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SummitTIMES

Vol 05 | Issue 333 | Gangtok | Tuesday | 22 December 2020

ON TOP OF THE NEWS

RNI No. SIKENG/2016/69420

Pages 8 | ₹ 5

12TH ANNIVERSARY OF 'RHOLU' PICNIC

Unlike Chamling, will prepare successor: Golay

**BIKASH CHETTRI
NAMCHI, 21 DEC:**

The 12th anniversary of the Rolu Picnic was observed today at Rolu Mandir, near Melli, South Sikkim, with a puja attended by Sikkim Krantikari Morcha president and Chief Minister, PS Tamang.

Mr Tamang was accompanied by SKM leaders, in-charge from South District, MLAs, cabinet ministers and party functionaries.

The day is celebrated every year to mark the picnic organised by those aligned with Mr Tamang who announced their stand against Sikkim Democratic Front and its government with the picnic.

In a Facebook post about the day, Mr Tamang writes: "...the day which holds a special spot in the hearts of all the 'Krantikaris' as 12 years ago on this fateful day we took an oath to accomplish systemic change and started our journey from this holy land. It was the dedication and efforts of all involved that we were able to dethrone a 25 years old regime."

Due to the pandemic, the day was observed in a restricted manner today with only prayers being conducted to mark the day.

On the day, Mr Tamang announced that



Rolu has been renamed "Rholu," which stands for 'Revolutionary Home of the Letdown and Underprivileged'.

The prayers were followed by a brief programme held near the temple, wherein the 2021 edition of Sikkim Krantikari Morcha party's calendar was launched followed by the re-launch of 'Jan Adhikar'

- the Nepali language weekly of Sikkim Krantikari Morcha along with the release of an audio cassette titled 'Krantiko Geet' part II.

Artist Shankar Luitel presented Mr Tamang with a portrait on the occasion.

In his address, Mr Tamang said that 21 December is a historic day for Sikkim

Krantikari Morcha and for the entire state. He remembered and thanked all who had gathered for the first Rolu picnic on the banks of Rangit river near Rolu mandir in 2009. He also remembered 'krantikaris' who are no longer there to see the 'parivartan' in Sikkim.

Mr Tamang thanked the owner of

the land where the first Rolu picnic was organized in 2009.

He shared the names of 31 individuals which included government employees and said that though they were government employees they helped him in his initial days of political struggle due to which they had to face many problems later.

The SKM president and Chief Minister said that the next Chief Minister of Sikkim will be prepared by him and the SKM party. He said that unlike SDF, his party believes in

having an alternative.

"I am not a leader who thinks that there is no alternative to me," stated Mr Tamang. He further shared his plans of visiting each and every corner of the state and especially those constituencies without SKM MLAs.

Mr Tamang announced that on 04 Feb, 2021 the party will further hand out roles and responsibilities to party workers and supporters.

He informed the public that he was late for the program since he had a prior commitment to attend a function at Kamrang. He assured that he will be meeting them soon in one of the 'Janata Durbars'.

Chamling rubbishes allegations that he instigated OFOJ court case

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 21 DEC:**

Former Chief Minister, Sikkim Democratic Front president Pawan Chamling has rubbished allegations against his party was behind the court case against the One Family One Job scheme and has called it laughable.

In his weekly Facebook Q&A released by the party today, Mr Chamling contends that the SDF will never risk the future of "our poor people for political gain."

However, on the allegation that the scheme did not have adequate legal safeguards, Mr Chamling did not provide a straight forward answer. He went on to list out the reasons why the scheme was started and how his party would have implemented the scheme if it had stayed in power.

"I do admit that no matter what well-intentioned schemes the government formulates, some public representatives and influential bureaucrats with vested interests will always take undue advantage," he said on allegations of multiple members of a family benefitting from the scheme. He also added that such cases would have been rectified in the next five years, had SDF come to power again.

Taking a jibe at the ruling party, Mr Chamling said, "If we had any electoral gain in mind, we would have included this scheme in our Election Manifesto and said - "If you vote for us, we will give this job within 10 days or 100 days".

The SDF president went on to state that people are more interested in knowing why the SKM government failed to deliver its promise of regularising the OFOJ employees within 100 days of coming to power.

Mamata cites central data to counter Amit Shah on development

KOLKATA, 21 DEC [NDTV]:

Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee today accused Union Home Minister Amit Shah of "spewing lies" during his visit to Bengal, citing his claims that the state has been going downhill in terms of industry and development. The Union minister, she said, has contradicted the data of his own government, which puts Bengal in the number one position in MSME (Medium and Small Enterprises) and the construction of rural roads. "Amit Shah has told a bunch of lies yesterday. He claimed our state is 'zero' in industry but we are number one in the MSME sector. He claimed we couldn't build rural roads. But we are number one in that. This is the Government of India's information," the Chief

Minister said.

The BJP, she said, is a "cheatingbaaz" party, which can do anything for politics. "You are the home minister. It doesn't suit you to tell lies," the Chief Minister said.

Yesterday, Ms Banerjee's close aide and party spokesperson Derek O'Brien had taken on Amit Shah over lies told during his weekend visit to the state.

He had tweeted a claim versus fact list, which that started with Mr Shah's claim that Ms Banerjee had joined a new party after being expelled the Congress. Ms Banerjee had founded a new party after walking out of the Congress, Mr O'Brien had pointed out.

What stung the Chief Minister most was the Union Home Minister's claim that her government had left the state's economy in shreds.

Mr Shah, who was on a two-day visit to the state over the weekend, had cited data from '50s and '60s to attack the Trinamool Congress, which came to power in the state in 2011 after 35 years of Left rule.

"After independence, Bengal would contribute one-third to the GDP. It has fallen ever since. Bengal's contribution to the Industrial Production right after independence was 30 per cent. Now at 3.5 per cent," Mr Shah said. "In 1960, Bengal was one of the richest states in the country. In 1950s, Bengal produced 70 per cent pharma products. Now it is around 7 per cent. Bengal jute industries that gave employment to many, are shut," he said, adding, "Our sankalp is to make Bengal Shonar Bangla once again," he had said.

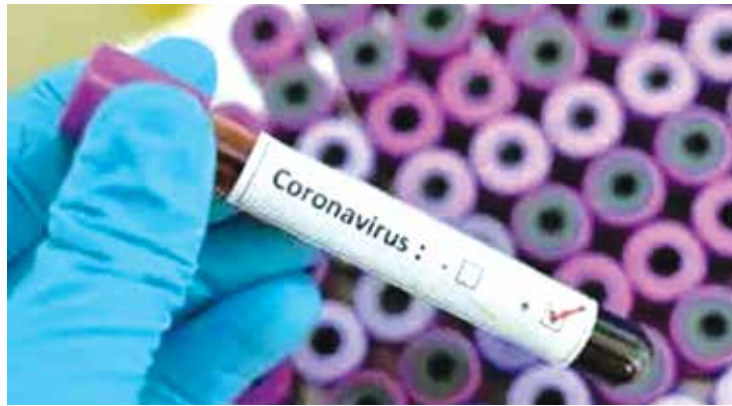
Sunday off for RTPCR testing delivers only 3 new cases

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 21 DEC:**

Sikkim recorded only three new cases of novel coronavirus in the last 24 hours, taking the State's tally of confirmed cases of COVID-19 reported so far to 5,576 on Monday.

The reason behind the low numbers can be ascribed to the fewer tests that are conducted in Sikkim on Sundays, a day when the VRD Lab at STNM Hospital where RTPCR tests are carried out take a day off.

The three new cases were thus picked up from 33 samples



screened on Sunday against the around 200 that are tested on working days.

While one new case was picked

up in TruNat testing of 15 samples, two returned positive in rapid antigen testing of 18 samples.

While providing details of

India halts UK flights till Dec 31 over new strain of Coronavirus

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC [NDTV]:

The government today banned flights from the UK till December 31 over a new fast-spreading strain of the coronavirus in that country. The ban will start from Wednesday and all passengers arriving from the UK before then will be tested on arrival at airports.

"Considering the prevailing situation in UK, the government of India has decided that all flights originating from UK to India to be suspended till 31st December," said the aviation ministry after a joint monitoring group on COVID-19 met this morning to discuss the mutant coronavirus that has spread rapidly in the UK, sending cases rocketing within days.

Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan said the new variant had an unusually large number of genetic changes and the development "calls for enhanced epidemiological surveillance, enhanced containment" and other measures to effectively tackle the challenge.

"India has been seeing a sustained decline in the number of fresh Covid-19 cases for over two months now, accompanied by a decline in the number of deaths. In this scenario, any interjection of a SARS-CoV-2 variant virus through passengers with air travel history could pose critical risks for pandemic management in India," he said.

Passengers on flights from Britain arriving before midnight tomorrow will be subjected to RT-PCR tests at the airport. Those who test positive will be sent to institutional quarantine while the rest will be asked to home-isolate for seven days.

Canada, Saudi Arabia, and several European countries have suspended flights from the UK over the new strain, believed to be 70 per cent more infectious. British Health Secretary Matt Hancock says "the new variant is out of control".

Much is unknown about the strain, but experts say current

vaccines should still be effective against it.

Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said the government was fully alert about the new strain and stressed "there's no need to panic".

There had been calls to ban flights from the UK since yesterday. Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal tweeted this morning: "New mutation of corona virus has emerged in UK, which is a super-spreader. I urge central government to ban all flights from UK immediately."

The UK is one of 23 countries that India shares an "air bubble" with; the country is home to a huge Indian diaspora and several flights per day take hundreds of people between London and New Delhi and London and Mumbai.

India, which has the second-highest number of cases after the US, does not currently mandate institutional quarantine for international travellers if they have a negative COVID-19 test result 72 hours before entering the country.

The mutant virus

was first detected in southeast England in September. It is quickly becoming the dominant strain in London and other parts of the UK, and has led to surging infection numbers and toughest levels of restrictions on some 18 million Britons.

Italy has reported a patient who had recently returned from the UK, infected with the mutant virus.

The new strain has worried health experts

at a time when several nations, including the UK and the United States, have cleared Covid vaccines to boost their fight amid pandemic.

European Union experts believe existing vaccines against coronavirus are effective against the new strain.

India's coronavirus cases passed the 1-crore mark on Saturday. Worldwide, over 7.68 crore cases have been reported so far; 16.9 lakh people have died.

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PIB webinar discusses potential of agriculture and allied industry in Assam

GANGTOK, 21 DEC (PIB): Science and Technology is the bedrock for bringing impetus to the entrepreneurial opportunities in agriculture and allied sectors for farmers, experts opined in a Webinar organised by Press Information Bureau, Guwahati on the topic 'Agriculture and Allied Industry and its immense potential in Assam in entrepreneurial and socio-economic AtmaNirbhar Bharat development' here today. Experts from Industry fraternity along with academicians deliberated and discussed about the opportunities in the agriculture and allied sector from academic and policy perspective.

Padma Shri Dr Uddhab Kumar Bharali said that agriculture and technological development has to happen in tandem. He said that the efficacy of technology is of prime importance from the perspective of entrepreneurial opportunities for

farmers and also for market demand sustainability. Dr Bharali said that technology play a game changer role when it comes to brining efficiency and productivity in agriculture. He said that low cost machinery and its effect on productivity could act as motivators for entrepreneurs to join agriculture as an business opportunity. He said changing life of farmers has to be a holistic process of providing facilities for developing quality agricultural products. In this perspective, he said that allied sectoral development of agriculture plays a vital role.

Describing the potential of agriculture along with inputs farmers in the discussion, Dr SK Md Azizur Rehman, Senior Scientist and Head, Krishi Vigyan Kendra, ICAR Bardhaman said that policies and technology play a very vital role for agriculture and its growth and development. He said that low cost machineries

along with awareness could generate the traction in the agriculture field so that entry in the domain is productive and efficacious for farmers.

Prof (Dr) ZR Azad, Faculty of Agriculture from Aligarh Muslim University said that mixed farming along with Cooperative farming and development of Centres to process Primary Food could provide the competence for comparative advantage for farmers. He said that in that endeavour, training and Human Capital Development with awareness programme could provide the impetus for better results. Lauding efforts of PIB Guwahati for the webinar initiative, he said that equitable development along with environment friendly growth is the reason for success of farming entrepreneurs.

S e c r e t a r y , Shyamsundar Das, DFFTA said that problems and solution has to be analysed from the perspective of all the value-addition

players in the business ecosystem. He said that rain water harvesting along with a planned farming techniques could play a game changing role for agriculture and fisheries. He said that technology has to be environment friendly so that the benefits have accentuating effect on future too.

Talking about the provisos of Indian Constitution and the future as was envisaged by the Constitution Makers, Abdur Rahman Mallick said that agriculture and allied sectoral development are related as development of one sector acts as an advantage for the other sectors too leading to WIN-WIN scenarios for socio-economic development.

The informative and knowledge webinar was planned and coordinated by Joint Director (M & C), Samrat Bandyopadhyay, PIB, Guwahati.

Senior officers of PIB were present in webinar. Information Assistant, Barnali Mahanta, PIB Guwhati welcomed the

experts while as the programme concluded Deputy Director, Pallav Chakravorty, PIB lauded the experts as the webinar delved into details on the various aspects of the topic such as technology and information management including in the arena of agriculture, fisheries, allied sectors, socio-economic, growth and development, among others.

The interactive Webinar has enthusiastic participation of students, academicians and industrial fraternity of Assam as they said that this information cum knowledge Webinar would help them in informed decision making and to be aware about the opportunities and potential in agriculture and allied sectors.

Along with students, eminent journalists and other government senior officials from Doordarshan Guwahati, Regional Outreach Bureau, Guwahati, All India Radio Guwahati were also present on the occasion.

Arunachal panchayat, civic polls to be held on Tuesday

ITANAGAR, DEC 21 (PTI): All arrangements have been made for simultaneously holding panchayat and municipal elections in Arunachal Pradesh on Tuesday, election officials said.

Ballot papers for panchayat constituencies have been collected by respective district officials, while EVMs have been commissioned for elections to Itanagar Municipal Corporation (IMC) and Pasighat Municipality, they said.

A total of 4.89 lakh voters are eligible to exercise their franchise at 1,472 polling stations, State Election Commissioner Hage Kojeen said on Monday.

The elections have been delayed by over two years due to various reasons, he said.

Elaborate security arrangements have been made to ensure smooth and peaceful polling.

More than 8,000 security personnel, including nine companies of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), besides 7,517 state police personnel have been deployed for

the elections, a senior police officer said.

As many as 258 polling stations have been identified as hyper-sensitive, and 536 as sensitive, Inspector General of Police (Law and Order) Chukhu Apa said. The state has 25 Zilla Parishads with 241 constituencies and 2,215 gram panchayats with 8,436 constituencies.

The IMC has 20 wards while the Pasighat Municipality has eight.

The ruling BJP has already won 96 of the 241 Zilla Parishad Member constituencies unopposed, while election to the Vijoyanagar seat in Changlang district will not be held due to the prevailing law and order situation there.

Vijoyanagar recently witnessed violent protests over the voting rights of former Assam Rifles personnel.

The saffron party has also won 5,410 of the total 8,436 gram panchayat constituencies and five seats in the IMC.

Elections will not be held in the entire Dibang Valley district as all the segments in both

Zilla Parishad and gram panchayat have been won by the ruling party unopposed, Kojeen said.

East Siang is the only district where elections will be held in all the polling stations, he said.

As many as 110 gram panchayat segments in the state have fallen vacant due to various reasons. The SEC will take a final call on conducting by-elections in those segments after the current electoral process is over, the official said. The state administration has declared a holiday on Tuesday. All government and semi-government offices, banks and commercial establishments, besides educational institutions and markets will remain closed.

Governor Brig (Retd) Dr B D Mishra appealed to the voters to exercise their franchise on Tuesday.

"Every single vote has democratic significance and all voters must avail of it. Beyond the constitutional right, it is our moral, social and national responsibility as well to cast our vote," he said.

Owner of 'Baba ka Dhaba' opens new restaurant

NEW DELHI, DEC 21 (PTI): Kanta Prasad, the owner of the small eatery 'Baba ka Dhaba' that was recently in the limelight on social media, on Monday opened a new restaurant in south Delhi's Malviya Nagar area.

The new restaurant has also been named Baba ka Dhaba'.

"We have opened a restaurant today which is near my small eatery. We will serve Indian and Chinese cuisines and have hired two chefs for the same. I will keep running my old eatery also," Prasad said.

The 80-year-old said he has opened the restaurant at a rented accommodation.

Tushant Adlakha, a social worker who also works with Prasad, said the restaurant will start functioning from Wednesday.

"Today, it was the opening of the restaurant. Prasad will take two days to set up the kitchen and from Wednesday,

they will start serving food to customers. They have both dine-in and take away options. They have hired two chefs and the rest of their family members are helping in the restaurant," Adlakha said.

Prasad had shot to fame after a video of him tearfully talking about the financial distress he faced in the months since the lockdown was shot by a man and shared widely across social media platforms.

Nearly a month after his video went viral, Prasad had filed a complaint against the YouTuber for alleged misappropriation of funds.

In his complaint to police, Prasad had alleged that the man who shot and published the video "intentionally and deliberately shared only his and his family/friends bank details and mobile numbers with the donors and collected huge amount of donation... without providing any information to the complainant".

Will Consider CAA As Soon As Covid Vaccination Starts: Amit Shah

Bolpur, West Bengal: Slamming West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee over the recent attack on BJP chief JP Nadda's convoy, Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday asserted the centre has the right to summon state IPS officers responsible for providing him security for central deputation, and asked the TMC to go through the rules before pointing fingers at the union government.

He also said that rules for the Citizenship (Amendment) Act are yet to be framed because of the pandemic situation and the matter will be considered once the COVID-19 vaccination starts and the corona chain breaks.

Addressing a press conference, Mr Shah claimed that Ms Banerjee and the Trinamool Congress raked up the "outsider-insider" issue to divert public attention from the failures of the state government and said that a "son of the soil" would lead the state if the BJP is voted to power.

"The rules of the CAA are yet to be framed as such a massive process could not be carried out because of the corona. As soon as (COVID) vaccination starts and corona cycle breaks, we will consider it," he said.

Asked about the summoning of IPS officers of West Bengal cadre by the Ministry of Home

Affairs, Mr Shah said that the Centre has sent the letter to state government as per the Constitution and the law. "It is according to the federal structure (of the country). They (TMC government) should first go through the rules and then talk to the centre and the public."

The centre had on Thursday shot off a fresh letter to the West Bengal government to immediately relieve its three IPS officers for central deputation, following which the Chief Minister branded the move as "unconstitutional and unacceptable".

On the attack on JP Nadda's convoy by alleged TMC activists during his visit to Diamond Harbour on December 10, Mr Shah alleged that political violence and corruption are at peak in the state.

"The BJP condemns it, and I too condemn it. The BJP believes that in a democracy, everyone should have the right to voice their views. And it is the responsibility of the ruling party to ensure that all parties can have their voice heard."

"The attack on the BJP chief is not only an attack on him. It is an attack on democracy in West Bengal and the Trinamool Congress is completely responsible for this," Mr Shah said.

It was more alarming that after the attack, TMC leaders' statements, in a way, supported it,

the senior BJP leader claimed.

They must not be under the impression that the BJP will be cowed down by such attacks, he said adding that the party will continue to work to defeat the TMC.

On the "insider-outsider" debate, Mr Shah said, "I think Mamata di has forgotten a few things. Did she call Indira Gandhi, Pranab Mukherjee, Narasimha Rao outsiders when they used to come to West Bengal, and she was with the Congress? Does she want a country where people from one state will not visit another?"

"Someone from Bengal, a bhumiputra (son of the soil), will defeat her and become the next CM of the state." He said.

Mr Shah, however, rejected any link between his "bhumiputra" comment and Suvendu Adhikari, a TMC heavyweight who joined the party on Saturday.

"The decision in this regard is taken by the parliamentary board. If we take any such decision, before election we will let you know," he said.

The assembly polls are due in the state in April-May next year.

Mr Shah also attacked the Mamata Banerjee government over infiltration from Bangladesh.

"The TMC can never stop infiltration as it believes in the politics of appeasement. Only the BJP can stop it," he said.

AFFIDAVIT

This is to state that Mr. B.Pradhan and Smt S. Mukhia were legally bound in marriage in the year 2011. This is also to state that Mr. B. Pradhan has been living separately from Smt. S. Mukhia since march 2020 i.e. 9 months.

This is also to state that Mr. B.Pradhan & Smt S.Mukhia are not socially and martially obligated to each other

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B.Pradhan

~ SummitTIMES ~ CLASSIFIEDS

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A two storey building constructed on plot area 50x40 ft. at Upper Phong near Phong SS ,Namthang South Sikkim is on sale. Cost Rs 60 Lakhs (Negotiable). Interested may contact : 8145829309, 7864937800, 9749897695.

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KUTSE SHERGU

We would like to inform all our friends, family and wellwishers that the 49th day Kutse Shergu of our beloved Mother, Mother in law, Grandmother, Great Grandmother, Lt Chedem Bhutia W/o Lt Pem Dorjee Bhutia R/o Rabong, South Sikkim who left for heavenly abode on 06/11/2020 falls on 24th December 2020.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank for your kind help and support in our time of grief and bereavement.

Diki Bhutia (Daughter)

Hon'ble Advisor, Commerce & Industries, GoS

Chumzey Bhutia (Daughter)

Kado Tshering Namka, Yap Tshering Namka

Fuchung Tshering Namka, Sonam Namka (Son)

Dechen Phigu Bhutia (Son-in-law)

Honble Advisor SMPB, GoS

Karma Rinchen Bhutia (Daughter-in-law)

Lhaki Bhutia (Daughter-in-law)

Sonam Topgay Bhutia (Son-in-law)

Pem Kicho Bhutia (Daughter-in-law)

Doma Tshering Bhutia (Daughter-in-law)

Susangla Diki Bhutia (Grand Daughter)

Kesangla D Lhasungpa (Grandson)

Facebook's blames error in automated system for Farmers' Protest Page getting taken down

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC [NDTV]: Facebook today clarified that an error on its part caused the blocking of the accounts used by farmers protesting against the government's new agricultural laws on Sunday. The social networking site said its automated systems flagged the pages of Kisan Ekta Morcha as "spam" following increased activity, although the group's Instagram account (owned by Facebook) remained unaffected.

"As per our review, our automated systems found an increased activity on the Facebook page www.facebook.com/kisanektamorcha and flagged it as spam, which violates our Community Standards. We restored the page in less than three hours when we became aware of the context. The review showed that only the Facebook page was affected by the automated systems while the Instagram account remained unaffected," Facebook said in a statement.

The company added that while it relies on automated systems to detect spams, it also uses human expertise to understand the context behind increased activity on a page. "The vast majority of our work fighting spam is done automatically using recognizable patterns of problematic behaviour. For example, if an account is posting over and over in quick succession that's a strong sign something is wrong. However, we also rely on our human review team to work on cases where human expertise is needed to understand the context of a particular situation. In Q3, 2020 out of the 1.9 billion pieces of content removed globally for violating our policies on spam, we restored 74.9 million pieces of content globally, when we identified issues ourselves," said a Facebook company spokesperson.

Facebook had taken down community pages of Kisan Ekta Morcha for around three hours on Sunday, sparking widespread criticism over what farmers said was an attempt to muzzle their voices.

Dance workshop concludes at New Heaven Dance Institute

SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 21 DEC:

The valedictory function for the 10-day dance workshop organised by New Heaven Dance Institute at Rangpo was held today with chairperson, Power Advisory Board Sikkim, Mingma Lahmu Bhutia, as chief guest accompanied by SKM Scheduled Castes Wing state president, Jagdish Cinturi as special guest, a press release informs.



Renowned dancers Tamang, and Hema Mingma D Lepcha, Bhim Bahadur Chhetri, Gagan Diyali, Vicky Dewman, who took classes at the workshop were also felicitated and certificates awarded to all who participated in the colourful cultural program presented today.

Eagle A wins Losoong/Namsoong Futsal Tournament

SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 21 DEC:

Eagle 'A' became the champions of veterans' category of Losoong/Namsoong Futsal Tournament 2020 played here at Fitnest Futsal Arena, Chandmari. In the neck-to-neck played final match on Monday evening, Eagle 'A' outplayed Hill Stone 7-5.

Sishil

Karthak contributed four goals to the Eagle 'A' win, while his teammates Norbu Sherpa scored a brace and Karma Gyampo added one more goal. Likewise, Suman Dewan scored four goals and Binod Bantawa added one more goal for Hill Stone.



The tournament is being organised by Chandmari United Sporting Club [CUSC]. A total of seven teams have participated in the veteran's category of the tournament. Other participating teams are Eagle 'B', Denzong Boys, United Veterans, Chandmari Veterans

and Teacher's Veterans in the tournament, which was kicked off on 12 Dec.

Former Minister, Rinzing Ongmu was present as the chief guest, who handed over cash prizes and trophies to winning and runners-up teams. The winning team received

cash prize of Rs 20,000, while the cash prize of Rs 10,000 was presented to the runners-up.

The final match of the open category of Losoong/Namsoong Futsal Tournament 2020 will be played between Aakraman FC and Mayal FC on Tuesday evening at 5 PM.

Mamley-Kamrang Christmas Festive Meet concludes



SUMMIT REPORT NAMCHI, 21 DEC:

Mamley-Kamrang Christmas Festive Meet 2020, which had started on 16 Dec, concluded today at the playground of Kamrang Secondary School in Kamrang, South Sikkim. The function was attended by Chief Minister, PS Tamang who is also the Area MLA as the chief guest.

The CM was accompanied by other Ministers and MLAs on the stage. Among

the gathered were the organisers, pastors and elders of local churches, villagers, teachers and students of Kamrang Secondary School, self-help groups, and invited guests of the programme.

The final day of Christmas Festive Meet saw the presentation of cultural shows; Hallelujah Choir of South Sikkim; felicitations to the pastors and elders of the churches of Poklok-Kamrang constituency; distribution of cash and kind to deserving

individuals, self-help groups, local associations, educational and religious institutions.

The final match of football tourney was held between Mamley-Kamrang GPU and Denchong GPU. The organizers also felicitated the chief guest.

The CM in his address stated that this event is the beginning of change in the constituency. He assured that all the proposals submitted by the organizing committee will be sanctioned after Christmas.

3 journalists attacked while covering BJP-CPI(M) clash in Tripura

AGARTALA, 21 DEC [PTI]: Three local media journalists were attacked when they went to cover a clash between ruling BJP and opposition CPI(M) at Khayerpur, 10 km from here, police said on Monday.

The scribes, identified as Prangopal Acharya of Syandan Patrika, Pintu Pal of Rising Tripura TV channel and Biswajit Debnath of Mrinalini ENN TV channel were attacked on Sunday, sub-divisional police officer of the new capital-complex area Priya Madhuri Majumder said.

"About 4-5 persons were wounded and

the three scribes were attacked, but they were not injured. Police is investigating the case, the SDPO said.

The Agartala Press Club has condemned the incident and demanded exemplary punishment for those involved in the assault.

Secretary of Agartala Press Club, Pranab Sarkar said the members met the SDPO, who assured them action against all those who were involved.

CPI(M) state committee member Pabitra Kar, who hails from Khayerpur, claimed that three of its members were

injured in the attack by the BJP and one of them has been shifted to-Kolkata for treatment, while the other two are still in-a hospital here.

BJP spokesperson N a b e n d u Bhattacharjee said the clash occurred in front of the police. "They know exactly what has happened and we demand that the police arrest the real culprits involved in the incident.

"We have already asked our activists to cooperate with the police in the investigation," he added.

Kalimpong's Sharma Nursing Home to open dialysis unit



GANGTOK, 21 DEC: Sharma Nursing Home in Kalimpong, synonymous with the town so much that it is more popular as Kalimpong Clinic, will soon opening a Dialysis Unit at its 10th Mile, RC Mintri Road, facility. It is informed that this will be the first dialysis unit in Kalimpong and will also have the service of a Nephrologist.

Protesting farmers queue up at Singhu border to register for blood donation camp

NEW DELHI, DEC 21 (PTI): Several protesting farmers queued up here at the Singhu border on Monday to register their names for a blood donation camp set up by a Ludhiana-based NGO.

More than 240 protesting farmers have so far donated blood at the camp, which began on Sunday and has been set up by Rehras Sewa Society.

A four-member team of the NGO, along with nine members of the blood bank, started their camp here at the Singhu border on Sunday around 10.30 am and by 5 pm, 190 farmers had donated blood.

Sukhminder Singh, president of Rehras Sewa Society, said, "On the first day of our camp, we got a very good response from people here. Around 190 people donated blood, which was overwhelming. So, we decided to extend our camp."

When asked what promoted them to start the camp here, Singh said Ludhiana has over 18 blood banks but ever since lockdown was implemented, no blood donation camps could be organised.

Citing acute shortage of blood in many banks,

he said people from across Punjab come to Ludhiana to avail medical facilities.

"Our volunteers who had earlier visited the Singhu border to offer 'sewa' realised that people here are polite and generous. They come forward as one to extend help. So, we thought of setting up a camp here so that people in Ludhiana who are in need of blood in times of emergencies could avail the facility," Singh added.

Amanpreet Singh, 23, who has been at the protest site since Saturday, said, "I am from Ludhiana but I work in Gurgaon for a multinational company. I come here during my weekend offs to join the protest along with a group of friends."

"Donating blood is a noble cause and if I can be of any help to someone, I am more than willing to do it. Not only donating blood can save someone's life, it also keeps you fit in a way," he added.

Another blood donor at the camp, Jagdish Singh, 50, from Mansa district in Punjab, said, "It is for a humanitarian cause and if this could help someone, what more do I if someone is in need of it."

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Government of India Ministry of AYUSH

Financial assistance for skill development in AYUSH sector

Ministry of AYUSH invites application in the prescribed format under Central Sector Scheme for Skill Development under Champion Services Sector Scheme for Medical Value Travel for the year 2020-21 from the institutions recognized by Central Council of Indian Medicine (CCIM) Central Council for Homoeopathy (CCH) Healthcare Sector Skill Council under Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship.

2. Financial assistance to conduct skill development training in AYUSH sector up to Rs. 1.5 lakh (for short term courses) / 3.00 lakh (for mid-term course) per training program will be provided to the institutions and Rs. 9000 will be provided to the students as stipend.

3. The eligible institutes may submit complete applications in prescribed format along with the required documents/ information to judge the eligibility of the institution. The detailed guidelines are available on the website of the Ministry of AYUSH i.e. <https://main.ayush.gov.in/schemes>

4. The applications in triplicate complete in all respect along with check list should reach to the Advisor (Ay.), Champion Services Sector Scheme Medical Value Travel, M/o Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha & Homoeopathy, Room No. 207, 2nd Floor, Ayush Bhawan, B-Block, GPO Complex, INA, New Delhi-110023 on or before 10th January, 2021.

davp 17201/11/0023/2021

What is Novel Coronavirus - nCoV?

The Novel Coronavirus (nCoV) is new strain of Coronavirus that originated in Wuhan, China. Notorious for mutating quickly and acquiring new qualities, it is a rising epidemic that was previously not identified in humans.

Symptoms of nCoV

- Fever
- Difficulty in breathing
- Dry Cough
- Severe acute respiratory syndrome
- Pneumonia - like symptoms

Precautions to Prevent nCoV

- Wash your hands often with soap.
- Use an alcohol based hand sanitizer
- Observe good personal hygiene.
- Avoid touching your face with unwashed hands.
- Avoid contact with people with possible symptoms.
- Avoid contact with animals and consumption of undercooked meats.
- Avoid travel to nCoV affected places.
- Wear a mask if you have respiratory syndrome and cover your mouth while coughing or sneezing.

Treatment

- Treatment is symptomatic and supportive, based on the patient's clinical condition.
- No vaccinations available as of now.
- Visit Doctor in case symptoms detected.

If you seek help, you may call :
-Toll free no. 104
District surveillance Officer
EAST : 7029372100
WEST : 9593297809
NORTH : 9641957468
SOUTH : 7407691463
New STNM
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Celebrate Diversity

Some clichés never go out of style

In the current times of overbearing rightwing monoculturalism, the fact that Sikkim, despite attempts at regimenting people by their community, remains largely unmoved by arguments which seek to other, remains a constant source of relief. Some continue to see individuality at the community level as somehow diluting a larger identity, but they are clearly hamstrung by regressive narrow-mindedness which continues to see empowerment and confidence as somehow detrimental to cultures and identities. Thankfully, such mindsets remain in minority in Sikkim. In an India where boorish religious heads want to hound certain idols out of temples, certain sexes away from worship, and impose caste obsessions on the entire population, the fact that Sikkim is yet to allow communal gimmickry political currency holds up a light that should never be allowed to dim. Clichéd as it may sound, Sikkim should never stop celebrating its diversity, its people should never hesitate from supporting expressions of cultural uniqueness by other groups, and even as such cultural expressions are made by individual groups and communities, the celebrations should be joined by all. Make it a habit and an instinctive response, and troublemakers keen to sow differences by fanning fear of the others will find themselves out of jobs. And make no mistake, agent provocateurs, if given the chance, will tease out hesitations and feed on suspicions thereby weakening the collective society. We have seen how that can wreck havoc on vast swathes of even a nation as big as ours, so its damage potential for a society as small as Sikkim's should have the residents doubly wary.

Agreed, "unity in diversity" is an overused cliché, a phrase which has accompanied us for far too long as a topic for essay-writing contests and argument for debates; and since everyone has heard it so often that it fails to elicit either pride or passion anymore, perhaps it is time to turn the approach on its head and reinforce unity. "Diversity in unity", as some thinkers have proposed for the country in the past, carries a nice spin to it, forces one to ponder longer and also acknowledges the fact that confident diversities mean self-assured identities which will be the best safeguard for unity. Unencumbered diversity inspires confidence which goes on to powers empathy; forced identities and ideas on the other hand fan fear which breeds intolerance which is a debilitating, self-defeating handicap.

To its credit, despite rather loud criticism by quite a few, Sikkim has rather consistently supported the aspiration of individual communities to express their individualities. And such an approach is also in perfect sync with the requirement for decentralization, empowerment and going back to the roots as one can see in the revival of organic farming, without being regressive or posturing. Endorsing diversity, once it becomes a habit, is no longer limited to cultures, and would also mean supporting free expression, accepting differing views, living with divergent traits and allowing free thought – if that is not the empathy and tolerance that a people need to thrive as a community, unencumbered by factionalism or hate, then what is?

Diversity, once ingrained, provides diverse people with the ability to be okay with and open to things that set them and others apart – religion, culture, race, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, language (the list goes on) and understanding and accepting of people for who they are. Being culturally aware provides an opportunity to stand back and consider that there are certain backgrounds, personal values, beliefs and upbringings that shape the things we all do. Something that is considered inappropriate behavior in one culture may be perfectly acceptable in another. Learning about other cultures helps people relate to one another and be okay with different perspectives. Everyone and every community can benefit from such attributes. Now more than ever.

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Coronavirus New Variant – Genomics Researcher Answers Key Questions

LUCY VAN DORP
THECONVERSATION.COM

A new variant of SARS-CoV-2, the virus which causes COVID-19, is thought to be driving increased transmission of the disease in parts of the UK. The government has placed some regions including London under new, stricter coronavirus restrictions, known as Tier 4. People in Tier 4 areas will not be able to gather with anyone outside their household for Christmas, while those in the rest of the country can only gather on Christmas Day itself.

Boris Johnson, the prime minister, and his chief scientific advisors said that the new variant could increase transmission of COVID-19 by as much as 70% and increase the R or reproduction number by 0.4.

What's the significance of this new discovery? The Conversation asked Lucy van Dorp, a microbial genomics researcher and an expert in the evolution of pathogens, some key questions about what we know at this point in time.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THIS NEW VARIANT?

The new UK variant, known as VUI-202012/01 or lineage B.1.1.7, was first announced by Matt Hancock, the health secretary on December 14. It was subsequently confirmed by Public Health England and the UK's COVID-19 sequencing consortium. Screening back through databases of SARS-CoV-2 the first sample was taken in the county of Kent on September 20.

The variant carries 14 defining mutations including seven in the spike protein, the protein that mediates entry of the virus into human cells. This is a relatively large number of changes compared to the many variants we have in circulation globally.

To date, genetic profiles – or genomes – of this variant have been largely sequenced and shared from the UK but include some in Denmark and two cases in Australia. There have also been reports of a case in the Netherlands. These countries all have very large genome sequencing efforts and it is very possible that these observations do not reflect the true distribution of this variant of the virus, which could exist undetected elsewhere. We will know more as

more genomes are generated and shared.

Thanks to the efforts of data sharing, genomic surveillance and COVID-19 test results in the UK, it seems that this variant is now starting to dominate over existing versions of the virus and that it may be responsible for an increasing proportion of cases in parts of the country, particular in regions where we also have rapidly expanding case numbers.

It is always very difficult to disentangle cause and effect in these cases. For example increases in the appearance of certain mutations can be due to viral lineages carrying them rising in frequency just because they happen to be the ones present in an area where transmission is high, for example due to human activities or choice of interventions.

Though this is still a possibility, there are clearly enough concerning observations so far for this variant to warrant very careful characterisation, surveillance and interventions to curb transmission.

IS IT MORE DANGEROUS?

Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer, stated clearly that there was no evidence to date that this variant alters disease severity, either in terms of mortality or the seriousness of the cases of COVID-19 for those infected. Work is underway to confirm this.

HOW DO VIRUS MUTATIONS HAPPEN?

Mutations are a natural part of virus evolution. In the case of SARS-CoV-2, these mutations may arise due to random errors during virus replication, be induced by antiviral proteins within infected people, or via genetic shuffling – known as recombination. Though signs of recombination are not currently detected in SARS-CoV-2.

Most viral mutations are expected to have no impact. For example, when our team assessed individual mutation replacements in more than 50,000 genomes from the first wave of the pandemic, we detected none that significantly altered viral fitness – the ability of the virus to survive and reproduce.

However, every so often a mutation, or in this case a particular combination of mutations, may strike lucky and offer the virus a new advantage. Viruses carrying these combinations of mutations may then increase in frequency by natural selection given the right epidemiological environment.

WHERE DID THE VARIANT COME FROM?

Right now, we don't know. To date, scientists have not identified any closely related viruses to support the theory that the variant had been introduced from abroad. The patterns of mutations observed are more supportive of an extended period of adaptive evolution most likely in the UK based on current data.

Similar patterns of mutation to these have been observed in the evolution of SARS-CoV-2 in chronically infected patients with weaker immune systems. The current hypothesis is that such a scenario of chronic infection, in a single patient, may have played a role in the origin of this variant. This will continue to be investigated.

HOW MANY VARIATIONS OF SARS-COV-2 HAVE WE FOUND?

There are many thousands of lineages of SARS-CoV-2 which differ on average by only a small number of defining mutations. It remains true that SARS-CoV-2 currently in global circulation have little genomic diversity. Subtleties in the mutations carried in different lineages can, however, be very useful for reconstructing patterns of transmission.

As an example, work early in the pandemic used lineage assignments to identify at least a thousand introductions of SARS-CoV-2 into the UK.

WHY IS THIS ONE DIFFERENT?

It is important to note that many of the mutations defining the UK variant have been observed in SARS-CoV-2 before and even sometimes quite early in the pandemic.

Yet the UK variant, or lineage, is defined by an unusual number and combination of mutations. One of these mutations, N501Y, has previously been shown to increase binding of the virus to receptors in our cells. N501Y was first sequenced in a virus in Brazil in April 2020 and

is currently associated with a SARS-CoV-2 variant also rising in frequency in South Africa – an independent lineage from B.1.1.7 that is also warranting concern.

The particular deletions identified in the spike protein of B.1.1.7 have appeared in multiple other lineages of the virus at increasing frequency and are also observed in chronic infections where they may alter antigenicity - recognition by immune antibodies. These deletions may also be associated with other mutations in the binding region of the coronavirus spike protein, including those observed in infections among farmed mink and a mutation shown to play a role in the virus's ability to evade the immune system in humans. B.1.1.7 also harbours a truncated ORF8 gene, with deletions in this region previously associated with decreased disease severity.

The functional effect of these mutations and deletions, particularly when in the combination reported in B.1.1.7, are still to be determined. The high number of mutations and the recent increase in prevalence of this particular variant, together with the biological relevance of some of the mutation candidates, emphasises the need for in-depth study.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE VACCINE?

At the moment we don't know. Though we should be reassured that vaccines stimulate a broad antibody response to the entire spike protein, so it is anticipated that their efficacy will not be significantly hampered by mutations. This is already being tested.

However, there is an increasing body of evidence that other species of seasonal coronaviruses exhibit some ability to escape immunity over longer time periods.

It is therefore conceivable that we may reach a point where we are required to update our COVID-19 vaccines, as we do for influenza, to reflect the variants in circulation at the time. It's too early to say if this will be the case now, but extensive genome sequencing, data sharing, and standardised reporting of variants will be vital to inform these efforts.

[the writer is Senior Research Fellow, Microbial Genomics, UCL]

How to reduce the spread of fake news – by doing nothing

TOM BUCHANAN
THECONVERSATION.COM

When we come across false information on social media, it is only natural to feel the need to call it out or argue with it. But my research suggests this might do more harm than good. It might seem counterintuitive, but the best way to react to fake news – and reduce its impact – may be to do nothing at all.

False information on social media is a big problem. A UK parliament committee said online misinformation was a threat to "the very fabric of our democracy". It can exploit and exacerbate divisions in society. There are many examples of it leading to social unrest and inciting violence, for example in Myanmar and the United States.

It has often been used to try to influence political processes. One recent report found evidence of organised social media manipulation campaigns in 48 different countries. The UK is one of those countries, as demonstrated by news reports about a local branch of the Conservatives which urged activists to campaign by "weaponising fake news".

Social media users also regularly encounter harmful misinformation about vaccines and virus outbreaks. This is particularly important with the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines because the spread of false information online may discourage people from getting vaccinated – making it a life or death matter.

With all these very serious consequences in mind, it can be very tempting to comment on false information when it's posted online – pointing out that it is untrue, or that we disagree with it. Why would that be a bad thing?

INCREASING VISIBILITY

The simple fact is that engaging with false information increases the likelihood that other people will see it. If people comment on it, or quote tweet – even to disagree – it means that the material will be shared to our own networks of social media friends and followers.

Any kind of interaction at all – whether clicking



on the link or reacting with an angry face emoji – will make it more likely that the social media platform will show the material to other people. In this way, false information can spread far and fast. So even by arguing with a message, you are spreading it further. This matters, because if more people see it, or see it more often, it will have an even greater effect.

I recently completed a series of experiments with a total of 2,634 participants looking at why people share false material online. In these, people were shown examples of false information under different conditions and asked if they would be likely to share it. They were also asked about whether they had shared false information online in the past.

Some of the findings weren't particularly surprising. For example, people were more likely to share things they thought were true or were consistent with their beliefs.

But two things stood out. The first was that some people had deliberately shared political information online that they knew at the time was untrue. There may be different reasons for doing this (trying to debunk it, for instance). The second thing that stood out was that people rated themselves as more likely to share material if they thought they had seen it before. The implication is

that if you have seen things before, you are more likely to share when you see them again.

DANGEROUS REPETITION

It has been well established by numerous studies that the more often people see pieces of information, the more likely they are to think they are true. A common maxim of propaganda is that if you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes the truth.

This extends to false information online. A 2018 study found that when people repeatedly saw false headlines on social media, they rated them as being more accurate. This was even the case when the headlines were flagged as being disputed by fact checkers. Other research has shown that repeatedly encountering false information makes people think it is less unethical to spread it (even if they know it is not true, and don't believe it).

So to reduce the effects of false information, people should try to reduce its visibility. Everyone should try to avoid spreading false messages. That means that social media companies should consider removing false information completely, rather than just attaching a warning label. And it means that the best thing individual social media users can do is not to engage with false information at all.

[the writer is Professor of Psychology, University of Westminster]

It's exhausting to be fearless: actor Swastika Mukherjee

JUSTIN RAO

MUMBAI, DEC 21 (PTI): Bengali actor Swastika Mukherjee says she has braved through several highs and lows in her career to stay independent and fearless.

Mukherjee is known for her performances in films like "Shaheb Bibi Golaam", "Shah Jahan Regency", "Bhooter Bhabishyat" and her recent works, "Paatal Lok" and "Dil Bechara".

In an interview with PTI, Mukherjee said she has followed her instincts and not trends to navigate her career without compromises.

"It's tiring, it's exhausting to be fearless. There were years when I did really less work, because I didn't want to do the other kind of work. If I wanted to do mediocre work, I could be shooting everyday.

"I started doing so much of women-centric films, where I wasn't working with so called 'heroes' and still making a mark. There came a time when heroes didn't want to do films with me."

Mukherjee said her encounter with gender-based stereotypes date back to her early days in the movies.

The 40-year-old actor, who made her 2001 screen debut with "Hemanter Pakhi", said she was told to hide being a mother so that the audience finds her "desirable."

"I was already a mother and there were



a lot of people in the industry, mostly men, they would tell me, 'Don't tell people you have a child' because it's difficult for a woman to become a heroine if people know you're a mother. That it's important for men to fantasise heroines, otherwise you won't be successful as a star."

Mukherjee said she was clear she didn't want to begin her journey in the film industry by concealing such a strong part of her identity.

"I would tell people that if actresses need that part of the audience which go gaga over you and feel you're hot, I'd achieve all of that putting it upfront that I'm a mother," she added.

The actor's latest project, ZEE5 series

"Black Widows", reflects the kind of stories she wants to tell.

The series is described as a darkly comic story of three best friends who try to kill their abusive and cruel husbands. However, one of the men survives and seeks revenge on the trio.

Directed by Birsa Dasgupta, the show features an ensemble cast of Mukherjee, Mona Singh, Shamita Shetty, Sharad Kelkar, Raima Sen, Parambrata Chattopadhyay, Aamir Ali and Sabyasachi Chakraborty.

Mukherjee said she was drawn to the show's world for its progressive portrayal of women.

"The show is about women taking a stand,

deciding what they want to do with their lives, their freedom, their perception of justice. I was kicked about this and felt at least there's an attempt to present something so exciting on screen."

The show is her third Hindi language outing for the year, after Amazon Prime Video's acclaimed series "Paatal Lok" and Sushant Singh Rajput starrer "Dil Bechara".

Mukherjee said her script choices are a reflection of her personal beliefs as she can't be vocal about women empowerment on Twitter while playing characters that glorify the perceived submissiveness of women on screen.

"As an actor, I feel it's

important that the stand I take on social media, reflects even in the work that I do. If I am always fighting for women rights online and play weak women characters, who are always dependent, asking for forgiveness, I don't feel fine with it."

For Mukherjee, the visual medium is a strong way to make a point reach across and she wants to use it to champion the causes she believes in.

"You need to become more than just an actor; you also have some social responsibility. It's important that what you feel and think, become a part of your work as well. It makes you happy that what you're fighting for, you're also doing it on camera," she added.

2 new COVID-19 cases in Mizoram

AIZAWL, DEC 21 (PTI): Two more persons tested positive for COVID-19 in Mizoram on Monday, taking the state's tally to 4,124, an official said.

The two cases were detected at Lunglei and Saitual district hospitals, the official said.

Both the patients have travel history and they are asymptomatic, he said.

Mizoram now has 154 active COVID-19 cases, of which Aizawl district has 65, Lunglei (38), Lawngtlai (29), Serchhip (7), Kolasib (8), Champhai (4), Saitual (2) and Hnahthial (1) active case.

Six more patients were discharged from COVID-19 Care Centres, taking the total number of recoveries in the state

to 3,963, he said.

Mizoram has so far reported seven COVID-19 deaths.

Altogether 1,71,305 samples have been tested for COVID-19 till date, including 183 on Sunday.

While the COVID-19 recovery rate in the state is 96 per cent, the infection rate is 2.41 per cent, the official added.

6 new COVID-19 cases in Andamans; tally rises to 4,881

PORT BLAIR, DEC 21 (PTI): Andaman and Nicobar Islands reported six new COVID-19 cases, pushing the tally in the Union Territory to 4,881, a health department official said on Monday.

All the six new patients have travel

history, he said.

The death toll remained at 61 as no new fatality due to the infection was reported, he said.

Thirteen more people were cured of the disease on Sunday, taking the total number of recoveries in the

archipelago to 4,732, the official said.

The Union Territory now has 88 active cases.

The Andaman and Nicobar administration has conducted 1,65,023 sample tests for COVID-19 so far, and the positivity rate stands at 2.96 per cent, he added.

Ladakh records nine new COVID cases



LEH, DEC 21 (PTI): Nine fresh COVID-19 cases were reported in Ladakh where 78 patients recovered from the infection during the past 24 hours, bringing down the number of active cases in the union territory to 355, officials said on Monday.

Ladakh had recorded a total of 9,279 virus caseload since the outbreak of the pandemic in March, out of which 124 patients, including 81 in Leh and 43 in Kargil, have succumbed to the infection.

All the nine new cases surfaced in Leh

district, which had of late witnessed a surge in the positive cases, the officials said.

With the recovery of 71 patients in Leh and seven in Kargil on Sunday, the recovery figure had gone up to 8,800, which is 95 per cent of the total cases, they said.

Assam records 5 more COVID deaths, 63 cases

GUWAHATI, DEC 20 (PTI): Assam's COVID-19 death toll increased to 1,017 after five more persons succumbed to the disease on Sunday, while 63 new infections took the total number of positive cases to 2,15,409, Health Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said.

He said that 64

patients were discharged during the day, pushing the total number of recoveries to 2,10,869.

Assam currently has 3,520 active cases while three patients have migrated out of the state.

"Sad to share the sad demise of five #COVID patients.....Condolences and Prayers", Sarma

tweeted.

Of the five fresh fatalities, the highest since November nine, two were reported from Cachar and one each from Golaghat, Sonitpur and Nagaon districts.

"63 cases detected out of 10147 tests conducted today with positivity rate of 0.62%," the minister said in the tweet.

Oli 'explains' how he was 'forced' to dissolve House and announce midterm elections

KATHMANDU, DEC 21 [MYREPUBLICA]: Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli has said that he was forced to take the decision to dissolve parliament after conspiracies were made against his government and it was not allowed to function properly.

In a special address to the nation, Prime Minister Oli said that he was forced to dissolve parliament and announce midterm elections after he learnt about a plan to file a vote of no-confidence against him.

"I was forced to go for taking a fresh mandate through elections as attempts were made against my government, not to allow it to function properly," the prime minister said while defending his decision to dissolve parliament and announce dates for midterm elections.

Oli said that the intraparty rift in the ruling Nepal Communist Party severely affected the government's

functioning.

The prime minister also insisted that his government had done well in terms of safeguarding the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Prime Minister Oli also urged one and all to make preparations for midterm elections which has been scheduled for April 30 and May 10.

The prime minister also accused some of his own party leaders of being responsible for forcing him to take this step.

"The elected government under my leadership which was doing pretty well was pushed to a corner and picketed against and was not allowed to work at all through various means. Therefore, I decided to dissolve parliament," he said in his 15-minute long virtual address.

Actually, nobody had thought that the country would go for a fresh public mandate one and half years before elections were due, the



prime minister said.

"This move could be seen as an abrupt step for now, but some of my party leaders should be held responsible for creating this situation who did not cooperate with my government," Oli said.

Prime Minister Oli said that his government made tireless efforts to strengthen the country's nationalism by enhancing ties with neighboring countries

China and India. He mentioned his government's move to issue a new political map incorporating Kalapani, Limpiya Dhura and Lipu Lekh which have long been occupied by India. The prime minister also said that the government signed the historic Trade and Transit Treaty with China.

"By going against the people's mandate and their will, national politics was

unnecessarily dragged into an endless game that hampered the functioning of parliament and government," he said.

"Since the prime minister who was commanding a majority government was not allowed to function properly, I did not prefer to indulge into dirty politics behind closed doors and reach consensus with them for their vested interests," Oli added.

Narcotic smugglers held along Indo-Nepal border

BAHRAICH (UP), DEC 21 (PTI): Two suspected drug smugglers including a Nepalese have been arrested along the India-Nepal border after they were allegedly found carrying five kg charas.

The two were arrested by a joint team of Narcotics Control

Bureau, Sashastra Seema Bal and police

On a tip off, a resident of Nepal was arrested from Balaigaon in Motipur area along the border with four kg charas on Sunday. The police also arrested another person identified as Ajay

with one kg charas in Nanpara area, Additional Superintendent of Police (ASP), Ashok Kumar, said. The recovered narcotics substance was stated to be worth Rs 1.6 crore. Both of them were taken into custody and the narcotics substance sealed by NCB officials.

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CA to honour indigenous pioneer during Boxing Day Test

MELBOURNE, DEC 21 (PTI): The player of the match in the upcoming Boxing Day Test between India and Australia will be awarded with the Johnny Mullagh Medal as a tribute to honour the captain of Australia's first sporting team to tour internationally.

Mullagh was the leader of the 1868 Aboriginal tour to the United Kingdom.

"The best player in the Boxing Day Test will be awarded the Mullagh Medal, named after the legendary Johnny Mullagh, captain of the 1868 cricket team who became the first Australian sporting team to tour internationally! #AUSvIND," Cricket Australia posted on its twitter handle.

Mullagh, whose real name was Unaarrimin, captained the Indigenous squad on its 1868 tour and played in 45 of 47 matches.

He was a skillful all-rounder and scored

1698 runs at an average of around 20 during the iconic 1868 tour.

Mullagh also bowled 1877 overs, 831 of which were maidens, and took 245 wickets at 10 apiece. He also donned the role of a part-time wicketkeeper and effected four stumpings during his career.

The medal is a recreation of the original belt buckle worn by the 1868 team.

CA's initiative is part of the 2019 Reconciliation Action Plan, which continues to find ways to improve cricket's relationship with Australia's indigenous people.

As a tribute, the Australian men's team wore an indigenous shirt in the T20I series against India.

Besides, Indian and Australian players had formed a 'Barefoot Circle' to respectfully acknowledge the country's indigenous population ahead of the first ODI last month.

Sydney Test in doubt as Covid-19 outbreak wreaks havoc on Australian sport

EMMA KEMP ADELAIDE, 21 DEC [THEGUARDIAN]: The Sydney Test could yet become a victim of Sydney's Covid-19 outbreak as new border closures and restrictions wreak havoc with the Australian sporting calendar.

Australia's third match against India, due to start at the Sydney Cricket Ground on 7 January, has been in doubt since last week when a coronavirus cluster emerged on the city's northern beaches.

But news that almost every state and territory has declared the greater Sydney region a hotspot has put the showpiece event at greater risk of being cancelled.

On Saturday the Sydney to Hobart yacht race was cancelled for the first time in 76 years and there have been postponements and logistical upheaval to the Big Bash League, A-League and W-League.

Cricket officials have been planning for all scenarios, as they did in November when a Covid cluster in South Australia threw into doubt the feasibility of Adelaide Oval hosting the first Test. In the end it went ahead.

Several alternatives have been thrown up, including swapping the Sydney and Brisbane Tests – the latter begins at the Gabba on 15 January – to get around

the issue of travelling from Sydney to Brisbane.

Another option is to stage the second and third Tests in Melbourne and skip Sydney altogether – before playing the fourth at the Gabba. The SCG clash could also be moved to Manuka Oval in Canberra.

But Cricket Australia's interim chief executive Nick Hockley said it had time on its side and it had "made no changes to our schedule, and our preference remains to play the match at the Sydney Cricket Ground".

"CA has prepared for the possibility of Covid-19 hotspots and state border closures over the course of the summer and the protocols that we have put in place have been effective in ensuring the safety and success of the men's and women's domestic and international programs to date," Hockley said.

On Saturday CA pre-empted Victoria's decision to close its border to greater Sydney, moving injured Test players David Warner and Sean Abbott to Melbourne. The rest of the Australian squad will soon join them after taking a 1-0 series lead against India with an eight-wicket win in Adelaide.

But the closure could present challenges for television networks and operators, some of whom live in Sydney.

Lewis Hamilton did something far greater than win awards and races in 2020

GILES RICHARDS

LONDON, 21 DEC [THEGUARDIAN]:

The debate will rage on over whether Lewis Hamilton is the greatest Formula One driver of all time but, as with all arguments spanning sporting eras, it will never be resolved. What is incontrovertible is that he is F1's most successful driver and it was recognised in his winning the Sports Personality of the Year award. Hamilton deserved it but had he not won it would not matter a jot. His actions off the track this year stand alongside his remarkable achievements; they had far greater import than what is ultimately a trinket to crown a popularity contest and they engendered a legacy that will span generations.

The 35-year-old took his seventh F1 title this year, matching Michael Schumacher's record. Having also surpassed Schumacher's records of pole positions and grand prix wins, Hamilton stands alone at the very top of his sport.

He did it with another outstanding display for Mercedes. From 17 races (in which he competed in 16, missing one having contracted Covid-19) he took pole 10 times and won 11. That he was in another class was epitomised at the Turkish Grand Prix, where he sealed the title.

Everything was ranged against him. Mercedes struggled at the track which was low on grip and where they could not bring their tyres up to their operating temperature and he



qualified in sixth.

What followed was the perfect rebuttal to the bluster of the claim that anyone would be successful in his car. Hamilton displayed a mastery of the wet and drying conditions that was almost otherworldly and nearly all of the other 19 best drivers in the world were unable to match it. Hamilton circled flawlessly on the treacherous surface while his rivals slid and spun as if on a different track. He called the race to perfection, with a touch and feel to make his worn tyres last and take a magnificent win. Difficult conditions allow the greats to shine and this was as memorable a display as Ayrton Senna's at Donington in 1993.

He won by 30 seconds from Sergio Pérez and tellingly his teammate Valtteri Bottas – in an identical car to Hamilton – span six times, had a collision and finished 14th, lapped by the world champion.

Hamilton's season, indeed his career, have been rich with such outstanding moments, yet it was his strength of character that really stood out this year when for once the "personality" part of the Spoty award is appropriate.

The world champion began speaking his mind at the opening round in Australia in March. Under the shadow of the emerging coronavirus pandemic driver after driver repeated the platitudes which they had been fed: that the FIA and F1 knew best and they were confident the decisions being made were the right ones. They were not.

Hamilton in contrast was blunt. He believed that holding an event of more than 100,000 people was irresponsible and that it should be cancelled. He was even more explicit in stating why it was going ahead. "Cash is king," he said.

As Covid struck and the race fell apart,

then the season, and the terrible effects of the virus became clear, one could only further admire Hamilton's courage in saying what F1 and the FIA had shied away from.

More, of even greater significance followed. After the killing of George Floyd, Hamilton, incensed by the racial injustice, was once more the only driver to speak out in his anger and desire for change. The silence across F1 was deafening and he called it out. "I see those of you who are staying silent, some of you the biggest of stars, yet you stay silent in the midst of injustice," he said.

Spurred on, many of his fellow drivers were emboldened to join his condemnation of racial injustice and the trickle became a wave as Hamilton, who had direct experience of racism since he was a child, pushed harder for change. A move for a pause to highlight

the anti-racist cause, hurriedly arranged for the first GP, was adopted to take place before every race. F1 had to react and created the We Race As One initiative with a commitment to encourage a greater range of ethnic minorities into the sport.

Hamilton's team were also invigorated. The drivers' overalls were to be black and their cars – historically the silver arrows – would be painted for the first time in black livery and they initiated their own diversity programme. Yet Hamilton would not let the cause which was of greater import to him than the world championship slide from view. He began wearing Black Lives Matter T-shirts and repeatedly brought up anti-racism and equality issues.

Nor was this just empty rhetoric. He created and funded the Hamilton Foundation, a long-term project with the Royal Academy of

Engineering, to engage young black people in STEM subjects and encourage them to enter motor racing and engineering.

At the Tuscan Grand Prix Hamilton wore a T-shirt drawing attention to the shooting of Breonna Taylor. As the backlash began, especially the tedious, reactionary bleating from the 'politics don't belong in sport' brigade, he was unbowed. "Want you to know I won't stop using this platform to shed light on what I believe is right," he said.

It is this fearlessness, this determination to make a difference, that illustrates why Hamilton, for all his glorious skill, deserves acknowledgement this year more than ever. He has 6.1m followers on Twitter and 21.3m on Instagram, he is F1's most recognised global star and his words travel the world like no other in the sport. How many people had heard of Breonna Taylor before his actions? How many cared about racial injustice? How many young people have had their horizons broadened and their perceptions and prejudices challenged because Hamilton put his position to good use rather than be subsumed in a morass of anonymity?

In 2020 Hamilton stood up to be counted. He did not do it for recognition but because it mattered. Reason enough to celebrate this truly great British sportsperson.

Benzema brilliance helps Real Madrid win fifth game in a row

EIBAR, SPAIN, 21 DEC (REUTERS):

Real Madrid forward Karim Benzema kept up his impressive run of form by scoring and providing two assists in a 3-1 win away to Eibar on Sunday, taking the champions level on points with La Liga leaders Atletico Madrid.

The French forward got Real off to a flying start by scoring in the sixth minute, trapping a chipped pass from Rodrygo with his right foot and calmly finishing into the net with his left for a fifth goal in his last four matches in all competitions.

He was the architect of Madrid's second goal in the 13th, beating a defender by the byline and cutting the ball back

to the edge of the area, where Luka Modric was waiting to slam it high into the net with one touch.

Eibar got back into contention with a curling long-range strike from Kike Garcia in the 28th minute. However, Zinedine Zidane's side sealed the points with a Lucas Vazquez goal in stoppage time, created by another fine pass from Benzema, to make it five wins in a row in all competitions.

The win means second-placed Real Madrid join leaders Atletico Madrid on 29 points, although Atletico have two games in hand.

Madrid were lacking a bit of firepower in



attack due to the absence of Eden Hazard and Vinicius Jr, but once again Benzema was happy to do most of the heavy lifting in attack.

The man who Zidane described last week as the best French forward of all time

combined superbly with Rodrygo for the opening goal, timing his run to perfection to beat the offside trap before producing an exquisite control and finish.

Benzema showed his more generous side to set up Modric for the second

goal and should have scored again moments later when he failed to properly connect with a Modric cross.

He looked to have found his second goal after Garcia's sumptuous curler but his strike was ruled out for offside.

Eibar improved greatly after the interval and spurned a number of chances to equalise.

Japanese midfielder Takashi Inui latched on to a disastrous pass from Real captain Sergio Ramos but failed to find the target, while his compatriot Yoshinori Muto struck the woodwork soon after.

Eibar then had loud appeals for a penalty turned down when the ball struck the arm of Ramos.

But just as in Madrid's last victory over Athletic Bilbao, they rode out late pressure and scored right at the end of the game to leave with a 3-1 scoreline that again masked some obvious defensive frailties.

Celtic wins Scottish Cup final to complete delayed treble

GLASGOW (SCOTLAND), DEC 21 (AP):

Neil Lennon became the first person in Scottish football to win the domestic treble as a player and manager after Celtic won the Scottish Cup final.

The 4-3 penalty shootout win over Hearts on Sunday ensured the pandemic-disrupted 2019-20 season was finally completed even as a new season is underway.

Lennon also completed a sweep of

domestic titles as Celtic captain in 2001 as a midfielder under Martin O'Neill.

The victory, which followed a 3-3 draw after extra time, also ensured Celtic completed an unprecedented quadruple domestic treble with the Glasgow club's 40th Scottish Cup win its record fourth in a row.

It is a boost for Lennon who has come under pressure with Celtic second in the

Scottish Premiership in the 2020-21 season, 16 points behind Glasgow rival Rangers, albeit with three games in hand.

"I must be doing something right," Lennon said.

"If it was that easy it would have been done long before me. It is unique, I feel unique at the minute. It is something very special to me.

"I said to the players, 'I need this as much as you need it.' And you

seen them all at the end, how much they felt for me as well and my backroom team, who are important to me. It is a culmination of a lot of hard work over 20 years but I feel fantastic."

Conor Hazard, the 22-year-old Northern Ireland goalkeeper making just his third appearance for Celtic, was the hero with two penalty saves in the shootout.

The Hoops seemed

to be cruising at halftime through goals from Ryan Christie and Odsonne Edouard, who scored a "Panenka" penalty.

But Hearts striker Liam Boyce reduced the deficit three minutes after halftime before defender Stephen Kingsley leveled in the 66th minute, both with headers, to send the final to extra time.

Leigh Griffiths put Celtic ahead in the 105th before fellow substitute Josh Ginnelly leveled for

Hearts.

Griffiths and Callum McGregor scored in the shootout before Hearts keeper Craig Gordon saved from Christie.

Steven Naismith, Michael Smith and Olly Lee netted their penalties before Hazard denied Kingsley and Craig Wighton and, after Mikey Johnston had scored to make it 3-3, Kristoffer Ajer drove in the winning spot kick to spark scenes of delight at Hampden Park.

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Concern among Muslims over halal status of COVID-19 vaccine

JAKARTA, INDONESIA (AP): In October, Indonesian diplomats and Muslim clerics stepped off a plane in China. While the diplomats were there to finalize deals to ensure millions of doses reached Indonesian citizens, the clerics had a much different concern: Whether the COVID-19 vaccine was permissible for use under Islamic law.

As companies race to develop a COVID-19 vaccine and countries scramble to secure doses, questions about the use of pork products — banned by some religious groups — has raised concerns about the possibility of disrupted immunization campaigns.

Pork-derived gelatin has been widely used as a stabilizer to ensure vaccines remain safe and effective during storage and transport. Some companies have worked for years to develop pork-free vaccines: Swiss pharmaceutical company Novartis has produced a pork-free meningitis vaccine, while Saudi- and Malaysia-based Aj Pharma is currently working on one of their own.

But demand, existing supply chains, cost and the shorter shelf life of vaccines not containing porcine gelatin means the ingredient is likely to continue to be used in a majority of vaccines for years, said Dr. Salman Waqar, general secretary of the British Islamic Medical Association.

Spokespeople for Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca have said that pork products are not part of their COVID-19 vaccines. But limited supply and preexisting deals worth

millions of dollars with other companies means that some countries with large Muslim populations, such as Indonesia, will receive vaccines that have not yet been certified to be gelatin-free.

This presents a dilemma for religious communities, including Orthodox Jews and Muslims, where the consumption of pork products is deemed religiously unclean, and how the ban is applied to medicine, he said.

“There’s a difference of opinion amongst Islamic scholars as to whether you take something like pork gelatin and make it undergo a rigorous chemical transformation,” Waqar said. “Is that still considered to be religiously impure for you to take?”

The majority consensus from past debates over pork gelatin use in vaccines is that it is permissible under Islamic law, as “greater harm” would occur if the vaccines weren’t used, said Dr. Harunor Rashid, an associate professor at the University of Sydney.

There’s a similar assessment by a broad consensus of religious leaders in the Orthodox Jewish community as well.

“According to the Jewish law, the prohibition on eating pork or using pork is only forbidden when it’s a natural way of eating it,” said Rabbi David Stav, chairman of Tzohar, a rabbinical organization in Israel.

If “it’s injected into the body, not (eaten) through the mouth,” then there is “no prohibition and no problem, especially when we are concerned about sicknesses,” he said.



Yet there have been dissenting opinions on the issue — some with serious health consequences for Indonesia, which has the world’s largest Muslim population, some 225 million. In 2018, the Indonesian Ulema Council, the Muslim clerical body that issues certifications that a product is halal, or permissible under Islamic law, decreed that the measles and rubella vaccines were “haram,” or unlawful, because of the gelatin. Religious and community leaders began to urge parents to not allow their children to be vaccinated.

“Measles cases subsequently spiked, giving Indonesia the third-highest rate of measles in the world,” said Rachel Howard, director of the health care market research group Research Partnership.

A decree was later issued by the Muslim clerical body saying it was permissible to receive the vaccine, but cultural taboos still led to continued low vaccination rates, Howard said.

“Our studies have found that some Muslims

in Indonesia feel uncomfortable with accepting vaccinations containing these ingredients,” even when the Muslim authority issues guidelines saying they are permitted, she said. Governments have taken steps to address the issue. In Malaysia, where the halal status of vaccines has been identified as the biggest issue among Muslim parents, stricter laws have been enacted so that parents must vaccinate their children or face fines and jail time. In Pakistan, where there has been waning vaccine confidence for religious and political reasons, parents have been jailed for refusing to vaccinate their children against polio.

But with rising vaccine hesitancy and misinformation spreading around the globe, including in religious communities, Rashid said community engagement is “absolutely necessary.”

“It could be disastrous,” if there is not strong community engagement from governments and health care workers, he said.

In Indonesia, the government has

already said it will include the Muslim clerical body in the COVID-19 vaccine procurement and certification process.

“ P u b l i c c o m m u n i c a t i o n regarding the halal status, price, quality and distribution must be well-prepared,” Indonesian President Joko Widodo said in October.

While they were in China in the fall, the Indonesian clerics inspected China’s Sinovac Biotech facilities, and clinical trials involving some 1,620 volunteers are also underway in Indonesia for the company’s vaccine. The government has announced several COVID-19 vaccine procurement deals with the company totaling millions of doses.

Sinovac Biotech, as well as Chinese companies Sinopharm and CanSino Biologics — which all have COVID-19 vaccines in late-stage clinical trials and deals selling millions of doses around the world — did not respond to Associated Press requests for ingredient information.

In China, none of

UK holds crisis talks as France closes border on virus fears

LONDON (AP): British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is to chair a meeting of the government’s emergency committee later Monday after France closed its borders to arrivals from the U.K. to stem the spread of a new strain of the coronavirus circulating in London and the southeast of England.

The meeting of the COBRA civil contingencies committee comes amid warnings of “significant disruption” around the ports in the English Channel, with tailbacks going back miles into Kent, the county in southeastern England.

The tailbacks came after France announced Sunday that it was closing its borders for 48 hours, which means lorries cannot get across the English Channel by boat. Goods arriving on containers are unaffected.

The government has urged everyone to avoid traveling to Kent, which hosts many of the cross-Channel ports. Dover notably sees around 10,000 lorries pass through every day, accounting for around 20% of the U.K.’s trade in goods. Eurotunnel, the rail service that links Britain with mainland Europe, has also suspended services.

Canada, India and Poland are among the latest countries to halt flights from the U.K., following the lead of many in Europe. France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Poland, Austria, Denmark, Ireland, and Bulgaria were among those who on Sunday announced widespread restrictions on flights from the U.K.

The moves come in the wake of Johnson’s announcement on Saturday that he was placing London and the southeast of England in a new Tier 4 level of restrictions after a warning from its scientific

advisers — using what is widely considered to be one of the world’s most sophisticated genome sequencing regimes — that the new variant was spreading far faster than existing strains. In Brussels, experts from member countries were meeting to discuss the new variant on Monday.

Johnson said early indications are that the new variant of the virus is 70% more transmissible and is driving the rapid spread of new infections in the capital and surrounding areas. On Sunday, the U.K. recorded a record daily total of 35,928 new infections.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control said in a “threat assessment” Monday that while preliminary analysis in the U.K. suggests the new variant is “significantly more transmissible,” there is no indication that infections are more severe.

The Stockholm-based agency said a few cases with the new variant have been reported already by Iceland, Denmark and the Netherlands. It also cited media reports of cases in Belgium and Italy.

While experts are stressing that there is no evidence that the new strain is any more lethal, it’s inevitable that more cases will lead to more hospitalizations and subsequent virus-related deaths.

British Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said France’s ban on freight hauliers was “slightly surprising” and that he is putting contingency plans for Kent in place, including the opening up of a lorry park and providing “welfare” for some of those drivers stuck there.

“The Kent Dover-to-Calais Eurotunnel, what we call the short straits, is probably about 20% of goods going to and from, in and out of the country,” he told Sky News. “But it’s not the mainstay. Most goods actually come in and out by unaccompanied containers and those will continue to flow.”

German court convicts man of murder over synagogue attack

BERLIN (AP): A German court on Monday convicted a right-wing extremist of murder and attempted murder and sentenced him to life in prison for his attack on a synagogue last year on Yom Kippur, Judaism’s holiest day. He killed two people after he failed to gain entry to the building.

The Oct. 9, 2019, attack is considered one of the worst anti-Semitic assaults in Germany’s post-war history.

The 28-year-old defendant, Stephan Balliet, posted a screed against Jews before trying to shoot his way into the synagogue in the eastern city of Halle while broadcasting the attack live on a popular



gaming site.

Judges at the Naumburg state court, which met in the state capital of Magdeburg for security and capacity reasons, on Monday found him “seriously culpable,” news agency dpa reported. That

means he will be effectively barred from early release after 15 years, which is typical for people in Germany given life sentences.

Presiding Judge Ursula Mertens described it as a “cowardly attack” as he

announced the verdict. Balliet showed no reaction but took notes.

During his trial, which began in July, Balliet admitted he wanted to enter the synagogue and kill all the 51 people inside. When he was unable

to open the building’s heavy doors, the German shot and killed a 40-year-old woman in the street outside and a 20-year-old man at a nearby kebab shop, and wounded several others.

He apologized to the court for killing the woman, saying that “I didn’t want to kill whites.”

German authorities have vowed to step up measures against far-right extremism following the Halle attack, the killing of a regional politician by a suspected neo-Nazi and the fatal shooting of nine people of immigrant background in Hanau — all of which happened within a year.

China criticizes US corporate auditing penalties

BEIJING (AP): China’s government on Monday called on Washington not to enforce a measure that might expel Chinese companies from U.S. stock exchanges if they fail American government audits.

The law, signed Friday by President Donald Trump, is a response to complaints

Chinese companies were failing to comply with stricter U.S. government oversight imposed following the 2008 global financial crisis. It applies to companies from any country but sponsors cited complaints Beijing was blocking American regulators from reviewing the work of

auditors for U.S.-traded Chinese companies.

The Foreign Ministry complained U.S. authorities disregarded efforts by Chinese regulators to supervise corporate audits.

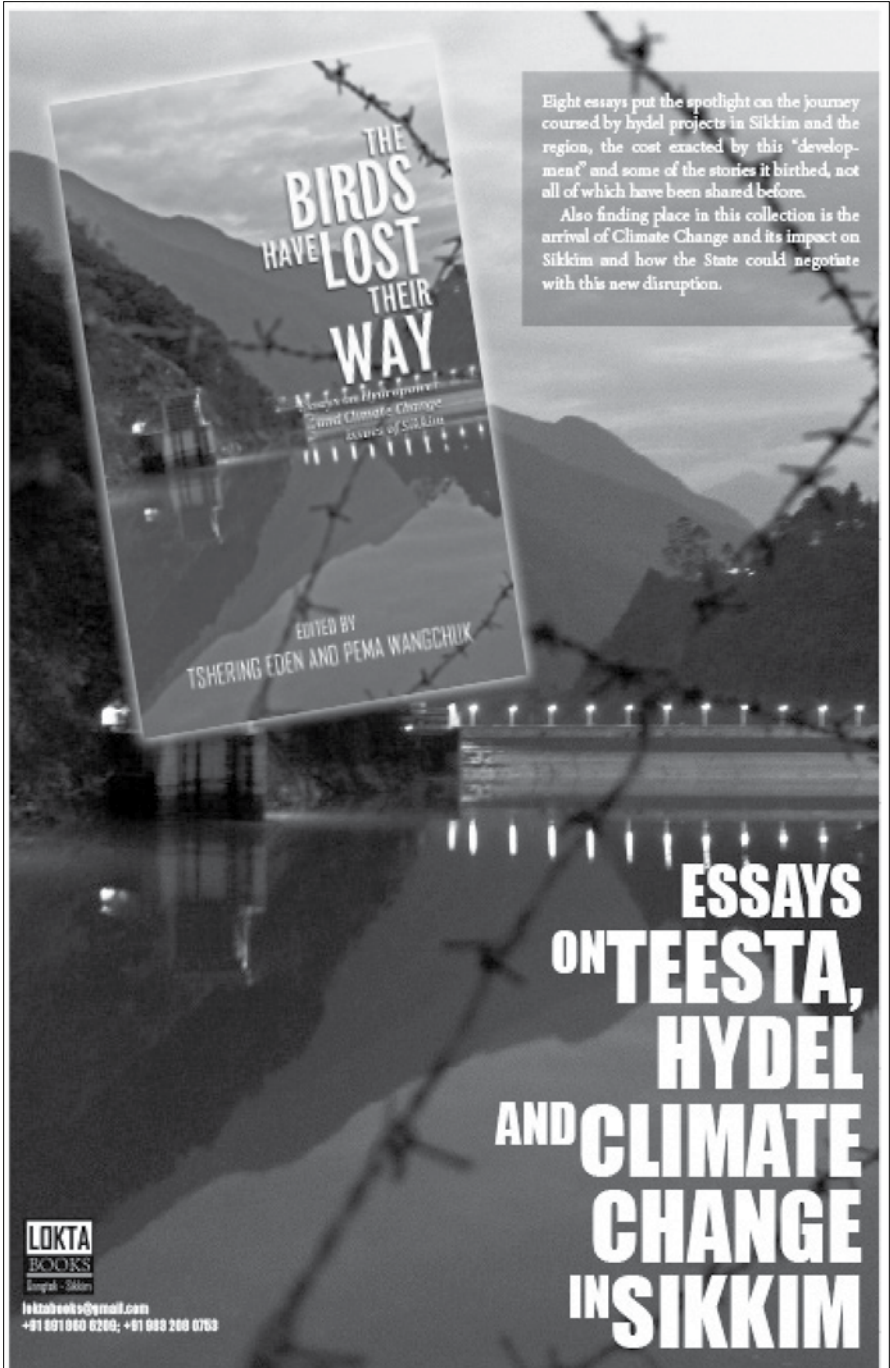
“We urge the U.S. not to implement the discriminatory provisions in the law concerning China” and

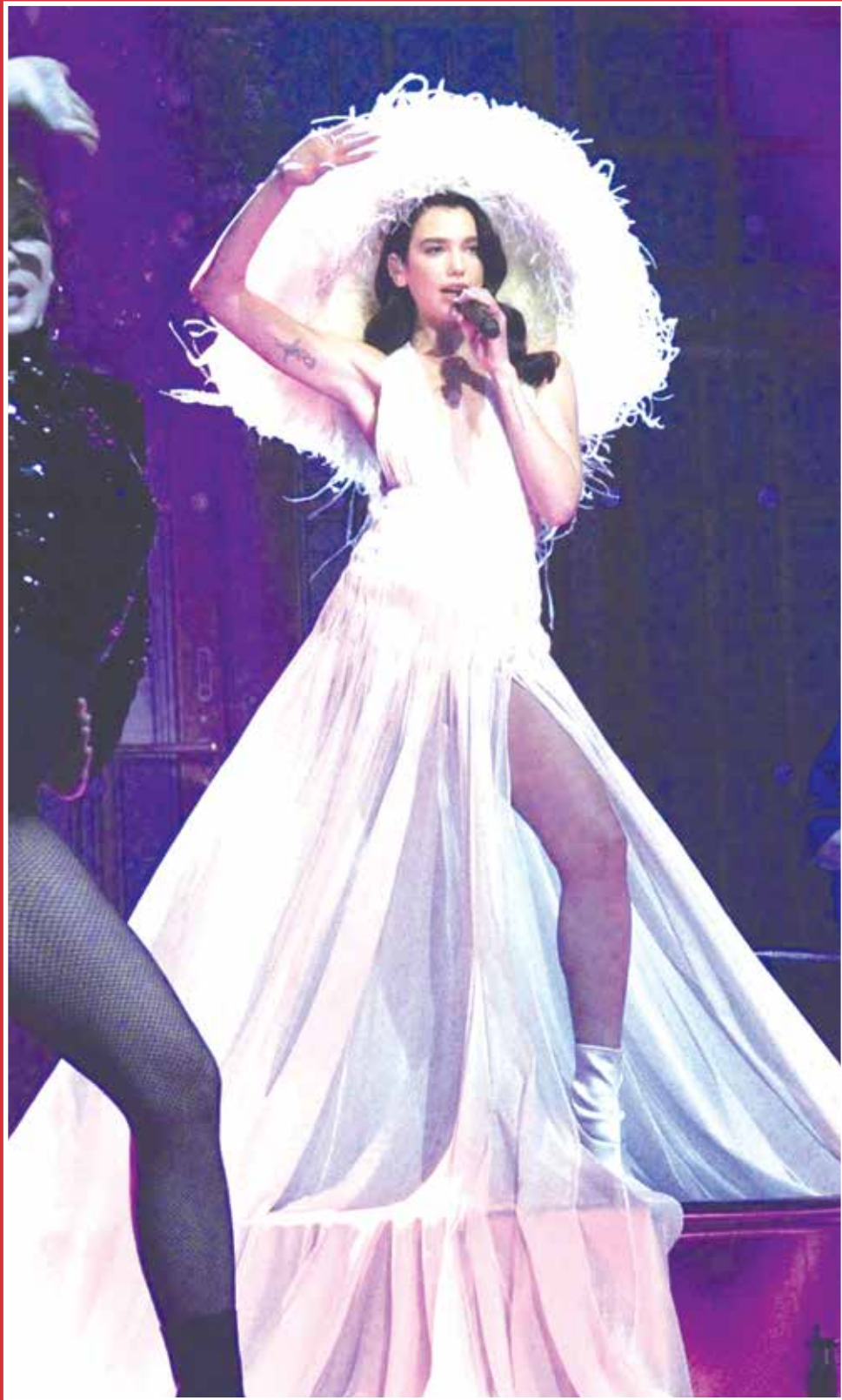
“stop the wrong practice of politicizing securities supervision,” said a ministry spokesman, Wang Wenbin.

The law would bar companies from trading shares on U.S. exchanges if they fail to comply with an audit by the U.S. Public Companies Accounting Oversight Board for three straight

years.

Chinese corporate giants including Alibaba Group and oil producer PetroChina Ltd. have raised billions of dollars from U.S. investors. Companies increasingly are pursuing listings on exchanges in China or Hong Kong but still want exposure to Western investors.





WINTER WHITES! The singer, Dua Lipa looks breathtaking while performing on SNL.

Tom Parker facing memory loss amid terminal brain tumour treatment

LONDON, DEC 21 (PTI): The Wanted frontman Tom Parker has revealed he is experiencing memory loss after undergoing rounds of chemotherapy and radiotherapy for his inoperable brain tumour.

The 32-year-old singer, best known for being the lead vocalist of the British-Irish boy band The Wanted, announced his grade four glioblastoma tumour diagnosis in October.

In a video on his Instagram Stories on Sunday, Parker said he is forgetting things he has "just done" as a result of the treatment.

"As some of you know, I have been through chemo and radio, haven't I? Which was pretty god-damn brutal, but some of the side effects from the chemo and radio are you get bad memory loss," he said.

The singer, who shares



17-months-old daughter Aurelia and two-months-old son Bodhi with wife, TV personality Kelsey Hardwick, said while he struggles to remember the events of the day, he doesn't forget presents for their elder child.

"But it's the weirdest thing because like, I'll go to (Hardwicke), 'What did I just do?' But I can remember stuff like this..." he added.

Last weekend, the couple

celebrated their 11-year anniversary.

Parker rose to fame as part of The Wanted, a five-member music group, whose hits include "All Time Low" and "Heart Vacancy."

The band, which also includes Max George, Jay McGuinness, Nathan Sykes, and Siva Kaneswaran, is on indefinite hiatus since 2014 in order to pursue solo projects.

Big B remembers 'most beautiful mother' Teji Bachchan on death anniversary

MUMBAI, DEC 21 (PTI): Paying tributes to his mother, social activist Teji Bachchan on her 13th death anniversary, megastar Amitabh Bachchan on Monday said her blessings continue to be with the family.

Teji Bachchan was born in Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan in 1914 and was married to Hindi poet Harivansh Rai Bachchan for 62 years till his death in 2003.

"She left us, the most beautiful mother in the world. They all are, the most beautiful, that is why they are Ma. I shall work early and in the schedule that has been planned. She would have wanted that to happen.

"Go and work, do not think of me in grief. Be in the happiness of the entire universe, we shall perish but our blessings shall ever be by your side; she would have said and what we all believe," Amitabh Bachchan wrote on his blog.

The 78-year-old actor said his mother brought laughter, joy and the "essence of life in all of us in every situation".

"Those moments of her passing shall ever remain in an imagery that shall never be erased... Never say die for her was a command. In the most desperate situations, she sat beside you, caressed your forehead and suddenly the



softness of her palms took away all anxiety, anxiousness and fear," he added.

Amitabh Bachchan said his mother resides in him through her unending love and blessings.

"Her memory, her presence, her blessing... with us tonight for the tomorrow and the many tomorrows that shall follow."

Teji Bachchan also played Lady Macbeth in her husband's Hindi adaptation of Shakespeare's play "Macbeth" and did a cameo appearance in the 1976 romance drama "Kabhie Kabhie", which featured Amitabh Bachchan as one of the leads.

She died at the age of 93 on December 21, 2007 following prolonged illness.

I learnt comedy through theatre, says Shikha Talsania

NEW DELHI, DEC 21 (PTI): Actor Shikha Talsania, who is looking forward to the release of "Coolie No 1", says she was introduced to the art of comedy at a young age through the stage plays of her parents.

The actor, daughter of actors Tiku and Dipti Talsania, said her regular visits to the theatre instilled spontaneity in her acting approach. "I saw a lot of theatre; both of my parents are theatre artistes. To see that process of creating magic every night on stage influenced me a lot. It taught me to be spontaneous, instinctive, and breathe with the audience.

"Every night the audience is different. It's a collective experience. Watching all the different actors on stage, including my parents, that's where I think I learnt comedy. It is about how much you can do it with, make it yours," Shikha told PTI in an interview over Zoom.

An adaptation of the 1995 hit of the same name, "Coolie No 1" stars Varun Dhawan and Sara Ali Khan in the lead and is directed by David Dhawan, who also helmed the original featuring Govinda and Karisma Kapoor.

Shikha plays Anjali, sister to Sara's Sarah, and the two are duped by Varun's Raju Coolie, who poses as a wealthy businessman Kunwar Raj Pratap Singh.

The 28-year-old actor, known for films like "Wake Up Sid" and "Veere Di Wedding", said being cast in the modern take was a dream come true especially when her father was a part of the original.

"It was one of my favourite films

growing up. I was called by David sir's team. He had called me for another project earlier but I wasn't able to do it as I didn't have dates. Universe conspired so I could be part of this film," she said.

Shikha recalled asking her father, who played Police Inspector Pandey in the 1995 film, for advice when she landed the role. "I asked him what I should do, how I should prepare. He said, 'Just have fun. It's David Dhawan'. And that was it. We had so much fun on the set, we were improvising.

"That's the fun about comedy when you have actors with you who are trying to create something different from what's written on the page, so much fun to create. The creative freedom was fantastic."

As someone who belongs to the 1990s generation, the actor said revisiting the era through the film was a delightful experience.

"The people who are creating content right now are '90s kids. We want our pop culture that we grew up with to be part of what we are creating right now. We are also the kids that went from cassettes to MP3 players, CD players to now iPods. We have been the



transient generation. It was lovely to go back."

Shikha said she has always been "selective" about the kind of work she wants to be associated with.

"I have always been very selective with my work right from the time I did 'Wake Up Sid'. I don't want to play stereotypical parts. The part should connect with me and I need to have fun while doing it."

The actor said she worked the whole of 2019 and some projects that were supposed to come out this year were delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"I'm just excited that 'Coolie No 1' is coming out now. People will have something to watch on Christmas."

Also starring Paresh Rawal, Jaaved Jaaferi, Johnny Lever and Rajpal Yadav, the film is slated to be released on Amazon Prime Video on Friday.

Sunny Leone begins shooting for her next with Vikram Bhatt

MUMBAI, DEC 21 (PTI): Actor Sunny Leone on Monday announced she has started work on her latest project, "Anamika".

Vikram Bhatt is attached to direct the thriller, which marks the first collaboration between the filmmaker and actor.

It is, however, unclear yet if "Anamika" is a film or webseries.

Leone, 39, took to Instagram and shared pictures of herself, holding a clapperboard on the sets of the project in



the city.

"Satnam... The start of something new and the end of my lockdown. A new

journey starting with the ever so nice @vikrambhatt," the "Jism 2" actor wrote.

"Anamika" is Leone's first project that she is shooting for post the coronavirus-induced lockdown in the country.

She had travelled to Los Angeles with her family in May to ensure the safety of her children against COVID-19.

The actor was last seen in the 2019 film "Motichoor Chaknachoor", starring Nawazuddin Siddiqui and Athiya Shetty, in a cameo.

ARIES:

We're still ten whole days away from the new year, but you're already feeling like a 2.0 version of yourself. The winter solstice is bringing with it all the feels, Aries, and inspiring you to embrace your power and potential. So, what do you want to create over the next 365 days? Now is the time to set your intentions. PS: The mysterious forces are assisting you on this journey to greatness!

TAURUS:

You've been going back and forth on this idea, Taurus, and no, your indecisiveness is not helping your career in any way. It's time to take a stance and set things into motion. Remember, the first step is always the hardest. There's so much you don't know about the road ahead. Give yourself the permission to figure it all out along the way.

GEMINI:

We're always worrying about the future and what it might bring. On other occasions, we're obsessing over what went wrong in the past, and how we'd like to fix

all of those things. The cards are urging you to change your approach a little. To embrace our inner Zen master and make love to this moment. 'Be here now' is the mantra, Gemini, and it will help you feel a sense of oneness with the divine forces.

CANCER:

Don't you love it when you're dropping words of wisdom and the doorbell rings at that precise moment, reaffirming your thoughts? Or when the song on the radio mysteriously answers a question you've had in your mind for a while now? Signs and symbols are unfolding all around you, Cancer. Take a moment to tune in and listen.

LEO:

Most modern yogis focus on contorting their bodies into pretzel-like postures. But, the truth is, the practice of yoga is not limited to postures. Pranayama, or breath work, is an integral part of the practice—and today, you're being asked to pay special attention to the flow of prana through your body via the breath. Trust that this will not only alleviate the stress and ten-

sion that's been weighing you down, but also help you experience mind, body, and soul integration.

VIRGO:

Don't let the sudden changes throw you off, Virgo. This is a time of drastic transformation, and your higher self has personally orchestrated circumstances that are helping you level up. The best thing you can do for yourself is stay in your centre and allow things to unfold as they must. Trust that you will have a deeper understanding of your soul purpose when you're on the other side of the storm.

LIBRA:

There was a time when you weren't able to enjoy the fruits of your labour, despite giving your all. Every time you moved closer to the destination, the prize was taken further away from you. But, you're experiencing a huge shift in your reality now. You're finding that things are taking place seamlessly, with little or not effort on your part. So, pause. Breathe. Take a moment to notice all of the blessings. Libra, you are one with the forces and the

forces are one with you.

SCORPIO:

When you're smack in the middle of the chaos, it's easy to feel like everything is closing in on you. Word for the wise: step away. Get some distance. This will help you become an observer of your circumstances and remember that all the world is but a stage. On the upside, you're likely to have at least one serendipitous encounter today—one that will reiterate your faith in the magic that surrounds you at this moment.

SAGITTARIUS:

The winter solstice is setting a big change in motion. You have little or no idea as to where you're being led, but you couldn't be more excited. After all, you've been manifesting a level up for yourself on every front! For some of you, the urge to start over in a new place will be strong. Maybe 2021 is the year that will provide just the opening you've been looking for.

CAPRICORN:

Tick tock, Capricorn! You've been going back and forth on this decision and it isn't helping your cause. The cards are urging

you to take a stance and put your plan into action. There is so much you're meant to create over the next few years. Slacking off at this point will put a few steps behind your competition.

AQUARIUS:

What if the worst thing that can happen to you is the best thing that can happen for you? A change in wind is indicated, Aquarius, and it has been triggered by none other than your higher self. So look beyond the chaos in your 3D reality and honour the lesson in each moment. Before you know it, you will have crossed over to the calmer shores with a deeper understanding of your soul purpose.

PISCES:

What happens when we make the same mistake over and over? What happens when we fail to acknowledge a soul lesson? The Universe is bringing your attention to a certain loop that you've been stuck in. It's time to break out of it with love and awareness. Remember, you are the co-creator of your destiny. The power to write a brand new script is already with you.