will follow due process if public property is damaged," the Minister said.

Around 1.25 crore candidates had applied for the exams that had advertised over 35,000 posts from level 2 to level 6, with starting pay ranging from Rs 19,900 to Rs 35,400 per month. Around 60 lakh people appeared for the exam.

"Railway constitutes High Power Committee to look into Concerns of Candidates over NTPC CBT-1 Result. Candidates may submit their Grievances to Committee till 16th February 2022," the Railway Ministry tweeted.

In Bihar's Jehanabad town, angry students burned an effigy of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on railway tracks and raised slogans against the Government. In another city, Sitamarhi, the police fired in the air to disperse angry demonstrators at the railway station. Protests were also reported from Patna, Nawada, Buxar, Ranchi,

Dhanbad, and Bhojpur districts of Bihar and Jharkhand. The protesting students posted videos and messages on social media platforms addressing job aspirants from other States as well to protest against the anomalies in the conduct of examinations. Refuting the allegations, the Ministry of Railways also has issued a clarification in which it said that the second stage exam was clearly mentioned in the notification.

The issue came to the fore when the results were declared on January 15. Many candidates also claim that the screening process is designed to favour those with a higher qualification, even in jobs that require lesser qualifications.

The railways had earlier said that it was looking to fill 35,281 posts. Of these, 24,281 posts in 13 categories were open to graduates and 11,000 posts in six categories were for undergraduates.

These thirteen categories were segregated into five groups based on the Seventh Central Pay Commission pay-scale levels (Levels 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6). These posts included that of train assistant, guard, junior clerk, time keeper and station master across its various zones.

While to get a Level 2 job, where the starting pay is about Rs 19,000, one requires to be a Class 12 pass, for a level 6 post like station master, who gets a starting pay of about Rs 35,000, being a graduate is mandatory.

Aspirants have alleged that during the Computer Based Test -1 which was held last year, candidates with higher qualification have sat for exams meant for Level 2

jobs. The problem, officials said, is that the railways cannot stop an aspirant with a higher qualification from sitting for an exam with lower qualification requirements.

In a clarification, the railways said short-listing of candidates has been done separately for each level based on educational qualifications and options exercised by the candidates.

For the second stage computer-based test (CBT) of each level, the number of candidates called was 20 times the community-wise vacancies notified against each RRB, it has stated.

Based on merit obtained in second stage CBT, the candidates will be short-listed for the third stage exam in which eight times the number of vacancies will be called.

Earlier, the short-listing was done 10 times the vacancy, however, this time it is 20 times the vacancy for the second stage, officials said.

Meanwhile, amid rising protests, the Ministry of Railways on Tuesday issued a statement, warning candidates of being "Debarred for Life" from obtaining a railway job.

"RRB NTPC Protest videos will now be examined by the Ministry with the help of specialised agencies. Upon proper examination, those found indulging in any of the mentioned activities will be penalised accordingly. They will be liable to both police action as well as lifetime debarment from a Railway job," said the statement.

According to the RRB NTPC exam dates, the CBT 2 exam, for which seven lakh candidates have been short-listed, is scheduled to be held on February 14 and 18.

# 13,049 new Covid cases, 21 deaths in Rajasthan

PTI ■ JAIPUR

Rajasthan on Wednesday Recorded 21 deaths and 13,049 fresh COVID-19 cases, an official report said. The new infected include 2,234 in Jaipur, 1,846 in Alwar, 1,000 in Jodhpur, 801 in Ganganagar, 673 in Udaipur, 588 in Bharatpur, and 558 in Ajmer. According to the health department data, 11,572 people recovered from infection on Wednesday. Active cases in the state currently stand at 94,148. Out of the 21 deaths, four each occurred in Jaipur and Jodhpur, two each in Bikaner and Nagaur, and one each in Ajmer, Alwar, Barmer, Dungarpur, Jalore, Jhunjhunu, Kota, Sikar, and Udaipur.

# Opinion Polls are ‘Opium Polls’ : Akhilesh Yadav

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Samajwadi Party (SP) president Akhilesh Yadav on Wednesday warned people against opinion polls ahead of Uttar Pradesh assembly calling them "opium polls".

"Opinion Polls in reality are Opium polls. We need to be careful of them," Yadav said in his address at the party office here on the occasion of Republic Day.

"BJP leaders want to take the election in a different direction with their statements. All kinds of misconceptions are being spread on WhatsApp," he said. The SP had earlier written to the Election Commission demanding ban on opinion polls on news channels, terming them a violation of election code of conduct. Yadav said people with "negative mindset" and those "divid-

ing the society" want to take the country backwards. "The country got its freedom through a long struggle and sacrifice of thousands of youths. A pledge must be taken to save this freedom, democracy, and the Constitution," he said.

Yadav alleged that the BJP government "insulted" the farmers during the farm bill strife and exhorted people to come together against it. "Farmers' sons are protecting the border."

But farmers are being harassed in the country and subjected to use of force. What was done to crush the farmers' protest we all know.

Everyone must consider this assembly election as their own. It will be decisive," Yadav also claimed that people's problems will go away after March 10 when SP will have come to the power.

# Covishield, Covaxin prices to be capped at ₹275/dose

From Page 1

At least 90 per cent of the doses administered so far are of Covishield. If the national drugs regulator grants approval to Covishield and Covaxin, then it will be the second and third anti-Covid vaccine in the world to have received full market authorisation, making it eligible for retail sale, albeit with certain conditions.

On August 23, this year, the US Food and Drug Administration (USFDA) approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which is now being

marketed as Comirnaty, for the prevention of Covid-19 disease in individuals 16 years of age and older.

"...While this and other vaccines have met the FDA's rigorous, scientific standards for emergency use authorisation, as the first FDA-approved Covid-19 vaccine, the public can be very confident that this vaccine meets the high standards for safety, effectiveness, and manufacturing quality the FDA requires of an approved product," acting FDA commissioner, Janet Woodcock had said after granting authorisation.

# PLA to hand over missing Arunachal youth to India after weather...

From Page 1

The MP said the incident took place near the place where Tsangpo river enters India in Arunachal Pradesh. Tsangpo is called as Siang in Arunachal Pradesh and Brahmaputra in Assam.

In September 2020, the PLA had detained five youths from Arunachal Pradesh's Upper Subansiri district and released them after about a week.

# Spectacular aerial show on R-Day

From Page 1

This was a tribute to the Tangail airdrop operations of the 1971 War. Tangail formation was followed by the Traan formation and Netra formation.

Next was the "Vinaash" formation comprising five Rafale aircraft followed by the "Baaz" formation displayed by a Rafale jet, two Jaguars, two MiG-29 UPGs, and two Su-30 MLs, creating an 'Arrowhead' formation of seven aircraft.

In the Tiranga formation, five Sarang (ALH) flew in ladder formation streaming Tricolour after Varuna formation. There was also a Meghna formation of 1 Chinook and four Mi-17s.

In the "Amrit" formation, 17 Jaguar aircraft made a figure of 75. The formation was led by Group Captain Avinash Singh and other pilots such as Group Captain Gourav Arjariya, Wing Commander Sandeep Jain, and Group Captain NP Verma.



# DDMA meeting today on lifting Covid curbs

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) will meet on Thursday to review the pandemic situation in the city. The meeting comes amid demands of lifting weekend curfew and odd-even system of opening shops by traders as well as the AAP and the BJP. Lieutenant Governor Anil Bajaj will chair the meeting. As Chief Minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal is also likely to attend the meeting and will discuss relaxations that may be allowed since Covid-19 cases are declining, according to Delhi Government, decision will also be taken on the reopening of schools from February month depending on the vaccination status of the students by the end of this month. On the matter of reopening of Delhi schools, Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia also interacted with a delegation of parents. Sisodia, who also holds the charge of Education Minister in the AAP Government said, reopening of schools is necessary to prevent further damage to socio-emo-

tional wellbeing of students. The Education Minister added that according to various researches done by global institutions, the risk of Covid is less among young children, and will recommend schools in the DDMA meeting. "We closed school when it was not safe for children but excessive caution is now harming our children. A generation of children will be left behind if we do not open our schools now," he added. It may be noted that the national capital on Wednesday reported 7,498 positive cases in the last 24 hours. While 11,164 patients recovered and 70,084 tests conducted, the tests positivity rate recorded 10.59 per cent and 29 deaths. While online learning confining the social interactions and students are bound to attend online classes due amid the threat of Covid 19, Sisodia said, "In the past two years, school children's lives have been confined to their rooms. Instead of going to schools and spending time in playgrounds, all their activities now take place only on mobile phones. The pandemic-induced school closures have not only affected their studies but also men-

tal health. During COVID, our priority was children's safety. But since various researches have now found that Covid-19 is not so harmful for kids, it is important to reopen the schools, as now is the time for exams and related preparations," he added. "Schools are being reopened in several countries and even many Indian states. The Covid cases and positivity rate are on the decline in Delhi, it would not be suitable to keep children away from schools. Hence, the Delhi Government will request in the DDMA meeting that it be allowed to reopen schools while following all Covid-19 protocols. With children returning to schools, not only will the schools witness a buzz but it will also indicate lives coming back on track," he said. The Deputy CM further tweeted, "I agree with the parents' demands. We closed school when it was not safe for children but excessive caution is now harming our children. A generation of children will be left behind if we do not open our schools now."

## 54% Delhiites want weekend curfew to continue: Survey

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Fifty four per cent of Delhiites are in favour of lifting the odd-even restrictions in markets but want the weekend curfew to continue till the positivity rate declines to five per cent, a survey has claimed. Delhi had seen an uptick in Covid-19 infections, mainly triggered by the Omicron variant, but the cases have seen a decline over the last 10 days. LocalCircles, a digital community-based platform, asked in its survey, "What should be the criteria to remove current Covid-related restrictions (weekend and night curfew, market odd-even shops, etc.) imposed in Delhi?" In response, 40 per cent people said market odd-even

restrictions should be relaxed but night and weekend curfew should continue until the positivity rate dropped to five per cent. Another 18 per cent people were of the opinion that the restrictions should be eased only when the positivity rate dropped to five per cent. Fourteen per cent respondents said they wanted the administration to do away with the restrictions only when the positivity rate came down to two per cent while an equal number of people said the government should continue with the existing setup until the positivity rate dipped down to one per cent. The remaining 14 per cent of the respondents wanted the government to remove

all restrictions immediately, the survey claimed. On average, 54 per cent of Delhi residents supported the removal of odd-even restrictions in markets. According to the survey, 72 per cent of the participants wanted the administration to the lift the weekend and night curfews only after the test positivity rate hit five per cent. The survey received 8,661 responses, of which 65 per cent of the respondents were men and the rest were women. The survey was released ahead of the crucial meeting of the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) on Thursday, which will see discussions on the removal of Covid restrictions in the national Capital.

## Delhi's active Covid-19 caseload drops by 50 pc in 12 days

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The number of active Covid-19 cases in Delhi has halved in just 12 days after rising to a high of 94,160 on January 13, while it took 21 days for the active caseload to drop by half during the second wave last year. The third wave of the pandemic saw the active cases peaking to 94,160 on January 13. The number dropped to 42,010 by Tuesday. During the ferocious second wave last year, active cases had risen to a high of 99,752 on April 28 and the number reduced to 45,047 by May 19. Experts said the decline in cases is in line with their expectations.

"It was expected. The rise was very rapid. The R naught value -- which indicates the spread of COVID-19 -- was around 4, which means a person would infect the entire family within two days. "The recovery is faster. The incubation period is shorter, hardly two to three days. Hence, the sharp fall in the number of cases," said Director-Professor, Community Medicine Department, Maulana Azad Medical College, Nandini Sharma. Researches suggest that Omicron has an incubation period of roughly three days as compared to the Delta variant which had an average incubation

period of about four days. The original strain of COVID-19 and its early variants had an incubation period of about five days. The Delhi Government data showed there have been fewer hospitalisations due to COVID-19 this time and officials said the virus isn't the primary reason for most fatalities. A maximum of 2,784 (17.96 per cent) of the 15,505 COVID-19 beds in hospitals were occupied on January 17. During the second wave, 20,117 (92 per cent) of the 21,839 beds were occupied on May 6. However, the increase in the number of patients on ventilators has been a cause for concern.

## R-Day parade held with Covid protocols



Artists from various States perform during the Republic Day parade at Rajpath

Pioneer Photo

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Crowds at the Republic Day Cparade on Wednesday were curtailed to just 5,000 people, all double-masked, vaccinated and maintaining strict 'do gaz ki doori' in view of the Covid-19 situation. Only double vaccinated adults and children above the age of 15 who have taken at least one dose of a Covid-19 vaccine were allowed to enter the venue. Children below 15 years were not permitted to attend. Chairs were placed at a distance to ensure social distancing. Participants also received a white cap with 'Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav' printed on it. "I used to watch Republic Day every year on TV. This year I was visiting a friend here and didn't want to lose this opportunity to attend the historic

parade taking place on the 75th year of independence," said Amrita Singh who travelled all the way from Ludhiana to attend the parade. For Ashmit Parekh, it was the last opportunity to see the parade in person before moving abroad this year. "I know there is Covid-19 but I wanted to see the parade once," he said. Asked if he is scared of contracting the virus, Parekh said he is double vaccinated and taking all precautions. "Honestly it is much safer here with all the protocols in place" the IT professional said. The annual ceremonial event at Rajpath which used to witness huge bustling crowds across many age groups has been scaled down since last year in view of the coronavirus pandemic. The spectators' size was

drastically cut to 5000 this year from the 25,000 last year. In the pre-pandemic times, over one lakh spectators used to witness the parade. Shibani Kapoor, a class 12 student, said the experience of seeing the parade in person was "awesome". "I am glad I attended the parade. The best part for me was the flypast, it was so beautiful and glorious," she added. Prime Minister Narendra Modi after the conclusion of the parade walked on Rajpath and waved at the people and greeted them. India is presently battling the third wave of Covid-19 driven by the Omicron variant. The country logged 2,85,914 new coronavirus infections taking the total tally of Covid-19 cases to 4,00,85,116, according to Union Health Ministry data updated on Wednesday.

## Awarded for taking varsity to greater heights: Jamia VC

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Jamia Millia Islamia vice chancellor Najma Akhtar said the Padma Shri award was a recognition of the work done by her to take the university to greater heights in the last one year during which the varsity was given A++ grade by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council.

**Najma Akhtar has been awarded the Padma Shri in the field of Literature and Education**

Akhtar was appointed as the vice chancellor (VC) in April 2019, the same year which saw protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December. Jamia Millia Islamia had become the epicentre of anti-CAA protests after police barged into the campus and allegedly attacked students studying inside the library on December 15, 2019. The police had said they entered the campus to look for outsiders involved in violence during the protests, a few metres away from the university. "It was an unhappy situation across the country. It was not my fault (what happened at that time). I did what was expected from me. Not many others might have done what I did. I had to take care of my students at that time and that is what I did," she told PTI after the award was announced. Akhtar holds the distinction of being the first woman vice-chancellor of the university, and probably also the first VC of any central university in the country. Will her tenure pave the

way for other women to be appointed in leadership roles? "It has already started paying way. After several years of independence, no government showed confidence in a woman. It was for the first time that the current government chose a woman. I had to show that they were right and justify my appointment," she added. Akhtar has been awarded the Padma Shri in the field of Literature and Education. She thanked President Ram Nath Kovind, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the government for recognising her work. Talking about the honour, she said the award gives her more encouragement to perform. "I was not aiming to get it. In the last one year, the university has been achieving great heights. The VC is given the responsibility as well as the blame. I know people are recognising my work. I am obliged that the prime minister and the president are recognising my work. I am extremely grateful. Everyone puts in hard work, but not everyone

gets recognition," she said. Talking about the university's performance in terms of rankings, she said along with her team, she tried her level best to improve the performance of the university. "I was entrusted with an important responsibility by the government to head Jamia Millia Islamia. I tried my level best with my team to improve the performance of the university and recent achievements like the A++ accreditation by National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), improvement in National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) and other international rankings can be seen as a result of that work," she added. The university has battled three waves of the COVID-19 pandemic and lost its faculty members to the virus. "We did a lot of work during COVID-19 not only in the university, but also for the whole community that is around the university and even for south Delhi," she shared. The VC said, in a statement, that the award is an important achievement for not only herself, but for every individual associated with the university, especially female students. "The responsibility has increased now and I will try my level best to keep up to their expectations," she said. The Jamia Millia Islamia, in a tweet, called Akhtar's achievement a proud moment for the university.



Army tanks being displayed during the Republic Day parade at Rajpath

Pioneer Photo

## Women daredevils from BSF thrill with acrobatics on bikes

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A team of women daredevils from the Border Security Force on Wednesday got the adrenaline rushing as they performed gravity-defying motorcycle stunts on Rajpath during the Republic Day parade. They also sent out a message of girl education and women empowerment. The 'Seema Bhawani' motorcycle team received applause and appreciation from the spectators, including several Union ministers and other dignitaries present at the venue, many of whom gave the women troupe a standing ovation. The segment began with a member giving a salute to President Ram Nath Kovind while precariously riding a motorcycle. She was followed by

her colleague, who rode a motorcycle sitting backward and holding a placard that read 'Beti Bachhao, Beti Padhao'. A number of other routines, too, got the pulses racing in the crowd, which was rather thin this year due to COVID-19 restrictions. Other stunts performed by them included 'single kneeling', 'chair riding', 'fish riding', 'double-back riding', 'Abhinandan', 'Gulistan', and 'pyramid' formation. Following their performance, the 'Himveers' troupe from the Indo-Tibetan Border Police dazzled the spectators with their acrobatics on motorcycles. The 'pyramid' formation called 'Himalay ke Prahari' was displayed by a group of 39 Himveers on nine motorcycles.

## Soon commuters will face no traffic snarls near Majnu Ka Tila on Outer Ring Road

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Commuters travelling through Outer Ring Road between central and north Delhi will soon get rid of traffic snarls near Majnu Ka Tila and Chandgi Ram Akhara on Outer Ring Road. The PWD's plan is to do away with both the traffic signals here and develop back-to-back U-turns near these crossings. "This can be executed after widening the road, which will be done. These U-turns will facilitate commuters to go towards Civil Lines, Vidhan Sabha, Delhi University, Kashmere Gate, Timarpur without interrupting traffic movement," the official said. Sources said that earlier there was a plan to build a fly-over at Metcalf House crossing to beat the traffic snarls but that has now been changed and back-to-back U-turns will be constructed to decongest the stretch. Official said that all the construction activities will be carried out following environmental norms and in a way that commuters are not troubled much. "The contractor shall at all times carry out work in a manner creating minimum interference in the flow of traffic as per direction of Engineer-in-Charge," the PWD tender document stated.

four months. The official said that long queues of vehicles can be seen during peak traffic hours in the morning and evening every day at traffic junctions near Mannu Ka Tila and Chandgi Ram Akhara on Outer Ring Road. The PWD's plan is to do away with both the traffic signals here and develop back-to-back U-turns near these crossings. "This can be executed after widening the road, which will be done. These U-turns will facilitate commuters to go towards Civil Lines, Vidhan Sabha, Delhi University, Kashmere Gate, Timarpur without interrupting traffic movement," the official said. Sources said that earlier there was a plan to build a fly-over at Metcalf House crossing to beat the traffic snarls but that has now been changed and back-to-back U-turns will be constructed to decongest the stretch. Official said that all the construction activities will be carried out following environmental norms and in a way that commuters are not troubled much. "The contractor shall at all times carry out work in a manner creating minimum interference in the flow of traffic as per direction of Engineer-in-Charge," the PWD tender document stated.

## WII to hold study on proposal to dump inert waste in Bhatti mines

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) will conduct a study on how the dumping of inert civic waste in the abandoned Bhatti mines, which are now part of the Asola Wildlife Sanctuary, can affect the flora and fauna of the region, forest department officials said. On behalf of the three municipal corporations in the capital, the South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) had in 2020 moved a proposal to use four 30-metre-deep pits measuring 477 acres for dumping of inert waste as they run out of space to store million of tonnes of inert material generated in the city. Board RMB Management (RMB), a high-powered body mandated to protect the Delhi Ridge, considered the lungs of the capital, had set up a five-member panel in March last year to examine the proposal. In its meeting held on July

29 last year, the panel had suggested that a study be conducted on the likely impact of dumping of inert material on the flora and fauna of the region. The WII, which also has a representative in the five-member panel, will conduct the environment impact assessment in this case, a senior forest official said. "The WII sent a proposal earlier this month and we have forwarded it to the RMB. The Board will take a call on it in its next meeting," he said. The officials of WII have assured the forest department that the EIA will be completed as soon as possible once the RMB approves the study proposal, the official said. Earlier, officials had said the proposal to dump the inert civic waste in the mines was likely to be rejected as majority of the members in the panel had opposed it on the ground that the area has over the decades become an ecologically-sensitive water recharge

zone and habitat of variety of flora and fauna, including leopards. The inert material, bio-remediated from solid waste dumps, will have adverse impact on the ground water, the panel members had reportedly said. The SDMC had informed the panel that the Shri Ram Institute of Industrial Research had assessed the inertness of the waste and it complied with all chemical and biological parameters. The city government had notified the mines as a wildlife sanctuary in 1991. The mined pits have undergone geomorphological processes which transformed them into water bodies that act as recharging zones. Some of the pits store rainwater even today, noted environmentalist Prof C R Babu said. According to orders of the National Green Tribunal and High Court, these water bodies cannot be used as dumping

grounds, but should be restored and preserved for recharging groundwater. These water bodies are the only source of water for wild animals, he said. Babu, who is part of the panel, had earlier warned that the leach outs may get mixed with groundwater, if the inert material has porosity, resulting in massive ground water pollution with toxic heavy metals and pathogenic microbes and even microplastics. If the inert material has low porosity, it will lead to heavy surface runoff into storm drains. This results in the drastic reduction in recharging leading to massive depletion of groundwater, he had told the committee. Forest officials said the pits are home to threatened species, including a family of leopards. Their nature has completely changed since 1994. A wide range of animals and plant species are found in and around those mine pits.

In 1994, too, the erstwhile MCD had requested the city government to allow it to use the Bhatti mines for development of solid waste management facilities. The forest department and the National Green Tribunal had rejected that demand. Mining operations at Bhatti mines, spread over 2,166 acres, were stopped around 35 years ago. According to the directions issued by the NGT in 2019, the municipal corporations are undertaking biominining of the legacy waste at the Okhla, Bhalswa and Ghazipur landfill sites which is expected to generate 200 lakh metric tonnes of inert waste. Biominining separates waste into four categories of construction and demolition waste, metals, plastic and rags, and soil and pebbles. While other components are sent to recycling units, soil needs to be dumped elsewhere. The SDMC alone needs 60 to 80 acres of land to dump the inert.

## Min temp dips to 5.8 deg C on R-Day

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Another 'cold day' is on the cards in the national Capital on Republic Day on Wednesday, but it will not be as chilly as the day before, according to the India Meteorological Department. The night temperature dipped to 5.8 degrees Celsius in the city as cold northwesterly winds sweep the northern plains. The maximum temperature is likely to settle at around 14 degrees Celsius. Visibility levels will oscillate between 1,000 and 1,500 meters, it said. Delhi had seen the coldest January day in nine years on Tuesday, with the maximum temperature plunging 10 degrees below normal and settling at 12.1 degrees Celsius. Before this, January 3, 2013 had recorded a maximum temperature of 9.8 degrees Celsius, according to

India Meteorological Department (IMD) data. It was also the second consecutive "severe cold day" in the national capital. The cold was so intense that all weather stations in Delhi recorded their maximum temperatures 10 degrees to 11 degrees Celsius below normal. According to IMD, a "cold day" is when the minimum temperature is less than 10 degrees Celsius and the maximum is at least 4.5 degrees Celsius below normal. A "severe cold day" is when the maximum temperature is at least 6.5 notches below normal. According to the IMD data, the national capital has recorded six cold days in January so far, the highest in the month in at least a decade. Senior IMD scientist R K Jenamani said Delhi has recorded a maximum temperature of less than 17 degrees Celsius on 11 days this month.

## 3 nabbed in hookah bar raids in Ghaziabad

PTI ■ GHAZIABAD

Two men were arrested for operating an allegedly illegal hookah bar in Raj District Centre (RDC), police here said on Wednesday. The arrests were made during a raid at Sky Café Thursday night, they said. The accused have been identified as Ram Singh and Gufran, both in their early twenties. They were booked under section 269 of the Indian Penal Act and sections 21 and 22 of the Cigarette and Other Tobacco Products Act, a senior police officer said. Four hookahs with 'chilams', small pouches of flavoured tobacco, and other equipment were seized in the raid, said City Superintendent of Police (second) Nipun Agarwal. Another hookah bar, Baba Café, was raided in Ajanta Park area of Khoda Police Station jurisdiction and its manager, Sahil, was arrested, the officer said.



# Award to Azad divides Congress G-23 group

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Padma Bhushan award for senior Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad has once again brought to the fore the sharp divide within the party, with leaders of the "G-23" or group of 23 "rebels" and Gandhi family supporters sparing openly.

Though Congress leadership has not formally reacted to the announcement yet, senior leaders of the party like Kapil Sibal, Jairam Ramesh, Anand Sharma, Raj Babbar were amongst the many who took to social media to express their views on Azad being named a Padma awardee by Modi Government fuelling a large scale debate in the public.

While former Union Minister Anand Sharma wished best to Ghulam Nabi Azad for being awarded the country's third highest honour, their party colleague Kapil Sibal was sarcastic in his remarks albeit on his own party.

"Heartiest congratulations to Ghulam Nabi ji for well-deserved recognition of his lifelong enriching contribution to public service and Parliamentary democracy," Sharma tweeted.

"Ghulam Nabi Azad conferred Padam Bhushan. Congratulations bhaijan. Irony that the Congress doesn't need his services when the nation recognises his contributions to public life," Sibal tweeted.

Jairam Ramesh used the phrase "Ghulam, not Azad



(enslaved, not free)". Ramesh also referred to CPM's Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, former Bengal Chief Minister, rejecting his Padma Bhushan.

"Former West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee declines the Padma Bhushan award. Right thing to do. He wants to be Azad not Ghulam," Jairam Ramesh tweeted.

He also shared a passage from a book about former bureaucrat PN Haksar's refusal of the award.

Jan 1973, the most powerful civil servant of our country was told he was being offered the Padma Vibhushan on his leaving the PMO (Prime Minister's Office). Here is PN Haksar's response to it. It is a classic, and worthy of emulation," his caption read.

Later, amid reports that Ghulam Nabi Azad had changed his Twitter bio - which has usually a sign of imminent exit - Azad put out a denial and blamed "mischievous propaganda".

"Some mischievous propaganda is being circulated by some people to create confusion. Nothing has been removed or added to my

Twitter profile. The profile is as it was earlier," Azad tweeted.

Azad, Sibal and Sharma are all part of the Congress "G-23", a group that wrote to Sonia Gandhi in 2020 complaining about a leadership drift and calling for big reforms in the organisation.

The letter bomb split the Congress down the middle and defined what had previously been muted criticism of the Gandhis and the party's inability to win elections over the past four years.

The Padma award row surfaced on a day the Congress lost another big leader to the BJP, just weeks before high-stakes elections in five states including Uttar Pradesh. RPN Singh, a former minister in the Manmohan Singh government, quit the Congress saying the party was "no longer what it used to be".

Singh is the third member of "Team Rahul" - the younger leaders who were part of Rahul Gandhi's inner circle - to quit over the past three years. In 2020, Jyotiraditya Scindia Haksar's response to it. It is a classic, and worthy of emulation," his caption read.

Raj Babbar congratulated Azad saying he is like an elder brother. "Your impeccable public life and commitment to Gandhian ideals have always been an inspiration. The Padma award is an ideal recognition of 5 decades of your meticulous service to the nation," Babbar said in his message.

# PM, Prez bid farewell to elite horse Virat

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Soon after the Republic Day parade concluded, visuals of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh petting a horse started doing the rounds on social media.

As India celebrated its 73rd Republic Day, it also brought the curtain down on the years-long service of Virat, the President's Bodyguard (PBG) Commandant's black horse after the conclusion of the Republic Day parade.

The PBG said the horse shall continue to adorn the stables of PBG till he breathes his last. In his illustrious service, Virat was the mount of President's Bodyguard Commandant Colonel Anup Tiwary and took part 13 times in Republic Day parades.

President Ram Nath Kovind, Modi and Singh were seen warmly greeting and affectionately petting the magnificent horse after the parade to bid him farewell. The trusted steed presented the President its last escort at the 21 Gun Salute ceremony at Delhi's iconic Rajpath, shortly before the parade began.

What made the occasion special was Virat's presence as it escorted the President back to the Rashtrapati Bhavan for the last time on Wednesday. The warm gesture by political leaders to show their love to Virat has sparked gleeful reactions from people on Twitter.

The Hanoverian breed horse, Virat, also called the President's bodyguard's "charger", was included in the President's Bodyguard regiment in 2003 at the age of three from Remount Training School and Depot Hempur and soon became the cynosure of all eyes.

Virat was awarded the Chief of the Army Staff Commendation on the eve of Army Day on January 15. It is the first horse to receive the commendation for exceptional service and abilities.

Virat received the visiting Heads of States during ceremonial receptions at Rashtrapati Bhavan for the last 13 years. "He performed his duties as the Commandant's Charger for over a decade and awed spectators, including foreign dignitaries, with his trademark poise and confidence, an official said. Within a short span of time, he displayed the



potential and temperament to become the most trustworthy Parade Horse.

The President's Bodyguard (PBG) is an elite cavalry regiment of the Indian Army. The regiment is based in the Rashtrapati Bhavan and the

recruited personnel are all paratroopers.

While their role is ceremonial during peace, they are trained to perform reconnaissance and work as parachute pathfinders during the war.

The Indian Army is one of

the few modern forces in the world that still have active cavalry units.

The PBG, the 61 Cavalry Regiment BSF camel regiment are the operational cavalry units of the Indian security forces.

# Indian Diaspora across world celebrate 73rd R-Day

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations and the foreign missions organised various events and cultural performances as India celebrated its 73rd Republic Day on Wednesday. Indian Diaspora across the world participated in these events with great zeal and enthusiasm.

A friendly cricket match was played between India and Australia High Commission in Pretoria, South Africa as part of National Day celebrations. Notably, India's Republic Day and Australia's National Day falls on 26 January. In his message on Twitter, Australian Prime Minister Morrison extended his greetings, also in Hindi, to his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi. "Australia and India enjoy a wonderful friendship. While we celebrate #AustraliaDay today, I also extend my very best wishes to my good friend @narendramodi and all Indians on #RepublicDayIndia," Morrison tweeted.

Charge d'affaires of the Indian Embassy in Beijing Dr. Acquino Vimal



hoisted the tricolour at the embassy premises and read President Ram Nath Kovind's address which was followed by cultural events. The ceremony was restricted to only officials of the embassy in view of the prevailing COVID-19 situation in the Chinese capital.

In Singapore, the Indian High

Commission virtually celebrated the Republic Day. Acting High Commissioner Siddhartha Nath read the president's message to the Indian community through social media. Performance of students from Indian schools in Singapore was also shared through social media.

The High Commission to Brunei celebrated the 73rd Republic Day in the morning at the Chancery premises. Despite heavy torrential rains, more than 100 members of the Indian Diaspora and friends of India attended the function.

On the occasion, at the Indian High Commission to New Zealand, High Commissioner Muktesh Pardeshi launched a handbook titled Exporting to New Zealand. The report has been prepared jointly by High Commission to New Zealand and Duco Consultancy.

The majestic Baths of Diocletian, dating back to the IV century in Rome, is illuminated with tricolor lighting. Chancery and India House were also illuminated and looked resplendent in tricolor at Atlanta.

In South Korea, Korean traditional musical instrument Gayageum performance was held by Gimhae City Gayageum Orchestra.

Angola Embassy lighted up in tricolour to celebrate 73rd Republic Day of India which also celebrates the ongoing 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav'.

From members of the Congress to industry leaders, from scientists and educators to Diaspora & students, greetings poured in on social media platform Twitter from the United States.

Jamaica organized a Free Medical Camp in Mandeville to celebrate India's Republic Day.

Embassy of India, Prague, Czech Republic held Republic Day celebrations with more than 100 Czech nationals on 22.01.22 at Strilky 'the Yoga Village' as part of #AKAM with the theme: Yoga and wellness during Covid pandemic.

The Indian Embassy in Rabat, Morocco in association with Moroccan Ministry of Culture & local cultural association ANAMA organized an event in Casablanca showcasing Indian culture, handicrafts & textiles.

## Govt notifies drone certification scheme to boost desi manufacturing

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) on Wednesday notified a drone certification scheme to ensure minimum safety and quality requirements as it will boost indigenous manufacturing.

"The drone certification scheme notified on January 26, 2022, under Rule 7 of the liberalized Drone Rules, 2021 will help in simpler, faster and transparent type-certification of drones," the MoCA said on Twitter. Along with the liberalised drone rules, airspace map, the PLI (production-linked incentive) scheme and the single window DigitalSky Platform, this will help drone manufacturing industry in India, grow, it stated. "Another step in making India the drone hub of the world by 2030," it mentioned.

The MoCA had on September 16 last year approved a PLI scheme for drones and drone components with an allocation of Rs 120 crore spread over three financial years. The PLI scheme came as a follow-through of the liberalised Drone Rules, 2021, released by the MoCA on August 25, 2021.

The certification criteria mentioned in the drone certification scheme (DCS) -- which was notified on Wednesday -- will be applicable to indigenous drone manufacturers, assemblers as well as importers, the MoCA noted. The objective of this DCS is to provide the minimum requirements for airworthiness -- safety and security requirements -- for drones and enable their evaluation for certification, it mentioned.

## NIA files chargesheet against key conspirator among two in Lanji Forest IED blast case

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) has filed a supplementary chargesheet against an explosive supplier and a key conspirator in the case of IED blast by banned Naxal outfit CPI (Maoist) in Lanji Forest, West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand.

The agency has filed the chargesheet against two accused persons Sukhram Ramtai alias Sukhram Tamariya and Jaiki Paradhi alias Jaiki under Indian Penal Code Sections relating to criminal conspiracy, attempt to murder, murder, voluntarily causing grievous hurt and assaulting a public servant to deter him/her in discharge of official duty and relevant provisions of the Explosive Substance Act and Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. The chargesheet was filed before the NIA Special Court, Ranchi, Jharkhand, the NIA said in a statement.

The case relates to an IED blast on March 4, 2021 around 8:30 AM in Lanji Forest Hill Area, located under police station Toklo, Chakradharpur, West Singhbhum, Jharkhand resulting in the death of three personnel of Jharkhand Jaguar (STF) and grievous injuries to three others including one ASI of CRPF.

The case was originally registered at Toklo police station as FIR No. 09/2021. The NIA had re-registered the case on March 24, 2021 and took up the investigation. Earlier NIA had filed a charge sheet against

nineteen accused persons on September 7 last year in this case.

"The accused chargesheeted yesterday Jaiki Paradhi alias had procured potash (explosive substance) from Beohari, district Shahdol, Madhya Pradesh and supplied it to other chargesheeted accused Sukhram Ramtai and Sorto Mahali at Chakradharpur, West Singhbhum, Jharkhand," it said.

Almost 700 kg of potash was procured illegally from MP and brought in several consignments for delivery to CPI Maoists in Jharkhand. These explosives were further supplied to the senior armed leaders of CPI(Maoist) which were used by them for making IEDs and targeting the security forces, it added.



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Dismissing theories that the virus will continue to mutate into milder strains that make people less sick than earlier variants, the World Health Organisation (WHO) on Thursday said the next Covid-19 variant that will rise will be more contagious than Omicron, but there's no guarantee that the future strains will be milder. According to Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO's Covid-19 technical lead, the real question scientists need to answer is whether or not it will be more deadly.

While Omicron appears to be less virulent than previous strains of the virus, the sheer volume of cases is crushing hospital systems in many countries, said Van Kerkhove.

"The next variant of concern will be more fit, and what we mean by that is it will be more transmissible because it will have to overtake what is currently circulating," she said as about 21 million COVID cases were reported to the



WHO, setting a new global record for weekly cases from the rapidly spreading Omicron variant.

"The big question is whether or not future variants will be more or less severe." She warned against buying into theories that the virus will continue to mutate into milder strains that make people less sick than earlier variants, the report said.

"There is no guarantee of that. We hope that that is the case, but there is no guarantee of that and we can't bank on it," she said, noting that people should heed public safety measures in the meantime.

"You won't have to wear a

mask forever and you won't have to physically distance, but for now, we need to keep doing this," Van Kerkhove said. Moreover, the next variant of Covid may also evade vaccine protections even more, making the existing vaccines even less effective.

According to Dr Mike Ryan, WHO's director of emergency programmes, the virus will continue to evolve before it settles into a pattern. He said it will hopefully settle into a low level of transmission with potentially occasional epidemics. It could become more seasonal or may only affect vulnerable groups, the report said.

# Air India likely to be handed over to Tata today

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Government is likely to hand over Air India to the Tata Group on Thursday, nearly 69 years after it was taken from the conglomerate.

After a competitive bidding process, the government had on October 8 last year sold Air India to Talace Private Limited - a subsidiary of the Tata Group's holding company - for Rs 18,000 crore.

Meanwhile, two airline pilot unions - Indian Pilots' Guild (IPG) and Indian Commercial Pilots' Association (ICPA) - on Monday warned Air India's CMD Vikram Dev Dutt of legal action as "multiple deductions and recoveries have been projected" on the dues owed to pilots.

"This recovery exercise is entirely illegal, and we demand

that this anomaly is rectified and the amount due is repaid with immediate effect," the letter sent by the two unions said.

Additionally, two other unions have opposed the carrier's January 20 order to check grooming and measure the body mass index (BMI) of cabin crew members at the airports just before their flights.

These unions - Air India Employees' Union (AIEU) and All India Cabin Crew Association (AICCA) - on Monday wrote to Dutt opposing the order on the grounds that it is dehumanising and in violation of rules prescribed by aviation regulator DGCA.

"BMI is a person's weight in kilograms divided by the square of height in metres. A high BMI can indicate high body fatness," stated the website of US' Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention.

Three days after Air India's sale was announced on October 8 last year, a Letter of Intent (LoI) was issued to the Tata Group confirming the government's willingness to sell its 100 percent stake in the airline. On October 25, the Centre signed the share purchase agreement (SPA) for this deal.

Officials said on Wednesday that the airline will most likely be handed over to the conglomerate on Thursday as all the formalities are close to completion. As a part of the deal, the Tata group will also be handed over Air India Express and a 50 percent stake in ground handling arm Air India SATS.

Tatas had on October 8 beat the Rs 15,100-crore offer by a consortium led by SpiceJet promoter Ajay Singh and the

reserve price of Rs 12,906 crore set by the government for the sale of its 100 percent stake in the loss-making carrier.



While this will be the Centre's first privatisation since 2003-04, Air India will be the third airline brand in the Tatas'

stable as it holds a majority interest in AirAsia India and Vistara, a joint venture with Singapore Airlines Ltd.



# ISI gave high-tech drones from China to JeM, LeT

RAKESH K SINGH ■ NEW DELHI

Pakistan's covert agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has procured "very sophisticated" customised drones from China and provided these machines to its terror cohorts Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) to use against India for crossing of arms and narcotics

According to intelligence inputs, these drones are water resistant and capable to operate during rainy time and their Chinese make would help the Pakistan ISI-military combine to deny its role in any nefarious anti-India designs and activities.

"These drones can fly up to 800 metres AGL (Actual Ground Level) in height and 15-20 km from one side in terms of endurance range. The sophisticated drones have been procured to avoid detection by Indian authorities," an official in the security establishment said. These inputs were generated earlier this month by the Jammu unit of the Border Security Force that secures the international boundary (IB) in Jammu.

Earlier, Pakistani agencies have pushed drones inside Indian territories in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir for dropping arms, ammunition

and narcotics.

As many as 68 drone sightings were made in 2021 of which only three such flying birds were shot down, the latest being downed on December 18 by the alert BSF troops in Ferozepur Sector of the paramilitary in Punjab.

The BSF is also looking for solutions to detect smaller drones being sent by Pakistan in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir even as it has deployed anti-drone systems in vulnerable stretches along the frontiers in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir.

Since there is no full proof system to disable or shoot down drones, the BSF has optimized the available anti-drone systems in areas where there are vital installations. Homegrown anti-drone solutions are also being scouted for detecting the tunnels that are sought to be erected from across the borders, Border Security Force Director General Pankaj Kumar Singh had said on November 30 while addressing the annual Press conference ahead of the Force's Raising Day.

Earlier on June 27, the ISI had conspired to execute the first-ever drone attack at the Indian Air Force (IAF) station in Jammu where two unmanned aerial vehicles

(UAVs), which came from across the border, dropped bombs, injuring two airmen and damaging a portion of a building. The latest Pakistani tactic comes after the ISI is estimated to have calculated the operational parameters of the available drones with the security agencies deployed in the Valley. The operational parameters of the security equipment are readily available in the public domain as the tendering process outlines the same on procurement portals, the sources said.

Earlier, the ISI had sought to compromise the CRPF personnel by contacting them on their official numbers and posing themselves as intelligence officials. The disposition statement comprising telephone numbers and email IDs of the CRPF personnel were reported to be circulating on social networking applications like WhatsApp, they said.

There is no police verification of local vendors in the Valley engaged in bulletproofing of vehicles used by the CRPF and could pose a threat to the security personnel as the terror groups have already been using armour piercing rounds of required caliber to defeat the bullet resistance capabilities of the armoured vehicles, they added.

# Relief for Wankhede; court rejects Zaid Rana's bail plea

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

In a relief for former Mumbai Zonal Director of Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) Sameer Wankhede, a Special Court in Mumbai has rejected the bail application of Zaid Rana, an accused in a case registered under the Narcotics Control and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, who had made allegations of fabrication of evidence against him.

In his bail application filed before the special court set up under the NDPS Act, Rana had claimed that Wankhede had registered this case based on "fabricated" evidence against him on the ground that there was animosity between Rana's parents and Wankhede's tenant, who were neighbours.

Wankhede — who was at the centre of a fierce controversy over the arrest of Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan's son and accused in the mid-sea drug bust case Aryan Khan on October 2 last year — returned to the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) after his tenure with the NCB ended late last month.

In his order rejecting Rana's bail application, Special Judge AA Joglekar noted: "...while deciding an applica-

tion for bail it is settled that the Court is required to see whether the prima-facie case exists or not. It is not necessary to make a roving enquiry or examination the merits of a prosecution case. The prima-facie material collected during the course of investigation specified herein above by the prosecution clearly demonstrates that the telephonic conversations and whatsApp chats between the applicant/accused and the co-accused".

"Apart from the same as stated hereinbefore as the contraband is recovered in commercial quantity the rigours of Section 37 of the NDPS Act are well attracted and this ipso-facto disentitles the applicant/accused from any such relief of enlargement on bail. Thus, considering this, I am of the opinion that the applicant/accused has failed to make out a prima-facie case for the grant of bail," the Special Judge ruled. Earlier, Rana's lawyer Ashok Saraogi had sought to make a case for the court granting bail to his client by saying among other things: that at the time of alleged house search, Rana was not present and he was later on called by his father, that the applicant is a youngster and deserves one more

opportunity and that the charge-sheet and commercial analysis report were filed and nothing incriminating could be found against Rana, nor did it indicate any connection with co-accused.

Saraogi also told the court that the panch-witnesses in the present case were the same as those in Aryan Khan's drug case, but following the controversy, the witnesses had been changed with a false report.

On his part, Special Public Prosecutor Advait Sethna opposed Rana's bail plea on the following grounds that that the NCB sleuths had recovered the contraband in commercial quantity and there was prima facie involvement of Rana in the recovered contraband

Sethna also told the court that Rana's submissions before the court were a "ploy to completely mislead and prejudice the Court" that the allegations against Wankhede came belatedly, after over a period of seven months from the date of the alleged planting of the contraband.

After hearing both the sides, the Special Judge rejected Rana's bail application on the ground that the applicant (Rana) had failed to make out a prima facie case for a grant of bail.

# Maha Covid cases rise by 1,842 to touch 35,756

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

In an increase in the Covid-19 infections, the daily Covid-19 cases rose by 1,842 cases to touch a tally of 35,756 in Maharashtra on Tuesday, even as the daily pandemic cases in Mumbai rose marginally — marginally from 1815 cases to 1858 cases.

On a day when no fresh Omicron cases were reported in the state, the Covid-19 cases in the state rose from 33,914 registered on Tuesday to 35,756 cases on Wednesday.

With the fresh cases reported on Monday, the total number of Covid-19 cases in the state went down from 75,69,425 cases to 76,05,181 cases. Mumbai, where the daily infections have been dropping steadily for more than eight days, witnessed a small increase in the number of cases from 1815 cases to 1,858 cases. With the latest cases, the total number of cases in Mumbai mounted from 10,38,505 to 10,40,363.

As 39,857 Covid-19 patients were discharged from the hospitals across the state after full recovery, the total number of people discharged from the hospitals since the second week of March 2020 increased from 71,20,436 cases to 71,60,293 cases. The recovery

rate in the state rose from 94.07 per cent to 94.15 per cent.

The number of "active cases" in the state dropped from 3,02,923 cases to 2,98,733. The fatality rate in the state stood static at 1.87 per cent.

With no let up in the worsening Covid-19 situation in Pune, the active cases in Pune dropped from 93,642 cases on Tuesday to 92,973 on Wednesday.

The active cases in Mumbai rose from 21,185 cases to 22,364 cases, while the active cases in the neighbouring Thane came down from 31,673 cases to 27,497 cases.

Nagpur accounted for 29,152 cases, followed by Nashik (18,017), Ahmednagar (11168), Raigad (9947), Satara (7907) and Aurangabad (8290).

Of the 73,86,385 samples sent to various laboratories across the state so far, 76,05,181 have tested positive (10.3 per cent) for COVID-19 until Wednesday.

Currently, 15,47,643 people are in home quarantine while 3,298 people are in institutional quarantine. Meanwhile, no fresh Omicron case was recorded in Maharashtra. As a result, the total number of the new Covid-19 variant cases registered in the state stood at 2858.

# AP to get 13 more new districts

PTI ■ AMARAVATI

The Andhra Pradesh Government issued draft notifications on Wednesday for carving out 13 new districts out of the existing 13, taking the total to 26.

"The Government, in the interest of better administration and development of the areas concerned, proposes to form a new district under Section 3 (5) of the AP Districts (Formation) Act, 1974," Chief

Secretary Sameer Sharma said in the draft notification, issued separately for each district.

He invited objections and suggestions from the citizens residing within the district, who are likely to be affected, for being taken into consideration within 30 days.

In his Republic Day address, Governor Biswabhusan Harichandan referred to the creation of new districts and said they would be in place by this Telugu New Year's Day Ugadi (falling on

April 2).

"For the delivery of more efficient services to people and for good governance, we will be creating 13 more districts in the state on the auspicious day of Ugadi. Two districts will be exclusively for tribal population," the Governor said in his address.

The state has 25 Lok Sabha constituencies and each is supposed to be made a revenue district.

However, with its size being too large and spread over many districts, the tribal-dominated Araku Lok Sabha constituency is being split into two new districts.

The two new tribal districts will be Manyam, with headquarters in Parvathipuram, and Alluri Sitarama Raju, named after the legendary Telugu freedom fighter with headquarters in Paderu.

The other new districts are Anakapalli (out of the existing Visakhapatnam district), Konaseema and Kakinada (out of East Godavari), Eluru (out of West Godavari), NTR (out of

Krishna), Bapatla and Palnadu (out of Guntur), Nandyal (out of Kurnool), Sri Satya Sai (out of Anantapuramu), Annamayya (out of Kadapa) and Sri Balaji (out of Chittoor).

The headquarters of the existing East Godavari district is being shifted to Rajamahendravaram and that of West Godavari to Bhimavaram.

Though he was born in the other part of Krishna district, falling under the Machilipatnam Lok Sabha constituency, the government chose to name the newly created district (spread over Vijayawada Lok Sabha constituency) after the Telugu legend N T Rama Rao (NTR).

In line with its 2019 election-eve promise, the Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy government initiated the districts reorganisation process in August 2020 but the exercise could not go ahead because of the impending Census operations and the ban

on redrawing the geographical boundaries. But, with the Government of India now easing the ban till July, the state government is seeking to fast-track the new districts formation.

Accordingly, a Cabinet note was electronically circulated to the ministers on Tuesday and their approval obtained.

Simultaneously, the government sent the draft proposals to all district Collectors, with a direction that they send their views by return mail.

On Tuesday afternoon, Chief Secretary Sameer Sharma conducted a videoconference with the district Collectors and obtained their consent for the districts reorganisation.

After midnight on Tuesday, the government started issuing the draft notifications for the new districts and they were uploaded on the web portal early Wednesday.

Meanwhile, AP Revenue Services Association president and leader of the PRC Struggle

Committee Bopparaju Venkateswarlu said "All the employees who are supposed to carry out the districts reorganisation process are now in agitation (over the pay revision). Barring the IAS officers, everyone will soon be on strike. The government should not exert pressure on us to get things done."

He appealed to the government not to create an atmosphere of confrontation by bringing pressure on the districts reorganisation.

The Struggle Committee, comprising four employees associations and Joint Action Committees, is on agitation mode, miffed with the state government's pay revision orders and has served a strike notice.

The committee has announced that the employees would go on strike indefinitely from February 7 demanding, among other things, immediate withdrawal of the pay revision orders issued on January 17.

# R-Day celebrations: Khattar resolves to make Haryana 'unemployment free'

PTI ■ AMBALA

Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar greeted people on the Republic Day on Wednesday and resolved to eliminate unemployment in the State in next two years.

He also called upon people to adhere to moral values and work unitedly to make the state clean, healthy and happy.

Addressing people during the 73rd Republic Day celebrations at the Police Lines ground in Ambala, he resolved to make Haryana "unemployment-free by providing employment to every youth by 2024". Khattar first paid homage to martyrs at the War Memorial in Ambala City. After this, he unfurled the national flag at the Police Lines ground and took the salute.

"Today, we are celebrating the 73rd Republic Day. On this occasion, we bow to the known and unknown martyrs who made the supreme sacrifices in

the country's freedom movement," he said.

The chief minister said his government is giving full respect to freedom fighters, martyrs and their dependents.

Along with giving a monthly pension of Rs 25,000 to freedom fighters and their widows, an ex gratia amount given to families of martyred soldiers and para soldiers has been increased from Rs 20 lakh to Rs 50 lakh, he said.

Government jobs to 345 dependents of martyrs have been given, he said.

The CM said families of brave sons of Haryana, who sacrificed their lives for the country, will be honoured during the "Amrit Mahotsav".

Under this, till August 15, 2023, around 2,000 programmes will be organised with public participation.

Khattar said equitable development of every region is being done with the spirit of "Haryana Ek, Haryanvi Ek".

He said 17 new highways

are being built to connect every district with national highways. Besides, a college has been opened in every 20-km radius to promote education.

Clusters are being set up at the block level for small and medium scale industries, he said. To make the youth of the state employable, the policy of 75 per cent reservation for local youth has been implemented in the private sector, he said. Under the Haryana Enterprise and Employment Policy, the target is to create five lakh new jobs, mobilise investment of more than Rs 1 lakh crore and double the exports, Khattar added. He said the state has also made big achievements in sports.

"Today, Haryana is the hub of sports and our players are bringing laurels. So far, 12 players have been appointed as deputy directors and 36 have been appointed coaches by creating 550 posts up to the first class in the sports department," he said.

## DHANKAR'S SPAT WITH WEST BENGAL GOVT

# Speaker to seek footage of Governor's Assembly Press meet

PTI ■ KOLKATA

In a deepening of the spat between Governor Jagdeep Dhankar and the TMC-led state government, West Bengal Assembly Speaker Biman Banerjee said on Wednesday he has requested for footage of the Governor's press meet held on the Assembly premises a day before where he had attacked the state government and accused the speaker of transgressing constitutional norms, before deciding on his future course of action.

Banerjee told reporters on the sidelines of a Republic Day function, that after scrutinising the footage, his office may in future enquire the purpose of

any future visits by Dhankar, other than constitutionally mandatory appearances such as the governor's address of the inaugural session of the house. Banerjee, a well known lawyer, also alleged that no governor in the past "had addressed the media in the fashion", Dhankar did on January 25, The Governor while speaking to the press after paying floral tributes at the statue of B R Ambedkar on the Assembly premises on the National Voters Day, not only castigated the speaker and the chief minister but also described the political condition in West Bengal as "horrible and frightening"

He said the governor had told the speaker before his visit that he would pay floral tributes to the founder of Constitution but "used the occasion (instead) to criticise the government inside the hall-lowed premises of the assembly which had never been done by any of his predecessors in past."

"He did not even go to the press corner situated in the premises," the Speaker said. Banerjee also claimed Dhankar did not inform his office about the status of bills such as those related to separating Howrah and Bally Municipal areas which had been passed by the house. BJP state President Sukanta

Majumdar described the Speaker's retort as a deliberate attempt to run down the office of governor and against the spirit of constitution.

"The Speaker cannot consider assembly as his domain. He should act as Speaker not as the representative of Trinamool. In past the governor's speech in house had been blacked out but the Speaker never acted on the issue," the Balurghat MP said.

The governor had said on Tuesday, "We have seen post-poll violence of unprecedented level. Those who dared to vote according to their own volition had to pay the price with their life... Democracy is in deep peril here."

# Buddhadeb named for Padma Bhusan as BJP eyeing Left votes: TMC

PTI ■ KOLKATA

The ruling Trinamool Congress in West Bengal on Wednesday said that the Centre announced former Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's name for Padma Bhusan as the BJP was eyeing Left votes in the state. The announcement of Bhattacharjee's name for the award shows the understanding between CPI(M) and BJP, TMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh claimed. "There is more to it than what meets the eye. Why Bhattacharjee was suddenly chosen by BJP? It shows the under-

standing between CPI(M) and BJP. The move was aimed at securing Left votes for BJP candidates in the upcoming elections," he claimed. Soon after his name was announced by the Centre, Bhattacharjee declined to accept the award.

CPI(M) state secretary Surjya Kanta Mishra said Bhattacharjee's decision was in line with the party's stand to not accept any such state-instituted award and nothing else should be read into it.

Hitting back the BJP said Ghosh's statement showed how the ruling party creates controversy in everything.

# Village head killed in UP's Bhadohi

PTI ■ BHADOHI

A village head was allegedly hacked to death purportedly over the recent panchayat election, police said on Wednesday.

Kanhaiya Lal Nishad (52), the pradhan of Bahpura Sherpur village in Koirauna police station area, was returning home from the market on his bicycle on Tuesday night when he was intercepted and his throat slit, Bhadohi Superintendent of Police Anil Kumar said.

His body was found on the banks of River Ganga on

Wednesday morning, he said.

Chhote Lal Nishad, Kanhaiya's nephew, has filed a complaint against Om Prakash Yadav, Arun Yadav and Ashutosh Kumar Dubey, residents of the same village, alleging that the trio had developed a rivalry with the victim after he latter won the election, recently.

The SP said the accused are absconding and a search has been launched. Additional police force has been deployed in the village as a precautionary measure, he added.

# Gujarat: 'Justice clocks' providing case pendency data of lower courts launched

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

The Gujarat High Court on Wednesday launched virtual 'justice clocks' which will display real-time information about the pendency and disposal of cases in every lower court. Chief Justice of the high court Aravind Kumar inaugurated the system on the occasion of the Republic Day.

It will cover the entire district judiciary comprising over 1,100 courts in the state, an HC release said here. Web links providing data of lower courts will be available on the portals of the respective district courts, it added. On January 17, Supreme Court justice and chairman of its e-committee D Y Chandrachud had inaugurat-

ed the justice clock at the Gujarat High Court in both physical and virtual forms. The clock displays statistics about case pendency and disposal in the high court and district courts. In the physical form, the justice clock is an outdoor LED display board put up on the high court premises. Its virtual replica features on the high court's website. The content displayed on justice clocks is developed from the data on the National Judicial Data Grid (NJDG) servers of the high court.

The data is also presented in a break-up in terms of how long cases have been pending, from 0-5, 6-10, 11-20, 21-30, 31-40 years and 40-plus years. The justice clock also shows the Case Clearance Rate.



An illuminated Vidhana Soudha during the 73rd Republic Day celebrations, in Bengaluru, on Wednesday

# Cong, Communists misusing Guru's name, says Karnataka Minister

PTI ■ MANGALURU

The Congress party and the Communists are 'misusing' the name of Sree Narayana Guru for political gains, Karnataka Minister for Energy, Kannada and Culture V Sunil Kumar alleged on Wednesday.

Addressing reporters here, Kumar said Sree Narayana Guru's ideals are above all narrow interests of castes and system. By using his name for political gains, the communists and the Congress are

making a mistake, he said.

Congress leaders have been criticising the Centre's rejection of the Sree Narayana Guru's tableau proposed by the Kerala government for the republic day parade, saying it is an insult to the social reformer.

On taking charge as the new district in-charge minister for Dakshina Kannada, Kumar said he will work along with people's representatives for the overall development of the district.







FIRST COLUMN

PLAYING WITH THE NATION’S HERITAGE

People feel that Amar Jawan Jyoti shouldn’t have been merged with another flame



SHIVAJI SARKAR

Never before perhaps a national memorial to soldiers has sparked such a major controversy as the decision to extinguish the 50-year-old eternal flame -Amar Jawan Jyoti - at India Gate or the installation of Netaji’s statue at a disputed canopy. Earlier, a proposal to install Mahatma Gandhi’s statue there was not considered befitting to his stature and abandoned. Then how can Netaji’s statue be installed there? India Gate was a memorial for the 80,000 Indian soldiers killed in foreign wars. The Jyoti was lit at its arch in 1972 by the then prime minister Indira Gandhi to commemorate the victory against Pakistan in 1971, creation of Bangladesh and in tribute to the soldiers. The dispute has now been sparked by an apparent targeting of the Congress at the height of the elections to UP and four other states. West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee is the other target whose Netaji tableau for Republic Day parade was rejected and



BJP is alleged to be appropriating Netaji’s legacy. The Government says though the flame was lit in 1972, the names of 3,843 martyrs of the 1971 war were not inscribed. The National War Memorial next to India Gate is the first national monument, with whose flame the one at Amar Jawan Jyoti has been merged. An unseemly situation is developing. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi slamming the government says that flames are for our soldiers and would be lit again. “This is insulting history and memory of the martyrs of Bangladesh war. It is shocking outrage”, says former Congress minister Anand Sharma. Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan says it is an “unnecessary controversy” and the opposition lacks knowledge of history.

The Congress is accusing the present government of not giving due to leaders like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi even as BJP appropriates freedom fighters like Vallabhbhai Patel, BR Ambedkar Patel and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. The people in Delhi feel that the Jyoti is historic and should have continued. Many Hindu shrines, including in Badarinath, have jyoti lit continuously for centuries. It is being echoed that now it is not the same jyoti at the NWM. The nation has to respect, honour and be proud of its heritage. Doing anything new is not a novelty. Let the nation think, consider, discuss and then do. The government says that dignitaries cannot pay tributes at two shrines. On the other hand, people wonder why suddenly the decision to install the Netaji statue was announced without a discussion.The statue of George V was removed from the canopy in 1968. In 1991, former prime minister Chandra Shekhar wanted the canopy demolished and a Gandhi statue erected there. But since the canopy housed a colonial occupier, who was removed by Indian freedom fighters, a statue of an Indian leader was found inappropriate and insulting. So Gandhi was never given that place.

Netaji has been raised to an icon by RSS executive member Indresh Kumar who initiated an event in Andaman to celebrate Netaji freeing the island and setting up the first national Azad Hind government every December end. Most senior leaders feel Netaji should have an independent place and not a “tainted” one. But it is more than this. Narendra Modi wants to trounce Mamata Banerjee. In 2021, he tried by having the 125th birth anniversary celebrations on eve of Bengal elections at Kolkata’s Victorial Memorial, an incongruous British symbol. Mamata had stolen the show. Now the government wants to install the Netaji statue to spite her. Would that help BJP? Unseemly battles do not behove a great nation. But politics is at a new low.

(The writer is a senior journalist. The views expressed are personal.)

Can expenditure tax be alternative to I-T?



SUBHASH CHANDRA PANDEY

If personal income tax is abolished but corporate income tax stays, as was done in some nations, it will be an open invitation to all sorts of manipulations

The budget for the next financial year is approaching and the pink press is full of comments and suggestions. Expectations are high on the post-pandemic economic recovery. For some, budget is all about taxation, particularly personal income tax.

There is a common gripe that the fixed-income group of salaried class and pensioners bear the brunt of income tax while flexible-income group of professionals and businesses have enough legal loopholes available to avoid paying income tax.

There are also voices against the very idea of taxing incomes because that means taxing low spenders and high spenders alike and actually discouraging savings. Here is an attempt to present different dimensions of this interesting debate.

Nearly 5.95 crore Income Tax Returns were filed for the financial year 2019-20 till the extended deadline of January 10, 2021. For the financial year 2020-21, over five crore ITRs were filed till December 29, 2021.

Out of total population of over 130 crore, only about 1.46 crore actually paid income tax for financial year 2019-20.

A detailed analysis of about 5.87 crore ITRs for FY2017-18 showed that 5.53 crore were from individual filers, 11.3 lakhs from Hindu Undivided Families, 12.7 lakhs from firms and 8.4 lakh from companies.

Out of the reported gross total income of ₹51.33 lakh crore, business income was ₹24.37 lakh crore and salary/pension income was ₹20.04 lakh crore. Taxable salary/pension (above ₹5 lakh pa limit) returned was ₹15.55 lakh crore with tax liability of about 3.95 lakh crore.

The salary/pension income is a major but not the dominant source of income tax. Total income tax collected in 2018-19 was ₹11.37 lakh crore out of which companies alone paid ₹6.64 lakh crore.

Of course, the argument that business and professional income is more evasion prone than salary/pension income is unassailable.

Efforts to curb income tax evasion revolve around tracking major expenditures and indicators of high conspicuous consumption (foreign travel, electricity consumption etc). Increasingly, high consumption and investment both are tracked by taxmen following the digital footprints left behind by PAN AAD-HAAR linkage.

Can any expenditure tax yield over ₹11 lakh crore to substitute expenditure tax? Over and above GST collection which at current rate of monthly collection of about ₹1.3 lakh crore comes to about annual collection of about ₹15.6 lakh crore?

To tax income or to tax expenditure? Which is more efficient and equitable way of collecting tax? An expenditure by one person is the income of another person



MOST INCOMES ARE LUMPY WHILE EXPENDITURES ARE MORE DIFFUSE, HARDER TO TRACK CRORES OF SALE/PURCHASE TRANSACTION, MORE SO IF MADE IN CASH. GETTING LUMPY INCOME IN CASH IS HARDER THAN SPENDING IN CASH. A LOW TAX BASE EXPENDITURE TAX WILL NOT COMPENSATE THE LOSS OF REVENUE BY ABOLITION OF INCOME TAX AND A WIDE BASE EXPENDITURE TAX WILL PROVE MORE REGRESSIVE WITH CASCADING EFFECT UNLESS GST-LIKE MEASURES ARE TAKEN

(The writer is President, Institute of Public Auditors of India and former Special Secretary, Ministry of Commerce and Industry. The views expressed are personal.)



and vice versa. Whether you tax salary income of employee or salary expenditure of employer, the effect is the same. (Knife and water melon - what falls on what is immaterial.)

Just as some incomes are harder to detect by taxmen so are some expenditures. It all depends on how diffused is the income/expenditure streams. For some, income comes in big chunks for others it comes in bits and pieces. Some expenditures are lumpy some are micro payments. It all depends on what rate of expenditure tax is applied on what class of expenditures.

The philosophy underlying taxation of spending rather than income was propagated as early as the seventeenth century by Thomas Hobbes who considered it unfair to tax low spenders and high spenders having same income alike.

In spite of the endorsement by some economists exempting saving from taxation, an expenditure tax has never been used in any industrial country.

Prof Nicholas Kaldor of Cambridge University made a strong case for expenditure tax in 1955. He proposed an expenditure tax be substituted for the surtax on higher income taxpayers in Britain. India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) had adopted Kaldor’s suggestion to introduce an expenditure tax for a few years but dropped it by 1966. The tax was different from that recommended by Kaldor and the small revenue yield was considered not worth the burden of compliance and administration.

Kaldor received reconsideration in India when Expenditure Tax was re-introduced in 1987 with very limited scope. Under the

Expenditure Tax Act, 10 per cent tax is charged on payment made at a high-end hotel (with room rent exceeding ₹3000 per day).

The proponents of expenditure tax argue that the Income Tax burden falls on salaried class/pensioners and abolition of income tax will be a big relief to these hassled taxpayers freeing them from the tedium of filing tax returns (big loss to chartered accountants and lawyers and a dip in national income!)

The Income Tax Department tirelessly scrutinises millions of returns, which are followed by queries, clarifications, refunds and protracted correspondence. However, what is the guarantee that expenditure tax will not bring more hassles of record keeping. Most incomes are lumpy while expenditures are more diffuse, harder to track crores of sale/purchase transaction, more so if made in cash. Getting lumpy income in cash is harder than spending in cash.

A low tax base expenditure tax will not compensate the loss of revenue by abolition of income tax and a wide base expenditure tax will prove more regressive with cascading effect unless GST like measures are taken.

Every time money changes hands and every transfer/disbursement /payment is not EXPENDITURE. When some bank is given money to disburse salaries or pensions or dividends, the expenditure is only by the employer or company, the disbursing bank is only an intermediary, a courier. The money does not belong to the bank. Postman delivery of cash is not postman’s expenditure. So obviously all such remittances would be out of expenditure tax.

We are talking of expenditure tax not transaction tax.

If we include salary, pension, interest, rent payment within expenditure tax, the recipient will not only face effective income tax but will be further liable to suffer more expenditure tax when spending the received income by way of salary/pension/ interest/rent.

Complexities of deciding which income to tax at what rate will be substituted by perhaps more complex task of taxing different types of expenditures at different rates. (Imagine a tax dispute: This is not wedding party but pre wedding or post wedding party taxable at lower rate!)

If personal income tax is abolished while corporate income tax stays as was done by some countries, there is open invitation to all sorts of manipulations. Personal expenses of shareholders and employees will get shifted as corporate expenses and promoters will drain out corporate profits by being lenders, landlords and employees of their own companies!! Have seen it all.

One of the reasons why expenditure tax did not find favour with major countries as the assessment that this tax will discourage spending (encourage savings) and would impede growth.

The risk of discouraging such spending as is reportable to tax department hurting overall economic growth is very much there. People resent government trying to snoop around finding what they earn. They will be more alarmed and more hassled if government starts hassling them and snooping around what they spend!!

I think expenditure tax is an idea whose time has gone.

POINT COUNTERPOINT

WHO ALL FROM THE SENA PARTICIPATED IN THE RAM JANMABHOOMI MOVEMENT? YOUR HINDUTVA IS MERELY ON PAPER. —BJP LEADER AND FORMER CM DEVENDRA FADNAVIS



HUNDREDS OF SENA WORKERS STOOD BY HINDUS DURING THE 1993 RIOTS AFTER BABRI MASJID’S DEMOLITION. MANY SACRIFICED THEIR LIVES. —SHIV SENA RAJYA SABHA MP SANJAY RAUT

Ties with India can help Cambodia’s long-term interests

Despite its increasing reliance on China, Cambodia must revitalise its relationship with other key and major partners in the Indo-Pacific

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s declaration of 2022 as the ASEAN-India friendship year goes beyond ceremonial rhetoric. India seeks to improve the level of partnership with key Southeast Asian countries. Recent developments indicate this trajectory. From high-level engagements with Indonesia and Vietnam to finalizing the sale of the BrahMos shore-based supersonic cruise missile with the Philippines, India has endeavored to bolster its strategic partnership with these countries. However, it will be interesting to assess the status of India-Cambodia relations given that both countries will be celebrating their 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations this year. Though the relations between India and Cambodia have been growing steadily over



DON MCCLAIN GILL

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the past years,Cambodia has been seen to be moving deeper-into China’s sphere of influence. Being Cambodia’s largest trading partner, China continues to increase its influence there. China has funded at least 70 per cent of Cambodia’s key infrastructure, particularly, roads and bridges. China promised to deliver an amount of RMB 4 billion (US\$588 million) in aid between 2019-2021. During the pandemic, China has also greatly supported Cambodia.

This heavy dependency on China has led to a series of diplomatic problems for Cambodia. From the deportation of Uyghur asylum seekers to blocking the issuing of joint communiqué on the assertion of China in the South China Sea, Cambodia has constantly been under the spotlight due to actions that con-



tinue to compromise its standing in the regional and global level. In fact, in 2020, former Singaporean diplomat Bilahari Kausikan highlighted how Southeast Asian countries may need to consider recoking Cambodia’s ASEAN membership due to its vulnerability to external pressure. Recently, the US announced a new set of restrictions on Cambodia, including an arms embargo, due to its notorious human rights abuses and China’s growing military influence.

Despite its inevitable and increasing reliance on China, Cambodia must attempt to revitalise and diversify its relationship with other key and major partners in the Indo-Pacific that seek to ensure the maintenance of a rules-based and transparent regional order as a foundation for international relations. Among these partners, India significantly stands out due to its historic relationship with Cambodia based on principles of mutual benefit and non-interference. As Cambodia assumed its role as ASEAN Chair for 2022, it will be a pragmatic option for both countries to step-up their relations. On January 10, Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar spoke with Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn to emphasize India’s steadfast com-

mitment to boost its partnership with ASEAN. Moreover, both officials discussed a wide array of regional security issues that directly impact Southeast Asian countries.

India is among Cambodia’s top 1 foreign investors and offers a massive market of 1.3 billion people for a much needed diversification of Phnom Penh’s exports. Being recognised as one of Asia’s most stable post-colonial countries and the world’s largest democracy, India can serve as a practical model for Cambodia in its quest to maximize peace within its borders. Furthermore, as India’s capabilities are growing exponentially in terms of economic capacity, military strength, and soft power, its role in Southeast Asia and the greater Indo-Pacific in general will also be expected to increase.

Given the intensifying power competition between the US and China, it will be imperative for Cambodia to bring in India into its overall strategic calculus to balance and safeguard its interests. This will also benefit India’s Southeast Asia strategy as it seeks to present itself as an important security provider, capacity builder, and strategic partner in the region. Moreover, forging robust relations with India will not only improve the China-dependent narrative often attributed to Cambodia, but will also provide the latter with an opportunity to balance and diversify its external relations without directly getting embroiled in the existing US-China competition. India’s adherence to strategic autonomy will provide Cambodia with a less controversial position vis-à-

vis its relations with China and serve as a complement to the overarching India-ASEAN partnership. It is therefore crucial for Cambodia to maximize its engagements with India given the geopolitical and economic uncertainty brought by the intensifying power competition and the crippling effects of the Covid pandemic.

However, India must also maintain a proactive level of consistency in applying its Act East Policy. The lack of momentum in the past has allowed countries like China to monopolize influence over key Southeast Asian countries. It will be necessary for India to project itself as a responsible stakeholder in the stability of the region and a trustworthy partner that seeks to achieve mutual gains.



# Record weekly Covid cases last week but deaths stable: WHO

AP ■ GENEVA

The World Health Organisation said there were 21 million new coronavirus cases reported globally last week, the highest weekly number of COVID-19 cases recorded since the pandemic began.

The number of deaths was largely unchanged, at more than 50,000. In its weekly assessment of the pandemic, issued late Tuesday, the UN health agency said the number of new coronavirus infections rose by 5 per cent and that the rate of increase appears to be slowing; only half of regions reported an increase in COVID-19.

Earlier this month, the previous highest number of cases - 9.5 million - was recorded amid a 71 per cent spike from the week before, as the hugely contagious omicron variant swept the world. WHO



People wearing face masks to protect against the coronavirus walk on a street Wednesday, Jan. 26, 2022 (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

said biggest increase in cases was seen in Middle East, with a 39 per cent rise, followed by a 36 per cent jump in Southeast Asia. Deaths increased in Southeast Asia, the Middle East and the Americas, but fell

in other regions. On Monday, WHO's director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus cautioned against talk that pandemic might be entering its "endgame," warning that conditions remain ripe for new

variants to emerge, with vast swathes of unvaccinated people in some countries amid rapid virus transmission. Still, Tedros said it might be possible for the world to exit the acute phase of the pandemic, if goals like immunising at least 70 per cent of each country's population are met later this year.

In Britain, researchers at Imperial College London recorded the highest-ever prevalence rate of COVID-19 in England earlier this month, estimating that about one in every 23 people tested had the virus.

The scientists said there were indications massive spike caused by omicron had started to level off but that infection rates remained high. Scientists have said that omicron is far less likely to cause serious disease and hospitalisation but spreads much faster than previous COVID-19 variants, including delta.

# Afghan talks focus on aid, women's rights as hunger increases

AP ■ OSLO

The difficulty of getting humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, where half the population needs it, topped the agenda Tuesday on the final day of talks in Norway involving Western diplomats, aid groups and the Taliban.

The closed-door meetings taking place at a hotel in the snow-capped mountains above the Norwegian capital of Oslo come at a crucial time for Afghanistan, as freezing temperatures are compounding misery from the downward economic spiral that has come with the fall of the U.S.-backed government and the Taliban takeover last summer.

Aid groups and international agencies estimate that about 23 million people, more than half the country, face severe hunger and nearly 9 million are on the brink of starvation.

People have resorted to selling possessions to buy food, burning furniture for warmth and even selling their children. The Taliban are demanding that \$10 billion frozen by the United States and other Western countries be released, but there is no agreement on that so far.

The United Nations has managed to provide some liquidity and allowed the Taliban administration to pay for imports, including electricity.

"The No. 1 problem now is that Western sanctions are creating a liquidity crisis, which means we cannot get aid fund-

ing into the country," said Jan Egeland, secretary-general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, one of the humanitarian organizations taking part in the talks. "We cannot save lives as we should. So the West and the Taliban need to talk. And we need to have an end to sanctions hurting civilians," he said.

But before they will agree to relax sanctions, Western powers are demanding increased rights for Afghan women and girls, along with the West's recurring demand for the Taliban administration to share power with Afghanistan's minority ethnic and religious groups.

The new Afghan rulers told The Associated Press last week they aim to have schools open for girls and women in late March, after the Afghan new year.

They repeated that promise in Oslo, according to Egeland, who met with the Taliban delegation led by acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi.

The three days of talks - the first in Europe since the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in August - opened on Sunday with talks between the Taliban and members of Afghan civil society.

The following day they held multilateral talks involving Western diplomats from the EU, the U.S., Britain, France, Italy and host Norway.

Tuesday's talks were bilateral, involving all parties including independent humanitarian organizations.

# Capsized boat found near Florida; 39 people missing

AP ■ MIAMI

The US Coast Guard searched for 39 people missing for several days after a boat believed to be used for human smuggling capsized off Florida's coast en route from the Bahamas.

A good Samaritan called the Coast Guard early Tuesday after rescuing a man clinging to the boat 45 miles (72 kilometers) east of Fort Pierce, the maritime security agency reported on Twitter.

The man said he was with a group of 39 others that left the island of Bimini in the Bahamas on Saturday night. He said the boat capsized in severe weather and that no one was wearing life jackets.

The survivor was brought to a hospital for symptoms of dehydration and sun exposure. The Coast Guard is calling it a suspected human smuggling case. Officials said on Twitter that they are searching by both air and sea over a roughly 135-mile (218-kilometer) area extending from Bimini to the Fort Pierce Inlet.

A cold front late Saturday brought rough weather to the Bimini area. Tommy Sewell, a local bonefishing guide, said there were 20-mph (32-kph) winds and fierce squalls of rain on Sunday into Monday.

Migrants have long used the islands of the Bahamas as a steppingstone to reach Florida and the United States. They typically try to take advantage of breaks in the weather to make the crossing, but the vessels are often dan-



The U.S. Coast Guard ship Bernard C. Webber, leaves the coast guard base, Monday, July 19, 2021, in Miami Beach, Fla. The U.S. Coast Guard is searching for 39 people after a good Samaritan rescued a man clinging to a boat off the coast of Florida (AP Photo/Marta Lavandier)

gerously overloaded and prone to capsizing. There have been thousands of deaths over the years. The Coast Guard patrols the waters around Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba and the Bahamas.

For the most part, the migrants are from Haiti and Cuba but the Royal Bahamas Defense Force has reported apprehending migrants from other parts of the world, including from Colombia and Ecuador earlier this month.

On Friday, the Coast Guard found 88 Haitians in an overloaded sail freighter west of Great Inagua, Bahamas.

"Navigating the Florida straits, Westward and Mona Passages ... Is extremely dangerous and can result in loss of life," the Coast Guard said in a statement last weekend.

Last July, the Coast Guard rescued 13 people after their boat capsized off of Key West as Tropical Storm Elsa approached. The survivors said they had left Cuba with 22 people aboard.

# UK Govt holds breath as it awaits 'partygate' report

AP ■ LONDON

Prime Minister Boris Johnson is bracing for the conclusions of an investigation into allegations of lockdown-breaching parties, a document that could help him end weeks of scandal and discontent, or bring his time in office to an abrupt close.

Senior civil servant Sue Gray could turn in her report to the government as soon as Wednesday. Johnson's office has promised to publish its findings, and the prime minister will address Parliament about it soon after.

Gray's office wouldn't comment on timing, and Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said the Conservative government hadn't yet received the report Wednesday morning.

She said she couldn't guarantee the government would publish the full report, saying there could be "security issues that mean parts of it are problematic to publish. But we will absolutely publish the findings of the report."

Allegations that the prime minister and his staff flouted restrictions imposed on the country to curb the spread of the coronavirus have caused public anger, led some Conservative lawmakers to call for Johnson's resignation and triggered intense infighting inside the governing party.

Johnson has urged his critics to wait for Gray's conclusions, but his "wait and see" defense weakened Tuesday when police said they had opened a criminal investigation into some of the gatherings. London's Metropolitan Police force said at "a number of events" at Johnson's

Downing Street office and other government buildings met the force's criteria for investigating the "most serious and flagrant" breaches of coronavirus rules.

Gray is investigating claims that government staff held late-night soirees, boozy parties and "wine time Fridays" while Britain was under coronavirus restrictions in 2020 and 2021.

The "partygate" allegations have infuriated many in Britain, who were barred from meeting with friends and family for months in 2020 and 2021 to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Tens of thousands of people were fined by police for breaking the rules. Johnson and his allies have tried, without much success, to calm a scandal that is consuming government energies that could be better spent confronting the international crisis over Russia's military build-up near Ukraine and a far-from-finished coronavirus pandemic.

Johnson has apologised for attending one event, a "bring your own booze" gathering in the garden of his Downing Street offices in May 2020, but said he had considered the party a work gathering that fell within the rules.

His office and supporters have also defended a June 2020 surprise birthday party for the prime minister inside Downing Street.

Loyal lawmaker Conor Burns said Johnson didn't know about the gathering in advance. "It was not a premeditated, organized party ... He was, in a sense, ambushed with a cake," Burns told Channel 4 News.

# Austria to lift lockdown for unvaccinated residents

AP ■ BERLIN

Austria will end its lockdown for unvaccinated residents next Monday - one day before a COVID-19 vaccine mandate takes effect in the country, the government announced Wednesday, according to Austrian news agency APA.

Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer and Health Minister Wolfgang Mueckstein said the measure, which was introduced in November, was no longer needed because there was no threat of hospital intensive care units being overstretched, APA reported.

For weeks, the lockdown for the unvaccinated has been "a measure that many people complained about, but that was unavoidable for health policy reasons," Nehammer said.

On February 1, a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for adults - the first of its kind in Europe - will take effect in the small Alpine country. Officials have said the mandate is necessary because vaccination rates remain too low.

They say it will ensure that Austria's hospitals are not overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients. So far, 75.4 per cent of the country's residents have been fully vaccinated.

Once the mandate goes into effect, authorities will write to every household to inform them of the new rules. From mid-March, police will start checking people's vaccination status during routine checks; people who can't produce proof of vaccination will be asked to do so in writing, and will be fined up to 600 euros (USD 676) if they don't.

# US-backed Syrian forces capture prison from ISIS after a week

AP ■ BEIRUT

U.S.-backed Kurdish-led forces said they wrestled control of the last section of a prison controlled by Islamic State militants and freed a number of child detainees used as human shields.

It ended a weeklong assault by the extremists on one of the largest detention facilities in Syria.

The attack was the biggest by IS since the fall of the group's "caliphate" in 2019 and came as the militants staged a number of deadly attacks in Syria and Iraq that stoked fears they may be staging a comeback.

In the week of clashes, dozens from both sides have been killed, the U.S.-led coalition has carried out nearly a dozen airstrikes and thousands of civilians living nearby have been displaced.

"The whole prison is now under control," said Farhad Shami, a spokesman for the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. "The operation today was on the cells where child detainees were held."

We were able to surround a number of terrorists who had taken them as shields and we killed them."

Shami said the force was then able to enter the cells and the remaining militants surrendered. A large number of children were freed, he said, but he had no specific number.

Shami said about 3,000 inmates have surrendered.

The militants had used child detainees as human shields slowing down the effort to retake the facility located in the northeastern city of Hassakeh, Kurdish officials said.

After breaking into the prison late Thursday, IS militants were joined by others rioting inside the facility.

# UN chief decries antisemitism, urges stand against hatred

AP ■ UNITED NATIONS

The Secretary-General Antonio Guterres decried the resurgence of antisemitism in comments Tuesday night at a service commemorating victims of the Nazi Holocaust, and he urged people around the world to "stand firm against hate and bigotry anywhere and everywhere."

The U.N. Chief said he was alarmed to learn recently that barely half of adults worldwide have heard of Holocaust, which saw the murder of 6 million Jews, comprising one-third of Jewish people, and millions of others during World War II. He said lack of knowledge among the younger generations "is worse still." "Our response to ignorance must be education," Guterres said. "Governments

everywhere have a responsibility to teach about the horrors of Holocaust." He spoke at the United Nations International Holocaust Remembrance Service at Park East Synagogue on eve of International Day of Commemoration in Memory of Victims of Holocaust, which was held virtually because of COVID-19 pandemic.

The U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution in November 2005 establishing annual commemoration and chose January 27, the day Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated by troops from Soviet Union in 1945. Guterres said the rise in antisemitism -- "the oldest form of hate and prejudice" -- has seen new reports of physical attacks, verbal abuse, the desecration of Jewish ceme-

teries, synagogues vandalized, and last week the hostage-taking of the rabbi and members of Beth Israel Congregation in Colleyville, Texas.

Around world, Guterres said, Jewish boys are warned not to wear a kippa, the skullcap worn by observant Jews, in public "for fear of being assaulted," and there are conspiracy theories devolving into "heinous antisemitic tropes" and "deeply disturbing attempts to deny, distort or minimise Holocaust," especially on internet.

He welcomed Jan. 20 adoption by 193-member U.N. General Assembly of a resolution condemning a denial of Holocaust and urging all nations and social media companies "to take active measures to combat antisemitism and

Holocaust denial or distortion. "Rabbi Arthur Schneier, a 91-year-old Holocaust survivor and Park East Synagogue's senior rabbi whose family perished in crematorium of Auschwitz, spoke of witnessing the burning of his synagogue in Vienna, his birthplace, on Kristellnacht -- Nov. 9, 1938."

It was the beginning of the Holocaust, the night Hitler and his henchmen destroyed every temple in Germany and Austria. Schneier said "hate mongers" always target houses of worship, saying the perpetrator of last week's hostage-taking in Texas flew from England "to commit this vicious attack." The hostages managed to escape and 44-year-old Malik Faisal Akram, who had ranted against Jews, was killed by police.

# Pope's right knee ligament inflamed, curbing mobility

AP ■ ROME

Pope Francis said Wednesday he is suffering from an inflamed ligament in his right knee that makes walking and going up and down stairs painful.

Francis told his weekly general audience that he had been informed that the inflammation usually only afflicts older people. "I don't know why it happened to me," the 85-year-old pope quipped, drawing applause from the crowd.

Francis, who has long suffered from sciatica nerve pain that makes him walk with a pronounced limp, cited the new knee pain in explaining why he wouldn't go down the steps of the Vatican audience hall to greet the pilgrims in the crowd.

Instead, a handful of guests were brought up to the stage. Francis had mentioned the leg pain last week in explaining that he would remain seated during a different audience. Over the years, he has apologized when he has missed liturgies or had to sit down during events that would otherwise require him to stand. The Argentine Jesuit enjoys generally good health, though he had 33 centimeters (13 inches) of his large intestine removed last July.

# Rights group says Lebanese staffer targeted with NSO spyware

AP ■ BEIRUT

Human Rights Watch said Wednesday that one of its senior staff members was targeted last year with spyware designed by the Israeli hacker-for hire company NSO Group.

The New York-based rights group said the software was used against Lama Fakih, the director of its Beirut office who also oversees its crisis response in several countries, including Syria, Myanmar, Israel and the Palestinian territories, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and the United States.

NSO Group has been mired in controversy following revelations its spyware was used in several countries against journalists, activists and even U.S. Diplomats. The U.S. Barred the firm from accessing American technology last year, saying its tools have been used by repressive regimes, and Facebook and Apple have filed lawsuits against NSO over hacks against their products.

NSO Group does not disclose its clients but says it has safeguards in place to ensure its products are only used to target suspected criminals and terrorists. It says it does not have

access to the intelligence its clients gather. Its Pegasus spyware grants full access to a person's phone, including photos, emails and real-time communications. The targeted person does not have to take any action, such as clicking a link, and would not be able to detect the breach without a sophisticated technical analysis.

NSO Group issued a statement expressing support for an "international regulatory structure" for cyber intelligence tools, but said any calls to suspend their use until one is established would benefit criminals who evade other forms of surveillance. It did not directly address the hacking reported by Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch said Fakih, a dual U.S. And Lebanese citizen, was targeted on five occasions between April and August.

Apple informed her of the breach on November 24, and forensic analysis by Human Rights Watch confirmed the presence of the software, the group said. "It is no accident that governments are using spyware to target activists and journalists, the very people who uncover their abusive practices," Fakih said.

# Lebanon to receive Jordan electricity via Syria, deal signed

AP ■ BEIRUT

Lebanon signed deals on Wednesday to purchase electricity from Jordan via Syria to help small Mediterranean country deal with its crippling energy crisis. The deals are expected to bring Lebanon up to 250 megawatts of electricity a day within two months, enough for about two hours of power a day. The electricity will be transmitted through Syria.

The World Bank is expected to finance the deals, and negotiations are underway. Lebanon's Energy Minister Walid Fayyad said he expects financing negotiations to conclude in two months. "After signing today, we are left with the financing through the World Bank, something I will work on as soon as possible."

The details will be clear in the next two months," Fayyad told reporters during the signing ceremony. "We don't want to promise the Lebanese people that as soon as we sign electricity will come." Lebanon's electricity company offers only a couple of hours of power a day, and residents have heavily relied on costly and polluting private generators. The aging national grid has not been able to provide 24-hour electricity in the country since the end of civil war in 1990.

# France bans gay 'conversion therapy' with new law

AP ■ PARIS

France has a new law that bans so-called conversion therapies and authorizes jail time and fines for practitioners who use the scientifically discredited practice to attempt to change the sexual orientation or gender identity of LGBTQ people.

The National Assembly approved the new law unanimously, voting 142-0 on Tuesday evening.

The legislation includes criminal penalties for people who are convicted of trying to "convert" LGBTQ people to heterosexuality or traditional gender expectations.

The law also opens the possibility for campaigners to file civil suits on behalf of victims, an advance hailed in parliament as a breakthrough for people who hesitate or are unable to alert police themselves.

Lawmaker Laurence Vanceunbrock, who helped steer the law's passage through parliament, said it will target "all those who equated an identity or a sexual orientation with sickness." "There is nothing to cure," she told the National Assembly.

The French government's equalities and diversity minister, Elisabeth Moreno, described so-called conversion therapies



FILE - A participant holds a rainbow heart during the annual Gay Pride march in Paris, June 26, 2021. The National Assembly approved a new law unanimously Tuesday Jan. 25, 2022 evening, putting into law new measures that ban so-called conversion therapies and authorize jail time and fines for practitioners who use the scientifically discredited practice to attempt to change the sexual orientation or gender identity of LGBTQ people. The legislation includes criminal penalties for people who are convicted of trying to "convert" LGBTQ people to heterosexuality or traditional gender expectations (AP Photo/Lewis Joly, File)

as "barbaric" and told lawmakers that the suffering they inflict "very often leaves permanent marks on bodies and minds." Under the new law, sustained efforts "that aim to modify or reprimand sexual orientation or gender identity" and which impact the physical or mental health of victims are punishable by up to two years in jail and 30,000 euros (\$34,000) in fines.

The punishment can increase to three years imprisonment and fines of 45,000

euros (\$50,000) for attempts involving minors or other particularly vulnerable people. Practicing therapy to change a person's sexual orientation already is prohibited in multiple U.S. states and the U.S. Caribbean territory of Puerto Rico.

The law will take effect in the next 14 days with President Emmanuel Macron's signoff. Macron hailed its passage. "Let's be proud of it," the French leader tweeted. "Because being oneself is not a crime."

# Russia threatens retaliation if Ukraine demands not met

AP ■ MOSCOW

Russia warned Wednesday it would quickly take "retaliatory measures" if the U.S. and its allies reject its security demands over NATO and Ukraine, raising pressure on the West amid concerns that Moscow is planning to invade its neighbor.

The Kremlin has repeatedly denied it has any such designs, but the U.S. and its NATO allies are worried about Russia deploying an estimated 100,000 troops near Ukraine and launching a series of sweeping military maneuvers.

As part of the drills, motorized infantry and artillery units in southwestern Russia practiced firing live ammunition, warplanes in Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea performed bombing runs, dozens of warships sailed for training exercises in the Black Sea and the Arctic, and Russian fighter jets and paratroopers arrived in Belarus for joint war games.

At stake is the future of Ukraine: Russia has demanded guarantees that NATO will never admit the country and other ex-Soviet nations as members and that the alliance will roll back troop deployments in other former Soviet bloc nations.



# India’s annual Budget again goes green

## Cuts down on printing to bare minimum

**New Delhi:** India's annual Budget will go green this year too, cutting down on the vast printing of documents that was associated with the presentation of tax proposals and financial statement of Asia's third largest economy.

The Budget documents will be available mostly digitally, with only a handful of physical copies, officials said. The printing of several hundred copies of the voluminous Budget documents was such an elaborate exercise that printing staff had to be quarantined inside the printing press in the basement of North Block -- the seat of the finance ministry -- for at least a couple of weeks.

This quarantine and the beginning of the printing would begin with a traditional 'Halwa ceremony' attended by finance minister, deputy finance ministers and senior officials in the ministry.

Since coming to power, the Modi government has curtailed printing of the Budget copies -- initially cutting copies distributed to journalists and outside analysts and then reducing those provided to Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha MPs citing outbreak of the pandemic.

This year, the outbreak of the highly infectious Omicron variant has brought more curbs.

As a result, the symbolic halwa ceremony is being given a go-by, sources said, citing the prevailing pandemic. However, a small group of staffers will undergo mandatory quarantine for the compilation of the digital

Budget documents.

The Budget documents usually include the finance minister's speech in Parliament, highlights, annual financial statement, finance bill containing tax proposals, memorandum explaining the provisions in financial bill, and macro-economic framework statement.

They also include the medium-term fiscal policy cum fiscal policy strategy statement, outcome framework for schemes, customs notification, implementation of previous Budget announcements, receipt budget, expenditure budget and statement of budget estimates.

The documents are so bulky that a cotton bag used to be provided with each set to carry them. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, who in her maiden Budget presentation in 2019 shunned the long-standing practice of carrying the speech and Budget document in a briefcase in favour of a 'bahi-khata' holding the papers, used a handheld tablet to read her speech on the last occasion on February 1, 2021. She came to Parliament carrying the gadget inside the red-coloured 'bahi-khata' cloth.

She will present her fourth Budget on February 1, 2022. The 'halwa ceremony' was usually held 10 days prior to the Union Budget. Last year, it was the first time since the presentation of independent India's first Budget on November 26, 1947, that the documents containing income and expenditure statement of the

Union government along with the finance bill, detailing new taxes and other measures for the new financial year, were not physically printed. **PTI**

## Budget 2022: Insurers urge higher 80 C investment limit; reduction in GST on health products

**Mumbai:** Insurance companies are seeking a separate deduction limit of ₹1 lakh for insurance premium payment under Section 80 C of the Income Tax Act in the upcoming Union Budget to bring in more people under the ambit of insurance.

The insurers also want reduction in the goods and services tax (GST) rate of 18 per cent currently applied on health insurance products to 5 per cent to make such products more affordable to common people. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will present the Union Budget for 2022-23 on February 1.

"The industry has long pending expectations from the policy makers for incentivizing people to get life insurance by giving a separate deduction limit of minimum ₹ 1 lakh for insurance premium payment under Section 80C," Tarun Rustagi Chief Financial Officer Canara HSBC OBC Life Insurance said. **PTI**

## India initiates anti-dumping probe against imports of vinyl tiles from China, Taiwan, Vietnam

**New Delhi:** India has initiated an anti-dumping probe against imports of a certain type of tiles, used for covering the floors in residential and commercial buildings, from China, Taiwan and Vietnam following a complaint by domestic players.

The commerce ministry's investigation arm Directorate General of Trade Remedies (DGTR) is probing the alleged dumping of "Vinyl Tiles other than in roll or sheet form".

Welspun India Ltd, Welspun Flooring Ltd and Welspun Global Brands Ltd had filed a petition before the directorate to impose anti-dumping duty on the imports from China, Taiwan and Vietnam, according to a notification of the DGTR.

The applicants, it said, have alleged that the dumping of the product is materially affecting the domestic industry which started commercial production in September 2019.

They have submitted that the industry and the product are at a nascent stage.

The directorate said "on the basis of the duly substantiated written application by or on behalf of the domestic industry, and having satisfied itself, on the basis of the prima facie evidence submitted by the industry about the dumping...The authority hereby initiates an investigation."

If it is established that the dumping has caused material injury to the domestic players, the DGTR would recommend the imposition of anti-dumping duty on these imports. The finance ministry takes the final decision to impose the duties.

Countries start anti-dumping probes to determine whether their domestic industries have been hurt because of a surge in cheap imports.

As a countermeasure, they impose these duties under the multilateral regime of the Geneva-based World Trade Organisation (WTO). The duty is aimed at ensuring fair trading practices and creating a level-playing field for domestic producers vis-a-vis foreign producers and exporters.

India has already imposed anti-dumping duty on several products to tackle cheap imports from various countries, including China. **PTI**

## Liquor makers approach NCLAT against CCI order, allege abuse of dominance by KSBC in Kerala

**New Delhi:** dies CIABC and ADBVI have approached the NCLAT alleging abuse of dominant position by the Kerala State Beverages (Manufacturing and Marketing) Corporation in the state.

The Confederation of Indian Alcoholic Beverage Companies (CIABC) and Association of Distillers Brewers and Vintners of India (ADBVI) have challenged an earlier order passed by the Competition Commission of India (CCI), which had in October 2020 rejected their pleas and said there exists no prima facie case. The National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT), which is an appellate authority, on January 24 issued notice to the Kerala State Beverages Corporation (KSBC) and Travancore Sugar and Chemicals Ltd (TSCL) on their pleas.

"Issue notice to Respondents No. 2 (KSBC) and 3 (TSCL) returnable within four weeks. Requisites along with process fee be filed within three days," the NCLAT order said.

The appellate tribunal has fixed February 28 as the next date of hearing.

Kerala State Beverages (Manufacturing and Marketing) Corporation is a public sector body entrusted with exclusive control over the procurement, wholesale and retail sale of liquor in the state.

In 2001, KSBC was also entrusted with the majority of retail outlets for the sale of alcoholic beverages in Kerala.

The associations submitted

before the CCI that the entire supply chain, from procurement to distribution and sale of liquor, including India Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL), beer, wine, Foreign Made Foreign Liquor (FMFL) and Foreign Made Wine (FMW), in Kerala is controlled by it.

They had alleged that KSBC, for the purpose of procurement of liquor, floats tenders periodically, inviting liquor manufacturers to participate, and "unilaterally and unfairly" fixes the contract price.

Moreover, abusing its dominant position, it imposes "unfair and discriminatory prices and terms on private alcoholic beverages manufacturers as against government brands and leverages its monopoly position by providing favourable prices as well as terms and conditions in the purchase of the product of TSCL".

It was alleged that KSBC grants preferential treatment to TSCL in terms of lower wholesale margin, lower cash discount, and priority in unloading at depots, thereby placing private brands at a competitive disadvantage.

However, this was rejected by the CCI, which observed that several manufacturers were supplying multiple liquor brands to KSBC whereas TSCL was supplying only one brand of rum.

The CCI had also observed that the complainants had not been able to demonstrate how competition, in general, with the existence of so many brands in the market, was adversely affected. **PTI**

# Global shares mixed ahead of Fed policy statements

**Tokyo:** Global shares were mixed on Wednesday, with many investors staying on the sidelines ahead of an update on how aggressively the Federal Reserve will tackle inflation.

France's CAC 40 added nearly 1.0 per cent in early trading to 6,903.90, while Germany's DAX gained 1.2 per cent to 15,309.64. Britain's FTSE 100 rose 1.2 per cent to 7,461.86. The future for the Dow industrials climbed 0.3 per cent to 34,287.00. The S&P 500 future was 0.4 per cent higher at 4,367.50. Stocks have gyrated this week as markets focused on whether the US central bank will clarify just how fast it plans to tighten credit and potentially slow the economy. The Fed's two-day meeting wraps up on Wednesday.

At the same time, tensions over the Russia and Ukraine tensions continue to grab attention.

Ukraine's leaders have reassured their country that an invasion from neighbouring Russia is not imminent but acknowledged the threat is real and received a shipment of US military equipment to shore up their defenses.

Moscow has denied it is planning an assault, but it has massed an estimated 100,000 troops near Ukraine in recent weeks and is holding military drills at multiple locations in Russia.

That has led the United States and its NATO allies to rush to prepare for a possible war. "Market volatility remains elevated as investors are still feeling jittery over a very tense Ukraine-Russia situation, a whole range of inflationary issues that include a potentially aggressive Fed and a global chip problem that just won't get any better," Edward Moya of Oanda said in a commentary.

## Jio-bp opens EV charging hub in Delhi; petrol pump count inching up

**New Delhi:** A joint venture of billionaire Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) and energy supermajor BP has opened one of the country's largest EV charging hubs in Delhi, as the duo scale up the fuel retail network, offering multiple fuel choices including EV charging infrastructure.

Reliance BP Mobility Limited, operating under the brand name Jio-bp, is working with multiple demand aggregators, original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and technology partners with a vision of being the leading EV charging infrastructure player in India, RIL had said in its third quarter earnings announcement last week.

"Jio-bp has constructed and launched one of the country's largest EV charging hubs in Dwarka, Delhi with BluSmart as its primary customer," it had said. RBML had launched its first Jio-bp branded Mobility Station at Navde, Navi Mumbai in October last year. And since then it has been scaling up the network. In 2019, BP had bought a 49 per cent stake in over 1,400 petrol pumps and 31 aviation turbine fuel (ATF) stations owned by Reliance for USD 1 billion. The existing petrol pumps of Reliance had since been transferred to the joint venture, which plans to scale them up to 5,500 by 2025. **PTI**

## Picasso heirs launch digital art piece to ride ‘crypto’ wave

**Geneva:** Heirs of Pablo Picasso, the famed 20th-century Spanish artist, are vaulting into 21st-century commerce by selling 1,010 digital art pieces of one of his ceramic works that has never before been seen publicly - riding a fad for "crypto" assets that have taken the art and financial worlds by storm.

For an exclusive interview before the formal launch this week, Picasso's granddaughter, Marina Picasso, and her son Florian Picasso opened up their apartment - which is swimming in works from their illustrious ancestor - in an upscale Geneva neighborhood. There they offered up a glimpse, however tantalisingly slim, of the piece behind what they're billing as an unprecedented fusion of old-school fine art and digital assets.

They're looking to cash in on and ride a wave of interest in so-called non-fungible tokens, or NFTs, which have netted millions for far-less-known artists and been criticised by some as environmentally costly get rich schemes. A Picasso, his family's promoters say, would mark the entry of a Grand Master into the game. In economics jargon, a fungible token is an asset that can be exchanged on a one-for-one basis. **AP**

## PLI scheme to help auto industry become self-reliant, globally competitive: TKM

**New Delhi:** The production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme for the automobile sector aims to provide impetus to a greener future and is also expected to make the industry self-reliant and globally competitive, automaker Toyota Kirloskar Motor said on Wednesday.

The company, which is a joint venture between the Japanese Toyota Motor Company and Kirloskar Group, said the automotive industry is one of the sectors that will benefit directly from the PLIs for electronics and advanced chemistry cells (ACC).

"These measures will help create a vibrant and competitive local manufacturing ecosystem for advanced and green technologies at global scales, thus making India a strong manufacturing hub. The benefits will also trickle down the entire supply chain thereby also providing a boost to the MSMEs," a TKM spokesperson said in a statement.

Moreover, as PLIs also focus on providing impetus to a greener future, these will further help to achieve the government's objectives of rapid carbon reduction, the spokesperson added. The automaker, which produces models like Innova Crysta and Fortuner, noted

that its philosophy too, has always been moving towards greener technologies and such measures from the government will encourage all industries, to bring out all possible greener technologies going forward.

"We as pioneers of electrified technologies will continue to focus on mass electrification through localisation of electrified vehicle parts. We believe the shift to a greener future can be hastened through policies, including taxation, being linked to transparent, easily measurable outcomes aligned to national objectives such as carbon reduction," it added.

The company believes that through its focus on PLI for several key identified sectors, the government has sought to transform India's economy by attracting huge investments in advance and future technologies, and for areas where India is currently highly import dependent, the spokesperson said.

"This initiative promises not only to make us self-reliant but also globally competitive. As the huge government allocation will be spread over the next five years, these schemes will give the desired boost without the sudden immediate burden on the exchequer," the spokesperson added. **PTI**

currently. Greater use of natural gas will cut fuel cost as well as bring down carbon emissions, helping the nation meet its COP-26 commitments.

"Non-inclusion of natural gas under the GST regime is having adverse impact on natural gas prices due to stranding of taxes in the hands of gas producers/suppliers and is also impacting natural gas-based industries due to stranding of legacy taxes paid on it," FIPI said.

VAT rate on natural gas is very high in some states -- Andhra Pradesh levies 24.5 per cent tax, Uttar Pradesh 14.5 per cent, Gujarat 15 per cent and Madhya Pradesh 14 per cent.

Inclusion of natural gas under GST is required to provide uniform taxation and to encourage free trade of it across the country without any tax anomalies. "This is one of the key prerequisites for the development of gas exchange in the country," it said.

FIPI said non-inclusion of basic petroleum products such as crude oil, natural gas, petrol, diesel and ATF under the newly introduced GST regime is affecting the sector adversely. **PTI**

## Elan Group acquires 40-acre land in Gurugram for ₹580 cr from Indiabulls Real Estate

**New Delhi:** In a big-ticket land deal, Elan Group has bought around 40-acre land in Gurugram for Rs 580 crore from Indiabulls Real Estate to develop housing and commercial projects. With the purchase of this land parcel, located on Dwarka Expressway, Elan Group will make an entry into the housing segment with the total development potential of around 5 million square feet. Elan Group has so far completed three commercial (office and retail) projects and is currently constructing five commercial projects. According to sources, Elan Group has

bought around 40 acres of licensed land, of which 30 acres is meant for residential development and 10 acres for commercial projects. Sources said, Elan Group has already made the advance payment to Indiabulls Real Estate Ltd and the deal will be concluded in the next few months.

## Coal Ministry CPSEs clock 28.33 pc growth in capex

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

The Government on Wednesday said the Ministry of Coal, through its CPSEs, has registered a 28.33 per cent year-on-year growth in capex achievement at Rs 12,605.75 crore for the period ending December, 2021.

The Ministry of Coal, through its Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs), had registered a capex achievement of ₹ 9,822.28 crore for the period up to December, 2020,

"As compared to the last year's achievement of Rs 9,822.28 crore for the period up to December, 2020, Coal Ministry CPSEs have done capex of Rs 12,605.75 crore, thereby giving a major impetus to the COVID-struck economy," the coal ministry said in a statement.

This capex achievement is also 75 per cent of the Ministry of Coal's annual target, the statement added.

Coal India (CIL) is one of the CPSEs under the coal ministry. CIL had earlier said that its capital expenditure jumped more than two-fold to ₹1,840 crore in the first quarter of 2021-22, compared to ₹ 844 crore in the year-ago quarter.

Coal India in a statement said the capital expenditure rose two-fold in the first quarter of FY22 as it continues to step up investments in evacuation infrastructure, land acquisition and procurement of heavy equipment.

CIL has achieved 94 per cent of the progressive target of Rs 1,960 crore, set for April-June quarter of the ongoing fiscal.

Underscoring the intent on strengthening evacuation infrastructure like setting up rail sidings and corridors, coal handling plants, (CHP), silos and haul roads CIL's capex has risen to ₹ 504 crore on this account, the second highest among all capex heads. **PTI**

### PUBLIC NOTICE

It is publicly notified that the House/Plot no. E-32 Sector 39 Noida, Gautam Buddha Nagar,U.P. was allotted in the name of Mrs. Satya Ahuja W/O Sh. J.C.Ahuja R/O 165 Bhera Enclave,Delhi,who had said the said House/Plot on the basis of GPA to the following persons: GPA was executed in favour of Maj. A.L. Bhardwaj S/O Sh. Parmanand Bhardwaj R/O IX/936, Prem Gali 3A, Gandhi Nagar, Delhi at S.R.NOIDA Vide Registration no.14125, Book no.IV, Volume no.2345, Pages no.150-152 dated 23/08/1993 and agreement to sell was not registered. So with the help of this notice it is informed the transfer of the said House/Plot goes in favour of Mrs. Indu Bhardwaj W/O Maj A.L.Bhardwaj, Arvind Bhardwaj S/O Maj. A.L.Bhardwaj both R/O E-32 Sector 39 Noida Gautam Buddha Nagar, U.P. and Mrs.Mamta Ashutosh Kr. Bhardwaj R/O A 601, Umang, Vasant Utsav, Thakur Village, Kandivali East, Mumbai.Maharashtra. If anyone has objection, he/she may submit objections in the housing department of Noida Authority along with sufficient proofs within 15 days of publication of this notice. Arvind Bhardwaj

## Aviation Ministry’s tableau debuts at R-Day parade, showcases impact of Udan

**New Delhi:** The Aviation Ministry's tableau debuted at the Republic Day parade on Wednesday and showcased the impact of regional air connectivity scheme Udan across the country.

Under this scheme, financial incentives from the aviation ministry, state governments and airport operators are extended to selected airlines to encourage operations from unserved and underserved airports and to keep airfares affordable.

The front part of the aircraft-shaped tableau showcased women pilots depicting women power in India's aviation -- India has among the highest number of female pilots globally.

The rear portion showed Buddhism symbols and the UDAN motto - Sab Uden, Sab Juden. The mid-

dle portion focused on the Buddha circuit, featuring the Buddha statue in Gaya where he attained enlightenment, the Dhamekh Stupa, Sarnath where he delivered his first sermon (Dharmachakra Parivartan) and the Mahaparinirvana Stupa, Kushinagar, where he attained Mahaparinirvana.

Both sides of the section depicted heritage sites -- Humayun tomb in the north, Konark sun temple in east, Hampi temple chariot in south and Ajanta caves in west -- connected through air services.

In October last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Kushinagar international airport. Various airlines operate domestic Udan flights to Kushinagar currently. **PTI**

### GOVERNMENT OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR OFFICE THE EXECUTIVE ENGINEER PWD(R&B) ELECTRIC DIVISION JAMMU

#### FRESH NOTICE INVITING TENDER

**Fresh e-NIT No.EDJ/220 of 2021-22 Dated 22-01-2022**  
For and on the behalf of the Lieutenant Governor of Jammu and Kashmir e-tenders are invited on item rate basis from approved and eligible contractors/agencies registered with Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir for each of the following works:-

**S.No.1 Name of Work :- Electrification to the Balance Work of Govt. Medical College and Hospital Kathua. (3rd call).**  
**Name of Division :- PWD (R&B) Electric Division Jammu**  
**Estimated Cost ( Rs. in lacs):- 181.30**  
**Cost of document (in Rs.) :- 5000/-**  
**Earnest Money (in Rs.)::- Uploaded Bid Security Declaration Form As Per tendered**  
**Time Allowed for completion :- 60 days**  
**Time & date of opening of tender :- 29-01-2022 At or after (12 : 00 A.N)**  
**Class of Contractor :- “A” Class Electrical Contractor /Firms having License Class 1 (AA) of CPWD / MES /PDD**  
**State Government Building Category Card and Full filling eligibility Criteria.**

The Bidding documents Consisting of qualifying information, eligibility criteria, specifications, bill of quantities (B.O.Q). Set of terms and conditions of contract and other details can be seen/downloaded from the departmental website <http://jktenders.gov.in> as per below schedule:

- Date of Issue of Tender Notice :- 22-01-2022**
- Period of downloading of bidding documents :- From 23-01-2022 to28-01-2022, 4:00 P.M**
- Bid Submission Start Date :- 23-01-2022**
- Bid Submission End Date :- 28-01-2022 up to 4:00 P.M**
- Date & time of opening of Technical Bids (Online) :- 29-01-2022 at or after 12:00 A.N in the Office of the Superintending Engineer PWD (R&B) Jammu/Kathua Circle Jammu.**
- Date & time of opening of Financial Bids (Online) :- To be notified after technical bid evaluation is completed**

Sd/- Executive Engineer  
PWD (R&B) Electric Division Jammu

### GOVERNMENT OF JAMMU & KASHMIR DIRECTORATE OF FLORICULTURE SRINAGAR KASHMIR

**Tel-0194-2474234 Fax - 2482032 – email - kashflori@rediffmail.com**

#### CANCELLATION NOTICE

**Subject:** - Supply of different kinds ofHybrid Flower Seeds (Summer & Winter).

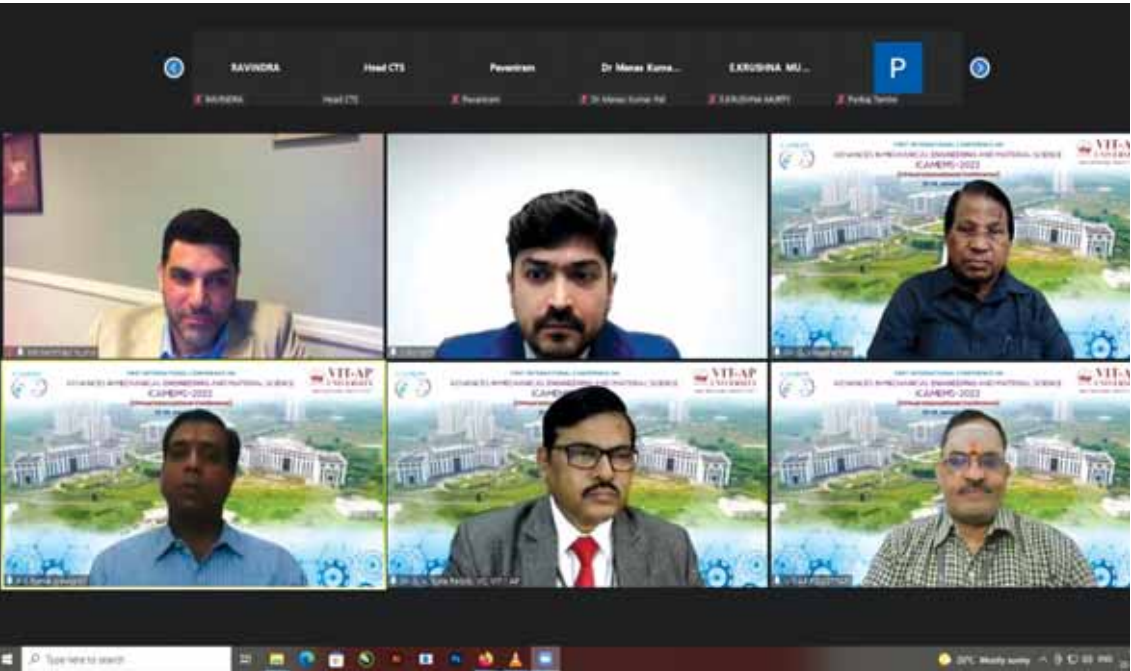
The e-NIT No.36 of 2022 Dated.04.01.2022 for supply of different kinds of Hybrid Flower Seeds (Summer & Winter) is hereby cancelled ab-initio on technical reasons.

By Order

Sd/- Accounts Officer  
(Member Secretary)

No. DIPK-J-17147/21  
Dated:- 25-01-2022





# International Conference by VIT-AP

The first International Conference on Advances in Mechanical Engineering & Material Science (ICAMEMS) is being held virtually at VIT AP University, Amaravati from January 22 to 24.

Chief guest S Balchandran, executive chairman and CEO, Buimerc Corporation Ltd., Dubai, UAE emphasized the role of mechanical, civil and electrical engineering in building block of current technologies development. The pandemic years have initiated a new era where technology plays vital

role. Dr Mohammad Younis, Professor, Department of Mechanical Engineering, Binghamton University, State University of New York, USA motivated students to make use of the conference to develop technologies based on the challenges the society faced.

Dr G Viswanathan, founder & chancellor, VIT emphasised the contribution of VIT group of institution in research and their alumni doing well in various industries across the globe.

Dr S V Kota Reddy, vice chancellor,

Dr P S Rama Sreekanth, convenor ICAMEMS, said that there were six speakers who are associated with reputed institutes and universities, 1,000 participants 25 states and from 13 countries and 120 articles accepted for publications.

Dr C L V Sivakumar, Registrar, VIT-AP, faculty, scholars and staff were also present.

## Power Minister flags off four ALS ambulances to IGIMS, Patna under NTPC's CSR

Shri R K Singh, Union Minister of Power, New & Renewable Energy, flagged off four high-tech ambulances, under NTPC's CSR grant to Indira Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences (IGIMS), Patna. The keys were handed over to Dr Manish Mandal, the medical superintendent of IGIMS, in a function organised in IGIMS administrative office complex where Union Minister of Power, Shri Singh joined through virtual mode from Delhi whereas Energy Minister, Bihar Shri Bijendra Prasad Yadav and Health Minister, Bihar Shri Mangal Pandey were physically present.

Speaking on the occasion, Shri R K Singh said that handing over of the four ALS ambulances to IGIMS, Patna by NTPC reflects the best in the CSR and we are continuously and proactively supporting the state of Bihar.

Shri Singh said 10 ambulances have already been provided to IGIMS, Patna and, on the request of Bihar government, he assured two more ambulances will be provided which would be a total of 16 ambulances for IGIMS, Patna.

Congratulating the efforts of NTPC and state health department in strengthening the health sec-



tor in the state, he said this is the work for progress and well-being of the people of the state and such efforts will continue in the future also.

The state-of-the-art ambulances, provided at a cost of ₹80 lakh, are fitted with Advance Life Support (ALS) facilities. NTPC has sanctioned four ambulances with ALS facility to IGIMS, Patna. Medical equipment in the ambulance include auto loading stretcher, wheel chair cum stair chair, transport ventilator, syringe infusion pump, multi parameter monitor, vacuum splint, portable oxygen cylinder with regulator, emergency kits, rescue tools etc.

Energy Minister, Bihar Shri Bijendra Prasad Yadav and Health Minister, Bihar, Shri Mangal Pandey also addressed the gathering and lauded the efforts of NTPC for providing medical infra-structural support to the State.

Shri Gurdeep Singh, CMD NTPC, Shri Pratayya Amrit, additional chief secretary, Health, Bihar, Shri Dillip Kumar Patel, director (HR), NTPC, Shri Vijai Singh, regional executive director, (East-1), NTPC, Dr N R Biswas, director, IGIMS, Patna along with officials of NTPC, energy department of Bihar and IGIMS Patna were also present on the occasion.



## VIT-AP University Felicitates 25 Unsung Heroes

On the occasion of 73rd Republic Day Celebrations VIT- AP University felicitated APSRTC driver O Madhu, 10 fire services personnel, two RTC drivers and conductor, 12 policemen for saving the lives of people by discharging their duties diligently. APSRTC Police constable K Srinivasa Rao was honoured posthumously.

A S Dinesh Kumar, joint collector and additional district magistrate, Guntur District unfurled the national tricolour and presented the award winners with certificates of appreciation and re-wards for their services. He also handed over free laptops to the Students of 2021 batch of Support The Advancement of Rural Students (STARS) programme on this occasion.

All 23 members received these awards and reward of ₹20,000. Vice Chancellor Dr. S V Kota Reddy, Registrar Dr. C.L.V. Sivakumar, Dr. Anupama Namburu, Deputy Director student welfare family members of unsung heroes, faculty, students and staff were also present on the occasion.

## Special Bal Samvad on National Girl Child Day

The Department of Women and Child Development, Delhi organised a special Bal Samvad with girls residing in Government run child care institutions on National Girl Child Day on January 24. All senior officers of WCD — including Dr Rashmi Singh, special secretary-cum-director DWCD — interacted online with girls, other residents/caregivers/superintendents of the childcare institutions on two topics 'Main Hu Leader' for instilling leadership and 'Cyber Surakshit Samuday' for creating safe cyber space in CCLs in collaboration with Room to Read and Space2Grow resource partners respectively.

The programme was conceptualised under the wider ambit of Bal Samvad commemorating its one year of initiation as an innovative exercise for providing an interface to children of CCLs to share their thoughts, ideas, aspirations and concerns.

"I appeal to all girls to dream big and believe in themselves, for the world is full of endless possibilities," was the message from Hon'ble Minister, WCD Shri Rajendra Pal Gautam which was read out from the special edition of Bal Samanvay magazine.

The officers present extended their best wishes of National Girl Child Day to girls at CCLs encouraging them to give their 100 per cent in all aspects of their lives to achieve their goals as well to support each other for their overall development. The children were very excited when Dr Singh announced that some surprises are underway as a gift on National Girl Child Day. These were dedicating three booklets to the girls namely *Bal Samanvay*, *Achievements & Milestones of the Department of WCD 2021* and *Saheli Samanvay Kendra handbook* and a poster on 'I am a leader'.

It was an exhilarating and motivating experience for children of the CCLs to see their paintings, poetry, writings and more published in the 'Bal Samanvay booklet'.

Dr Navendra Kumar Singh, Joint Director DWCD appreciated the publication of these booklets as they would serve as informative public documents which are crucial for generating awareness of the vital work being undertaken by the Department of Women and Child Development for the care and protection of vulnerable children & our endeavors to promote their holistic development.

He further remarked that girls are the foundation of the society and unanimous efforts of everyone are required to empower them.

The Department also took the opportunity to roll out 'Swachhta hi Seva' Campaign in CCLs extending the concept from physical hygiene to inner well-being and positive cognitive development. A wide array of activities under the components of wall paintings/murals, story telling/screening of films, hygiene/nutrition & health/sports/fitness/wellness and mindfulness shall be conducted in CCLs in the coming weeks.

In 'Main hoon leader' initiated in collaboration with Room to Read, a comic strip depicting leadership stories of girls/women was dedicated to the girls. Under this campaign, girl would be promoted to build their leadership skills by being good communicators, influencing peers to talk and discuss issues related to studying and reading and be conscious about their inbuilt capacities.

Space2Grow conducted its first workshop with girls from Sanskar Ashram Dilshad Garden and Nirmal Chaya on Cyber Surakshit Samuday for creating safe cyber space in CCLs. The session began with an introduction by Chitra Iyer (Co-founder, Space2Grow).

The session touched upon topics like online child abuse, cyber stalking, identity theft and impersonation, child pornography email hacking and more.

## Metro Railway observed the 73rd Republic Day

As part of the celebration of 73rd Republic Day, Shri Manoj Joshi, general manager, Metro Railway unfurled the National Flag at Metro Rail Bhavan and took the Guard of Honour from RPF.

In his address to the staff & officers present on this occasion, he highlighted the following achievements of Metro Railway:

In the current financial year 2021-22, Metro Railway's passenger earnings have increased to ₹76.81 crore from ₹13.13 crore up to December '21 during the corresponding year of the last year.



Metro carried 4.91 crore passengers from April '21 to December '21 in spite of Covid restrictions.

Metro RPF rescued five children and handed them over to their parents/local police stations.

In his speech, the general manager has also mentioned that 10 Automatic Smart Card Recharge Machines at nine stations and 52 Card Balance Checking Terminals at 26 stations have been branded.

QR Code based ticketing system and Wi-Fi facility has been introduced in East-West Metro Corridor.

Two lifts have been commissioned for easy movement of differently-abled persons and senior citizen and at Mahanayak Uttam Kumar station.

Shri Joshi stressed upon ensuring safety, security, punctuality and enhancing amenities for the passengers and urged upon the Metro employees to be more dedicated in providing the best service to the commuters.

After the programme, one energy efficient, VVVF drive enabled and contactless lift was dedicated to the service of the nation by Shri Joshi, and another energy efficient, VVVF drive enabled and contactless lift was inaugurated by Smt Dipti Joshi, president, Metro Railway Women Welfare Organisation at Metro Rail Bhavan.

## POWERGRID signs CSR MoU with Hardayal Municipal Heritage Public Library, Delhi

As a CSR initiative, Power Grid Corporation of India Limited (POWERGRID) has signed an MoU with Hardayal Municipal Heritage Public Library, Delhi (HMHPL) on January 20 to help upgrade the existing infrastructure of the library by supply of furniture, equipment, books and more. More so, in order to enhance e-awareness, promote exchange of ideas & information, and inculcate reading habits amongst youth, this project especially includes creation of a digital section (POWERGRID GYAN KENDRA) to provide facilities for e-learning



through sufficient computers in a networked system. Estimated project cost is ₹94.60 lakh to be executed through POWERGRID Northern Region-I.

Hardayal Municipal Heritage Public Library (HMHPL), situated in the heart of Chandni Chowk, is the oldest public library of Delhi, which is free for public usage and no

charges are levied on public using the reading section. The library has a unique collection of more than 1,70,000 books in Hindi, English, Urdu, Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit. It is one of the very few libraries in the world with a collection of at least 8,000 rare books. The oldest book in the library is block-printed.

The agreement was signed by Shri Vinayak Chauhan, senior general manager (CSR), POWERGRID and Smt Poonam Parashar Jha, secretary, HMHPL. Shri U C Trivedi, chief manager from POWERGRID along with other senior officials were present at the event.

## Webinar for Pensioners' Associations

A webinar was organised for all the Pensioners' Associations under the chairmanship of Shri V Srinivas, secretary (P&PW) with the objective to create awareness on newly notified CCS (Pension) Rules, 2021 and generation of Digital Life Certificates using Face Authentication Technology Central Government Pensioners Associations from all parts of the country participated in the meeting. Presentations were given on CCS Pension Rules 2021 and on DLC generation through Face Authentication followed by a Question Answer session after each presentation.

The Secretary (P&PW) expressed his happiness to meet the 52 participants from the various Associations and to have a constructive interaction. He appreciated the intensity of the discussion and the various queries raised, given the release of CCS Pension Rules 2021 on December 25 and the recent launch of DLC generation through face authentication. The curiosity among pensioners



was very understandable and such interactions would continue with a view to stay in touch and ensure that every association reached out to. He also requested each Association regularly interact with their members.

He reiterated that the objective of the meeting was to enhance interaction between the department and the Pensioners' Associations, especially at his level so that he could know each one personally and the associations could be assured that the secretary would be in a position to understand and listen to areas where concern exists. He informed that since the pension department is a very legalistic and policy-based department, it is important to understand where reforms are necessary and constant updations and amendments in law may be required to ensure greater benefits for pensioners. He hoped that membership of each association is more than 300 and they are interacting regularly with the members.

## Rajasthan CM hoists flag

Rajasthan Chief Minister Shri Ashok Gehlot hoisted the flag at Badi Chauran on the occasion of Republic Day. On this auspicious occasion he asked everyone to take a pledge to work together to protect the Constitution of the country and strengthen democracy. He said that in view of the atmosphere of tension and mistrust in the country today, we need to follow the path of truth and non-violence shown by Gandhiji.

While congratulating the people of the state on Republic Day, he said that we should remember those known and unknown fighters, who sacrificed their lives to liberate this country. Many great men including Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Gopal Krishna Gokhale made an invaluable contribution under Gandhiji's guidance. He said that

Babasaheb Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar has given us a strong Constitution. It's our responsibility to protect its values and strengthen democracy's roots. Diverse religions, castes and classes live here and the country's unity in diversity has to be maintained.

Shri Gehlot said that after independence, our country has made progress in every field including science and technology, industry and agriculture, but today efforts are being

made to deny those achievements of 70 years. Former Prime Ministers, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and Punjab chief minister Beant Singh preferred martyrdom rather than allowing divisive forces any success.

Shri Gehlot said that the State government successfully faced the corona epidemic. The CM said that the State government was providing sensitive, transparent and accountable governance.



## Sports stars from Haryana shine bright at Rajpath

The celebrations of 73rd Republic Day held at Rajpath in New Delhi witnessed the 'Sports power of Haryana', as its tableau featured international sportspersons.

The tableau looked like an international competition as Yogeshwar Dutt, Bajrang Punia, Kumari Rani Rampal and Sumit Antil, who have won medals in the Olympics, Asian and Commonwealth Games, were present.

Haryana stands first in the country in the performance of its players at international events and is also ahead in terms of awarding the highest award money to its players.

KEY HIGHLIGHT OF HARYANA'S TABLEAU

The tableau was divided into two parts. The front portion consisted of horses and a conch symbolising 'Vijay Rath' from the Mahabharata and the conchshell of Lord Krishna respectively. The back portion was divided into four parts. In one part, two wrestlers were giving demonstrations in an arena built on the lines of the Olympic Games. In the rear, 10 famous international sportspersons were standing. At the back was a life-size replica of Olympian Neeraj Chopra.

On both sides, sportspersons from boxing, weight-lifting, shooting, discus-throw and hockey were depicted. With the theme of 'Haryana-Number One in Sports', it showcased India's pride in sports.

**Players on the tableau:** Bajrang Punia, wrestling Bronze Medal (Olympics 2020); Kumari Rani Rampal, captain, Women's Hockey Team 4th place (Olympics 2020); Yogeshwar Dutt, wrestling, Bronze Medal (Olympics 2012); Mamta Kharab, former Captain of Indian Women's Hockey Team; Arjun Awardee, Sumit Antil, para athlete Gold Medalist (Paralympics-2020); Deepak Punia, wrestling fourth position (Olympics 2020); Harvinder, para archery, Bronze Medal (Paralympics 2020); Yogesh Kathuniya, para athlete, Silver Medal (Olympics 2020); Rampal, para athlete, participant (Paralympics 2020); Ranjit, para athlete, participant (Olympics 2020); Ashu, wrestling, live demonstration; Anil, wrestling, live demonstration and Dr Kuldeep Saini, representative, Haryana Government.



Rajasthan Chief Minister, Shri Ashok Gehlot, unfurled the tricolour flag on Republic Day at 7.30 am at the Chief Minister's residence, 8, Civil Lines. Under the leadership of Company Commander Shri Vishram Singh (R A C), the team saluted the Chief Minister who extended his greetings and best wishes to everyone on Republic Day. Officers of the Chief Minister's office and residence were present on this occasion.



# UAE AND IRELAND ENTER PLATE SEMIFINALS

PTI ■ PORT OF SPAIN

United Arab Emirates and Ireland booked their places in the Plate semi-finals as the next stage of the ICC Under-19 Men's Cricket World Cup got off to a thrilling start in Trinidad and Tobago.

UAE survived a dramatic batting collapse to edge past Uganda by one wicket and set up a clash with either host nation West Indies or Papua New Guinea in the next round.

Philippus le Roux was Ireland's hero, digging in for a vital unbeaten 83 to help his side post a total which proved comfortably beyond Canada on Tuesday night.

Ireland will now meet the winners of the clash between Zimbabwe and Scotland while Canada join Uganda in the Plate play-off semi-finals.

**Shetty stars as UAE survive scare**

Adhithya Shetty shone with the ball and held his nerve with the bat as UAE recovered from a col-

lapse to overcome Uganda by one wicket here.

Shetty took four wickets to help dismiss the Baby Cricket Cranes for 123 and later saw his side home with the bat during a nail-biting finish in Port of Spain.

Uganda opted to bat and started cautiously, adding 30 for the opening wicket before Ronald Opio was trapped in front by Shetty in the 11th over.

The leg-spinner went on to claim Uganda skipper Pascal Murungi (23) among his other scalps, finishing with four for 29 from his 10 overs to keep the batting side in check.

UAE made a strong start to their pursuit of 124, Kai Smith hitting five boundaries in a fluent 25, and were almost halfway to their target in the 15th over for the loss of just Smith.

But the pendulum swung in Uganda's direction in the space of 14 balls as UAE fell from 61 for one to 62 for five.

Matthew Musinguzi and Joseph Baguma were the destroyers-in-chief and finished with three wickets apiece to set up a

thrilling finish.

**Le Roux leads Irish charge**

A fine unbeaten 83 from Philippus le Roux set Ireland to a 94-run victory over Canada, who remain in search of their first victory of the competition, at Tarouba.

Canada started well with the ball, Ethan Gibson taking two early wickets – including danger man Joshua Cox, who struck a century against Uganda in the group stage – to reduce Ireland to 34 for three.

Le Roux arrived at the crease to begin the rebuilding job but soon lost the company of his captain Tim Tector (15) as Canada continued to apply pressure.

When Gibson (three for 36) returned to clean bowl Matthew Humphreys for a duck, Ireland were in trouble at 90 for seven but Le Roux continued to stand firm. He added 48 with Jamie Forbes (25) and struck 12 boundaries in all as he carried Ireland to 179, at which point he ran out of partners 17 short of a century.



## MS Dhoni is one of the sharpest cricket minds I have encountered: Greg Chappell

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Australian great Greg Chappell has rated former India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni as "one of the sharpest cricket minds", saying his decision-making skills set him apart from his great contemporaries.

Chappell, who had a tumultuous two-year tenure as India's chief coach from 2005 to 2007, had often spoken highly of the two-time World Cup-winning captain who ended his glorious career as one of the country's greatest players.

The Australian cited the example of Dhoni while lamenting the absence of natural environments that once played a huge part in the development of players in strong cricket nations.

"The developed cricket countries have lost the natural environments that were a big part of their development structure in bygone eras.

In those environments, young cricketers learned from watching good players and then emulating them in pick-up matches with family and friends," Chappell wrote in ESPNcricinfo.

"The Indian subcontinent still has many towns where coaching facilities are rare and youngsters play in streets and on vacant land without the interference of formal coaching. This is where many of their current stars have learned the game."

One of them is Dhoni, who came from the town of Ranchi in Jharkhand.

"MS Dhoni, with whom I worked in India, is a good example of a batter who developed his talent and learned to play in this fashion.

"By competing against more experienced individuals on a variety of surfaces early in



his development, Dhoni developed the decision-making and strategic skills that have set him apart from many of his peers.

His is one of the sharpest cricket minds I have encountered," Chappell said.

Beginning his career under Sourav ganguly and John Wright, Dhoni began flourishing in the Rahul Dravid-Greg Chappell era, his explosive knock of 183 not out in an ODI against Sri Lanka being of the highlights.

Former Australia batter Chappell is of the opinion that coaches need to create environments where players can learn problem-solving and decision-making on their own.

Noting England's struggles in the recently-concluded Ashes, Chappell said the problem is with the absence of natural environments for the youngsters to express themselves.

## PCB: Robust safety protocols in place ahead of T-20

AP ■ ISLAMABAD

The Pakistan Cricket Board says "robust" COVID-19 health and safety protocols are in place ahead of its month-long domestic Twenty20 competition in Karachi and Lahore, with several foreign cricketers participating in a six-team event.

"In the present-day environment, all international sport events are going ahead because there is more awareness and information about the pandemic," PCB chairman Ramiz Raja told The Associated Press on the eve of Pakistan Super League. Karachi will host the first leg of the tournament beginning Thursday before the league moves to Lahore on Feb. 10. Lahore will also host the playoffs and the final on Feb. 27. Last year the PSL was postponed in March after six players tested positive for COVID-19 in a bio-secure bubble, and the league was switched to Abu Dhabi in June. The PCB has hired the same company for the seventh edition of its marquee event which successfully created the bio-secure arrangements in Abu Dhabi last year.

"The PCB, despite delivering 267 matches in 10 domestic events in 2021, is not taking anything for granted," Raja said.

"We have designed and put in place robust health and safety protocols for the well-being of all (PSL) participants." The virus has already caused concerns before the first game between defending champion Multan Sultans and Karachi Kings kicks off at National Stadium on Thursday. At least three players, including Peshawar Zalmi's wicketkeeper-batsman Kamran Akmal, and five support staff members tested positive last Saturday when the teams began to assemble in Karachi.

## Kohli retains 2nd spot in ICC batting rankings

PTI ■ DUBAI

India stalwart Virat Kohli retained his second spot in the ICC men's ODI batting rankings on the back of his decent performance in the recently-concluded South Africa series.

Kohli, who stepped down from the Indian team Test captaincy after the away series against South Africa, scored 116 runs in the three-match ODI rubber against the Proteas, including two half-centuries.

Another India senior player Rohit Sharma, who has been named Kohli's successor in the India ODI team, also maintained his third place despite not playing in the South Africa series as he was recovering from an injury.

Kohli has 836 rating points to his kitty, while Rohit has 801. Pakistan captain Babar Azam leads the ODI batting rankings with 873 points.

South Africa's Rassie van der Dussen broke into the top 10 after a brilliant outing in the series against India. He went up 10 places to be at no 10 spot with 750 rating points, while teammate Quinton de Kock, who hit a century in the series against India, also went up four places to occupy the fifth position.

De Kock and van der Dussen topped the ODI run charts with 229 and 218 runs respectively, with both players making hundreds in the series.

De Kock averaged 76.33 while van der Dussen scored his runs at a staggering 218, and those performances have been reflected on the recent ICC ODI rankings.



Captain Temba Bavuma, who was the third centurion in the series against India, also climbed 21 places to be placed at 59th spot. Bavuma notched up 153 runs in three matches at an average of 51. In the bowling rankings, Lungi Ngidi and Keshav Maharaj made big leaps. Ngidi went up four places to occupy no 20 spot, picking up five wickets at 31.40.

India pacer Bhuvneshwar Kumar, who had an ordinary ODI series, meanwhile dropped four places to lie at no 22. Maharaj, who dismissed Kohli twice in the ODI series, and

impressed with his economy rate, went up 18 places to occupy the no 33 spot.

There wasn't too much movement in the top 10 with Kiwi Trent Boult and Australian Josh Hazlewood continuing to occupy the top two positions. In the ODI all-rounder rankings, Andile Phehlukwayo, who topped the wickets chart in the ODI series against India with six wickets, went up three places to be at the 15th position.

Meanwhile, in the T20I batting rankings, Dawid Malan lost three places after missing the first two T20Is against West Indies.

## Beth Mooney set for one-off women's Ashes test

PTI ■ CANBERRA

Three metal plates in her face, a wire on her bottom teeth and on liquid diet after a surgery to fix her broken jaw just over a week ago, Australia keeper-batter Beth Mooney is geared up to make the playing XI for the one-off women's Ashes Test against England starting here on Thursday.

Mooney was injured while batting in nets nine days ago and while speaking to 'SEN Radio' ahead of the one off Test in the multi-format series, spoke about how she coped with the massive setback. "(The medical staff) were pretty adamant to me not long after we got the diagnosis that we could aim for the Test match," Mooney said. "We went and got a 3D CT scan of my skull, and there were two clear breaks pretty much straight down my chin, and then where the ball hit the side of my face, there was another clear break down the side there.

"I've got two plates in my chin and one near my ear and a few screws.

I don't think you can speed up a broken bone, it's going to be broken for five more weeks, but it's certainly a lot more comfortable now than it was a week or so ago," she added.

The only worry for Mooney is how she would keep up with the physical intensity of the match given her diet right now is made up entirely of soups, ice creams and milk-shakes.

"She said she's able to eat unlimited amounts of ice cream," captain Meg Lanning



was quoted as saying 'cricket.Com.Au'.

"So she's pretty happy with that. Otherwise it's soups, a few milk-shakes and thick shakes. It's pretty incredible. Right from the moment she got hit she was pretty positive about the whole situation. "To be coming back to play international cricket around a week after hav-

ing jaw surgery is pretty inspirational for the group." A win in the match would give Australia the Ashes trophy as they lead the series 4-2 on points after claiming the T20 series 1-0, where each win is worth two points. The other two matches were abandoned due to rain because of which both teams got a point each.

## Dravid will bring lot to table: Warne

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Rahul Dravid will bring in a "lot of steel" in the current Indian team and his role will be more of a 'Man Manager' rather than of a conventional coach which is an obsolete concept, reckons Australian spin wizard Shane Warne.

Warne had some great on-field battles with Dravid during their playing days. The legendary leg-spinner has utmost respect for the new Indian head coach but as has been his stance for nearly three decades now, he doesn't believe in "terminology" at elite level.

"Rahul Dravid will bring in a lot to the table. Terrific cricketer, great person. I think he will bring in a lot of steel, lot of toughness to the group," Warne told PTI in an exclusive interview facilitated by 'BookMyShow'.

His documentary 'Shane' is already out on 'BookMyShow Stream'.

"I think he will bring in a



lot of tactical stuff that will be good. Rahul is fantastic for Indian cricket," he added.

However Warne then explained what he feels about the concept at the international level.

"The coach, it is the terminology which I don't like in international cricket. In domestic cricket, the coaches are really important, but in international cricket, he should be called a manager

not a coach," Warne explained.

Elaborating further, he said, "Getting front-elbow up and coaching them like kids isn't what is required at international level."

"You do that for kids at age-group level, first-class level, where you are taught how to play the game and coached to get ready for international cricket."

At the highest level, the

emphasis is on the mental and tactical side of the game and that's not the job of a conventional coach'.

"It's about mental side and tactical side and that's where man management comes in. By the time you go international cricket, you know how to play.

"Sometimes you just forget how to play and make things too complicated and that's why you don't get coached at international level. You are managed. Does that make sense?" the flamboyant cricketer asked.

In the '90s and till mid 2000, Australia had Warne while India had Anil Kumble and Pakistan had Mushtaq Ahmed as world's premier wrist spinners. This art form has not been put to great use in last one and half decades with only name to shine through ranks is Pakistan's Yasir Shah.

Is it because of poor captaincy at Test level that we don't get good leg break bowlers?

# INDIA'S UNDER-19 STARS SET TO ATTRACT GOOD BIDS

IAANS ■ NEW DELHI

Over the years, India's Under-19 cricketers have got good money in IPL auctions and it will be no different this time as well when the paddle goes up on February 12 and 13.

The impressive performance of Indian colts in the ongoing Under-19 World Cup in the Caribbean will not only help them in making it into the senior national team, but it will also serve as a pathway to quick fame and potential big money via the cash-rich league.

The current generation, which

has grown up watching the IPL, will definitely keep one eye on the auction and another on the Under-19 World Cup.

However, it wasn't always the case. In 2008, then U-19 skipper Virat Kohli and his teammate Ravindra Jadeja made it to the Royal Challengers Bangalore and Rajasthan Royals, respectively via the draft system. They were not available for the player auctions, and naturally, the money was limited.

Over the years, the rules changed and Indian colts were allowed to participate in the auctions and since then they got good money

and their lives changed forever.

These U-19 cricketers may or may not deliver from the very first season but franchises see them as long-term investment prospects. This year's auction is also likely to be the last IPL mega auction so owners/officials would want to buy these raw talents at comparatively lesser amount and get fruitful results from them in future.

Virat Kohli, Ravindra Jadeja (2008), KL Rahul, Mayank Agarwal (2010), Unmukt Chand, Hanuma Vihari (2012), Kuldeep Yadav, Shreyas Iyer, Sanju Samson (2014), Ishan Kishan, Rishabh Pant,



Washington Sundar (2016), Prithvi Shaw, Shubman Gill (2018) Ravi Bishnoi, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Kartik Tyagi (2020) and many others have made it big for India or have become IPL stars over the years after taking part in different editions of the Under 19-World Cup.

Likewise, the IPL 2022 auction will also change the lives of many youngsters and the cash-rich league will provide them a chance to showcase their talent in front of the world.

In this listicle, we talk about five Indian Under-19 players who can get hefty deals during the auction on

February 12 and 13.

1. Harnoor Singh: Harnoor is one of the most promising talents from this year's India U-19 side. He is the key batsman of the side and has produced some brilliant knocks in the recently-played friendlies and in the U-19 World Cup as well.

In India's second match of the ongoing U-19 World Cup, he was their highest run scorer with an 88-run knock. Harnoor will definitely be one of the young batters out there that the IPL teams can bid for.

2. Angkrish Raghuvanshi: Opener Angkrish is a very dependable batsman. He scored 79 in the

match against Ireland and followed it with a daddy hundred (144 off 120) against Uganda. So, he will definitely be one of most sought-after names in the auction.

3. Raj Bawa: He is an allrounder and probably best suited for the IPL format. He can bowl 3-4 overs at ease and is a good batsman as well. He played a sensational knock (162 off 108) against Uganda in addition to his 42 off 64 against Ireland and four big wickets with the ball against South Africa. Franchises who need a young all-rounder will definitely bid for Bawa in the auction and the youngster can get a hefty deal.



"THE CONDITIONS MIGHT HAVE CHANGED A LITTLE BIT AFTER THE ROOF WAS CLOSED — SLIGHTLY FASTER, NOT AS BOUNCY AS BEFORE.

# Tsitsipas advances in Australia

AP ■ MELBOURNE

Stefanos Tsitsipas maintained his perfect record in Grand Slam quarterfinals, beating No 11-seeded Jannik Sinner 6-3 6-4 6-2 on Wednesday to reach the last four of the Australian Open. The 23-year-



old, No 4-ranked Tsitsipas improved to 5-0 at this stage of a major. It's the semifinals he's yet

to master, winning just one — at Roland Garros last year — from four so far.

He'll next player either Daniil Medvedev, who made his Grand Slam breakthrough when he won

**Tsitsipas didn't face a break point and converted all four he got on Sinner's serve in the match that lasted just over two hours, considerably less than his five-set fourth-round win over Taylor Fritz.**

last year's US Open title, or No 9 Felix Auger-Aliassime No. 2 Medvedev and Auger-Aliassime were meeting later on Wednesday in a night match.

Tsitsipas didn't face a break point and converted all four he got on Sinner's serve in the match that lasted just over two hours, considerably less than his five-set fourth-round win over Taylor Fritz.

The only real delay came from a weather disruption, when a late afternoon storm meant the roof over Rod Laver Arena had to be closed when the Greek star was already up a set and a break.

"I knew I was heading toward the right direction," Tsitsipas said. "The conditions might have changed a little bit after the roof was closed — slightly faster, not as bouncy as before. I tried to adapt to the new conditions, and it just worked."

Dozens of ball kids and staff used towels to soak up water on the court in the 15-minute break.

The temperature dropped from the highs of the afternoon, when Iga Swiatek took three hours in the afternoon heat to beat 36-year-old Kaia Kanepi 4-6 7-6(2) 6-3, with the payoff being a spot in the semifinals against Danielle Collins.

"This match was crazy," the 20-year-old, 2020 French Open winner said.

"First set I think my mistake was I had so many break points. I felt like I missed my chances. In the second set ... I felt like she's playing so fast that I can't be tight. I had to finish my forehands."

The temperature reached 36 degrees Celsius (97 degrees Fahrenheit) on Day 10, continuing a week of hot weather.

Collins won the opening match before the heat peaked, swinging it in her favor with a key service break in the final game of the opening set on her way to a 7-5 6-1 victory over Alize Cornet.

No 115-ranked Kanepi was coming off an upset, three-set win over No 2-ranked Aryna Sabalenka and took the match to Swiatek, who saved nine set points before losing the first set.

Swiatek rallied in the second, exchanging service breaks twice before winning it in a tiebreaker.

After getting on top in the third, Swiatek was broken in the eighth game when she was serving for the match. She eventually clinched on Kanepi's serve, scrambling to stay in the last point until the Estonian player sent a forehand wide.

After the first three quarterfinals were decided in straight sets — Ash Barty beat Jessica Pegula and Madison Keys beat Barbora Krejickova on Tuesday — the last one went all the way.



## Quarterfinals spot secured but Australia not dropping guards against Thailand

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Title contenders Australia have secured their place in the quarterfinals after two dominating wins and they would look to continue their strong show against Thailand in their final group B match of the women's Asian Cup here on Thursday. That the Matildas will be one of the eight teams to advance to the knock-outs is certain, but they require at least a point against Thailand to be sure of becoming group winners.

The Thais, on the other hand, will have a complicated knockout stage equation when they face the 2010 champions at the Mumbai Football Arena. Australia head coach Tony Gustavsson warned his players against expecting a drop in their standards during Thursday's match. Gustavsson's side have taken no prisoners since touching down in Mumbai, piling on 22 unanswered goals in wins over Indonesia and the Philippines, and living up to their billing as title contenders.

The 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup co-hosts have fielded exceptionally strong starting line-ups in their group stage matches, with stars like Sam Kerr, Ellie Carpenter and Steph Catley all starting on both occasions.

Gustavsson hinted at possible changes for his side's third and final match in Mumbai but declared there would be no letup in terms of how they approach the match itself.

"We're going to treat that game the same way we've done with these two. We have two main targets for the group stage. One was to win the group, and two was to get out of the group peaking physically and mentally going into the playoffs," he said.

"Now we have secured a spot in the playoffs. A tie in the last game would secure that (top in group). We're going to do that in a way that makes sure we have as many players as possible available for the quarter-final, but also peaking." Australia's path to winning the group -- and booking a quarter-final date with either Japan or Korea Republic -- is clear, but Thailand's position in the race for the knockout stage is far more complicated.

The Thais are level with the Philippines on points after a Kanyana Chatthabutr-inspired 4-0 win over Indonesia on Monday, but the loss they suffered to Alen Stajcic's side in their first match means they still sit third in the group standings.

AP ■ SAO PAULO

With World Cup spots secured, Brazil and Argentina appear set to test players in qualifying who are beloved by fans while trying to prove themselves with national teams.

Vinicius Junior has not scored in his first nine appearances for Brazil and Paulo Dybala has two goals in 31 games for Argentina.

Vinicius Junior is expected to replace Neymar for the Seleccion against Ecuador and Dybala is likely to take the field in place of Lionel Messi against Chile.

Four South American nations qualify for this fall's tournament in Qatar and fifth places advances to a playoff against an Asian opponent, leaving two automatic berths still in contention. Only last-place Venezuela, with seven points, is out of contention.

Brazil leads with 35 points, followed by Argentina (29),

Ecuador (23), Colombia, Peru (17), Chile, Uruguay (16) and Bolivia (15).

The contenders each have four games remaining.

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The contenders each have four games remaining.

### ECUADOR VS. BRAZIL

Vinicius Junior's top form at Real Madrid has drawn criticism at home for Brazil coach Tite, accused of not giving the 21-year-old enough time to show his dribbling skills and quick passes. Some allege the coach has difficulties to innovate and test rising players in new roles.

Tite maintains the winger requires patience. Based on Tuesday's training session, Vinicius Junior appears likely for the starting lineup.

Midfielder Casemiro, who plays with Vinicius at Madrid, agrees with his national team boss on not rushing the youngster.

"He has been exceptional, I see him every day. I saw him grow at the club," Casemiro said.

"With the national team there is a different style of playing, another period to adapt. The competition is different. The quicker he adapts, the better. But we can't forget he is just 21 years old."

Ecuador, coached by Argentinian coach Gustavo Alfaro, should clinch with four points from its remaining games.

## PM Modi writes to Gayle, Rhodes on Republic Day

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

As India celebrates its 73rd Republic Day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has written to celebrated cricketers Jonty Rhodes and Chris Gayle, acknowledging their "profound connection" with the country.

While South African Rhodes, a former Mumbai Indians fielding coach who resides in the country for a considerable part of the year, has a daughter named 'India', West Indian swashbuckler Gayle has been a big hit among cricket fans for his exploits in the IPL.

Modi, in his letter to Rhodes, wrote: "I would like to convey my Republic Day Greetings to You."



"Over the years, you have developed a profound connection with India and its culture. This is truly reflected when you named your daughter after this great nation. You truly are a special ambassador of the strong relations between our nations,"

the letter that Rhodes shared on his social media page said.

"India is witnessing a series of historic socio-economic transformations.

I am confident these will empower lives and contribute to the global fund."

Both Rhodes and Gayle thanked the Indian Prime Minister for his gesture.

"Thank you narendramodiji for the very kind words. I have indeed grown so much as an individual on every visit to India. My whole family celebrates RepublicDay with all of India, honouring the importance of a Constitution that protects the rights of the Indian people JaiHind," Rhodes tweeted.

Jamaican Gayle, who represents the West Indies in international cricket, also spoke about his special bond with Indian public.

"I would like to congratulate India on their 73rd Republic Day.

## Anthony Martial seals move from Man United to Sevilla

AP ■ SEVILLE

Anthony Martial will play for Sevilla on a loan from Manchester United until the end of the season, the Spanish club said. United manager Ralf Rangnick said last month that the 26-year-old Martial wanted to leave after tumbling down the list of forwards at the club, behind Cristiano Ronaldo, Marcus Rashford, Edinson Cavani, Jadon Sancho

and Mason Greenwood.

The France forward became the world's most expensive teenage player when United signed him from Monaco in September 2015 for 36 million pounds (then \$55.1 million) that could potentially rise to 58 million pounds (\$78 million).

There was no reported transfer fee or option to buy.



## Santosh Trophy football tournament postponed due to rise in COVID-19 cases

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The National Football Championship for the Santosh Trophy, which was scheduled to be held at Malappuram in Kerala from February 20 to March 6, was on Wednesday postponed till further notice due to rise in COVID-19 cases.

The All India Football Federation said it will review the circumstances next month before announcing the new schedule.

"The AIFF has communicated to participating state associations that in wake of rise in COVID-19 positive cases, and after consultation with the Government of Kerala, the competition schedule for the Hero National Football Championship for the Santosh Trophy has been deferred," the federation said in a release.

"A review of the circumstances will be undertaken in the third week of February to decide on new dates and the new schedule."

# Dennerby blames AFC for COVID outbreak in Indian team

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Indian women's football team coach Thomas Dennerby on Wednesday squarely blamed the AFC for the COVID-19 outbreak that led to the country's ouster from the ongoing Asian Cup here, alleging that his players were infected by the hotel staff in a 'bio-bubble' that was not "foolproof". In a scathing attack on the continental body, Dennerby said India's dream of taking a shot at the FIFA World Cup was shattered not because of any fault of the players but due to the weak bio-bubble created by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). He said the AFC did not show any "respect, compassion, empathy" to the team to deal with the "extraordinary" situation in such a high-stake tournament.

"We were all negative of COVID when we reached team hotel (on Jan 13)

and after arrival tests. The first positive case came on the day we went out of hotel for training and a day later (January 17), seven hotel staff tested positive. It is not rocket science to know how the outbreak came," he told PTI after a virtual media interaction. "The first huge outbreak was among the hotel staff. From my point of view, it's very clear where it (COVID) started, it definitely did not start in the team. It came from the AFC bubble inside the hotel," he said. "The hotel staff was tested for every six days and not every three days as done in case of teams. We know tests were conducted on hotel staff on Jan 11 and then on Jan 17 and seven positive cases were known on Jan 18. But the information was given only on Jan 19 afternoon. What was AFC doing for whole one day, we don't know." India were forced out of the AFC Women's Asian Cup on Sunday after a



dozen COVID-19 cases among their players led to the cancellation of a group match against Chinese Taipei minutes before kick-

off here. The AFC had said given the situation, Article 4.1 of the tournament rules came into effect, which made it clear

that if a team failed to assemble for a match, it would be "considered to have withdrawn from the relevant Competition."

Dennerby said the AFC should have asked the infected hotel staff to leave immediately and not have any contact with players. "We don't know why the AFC did not take immediate action. AFC should have called the hotel directly and asked the infected staff to immediately leave and not to have any contact with players," said the Swede who will also coach the Indian team in the FIFA Women's U-17 World Cup in October. "Several hotel staff infected with COVID, including team India coordinator, kitchen staff, chef, housekeeping, service staff, all of them taking care of us, cooking and serving food, cleaning our rooms, while we were inside isolated in our rooms, still the AFC waited for a whole day."

## Ogbeche threatens to break more records as Hyderabad take on Odisha

PTI ■ VASCO

A place in the top four will be up for grabs but for that Odisha FC will have to tame Bartholomew Ogbeche and Hyderabad FC in their Indian Super League match at the Tilak Maidan Stadium here on Thursday.

Hyderabad are top of the table at the moment and will stay put unless Chennaiyin FC beat Bengaluru on Wednesday.

For the Nizams, the league's top-scorer Ogbeche has been on fire to say the least. The Nigerian put on a treble show against SC East Bengal the other day, putting in the back of the net almost everything that was thrown at him. Ogbeche's hat-trick that took Hyderabad to pole position yet again, ensured his tally of goals went up to 12, placing him on the shop window in the golden boot race.

After picking up another record, Ogbeche will now be aiming for the next big ones — becoming the leading goal scorer in Hero ISL history and becoming the first player to score 50 goals in the competition.

He currently has 48 goals. Odisha, meanwhile, go into the game having kept two consecutive clean sheets, and that will give interim coach Kino Garcia some solace.

Arsheep Singh has looked composed under the bar and so has their backline, although their litmus test is on Thursday against Ogbeche's Hyderabad.

Odisha have got the momentum going for them in the last four games where they collected two wins, one draw, and one solitary loss to Kerala Blasters. "We know Hyderabad can play



attacking football and they have an experienced coach. But, we will use our weapons to face them. Winning will be a boost for us but we realise there are nine games to go.

We think we can be in the semifinals but we are looking to build steadily and be ready for the final games," Garcia said.

For Hyderabad, only two losses in 12 matches mean they are in fine fettle and well on course for a play-off berth. In that quest, head coach Manolo Marquez will believe his team can pick up full points from the Odisha game, especially after their dominating performance against SC East Bengal.

Not only Ogbeche but the defence also looked good. Ashish Rai was as impressive as ever and Aniket Jadhav also came to the party not only for his goal but also overall industry.

# Focus on Brazil's Vinicius Junior, Argentina's Dybala

### CHILE VS. ARGENTINA

Under coach Lionel Scaloni, Argentina won last year's Copa America.

Following decent form at Juventus, the 28-year-old Dybala is expected to replace Messi in a match played at nearly 7,900 feet (2,400 meters) at Calama, in northern Chile's Atacama Desert.

Dybala also started for Argentina in November's 1-0 qualifying win at Uruguay, when Messi was recovering from a knee injury and entered in the second half.

Despite Argentina's early qualification to the World Cup, goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez said he and his teammates "are still hungry" and "not relaxed."

"We want to continue uniting as a team and as a group. We have to give our best to be in the final list,"

he said.

"We will try to win every match or play them as if they were our last. People have to see the best version of us in this World Cup year and we want to reach that goal."

Messi will miss these games while regaining fitness following a positive COVID-19 test last month.

"We don't have (Arturo) Vidal and we have to win. If our opponent doesn't have Messi, we have to beat them too," Chile coach Martin Lasarte said Tuesday.

No. 7 Uruguay will need a win at ninth-place Paraguay on Thursday to climb back to a qualifying position and to start strong under coach Diego Alonso, who took over after Oscar Tabarez was fired.

Fourth-place Colombia will host No. 5 Peru, and Bolivia will play at Venezuela.

**VINICIUS JUNIOR IS EXPECTED TO REPLACE NEYMAR FOR THE SELECAO AGAINST ECUADOR AND DYBALA IS LIKELY TO TAKE THE FIELD IN PLACE OF LIONEL MESSI AGAINST CHILE.**

