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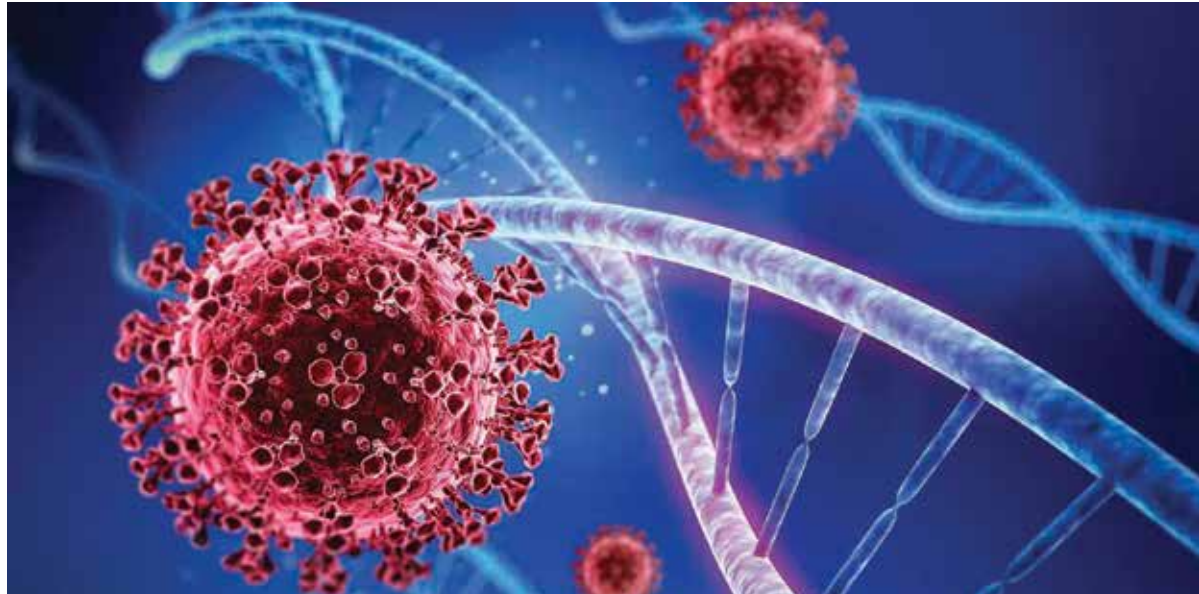
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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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64 new cases, no new Covid deaths in Sikkim



**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 16 SEPT:**
Sikkim's tally of confirmed cases of Covid-19 reached 30,802 on Thursday with 64 new cases reported in the last 24 hours. Of the 64 fresh cases, 33 were registered

in East District, 16 in West District and 15 in South District. As per the Daily Report of COVID-19 in Sikkim released by the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme of the Health Department, 64

samples returned positive for Covid from the testing of 597 samples yesterday giving Sikkim a daily test positivity rate of 10.7%. While 32 new cases were detected in RT-PCR testing of 248 samples,

32 more were picked up in rapid antigen testing of 346 samples. While the high positivity rate remains a worry, what should come as a relief is that there were no Covid related deaths in the State in the past 24 hours

and the toll holds at 379. While on recoveries, Sikkim's count of recovered Covid cases has further improved to 29,343 with the discharge of 34 more people from home and facility isolation after they made full recoveries. There are currently 775 active Covid cases in the State, of whom most are recovering in home or facility isolation while eight are currently admitted in ICU facilities at STNM Hospital and Central Referral Hospital. Sikkim continues to vaccinate in strength, and yesterday, 14, 869 more people received their Covishield jabs in the State - 496 people receiving their first dose while 14,373 others completed their vaccine schedule with the second dose.

'Kolkata-Gangtok Chase' flagged off

KOLKATA, SEP 16 (PTI): A relay race from Kolkata to Gangtok covering a distance of 685 kilometres in approximately 60 hours was flagged off here on Thursday. Eleven experienced runners from across the country have come together to be part of this non-stop day and night race titled 'Kolkata Gangtok Chase', according to a media statement. Each runner on an average would cover 62 kilometres approximate-

ly and would follow the route of Krishnanagar, Berhampore, Malda, Raiganj, Islampur and Siliguri before finishing off at Gangtok. A brainchild of 'Tutopia Learning' app, the race hopes to promote health, fitness, mass education and the spirit of adventure. "The idea is to be healthy which is more relevant during COVID-19 times, said Subrata Roy director, Tutopia Learning app.

2 Boys Find Over 900 Crore Credited Into Their Bank Accounts In Bihar

PATNA, 16 SEPT [NDTV]: Residents of a village in Bihar's Katihar rushed to ATMs and banks to check their account statement. The reason? Two school-children suddenly found their accounts laden with crores of rupees overnight, and the villagers hoping for a similar luck made a dash to the banks. The two boys have accounts in Uttar Bihar Gramin Bank. They were expecting to get some money under a government scheme to buy school uniform and pay for related expenses. Along with their parents, they went to a public internet centre at the village to check whether the money had come. On checking their statement, they were shocked to find crores of rupees credited into their accounts. Class 6 student Ashish found himself rich by over 6.2 crore. Another schoolboy, Guru Charan Vishwas, was surprised to see over 900 crore sitting in his account. The village head has

confirmed the matter. Local reports say the bank is investigating the transactions. "I received information last evening that a huge sum has been found in the bank accounts of two boys. We are investigating it. We opened the bank branch early this morning to check how it happened. The branch manager told us there was some glitch in the computerised system of sending money. The amount was visible in their statements but the actual money wasn't in their account. I have sought a report from the bank," Katihar District Magistrate Udayan Mishra said. This is the second incident of a huge wrong amount being sent to a bank customer or made to reflect in the statement in Bihar in recent times. A man in a village on Patna's outskirts was sent to jail for not returning over 5 lakh that was credited into his account by mistake.

Oxygen plant dedicated at Singtam District Hospital



GANGTOK, 16 SEPT [IPR]: Health Minister Dr MK Sharma inaugurated a PM Cares-supported 200LPM PSA Plant (Oxygen Plant) at District Hospital, Singtam, today. While addressing the program, the Minister stressed the importance of medical oxygen as a life-saving aid. He further highlighted the importance of Oxygen Plants during the Covid-19 situation. The Minister stated

that the installation of the Oxygen Plant is yet another milestone in the healthcare system in the State. He further informed that Oxygen Plants of various capacities are being inaugurated simultaneously all the districts here. The Minister urged everyone to make hygiene an integral part of their lives and keep public spaces clean. The

Minister also urged the participants to actively participate in the implementation of government schemes. The programme was attended by Chairperson, RDD, Sunita Gautam, Members of Singtam Nagar Panchayat, CMO East Dr Tempo Gyaltsen, DMS East Dr Manoj Mishra, doctors and medical staff of District Hospital Singtam, Officials, and local gentry.

Delhi reported highest rape cases, murders among metros in 2020: NCRB data

NEW DELHI, SEP 16 (PTI): Delhi accounted for nearly 40 per cent of all rape cases and almost 25 per cent murder cases among 19 metropolitan cities in India in 2020, according to latest government data. Altogether, 1,849 murder cases and 2,533 rape cases were reported across the country in 2020, a year that witnessed COVID-19 outbreak and lockdowns, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data showed. The NCRB, which functions under the Union home ministry, classified 19 cities with over 20 lakh population as metropolitan -- Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Chennai, Coimbatore, Delhi, Ghaziabad, Hyderabad, Indore, Jaipur, Kanpur, Kochi, Kolkata, Kozhikode, Lucknow, Mumbai, Nagpur, Patna, Pune and Surat. Delhi logged the maximum 461 (24 per cent of 1,849) murder cases in 2020

followed by Bengaluru (179), Chennai (15), Mumbai (148) and Surat (116), while Kolkata reported 53, according to the data. A total of 1,849 cases of murder were registered during 2020, showing a decrease of 8.3 per cent over 2019 (2,017 cases). The crime rate registered also show a decrease of 1.8 in 2019 to 1.6 in 2020, the NCRB stated. Another 192 cases of 'culpable homicide not amounting to murder' were registered across the metropolitan cities with Delhi alone accounting for 57 of these cases followed by Lucknow (28) and Bengaluru (10), it showed. During 2020, India reported a total of 2,533 cases of rape across the metropolitan cities, with Delhi accounting for the maximum 967 (38 per cent) cases followed by 409 in Jaipur (16 per cent), 322 in Mumbai (12 per cent), the NCRB data showed.

O2 Plant installed at Namchi District Hospital



NAMCHI, 16 SEPT [IPR]: Transport Minister Sanjeet Kharel, who is also chairperson of the State Oxygen Management Committee, inaugurated a 1,000 litre per minute Pressure Swing Adsorption Oxygen Generator Plant at the District Hospital here today. The plant has been established through the Prime Minister CARES Fund and was completed within two months by the Buildings Department. Oxygen plants have been installed in all the district hospitals and were inaugurated simultaneously today.

The plant here is under the charge of Junior Engineer [Mechanical], Rohit Rai, and JE [Electrical], Purna Bdr. Pradhan, both of the Health Department. The Minister was accompanied by the inauguration by Advisor, Skill Development Department, Satish Chandra Rai, South Zila Adhakshya Tshering Dem Bhutia, Namchi Municipal Council chairperson, Ganesh Rai, and local gentry. The program also had presence of DC (South) M Bharani Kumar, CMO (South) Dr DC Sharma alongside doctors and staff of the Health Department and other concerned officials. Addressing to the media, the Minister extended congratulations on the successful installation of the oxygen plant

and remarked that it was a boon for the people. Amid the Covid pandemic, such a facility will be crucial to meet any medical crisis in providing unabated oxygen supply to critical patients, he pointed out. He thanked the Prime Minister and the Chief Minister for timely intervention in setting up such an important facility in order to fight Covid. Thereafter, the Minister also inspected under-construction government sites in Namchi -- the 300-Bed District Hospital and the Community Hall and reviewed the progress of works and enquired whether the projects meeting their projected schedules.

Oxygen Plant inaugurated at Mangan Hospital



MANGAN, 16 SEPT [IPR]: Roads & Bridges Minister, Samdup Lepcha, who is also the area MLA, inaugurated a 1000 Litre Per Minute capacity PSA Oxygen Plant, established through the PM Cares Fund, at District Hospital, Mangan, today. Addressing the programme, the Minister extended his gratitude to the Chief Minister with whose goodwill and effort this Oxygen plant was established at Mangan to cater to the public of North District. Minister Lepcha lauded the effort of the team involved in the process of installation of the new oxygen plant. The Minister also acknowledged the relentless effort of the Covid warriors headed by DC, North for smooth func-

tioning and handling the pandemic with minimum cases and fewer casualties. He said that the Government has given topmost priority to the health sector and efforts are on to make the health care system in Sikkim the best in the country. Further, the Minister appealed to the contractor of the New District Hospital, Mangan to execute the work for early completion. Chairman Sikkim Welfare Commission, Nim Tshering Lepcha said that the oxygen plant in the district hospital is yet another milestone achieved by the state in terms of strengthening its health infrastructure. Speaking on the occasion, DC (North), Tenzing T KaLeon informed that the oxygen plant in North

Sikkim was set up in one month. He acknowledged the effort of the team involved in the process of installation of the new oxygen plant. Earlier, District Medical Superintendent (North), Rinzing Doma Bhutia in her welcome address highlighted the technical aspects of Oxygen plant and gave a brief data on Covid cases in the district. She informed that 32,009 (1st dose) and 15,590 (2nd dose) of Covid-19 vaccine have been administered to the people of North District till date. The inaugural programme also had the presence of Additional Political Secretary to CM (North), Tshering Wangyal Bhutia, SP (North), Ongmu Bhutia and officials.

After Supreme Court rap, Centre's notification on Tribunals appointments

NEW DELHI, 16 SEPT [NDTV]: The government on Thursday issued a notification regarding rules for appointments to 12 tribunals, or quasi-judicial bodies, in various fields, including the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal.

This comes a day after an irritated Supreme Court reprimanded the government for its delay in filling posts in tribunals; a bench led by Chief Justice NV Ramana told Solicitor General Tushar Mehta "return with appointment letters (in two weeks)... or (if appointments are not made) cite the reason".

"We are a democratic country... follow the rule of law," the Chief Justice reminded the government.

In a charged hearing the court singled out delayed appointments to the NCLT, or National Company Law Tribunal, and criticised the government for "cherry picking" from a shortlist of 22 names.

The Chief Justice - part of the selection committee - said 544 people had been interviewed for the shortlist, but "... only some were appointed... rest went to (a) wait list," he observed.

The Solicitor General's reply - that "the government is entitled to not follow certain recommendations" - did not go down well; Justice L Nageswara Rao, part of the three-judge bench, shot back: "What (then) is the sanctity of the selection committee (headed by top court judges)?" Meanwhile, the government has also reversed its decision to retire Justice Ashok Iqbal Singh Cheema as Chairperson of the NCLAT. This was after the court warned the government that it would stay the contentious Tribunal Reforms Act that is at the centre of a tug-of-war between the two.

Justice Cheema, a former judge of the Bombay High Court, was removed by the government on September 11 - ten days before his term was to end, and with five judgments still pending.

He had moved the Supreme Court against that decision. The court was told he could continue as Chairperson "but only on paper" as an "awkward" situation had developed - an alternative had been appointed. The court, however, refused to accept this, saying, "You (the government) are responsible for this awkward situation..."

The issue of appointments and rules of appointments to tribunals has been debated in the top court in the past few days, with the court last week warning the government "you are testing our patience".

"... we feel the government has no respect for this court," the court said, referring to a "pattern"; "... we strike down one Act and a new one comes..." Justice DY Chandrachud said, as another bench (also led by the Chief Justice) gave the government a week to make the appointments.

PHE Minister inaugurates Oxygen Plant at Gyalshing District Hospital

GYALSHING, 16 SEPT [IPR]: PHE Minister Bhim Hang Subba inaugurated a 200 litres per minute PSA medical oxygen generation plant at the District Hospital, Gyalshing, today.

The Minister was accompanied by District Collector, West, Karma R. Bonpo, CMO West, DMS West, doctors and medical staff of the District Hospital.

Now, the hospital can produce its own oxygen at low operation cost, fully automated and with high purity.

The country witnessed a medical oxygen shortage due to an unprecedented surge



in COVID-19 cases. The shortage of oxygen supply was alarming. The supply of medical oxygen is extremely important for severe COVID-19 patients as

one of the most common symptoms of the virus is shortness of breath. The government has taken a step forward in preparing the state to combat any se-

vere shortage of oxygen in the state in future.

The government has put the highest priority on the health sector and efforts are on to make

the health care system in Sikkim the best in the country. The vision of the government is to ensure quality health care for all within the state.

Project Management, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation training in Gangtok

SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 16 SEPT:

Economic Services Group of National Productivity Council (NPC) has announced plans to conduct residential training on 'Project Management, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation' in Gangtok from 20 to 24 Sept.

There will be around 16 participants from different departments, academic institutions etc, a press release informs.

Director (Economic Services), Rajesh Sund,

NPC, who is also coordinator of the program and faculty for Project Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, informed today that Secretary, Commerce & Industries Department, HK Sharma, will attend the inaugural programme as chief guest.

The training has been conceptualized with the objective to prepare participants to contribute to the higher-level results and develop and act on strategies to achieve those results.

"May rob media's independence": 2nd High Court setback for new IT Rules



NEW DELHI, 16 SEPT [NDTV]: Key sections of the country's new Information Technology rules that seek to regulate digital media outlets were put on hold on Thursday by the Madras High Court, which became the second court to do so after the Bombay High Court last month.

"Prima facie there is substance that the oversight mechanism to control the media by the government may rob the media of its independence and the fourth pillar of the democracy may not be there at all," the Madras High Court said.

"By way of abundant caution, sub-rules 1 and 3 of Rule 9 of the said Rules of 2021 will remain stayed," it added.

Put on hold by the Bombay High Court on August 16, Clauses 1 and 3 of Rule 9 require digital media outlets to follow the code of conduct laid down by the Press Council of India and the country's cable TV code which includes provisions of government oversight.

The petitioners allege that creating an oversight mechanism consisting of government officials will result in the state's interference in the editorial functioning of the media.

Various petitions against the new rules have been pending in different high courts across the country. Several courts have already said that no coercive action can be taken against publishers who have not implemented the rules. The relief to the publications remains in place for now.

Earlier this month, the Supreme Court said it will consider transferring to itself all cases linked to the new rules and giving them a combined hearing. The plea came from the centre, which filed a transfer petition days after the Bombay High Court order.

The Madras High Court's order on Thursday came over two petitions filed by Carnatic musician TM Krishna and the Digital News Publishers Association, comprising thirteen media outlets, and journalist Mukund Padmanabhan.

The petitioners argued that despite the Bombay High Court putting the provisions on hold over a different case, the government had issued notices seeking compliance to media outlets. They hope the second High Court order will force the government to drop the move.

Review meet takes stock of SGAY constructions in Martam block



SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 16 SEPT:

A review meeting on the progress of Sikkim Garib Awas Yojana [SGAY] scheme in Martam block was held at the Martam BAC today.

The meeting was chaired by the area MLA Sonam Tshering Venchungpa and also attended by Additional Political Secretary to the CM, Tshering Wangchuk Lepcha, ADC (Dev) Gangtok, Radha Pradhan, Panchayat President (Namli, Martam Nazitam GPU, Byeng Phegyong GPU), Panchayat members, Sikkim Krantikari Morcha's CLC vice president, BDO Martam, Assistant Engineer BAC Martam, Project Manager, Junior Engineer (Mungkipa Trade Link Pvt. Ltd), Junior Engineer BAC Martam & Beneficiaries from Various stages of House completion.

The main agenda of the meeting was to take stock of the status of SGAY constructions, coordination among department, contractors & beneficiaries and to ensure timely completion of the 70 SGAY homes under construction in Martam Block. The deadline for these constructions is March 2022.

BDO Martam, Sonam Palden Bhutia, in his welcome address, made a power-point presentation on the status of SGAY projects.

Project Manager, Manoj Agarwal of Mungkipa Trade Link, briefed the meeting on the current status of constructions and provided a background on the implementation module.

During the interactive session, the beneficiaries expressed gratitude towards the Chief Minister and registered their sat-

isfaction with the implementation of the scheme and provision of necessary furnishing which completes the homes.

ADC (Dev) Gangtok, Radha Pradhan highlighted the importance and significance of the scheme and remarked at the farsightedness of the Chief Minister in implementing the scheme.

APS Tshering Wangchuk Lepcha, in turn, took stock of the progress and urged the beneficiaries to meet the deadline and thanked the BDO for the well-coordinated project which has ensured success.

The area MLA spoke on the vision of the state Government to provide dignified homes to the underprivileged and appealed to the people to be aware of how the government was proactively working for the upliftment of the people.

Virat Kohli to step down as India's T20I Captain after ICC T20 World Cup

NEW DELHI, 16 SEPT [NDTV]: Virat Kohli on Thursday took to social media to announce that he will be stepping down as captain of the Indian cricket team in T20Is after the completion of the upcoming ICC T20 World Cup, which is scheduled to take place in UAE and Oman from October 17 to November 14. He will continue to lead the team in Test cricket and ODIs.

"I have decided to step down as the T20 captain after this T20 World Cup in Dubai in October," Kohli wrote in a statement that he shared on his social media handles.

"I have been fortunate enough to not only represent India but also lead the Indian Cricket Team to my utmost capability. I thank everyone who has supported me in my journey as the Captain of the Indian Cricket Team.

I couldn't have done it without them - the boys, the support staff, the selection committee, my coaches and each and every Indian who prayed for us to win.

"Understanding workload is a very important thing and considering my immense workload over the last 8-9 years playing all 3 formats and captaining regularly for last 5-6 years, I feel I need to give myself space to be fully ready to lead the Indian Team in Test and ODI Cricket. I have given everything to the Team during my time as T20 Captain and I will continue to do so for the T20 Team as a batsman moving forward.

"Of course, arriving at this decision took a lot of time. After a lot of contemplation and discussions with my close people, Ravi bhai and

also Rohit, who have been an essential part of the leadership group, I've decided to step down as the T20 Captain after this T20 World Cup in Dubai in October. I have also spoken to secretary Mr Jay Shah and the President of BCCI Mr Sourav Ganguly along with all the selectors about the same. I will continue to serve Indian Cricket and the Indian Team to the best of my ability," Kohli wrote in his statement.

Kohli took over as captain in the shortest format in 2017 after MS Dhoni stepped down from his position. This will be the first time that Kohli will lead India in the ICC T20 World Cup. He has led the team to the final of the 2017 ICC Champions Trophy and the semi-final of the 2019 ICC World Cup in the past.

India records 30,570 COVID-19 cases, 431 deaths

NEW DELHI, SEP 16 (PTI): With 30,570 more people testing positive for COVID-19, India's overall infection tally has risen to 3,33,47,325, while the count of active cases has dipped to 3,42,923, according to the Union Health Ministry on Thursday.

The death toll due to the disease has climbed to 4,43,928 with 431 daily fatalities being recorded, according to data updated by the ministry at 8 am.

The number of active cases has dropped to 3,42,923, which comprises 1.03 per cent of the total infections, while the national COVID-19 recovery rate was recorded at 97.64 per cent, the ministry said.

A reduction of 8,164 cases has been recorded in the active COVID-19 caseload in a span of 24 hours, the data showed.

Also, 15,79,761 COVID-19 tests were conducted in the country on Wednesday, taking the total number of such examinations so far to 54,77,01,729, it stated.

The daily positivity rate was recorded at 1.94 per cent. This has been

below three per cent for 17 days.

The weekly positivity rate was recorded at 1.93 per cent. This figure has been below three per cent for 83 days now, according to the health ministry.

The number of people who have recuperated from the disease has surged to 3,25,60,474, while the case fatality rate was recorded at 1.33 per cent.

The cumulative number of COVID-19 vaccine doses administered in the country so far under the nationwide vaccination drive has exceeded 76.57 crore, according to the ministry.

India's COVID-19 infection tally had crossed the 20-lakh mark on August 7, 2020, 30 lakh on August 23, 40 lakh on September 5, 50 lakh on September 16, 60 lakh on September 28, 70 lakh on October 11, 80 lakh on October 29, 90 lakh on November 20 and the one-crore mark on December 19.

The country crossed the grim milestone of two crore cases on May 4 and three crore on June 23.

In Bengal village, teacher turns walls into blackboards to close digital gap

PASCHIM BARDHAMAN, 16 SEPT [REUTERS]: In a small tribal village on the eastern tip of India, an enterprising teacher has turned walls into blackboards and roads into classrooms, trying to close the gap in learning brought on by prolonged school shutdowns in the country.

Deep Narayan Nayak, 34, a teacher in the tribal village of Joba Attpara in Paschim Bardhaman district of the eastern state of West Bengal, has painted blackboards on the walls of houses and taught children on the streets for the past year. The local school shut down after strict COVID-19 restrictions were imposed across the country in March 2020.

On a recent morning, children wrote on one such wall with chalk and peered into a microscope as Mr Nayak watched over them.

"The education of our children stopped ever since the lockdown was imposed. The children used to just loiter around. The teacher came and started teaching them," Kiran Turi, whose child learns with

Mr Nayak, told Reuters.

Mr Nayak teaches everything from popular nursery rhymes to the importance of masks and hand-washing to about 60 students and is popularly known as the "Teacher of the Street" to the grateful villagers.

Schools across the country have gradually begun reopening starting last month. Some epidemiologists and social scientists are calling for them to open fully prevent further loss of learning in children.

An August survey of nearly 1,400 schoolchildren done by a scholars' group found that in rural areas, only 8% were studying online regularly, 37% were not studying at all, and about half were unable to read more than a few words. Most parents wanted schools to reopen as soon as possible, it said.

Mr Nayak said he was worried that his students, most of whom are first-generation learners and whose parents are daily wage-earners, would away from the education system if they didn't continue with school.

अन्त्येष्टि कार्यको सूचना



हाम्रा दिवंगत पिताश्री मुकुन्द प्रसाद ढकालको १३ दिनको अन्त्येष्टि क्रिया ७ सेप्टेम्बर, २०२१, मंगलवारदेखि शुरू गरिएको छ। उहाँको अन्त्येष्टि क्रिया १९ सेप्टेम्बर, २०२१, आइतवारको दिन निज निवास लिङ्मो, मिडल कोल्याड, दक्षिण सिक्किममा हुने भएको छ। यस दुःखद घडिमा हामीलाई साथ अनि सान्त्वना दिनुहुने हाम्रा बन्धु-बान्धव, झट-मित्र, शुभचिन्तक, आफन्तहरू सबैलाई अन्त्येष्टि कार्यमा उपस्थित भएर उहाँको आत्मा शान्तिको निम्ति श्रद्धाञ्जली अर्पण गरिदिनुहुन अनुरोध गर्दछौं।

अन्त्येष्टि कार्य (१३ दिने): १९ सेप्टेम्बर, २०२१ (आइतवार)

स्थान: लिङ्मो मिडल कोल्याड, दक्षिण सिक्किम

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Strong-room for Arithang-II municipal bypoll opened

GANGTOK, 1 SEPT [IPR]:

The strong-room for the Municipal by-elections scheduled for 1 Sept, was opened by Municipal Returning Officer East Ragul K at 2.30PM today in the presence of the candidates and the Electronic Voting Machines shifted to the Conference Hall of District Administrative Centre, East for the distribution process.

Polling teams, Electronic Voting Machines, polling materials and the security personnel assigned for the By-Election to Arithang-II municipal ward of Gangtok Municipal Corporation were dispatched to the three Polling Stations set up at Arithang Junior High School.

The dispatching process was conducted under the supervision of



the Municipal Returning Officer-East.

ADC East, Tushar G Nikhare, was also pres-

ent during the dispatching exercise.

MRO further reminded the teams to coordi-

nate with Sector Magistrate Robin Sewa and to keep the checklists to ensure that the EVMs and

materials are dispatched properly.

Polling begins at 8AM on Friday.

Central agency team in Bengal to probe blasts outside BJP MP's home

NORTH 24 PARGANAS, 16 SEPT: The National Investigation Agency (NIA) officials reached Jagaddal today to probe incidents of bombings outside BJP MP Arjun Singh's residence last week.

NIA officials arrived at BJP MP Arjun Singh's residence in Jagaddal, North 24 Parganas to probe the September 8 bombing case there.

"I have seen two officers here and another NIA team is on the way. They will talk to the local police. I have given all details about bombings," Mr Singh told reporters.

Three crude bombs were hurled outside the house of Arjun Singh "Majdoor Bhavan" at Jagaddal in Bengal's North 24 Parganas district between 6 am and 6.30 am on September 8. The bombs hit one of the entrance gates of the house. However, no injuries were reported in the incident.

The BJP leader was

in Delhi at the time of the incident, but his family members were inside the house.

Soon after the attack, the BJP reacted strongly and Darjeeling MP Raju Bista demanded an NIA investigation into the matter. The West Bengal BJP has claimed that the ruling Trinamool Congress was behind the attack.

However, the Trinamool denied the charges and said that the attack was a result of the internal feud in the Bengal BJP.

Meanwhile, the centre has upgraded Mr Singh's armed security cover to "Z" category after the incident.

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) on Monday issued an order giving the security responsibility of the leader to the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF). "The paramilitary wing under the Central government took the

charge on Tuesday," a government source told ANI.

The leader will be provided with the security cover only in West Bengal, said the source, adding "Arjun Singh was earlier being provided 'Y +' category security by the CISF.

The CISF has been providing "Y+" security cover to Arjun Singh since March 2019.

Mr Singh, an MP from Barrackpore parliamentary constituency, has now been put under security cover of more than nine armed CISF troops at his house round the clock. A squad of five armed commandos will provide security to the leader while travelling within West Bengal.

Mr Singh, who was a Trinamool Congress MLA, joined the BJP in 2019 ahead of the Lok Sabha elections and won from the Barrackpore parliamentary constituency.

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DC inspects landslide damage to Smart City projects in Namchi

BIKASH CHETTRI

NAMCHI, 16 SEPT:

District Collector (South) today inspected damages suffered by ongoing Smart City project works in and around Namchi. He was accompanied to the inspection by the Divisional Engineer (Smart City), District Project Officer (South), JE (NSCL), Inspector NMC, Councilors and others.

The inspection began with the landslide at Tinzir above the under-construction property of Meena Kumari Rai. The



team then inspected the road connecting Masjid Road Line with Upper Kamrang which has been hit by a series of slides. At Kalok-Dambudara Jhora, a massive slide has dam-

aged private water supply pipelines.

The team also inspected the road construction work on the Mandir Dara to Debrung axis.

Russia votes in parliament election without main opposition

MOSCOW (AP): After a few weeks of desultory campaigning but months of relentless official moves to shut down significant opposition, Russia is holding three days of voting this weekend in a parliamentary election that is unlikely to change the country's political complexion.

There's no expectation that United Russia, the party devoted to President Vladimir Putin, will lose its dominance of the State Duma, the elected lower house of parliament. The main questions to be answered are whether the party will retain its current two-thirds majority that allows it to amend the constitution; whether anemic turnout will dull the party's prestige; and whether imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny's Smart Voting initiative proves to be a viable strategy against it.

"There is very little intrigue in these elections ... and in fact they will not leave a special trace in political history," Andrei Kolesnikov, an analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center, told The Associated Press.

Putin, however, on Thursday urged Russians to vote, saying in a video message that "election of (the Duma's) new composition is undoubtedly the most important event in the life of our society and country."

With 14 parties fielding candidates for half of the Duma's 450 seats that are chosen by party list, the election has a veneer of being genuinely competitive. But the three parties aside from United Russia that are expected to clear the 5% support necessary to get a seat rarely challenge the Kremlin.

The Kremlin wants control over the new parliament, which

will still be in place in 2024, when Putin's current term expires and he must decide on running for reelection or choosing some other strategy to stay in power.

The other half of the seats are chosen in individual constituencies, where independent candidates or those from small parties such as the liberal Yabloko may have stronger chances. These seats are also where the Navalny team's Smart Voting strategy could make inroads.

The program sidesteps ideology in order to undermine United Russia, simply advising voters which candidate other than the ruling party's is the strongest in a single-mandate race.

It's essentially a defensive strategy.

"Voting to harm United Russia is not a meaningful goal, not a goal to choose another candidate whom you ideologically support," Kolesnikov said. But it showed potency in its inaugural use in 2018 when opposition candidates won 20 of 45 seats in the Moscow city council, and a year later when United Russia lost its majorities in the councils of three large cities.

However, it's unclear how widely it will be used this year after authorities blocked access to its website. The service remains available through apps, but Russia has threatened fines against Apple and Google to remove the apps from their online stores. The Foreign Ministry last week summoned U.S. Ambassador John Sullivan to protest election interference by American "digital giants."

Blocking the website was the latest move to neutralize the

Navalny operation, which was Russia's most visible and determined opposition organization, capable of calling sizable protests throughout the country.

Navalny himself was jailed in January upon returning to Russia from Germany where he had been recuperating from nerve-agent poisoning; he was subsequently sentenced to 2½ years in prison. A court later outlawed Navalny's Foundation for Fighting Corruption and a network of his regional offices as extremist organizations, a verdict that barred people associated with the groups from seeking public office and exposed them to lengthy prison terms.

Russian authorities also blocked some 50 websites run by his team or supporters for allegedly disseminating extremist propaganda.

In August, Russia added the independent vote-monitoring group Golos to its list of foreign agents, a move that does not block its work but strongly suggests it should be regarded with suspicion.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, whose election-monitoring missions are widely regarded as authoritative, will not send observers for the parliament vote, saying that Russia imposed excessive restrictions.

In addition to the Duma election, nine Russian regions will be choosing governors, 39 regions will be choosing legislatures and voters in 11 cities will be choosing city councils.

The Elections Commission ordered voting expanded to three days, concluding on Sunday, to reduce crowding at the polls amid the coronavirus

pandemic. Critics say the decision raises the chance of ballot manipulation. Commission head Ella Pamfilova rejects the accusation, saying there will be "total video surveillance" of polling places and that ballots will be in secure containers.

Other ethical concerns also hover over the election. According to the state-funded pollster VTsIOM, more than one in 10 workers say they have been given directives by their bosses to vote. In St. Petersburg, a candidate from the Yabloko party named Boris Vishnevsky, who is running simultaneously for the Duma and a regional legislature, discovered that there are two other men using that name opposing him in each race — one of whom is a member of United Russia, according to the newspaper Novaya Gazeta.

Although polls indicate that general approval for United Russia is low, the party is expected to ride to an overwhelming first place in the new parliament. The independent Center for Current Politics predicts it will score 299-306 seats — down from the 343 it currently holds but within the range of the 303 seats needed to change the constitution.

The center's prognosis suggests that most of the seats lost by United Russia would be picked up by the Communist Party, the second-largest parliamentary faction. But the party largely conforms to the Kremlin line, as do the two other parties likely to get double-digit seats.

"The Communists themselves are not very dangerous," said commentator Sergei Parkhomenko on EkhoMoskvyy radio. The party is "a tool for imitating an opposition movement."



GOVERNMENT OF SIKKIM URBAN DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT GANGTOK

NO.33/UDD/2021

Dated: 17.09.2021

PUBLIC NOTICE

The Gangtok Smart City Development Limited (GSCDL) is commencing carpeting work of feeder roads from the beginning of October 2021 under work "Improvement of Selected Feeder Roads in and around Gangtok," as per the list available on the website <http://smartsitygangtok.com>.

The household utility lines like power cables, water supply pipelines, sewerage pipelines etc. are to be laid prior to the commencement of the works so as to avoid damages to the roads, post carpeting and also to avoid inconvenience causing to the general public after the completion of work. The Urban Development Department requests all concerned to approach GSCDL prior to the commencement of the work i.e. at least within one month from the date of issue of this notice with request of permission for above works. They may submit their requests at the following email addresses or personally contact the office of the GSCDL within the stipulated time:-

1. gangtoksmartcity@gmail.com
2. ctosmartcity.gangtok@gmail.com
3. degscdl@gmail.com
4. se2smartcity@gmail.com

After the expiry of above mentioned notice period, the GSCDL will not be in a position to accept or allow any request for digging of roads for laying utility lines. The Department solicits cooperation from all concerned to prevent damages to the public infrastructure once carpeting work is fully done.

Sd/-
Secretary
Urban Development Department



STATE POLLUTION CONTROL BOARD SIKKIM FOREST AND ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT GOVERNMENT OF SIKKIM DEORALI, GANGTOK – 737102

F.No. 351/SPCB/3181

Dated: 8.9.2021

NOTICE

As per the provisions of Section 25 of water (Prevention & Control of Pollution) Act, 1974 and Section 21 of Air (Prevention & Control of pollution) Act, 1981, no person/s can establish or operate any enterprise, industrial units without obtaining prior Consent to Establish or Operate which are liable for causing environment pollution. The units include any type of enterprises/establishments e.g. Health car Establishment (Hospital, Clinics, Clinical labs, blood bank etc), Pharmaceutical units, Fabrication units, factories, Vehicle cleaning facility (car spa), Automobile workshop/ Garages, Hydro-electric project and industrial units, Hotels, Resorts, restaurants, Hot mix plant, DG Sets, Mobile tower, petrol pumps, photo studios, Dairy, Bakery, Laundry an jewellery shops, poultry farms (5000 birds & above) etc.

Therefore, notice is hereby given to all units to apply for Consent to Establish/Operate online at www.skocmms.nic.in without fail. Failure to obtain Consent may result in legal action in exercise of power vested under Section 5 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, Section 33 A of the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974 & under section 31 A of the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981 by the State Pollution Control Board Sikkim for contravention of the relevant provisions of the Acts.

For further enquiry please contact the office of the State Pollution Control Board, Sikkim Deorali Gangtok, East Sikkim.

Email: spcbsikkim@gmail.com

Member Secretary

State Pollution Control Board, Sikkim
Department of Forest & Environment,

Government of Sikkim
Deorali, East Sikkim.

R.O. No. 192/IPr/Pub/Classi./21-22
Date: 10.9.2021

Noninvolvement Feeds Arrogance

...a prescription which poisons democracy

The dictionary defines “noninvolvement” as a lack of emotional engagement and failure or refusal to become involved.

In most contexts, this term takes a more policy/political term in that it applies to nations in the line of “nonalignment”. When so practiced, it is mostly a good thing so long as it is about distancing from “politics” and not humanitarian situations because had it been followed, USA would not have been fighting so many wars instigating the creation of monsters like ISIS and then so overtly undermining the significance of the UN... or even ignoring the science of climate change for that matter; or not even opting for a fig leaf excuse in ignoring the brazen murder of a journalist by an offensive regime on foreign soil.

The same principle, however, does not apply to the citizenry with the same merits. In fact, noninvolvement among a people has the opposite effect of what it does on nations. When a people refuse to engage, democracy gets reduced to election cycles, accountability is replaced by bombast and the sense of service among representatives is subsumed by the arrogance of “leaders”. When things come to such a pass, policy decisions become diktats, the noxious fringe crawls out from under the rocks and dances madness in the public domain. And no, social media activity does not really qualify as involvement; if anything, it is a false equivalent for public participation because what it seeks to do is abuse/ shout discourse into meek acceptance or vent into an echo chamber and think humanity has been served. And as the troll army wins more and more battles, it helps create a mob of bots programmed not to analyse or challenge but applaud the demagoguery of flag-waving chauvinists and end up subverting democracy so much that the idea of supreme and all-powerful leaders does not offend anymore and no one even blinks when the term in office of an elected government is referred to as “rule”.

A people self-assured in their ignorance make for easy pickings when it comes to seeding fears because when one refuse to get involved and hence get informed, they cannot handle complexities anymore and gravitate towards the black & whites of the alt-Right. We know we are in trouble when hate can be peddled as righteousness and not even get called out. You know democracy is being compromised when dictation replaces consultation and no one has a problem with it.

Democracy is supposed to ease people’s minds, allowing them their disagreements and differences and still providing the space where they can be themselves without having to constantly look over their shoulders. Fail to remain involved, and every expression of democracy becomes conditional and violence punctuates the lives of lay people more often than should ever be allowed. We have seen this trend gather pace in the recent past when suspicions, bans, deregulation, demonization (okay, also demonetization), forced nationalism, increased supervision bordering on surveillance and pulp-mongering have come to define governance and gain meek acceptance. Arrogance is an undesirable quality in anyone, but when it comes to leaders, it is dangerous. And we continue feeding it with our noninvolvement.

WRITE US:

Readers are invited to comment on, criticise, run down, even appreciate if they like something in this paper. Letters carrying abusive/ indecorous language and personal attacks, except when against people responsible in this newspaper (who are fair game), will have to be ignored. Letters which carry forward a conversation or initiate a dialogue will command immediate attention and receive prominence. Mail us at: news@summittimes.com



Grammar Still Matters – but teachers are struggling to teach it

WILLEM HOLLMANN
theconversation.com

Do you know what a suffix is, or how to distinguish adjectives from adverbs? If you have a six or seven-year-old, the chances are they do. Or at least, the UK government now says they should – by the end of year 2, to be specific.

In year 3, primary schoolers turn their attention to prefixes and conjunctions. By the time pupils head to secondary school, they are expected to know what determiners and adverbials are. They should be able to recognise a relative clause as a special type of subordinate clause. And their creative writing should showcase modal verbs and the active and passive voice.

Obviously, for all this to happen, teachers need to be comfortable with these terms and the concepts they cover. And if you went to school before 1960, you probably are. However, between 1960 and 1988, English – in England and Wales – was taught in a virtually grammar-free manner.

While grammar made a comeback in 1988, with the introduction of the national curriculum, many teachers today feel ill-prepared to teach it. And that’s because, as I and other language experts have pointed out, they themselves were never taught much, if any, grammar. And appropriate teaching support and materials are lacking.

Of course, grammar at school often becomes a political issue, with liberals rejecting a more conservative insistence on so-called correct grammar. But as a Dutch linguist, my perspective is that learning grammar isn’t about speaking properly. It is about gaining a broader understanding of one’s own language and how to use it creatively. It’s also a useful tool for learning other languages.

GRAMMAR-FREE TEACHING

Before 1960, the way in which British schools taught English grammar was based on Latin. Categories that had been developed for Latin grammar were imposed on English. That frequently made little sense because English is a very different language.

From the 1920s, this Latinate approach was highly criticised, and the argument against English

grammar in schools gathered force in the 1940s and 1950s. Studies in Scotland and England in the middle of the 20th century claimed that the subject was essentially too difficult for children.

Research suggests the disappearance of grammar from the English school curriculum in 1960 is also due to an increased emphasis on English literature. The idea was that children would pick up the needed grammar more or less as they went along.

The 1970s marked a turning point. The government published several critical reports, citing in particular high levels of illiteracy in England and Wales. This led to a U-turn in policy, with grammar gradually returning to the classroom from 1988.

Research in the years that followed showed that student teachers didn’t have the knowledge they needed to teach it, though. The authors of a 1995 study of 99 student teachers in Newcastle noted -- and subsequent researchers concurred – that without significant input during training, teachers would struggle.

WHY GRAMMAR MATTERS

Teachers’ knowledge about grammar remains problematic. A 2016 case study of a primary school in the north-west of England (which was rated “good” by Ofsted) analysed data collected over ten months from June 2014 to March 2015 on what teachers knew.

When questioned about the terms specified in the national curriculum, including adjective, conjunction and determiner, the teachers only got about half of the questions right. Teaching-support staff fared even worse.

Why should we care about whether our teachers are well equipped to teach grammar? In the first instance, we should because they have to. It is crucial that teachers have the knowledge and confidence to support pupils through statutory subjects, on which, in non-pandemic times at least, they will be formally tested.

A growing body of evidence also shows that teaching grammar may enhance students’ writing development. This is because knowledge about concepts such as active and passive voice may allow for more precise and productive conversations

between teachers and students about textual effects and possibilities. And it may enable students to shape their prose more consciously.

It can also help them learn new languages. If learners already have a conscious awareness of linguistic features such as tenses, that helps them to recognise and discuss what is the same or different in another tongue. And though more research is needed, some scholars have even suggested that grammar teaching may improve general thinking skills.

Many publishers have stepped into the gap left by the government and have produced support materials to help (student) teachers master the grammatical terms the curriculum specifies. But publishers operate in a free market without oversight from the Department for Education. Also, the materials have generally not had any input from academic grammarians. As a result, they often contain mistakes.

These are not just typos. For instance, one book aimed at teachers analyses “have” as a modal verb, which it is not, and suggests that modal verbs form tenses, which they do not. Another grammar book categorises “don’t touch!” as an exclamation, while it is actually a straightforward example of a command. Such errors are not dissimilar to the suggestion that seven times seven is 48, when all year 4s are of course taught that it is in fact 49.

Furthermore, it is well known that teachers experience more job stress than other professionals. In this context it may not be reasonable to expect them to have to independently procure and work through professional development materials in a subject area of such importance.

Our baseline argument is that when it comes to recognising the importance of grammar, the curriculum is on point. However, the government should equip its teachers to teach it. It needs to commission research into the exact nature of the gaps in their knowledge. And it should get academic grammarians on board in developing appropriate support materials and training.

[the writer is Professor of Linguistics, Lancaster University]

One-third of the world’s tree species are threatened with extinction – here are five of them

ADRIAN NEWTON
theconversation.com

One in three of the world’s tree species are at risk of becoming extinct, according to a recent report by the Global Tree Assessment – the first attempt to estimate the conservation status of all of Earth’s trees.

Well-known species, including magnolias, oaks and maples are among those at risk. More than 400 species have fewer than 50 individuals remaining in the wild, and 142 tree species are already extinct. Human activity is the overwhelming culprit, especially forest clearance for farming, logging for timber and the spread of invasive pests and diseases.

When myself and colleagues first came up with the idea of a worldwide assessment of tree species in 2015, it seemed like an impossible task. Back then, nobody even knew how many there were, let alone how they were all faring. The first task was to make a list of all tree species that have been described in scientific literature. It turns out there are nearly 60,000, most of which live in tropical forests, and scientists continue to describe new species each year.

We then had to determine which of these are under threat of extinction. Given the huge number of species, this was a much bigger task than any conservation assessment undertaken previously. We created a global network of more than 500 experts, each assessing the species they were most familiar with, and the report is the result of that enormous collab-

orative effort which took five years to complete.

There are twice as many threatened tree species globally than threatened mammals, birds, amphibians and reptiles combined. But trees are also food and habitat for at least half of the Earth’s known land-based plants and animals. Losing tree species can cause cascades of extinction among the many species that depend on them.

Trees are very valuable to people too. More than one-fifth are used as a source of food, fuel, timber or medicine. Others have important cultural and religious value. Worryingly, some of the most useful and significant species are among those facing extinction. Here are five of them.

DIPTEROCARPS

Dipterocarps belong to a large family of timber trees, comprising 680 species, most of which are found in the tropical forests of south Asia. Related to hibiscus plants, most dipterocarps are tall with evergreen leaves and winged seeds. They are often the most abundant trees in the canopy of forests where they occur.

These trees possess high-quality timber, worth around US\$170 per cubic metre (£123). Over US\$3.5 billion worth of dipterocarp timber is exported each year from the island of Borneo alone, where 182 species are threatened with extinction, including the tallest known tropical tree, Shorea faguetiana.

AGARWOOD

Agarwood is fragrant and produces a highly valuable resin called

aloes, used in perfumes and incense. It is one of the most valuable raw materials in the world, worth up to US\$100,000 a kg and with a global trade valued at US\$32 billion.

The production of this resinous wood is stimulated when these trees are attacked by a fungus. Overharvesting of the resin has led to more than 20 species being threatened, including the main source of agarwood, Aquilaria malaccensis.

AFRICAN CHERRY

Prunus africana has bark containing a range of compounds which can reduce inflammation, making it useful for treating a range of diseases, including malaria, kidney disease and prostate disorders. The international trade in the bark is valued at US\$200 million, but overharvesting has meant this species is threatened throughout its range in central and southern Africa.

MAHOGANY

Swietenia macrophylla is one of the most valuable tropical hardwoods, valued for making furniture and musical instruments such as guitars. Mahogany wood is durable and has a beautiful colour. A single tree can be worth many thousands of dollars.

Native to the tropical forests of the Americas, mahogany was one of the first trees to be listed as an endangered species, owing to widespread illegal logging.

PACIFIC YEW

Taxus brevifolia is the source of the anti-cancer drug Paclitaxel, which has a global trade worth over US\$100 million. Native to the Pacific

Northwest of North America, this evergreen conifer is now categorised as Near Threatened by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), primarily because of logging. Other yew species, which are also a source of this drug, are even more threatened, such as Taxus contorta in the Himalayas.

While individual trees are important for both humans and wildlife, the collective value of forest ecosystems is far higher. Forests cover approximately 31% of the world’s land surface and their total economic value has been estimated at around US\$150 trillion. Forests contain around 50% of the world’s terrestrial carbon and help provide 75% of its accessible freshwater. These benefits could be lost if tree species go extinct.

As well as supporting wildlife and people, tree diversity can help forests cope with disturbance. For example, having a diverse range of tree species in a forest reduces the damage that plant-eating insects can do, and makes the ecosystem more resilient to drought.

As tree species die out, forest ecosystems are placed at greater risk of collapse. Conserving both forests and the tree species they contain can combat climate change and preserve biodiversity. The world must urgently protect threatened trees, restore degraded forests and ensure that the harvesting of useful tree species is sustainable.

[the writer is Professor in Conservation Ecology, Bournemouth University]

Assam government issues guidelines for festival season

GUWAHATI, SEPT 16 (PTI): The Assam government on Wednesday said organisers and volunteers of all puja committees must be inoculated with at least the first dose of vaccine against COVID-19 and preferably with the second jab.

Addressing a press conference here, state Health Minister KeshabMahanta said as the vaccination drive has gained momentum, and vaccines are available in every district and health block, no excuse will be accepted.

The fresh set of guidelines is for the coming Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Kali Puja and Diwali festivals. Steps are being taken to ensure that people are able to observe the festivals while controlling the COVID-19 spread at the same time, he said.

The vaccination certificate of all puja committee members and those involved in organising the festival has to be submitted with the application for acquiring permission for puja celebration, Mahanta said.

The district administration must carry out a random check of the vaccination status of the organisers and the volunteers and grant permission to the puja committees only if the persons concerned are adequately vaccinated, the minister said while highlighting the guidelines issued for the upcoming festi-



vals. All the volunteers, priests and puja organisers must get themselves tested for COVID-19 before Puja begins (on Panchami day) and after immersion, even if they are vaccinated.

Devotees attending the events shall be allowed to enter the pandals only after ensuring that they have received at least the first dose of vaccination, with exceptions allowed for those below 18 years.

For ensuring this, sufficient trained volunteers shall be put at the entry points by the organisers who will be supervised by the squads formed by the district administration, Mahanta said.

In case a person is found with suspected COVID-19 symptoms, the matter should be immediately informed to the district administra-

tion and the person concerned should be shifted to a Covid testing facility while adequate sanitization measures should be undertaken.

Puja committees must keep an adequate number of vaccinated volunteers inside and outside the pandal to ensure that visitors maintain physical distance, wear masks properly and sanitize their hands.

Volunteers should also sanitize their hands, wear masks/face shields properly and maintain physical distance while interacting with visitors and the rituals must be performed very carefully adhering to COVID norms, in small groups and in a staggered manner.

Volunteers and police staff on duty must ensure continuous movement of people to avoid crowd-

ing near all event spots, the minister said. The event organisers shall seek permission from the administration of the district concerned for organising any event resulting in public gathering, mentioning the number of people likely to attend the proposed event which will enable the authorities to extend all possible support to the organisers for safe celebration of the festival, he said.

The organisers will have to provide masks to visitors who come without it while sanitisers must be kept at the entry gate and the site must be sanitised twice as a strict public health measure, the minister said.

The curfew hours as announced by the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) must be strictly adhered to, he said. The inaugura-

tion of puja pandal and immersion of Durga idol should be a low-key affair with minimum people attending it by adhering to all COVID norms.

The organisers may explore the possibility of inauguration by virtual mode, he said.

Mahanta urged the organisers to keep the size of the idols small so that many people are not required for the immersion. Immersion must be planned by the district administration in a staggered manner by allotting specific time to each puja committee.

"Entry with at least one dose of Vaccination only" signages must be put at all entry points and miking should be done at regular intervals by the puja committees to ensure that the devotees are also vaccinated properly.

Assam reports more recoveries than fresh COVID-19 cases

GUWAHATI, SEPT 15 (PTI): Assam reported more COVID-19 recoveries than fresh cases on Wednesday as 706 patients recuperated from the disease while 444 new infections pushed the tally to 5,96,606, the National Health Mission said.

However, the recovery rate marginally declined to 98.13 per cent from 98.08 per cent on Tuesday.

A total of 5,85,435 patients have recuperated from the disease thus far.

Kamrup Metropolitan district registered the highest number of new cases at 94, followed by Golaghat (46), Jorhat (35), and Sivasagar (32).

Assam at present has 4,049 active cases.

Eight more COVID-19 patients died during the day increasing the death

toll to 5,775. Two deaths were reported from Tinsukia district and one each from Bishwanath, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, KarbiAnglong, Lakhimpur, and Sivasagar.

The current death rate is 0.97 percent and the number of COVID-19 positive patients dying due to other causes is 1,347. The new cases were detected out of 61,642 tests, lower than 70,893 tests conducted on Tuesday, with the daily positivity rate at 0.72 per cent.

So far, 2,27,54,718 samples have been tested for COVID-19 in the state.

The total number of people vaccinated during the day was 1,05,611, lower than the previous day's 2,15,460.

Meanwhile, the Assam government has set a target of vaccinating

eight lakh people during the mega COVID-19 vaccination drive on September 17 which is incidentally the 71st birthday of Prime Minister NarendraModi.

Chief Minister HimantaBiswaSarma on Wednesday held a video conference with Deputy Commissioners of all districts and directed them to vaccinate maximum people before the forthcoming festive season, an official release said.

A total of 9.75 lakh people were inoculated in the first mega vaccination drive held in the state from June 21 to 23 and those people are now eligible for receiving their second dose, Sarma pointed out.

He also stressed the importance of covering those areas where the rate of vaccination is low.

In Bengal Village, teacher turns walls into blackboards to close digital gap

Deep Narayan Nayak has painted blackboards on the walls of houses and taught children on the streets for the past year.

PaschimBardhaman: In a small tribal village on the eastern tip of India, an enterprising teacher has turned walls into blackboards and roads into classrooms, trying to close the gap in learning brought on by prolonged school shutdowns in the country.

Deep Narayan Nayak, 34, a teacher in the tribal village of JobaAttpara in PaschimBardhaman district of the eastern state of West Bengal, has painted blackboards on the walls of houses and taught children on the streets for the past year. The local school shut down after strict COVID-19 restrictions were imposed across the country in March 2020.

On a recent morning,

children wrote on one such wall with chalk and peered into a microscope as MrNayak watched over them.

"The education of our children stopped ever since the lockdown was imposed. The children used to just loiter around. The teacher came and started teaching them," KiranTuri, whose child learns with MrNayak, told Reuters.

MrNayak teaches everything from popular nursery rhymes to the importance of masks and hand-washing to about 60 students and is popularly known as the "Teacher of the Street" to the grateful villagers.

Schools across the country have gradually begun reopening starting last month. Some epidemiologists and social scientists are calling for them to open fully pre-

vent further loss of learning in children.

An August survey of nearly 1,400 schoolchildren done by a scholars' group found that in rural areas, only 8% were studying online regularly, 37% were not studying at all, and about half were unable to read more than a few words. Most parents wanted schools to reopen as soon as possible, it said.

MrNayak said he was worried that his students, most of whom are first-generation learners and whose parents are daily wage-earners, would away from the education system if they didn't continue with school.

"I would see children loitering about the village, taking cattle for grazing, and I wanted to make sure their learning doesn't stop," he told Reuters.

Top Maoist escapes during gun-battle in Odisha

BHUBANESWAR, SEP 16 (PTI): Top Andhra Pradesh-based Maoist Suresh Surana and his associates have managed to escape during an intense gun-battle with security forces in Odisha, leaving behind arms and ammunition in their hideout, police said on Thursday.

Acting on a tip-off, Odisha Police and Border Security Force (BSF) personnel conducted a search operation on Badili Hill along the boundaries of Malkangiri and Koraput districts on

Wednesday and spotted the Maoist camp.

As soon as the security forces approached the camp on Wednesday night, the red rebels opened fire on them, leading to an exchange of fire that lasted for two hours, Malkangiri Superintendent of Police PrahladMeena told reporters. However, taking advantage of the dark, the Maoists including Surana managed to escape from the spot, he said.

A firearm, six cartridges, four detona-

tors, two walkie-talkie radio sets, uniforms and posters were seized, Meena said, adding that a search operation has been launched along the Odisha-Andhra Pradesh boundary in Malkangiri district as it is being suspected that the red rebels fled towards the neighbouring state.

The incident comes barely a couple of days after Odisha Police nabbed another wanted Maoist Dubbasi Shankar alias Mahender in Koraput district on Tuesday.

Trinamool reaching North-East: Sushmita Devon Rajya Sabha nomination

SushmitaDev said, "This will give an important message to the entire country that TMC is not just a party of West Bengal." Kolkata: Trinamool Congress (TMC) Leader, SushmitaDev on Wednesday said that her RajyaSabha nomination for RajyaSabha sends a message to the country about the party reaching the North-East to expand its footprint outside West Bengal.

While speaking to ANI, SushmitaDev said, "This will give an important message to the entire country that TMC is not just a party of West Bengal but is now



also reaching the North-Eastern states." "I am extremely grateful to my leader, Mamata Di that she has given me an opportunity to file my nomination and contest the RajyaSabha election," she added.

SushmitaDev, a former Congress MP from Silchar, Assam joined TMC last

month. The Election Commission had earlier this month announced bypolls for six RajyaSabha seats across five states. The six RajyaSabha seats include two in Tamil Nadu and one seat each in West Bengal, Maharashtra, Assam and Madhya Pradesh. Voting for all seats is scheduled for October 4.

71 new cases push Arunachal's COVID-19 tally to 53,943

ITANAGAR, SEP 16 (PTI): Arunachal Pradesh's COVID-19 tally rose to 53,943 on Thursday as 71 more people tested positive for the infection, a senior health official said.

The coronavirus death toll remained unchanged at 271 as no fresh fatality was reported, State Surveillance Officer (SSO) DrLobsang-Jampa said.

Lower Subansiri district registered the highest number of new cases at 19, followed by Tawang (17) and Capital Complex region (13), he said.

The state now has

545 active cases, while 53,127 people have been cured of the disease so far, including 54 in the last 24 hours. The recovery rate among the coronavirus patients in the state stood at 98.49 per cent.

The administration has thus far tested over 11.05 lakh samples for COVID-19, including 3,681 on Wednesday, Jampa said, adding that the positivity rate stood at 1.01 per cent.

State Immunisation Officer DrDimongPadung that over 10.58 lakh people have been inoculated to date.

Five bovine smugglers arrested in Jammu



JAMMU, SEP 15 (PTI): Five smugglers were arrested and 36 bovine animals were rescued from them in the district on Wednesday, officials said.

A police team intercepted two vehicles in ChowkiChoura area of the district and carried out searches, they said.

The police rescued 36 bovines during searches carried out by

them, they said.

Those arrested have been identified as Mohammad Yousuf, Faisal Bashir, Touseef Ahmed Sheikh, Muneeb Ahmed Shiekh, residents of Anantnag district of South Kashmir and Barkat Ali of Akhnoor area of Jammu district, they said.

Further investigation in the matter is underway, police said.

2 Boys find over 900 crore credited into their bank accounts in Bihar

The two boys have accounts in Uttar Bihar Gramin Bank. They were expecting to get some money under a government scheme to buy school uniform and pay for related expenses

Patna: Residents of a village in Bihar's Katihar rushed to ATMs and banks to check their account statement. The reason? Two schoolchildren suddenly found their accounts laden with crores of rupees overnight, and the villagers hoping for a similar luck made a dash to the banks.

The two boys have accounts in Uttar Bihar Gramin Bank. They were expecting to get some money under a government scheme to buy school uniform and pay for related expenses.

Along with their parents, they went to a public internet centre at the village to check whether the money had come. On checking their statement, they were shocked to find crores of rupees credited into their accounts.

Class 6 student Ashish found himself rich by



over 6.2 crore. Another schoolboy, Guru Charan Vishwas, was surprised to see over 900 crore sitting in his account.

The village head has confirmed the matter. Local reports say the bank is investigating the transactions.

"I received information last evening that a huge sum has been found in the bank accounts of two boys. We are investigating it. We opened the bank branch early this morning to check how it happened. The branch manager told us there was some glitch in the computerised system of sending money. The amount was visible in their statements but

the actual money wasn't in their account. I have sought a report from the bank," Katihar District Magistrate Udayan Mishra said.

This is the second incident of a huge wrong amount being sent to a bank customer or made to reflect in the statement in Bihar in recent times.

A man in a village on Patna's outskirts was sent to jail for not returning over 5 lakh that was credited into his account by mistake. The man had refused to return the money to the bank, claiming the amount was government relief sent by Prime Minister NarendraModi.

Ladakh reports 8 new Covid cases

LEH, SEP 15 (PTI): Ladakh recorded eight fresh COVID-19 cases, taking the tally to 20,616, while the active cases in the union territory has gone up to 36, officials said.

Ladakh has registered 207 Covid-related deaths -- 149 in Leh and 58 in Kargil -- since the outbreak of the pandemic last year.

Four patients of COVID-19 were discharged after recovery from hospitals on Sunday, taking the number of those discharged to 20,375, which accounts

for 98.8 per cent recoveries, they said.

A total of 1,526 sample reports in Ladakh, including 530 from Leh and 996 from Kargil, were found negative, the officials said.

There was no death reported due to Covid in Ladakh on Thursday.

Four patients were discharged from Leh, they said.

With this, the total number of active COVID-19 cases in Ladakh has gone up to 36, including 34 in Leh and two in Kargil district.

AIFF president Patel meets Sports Minister Thakur

NEW DELHI, SEP 16 (PTI): All India Football Federation (AIFF) president Praful Patel on Thursday called on Sports Minister Anurag Thakur and briefed him about the upcoming international tournaments the country is hosting.

The AIFF president updated the honourable minister on the forthcoming major international events which are to be held in India in 2022 viz. the AFC Women's Asian Cup India 2022 scheduled to kick off in Mumbai, Navi Mumbai and Pune from January 20 onwards and the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup India 2022 to be held from October 11, 2022, the AIFF said in a release.

Sports secretary Ravi Mittal and Sports Authority of India's director general Sandip Pradhan were also present during the meeting alongside AIFF general secretary Kushal Das and his deputy Abhishek Yadav.

Hope my Olympic bronze will inspire youngsters of Manipur to take up hockey: Nilakanta

NEW DELHI, SEP 16 (PTI): Indian men's hockey team midfielder Nilakanta Sharma hopes his contribution to the country's bronze medal-winning feat at the Tokyo Olympics will inspire a generation of youngsters from his home state Manipur to take up the sport professionally.

Nilakanta was a vital cog in India's midfield in Tokyo, where the country ended a 41-year-old Olympic medal drought.

Before Tokyo, India's last medal -- a gold -- came in the 1980 Moscow Games.

"Definitely there is a lot of potential for Manipur hockey to grow further. A lot of good things are happening in the state and the emphasis is on creating good infrastructure. I hope my performance in Tokyo has inspired more youngsters from my state to take up hockey," the 26-year-old said in a Hockey India release.

Nilakanta, who was promoted to the senior rank in 2017, a year after winning the FIH Junior World Cup in Lucknow, believes the key to success for a player is continuous improvement.

He is targeting more laurels next year.

"I have had some time to introspect about my own performance over these past few years with the senior team. I think I have been very fortunate to have played along with some of the best players in India and have been able to learn a lot from them.

"I always like to keep things simple and execute what is expected of me. Each player is assigned a certain role by the coach and I just try to stick to it," he said.

Davis Cup: Indian players need to give their all against Finland

ESPOO (FINLAND), SEP 16 (PTI): India's singles players will need to back their talent with some killer instinct for the team to emerge victorious against a reasonably strong Finland in the Davis Cup World Group I tie, starting here on Friday.

Prajnesh Guneswaran and Ramkumar Ramanathan have the experience of playing the big matches.

They have rubbed shoulders with better players but it's time for them to move forward from playing mere close matches. They need to deliver that knockout punch that will take India to the next year's Qualifiers.

If Ramkumar can play the same way he competed against 2014 US Open champion Marin Cilic in the previous tie against Croatia and does not miss the chances he gets, India will have a very good chance in the tie.

As the second-best ranked player from India, Ramkumar will be up against Finland's number one player Emil Ruusuvuori, who is placed 74 in the world, on the opening day of the tie. If Ramkumar takes



the court first and puts India on board, that will be a huge result for the visitors and take the pressure off Prajnesh (ranked 165) who will most likely compete against Otto Virtanen (ranked 419).

Prajnesh too gets close to wins with his talent but has the tendency of giving up advantageous positions, like the

one against Borna Coric in the last tie against Croatia.

Maybe it's pressure of playing for the flag but the left-hander from Chennai insists it is not the case.

"Matches against good players are always close if I'm playing well. I have won matches against good players being in the lead and I have

also lost matches being in the lead. That's just the way they go," Prajnesh told PTI.

"Matches which are closely fought can go either way. There is no pressure of playing for India that influences me... Sometimes there's more pressure, other times that's less.

"Again, just depends on

how well I cope on that particular day," he added.

India considered the doubles point in their pocket till the time Leander Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi competed together but now things have changed.

Rohan Bopanna (44) has immense experience of the big stage and he needs to use

all of that to shepherd the team with Divij Sharan (86) since their opponents -- Henri Kontinen (ranked 46) and Harri Heliövaara (ranked 76) -- will be a tough nut to crack.

Bopanna and Sharan have played only one tie together, winning against Italy in March 2019.

Most of 40-year-old Bopanna's doubles wins have come either with either Paes or Saketh Myneni.

It remains to be seen if captain Rohit Rajpal fields Bopanna with Sharan or Myneni, who is the fifth member of the squad.

Kontinen has played three of the four Grand Slams this year with Edouard Roger-Vasselin but paired with Heliövaara at the US Open, probably to get ready for this tie.

They had a decent first round before losing in a close three-set match.

Non-playing captain Rohit Rajpal feels that the conditions are not entirely in the favour of the hosts since the low bounce of the courts will benefit the Indian players, who can play the chip-and-charge game to counter their rivals.

I can say that old Yuzi is back, asserts Chahal ahead of IPL

DUBAI, SEP 16 (PTI): One of the most notable omissions from India's T20 World Cup squad, leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal on Thursday asserted that he will be his wily, old wicket-taking self in the upcoming second half of this year's IPL.

During a training session for his team Royal Challengers Bangalore, a cheerful Chahal offered to bat, but only if the swashbuckling Glenn Maxwell was the bowler.

Reflecting on his first training session with the team, Chahal said, "Obviously, the feeling was good, it was okay and I'm happy with the way I bowled today.

"I'm very pumped up, especially, you know, we're good on the points table and we have a very good chance to stay at the top of the table and

when you bowl well after a long time you always feel good. Today, I can say that the old Yuzi is back."

The IPL-14, which was suspended midway into the league in May owing to multiple COVID-19 cases in its bio-bubble, will resume in the UAE on Sunday and Chahal will be one of the many players trying to reclaim his place in the national team.

Chahal was far from his best in the first leg of the IPL in India. Despite his team playing in spin-friendly surfaces such as the one in Chennai, the leg-spinner struggled for rhythm and could only pick four wickets in seven matches at an economy of 8.26.

During the training session, South African legend AB de Villiers was seen welcoming both Chahal and Maxwell back into the team before the

net session commenced.

Head coach Mike Hesson laid out the plans for the session and said, "In terms of practice today, we all know what the role is. We've all had those meetings for what we're training for. So when we go in the nets, we're really specific about what we're trying to get out of it."

When the league was suspended, RCB were placed third in the points table with five wins from seven matches.

After the net session, de Villiers was joined by Maxwell to compete in a game where both players attempted to hit the stumps from 22 yards, but with a tennis ball and a racket.

The versatile de Villiers said that he played the sport quite a lot in his younger days and Maxwell responded that he was not surprised at all.

Spanish clubs relieved to resume La Liga after CL turmoil



BARCELONA, SPAIN (AP): Antoine Griezmann jeered. Sergi Roberto booed. Sevilla thankful it drew with a team from Austria.

Spanish teams used to look forward to the end of summer and the return of the Champions League.

Not this time. Of five Spanish teams, Real Madrid was the only one that could manage a win from the opening batch of games in Europe's elite competition.

And even Madrid will be relieved to get back to the Spanish league on Sunday when it visits Valencia with both tied on points atop the table with Atlético Madrid.

Valencia has exceeded expectations under new coach José Bordalás and a breakout season by Carlos Soler. The midfielder leads Valencia with three goals and has scored twice for Spain in World Cup qualification in recent weeks.

But Carlo Ancelotti will be expecting his Madrid to offer more in Mestalla Stadium than just another gritty defensive performance that kept it alive against Inter Milan

before Rodrygo could snatch a 1-0 victory with an 89th-minute goal on Wednesday.

Rodrygo's was only the second shot Madrid steered toward Inter's goal in the entire match. It took Dani Carvajal almost an hour to get its first strike on target.

Until then, Madrid was on pace to reproduce the embarrassment by Barcelona that was too much for some of its fans to bear.

Overwhelmed 3-0 by Bayern Munich, Barcelona was unable to muster a single shot on goal in the entire match on Tuesday.

The crowd, back at Camp Nou for its first European match since the start of the pandemic, took out its frustration on Roberto. The homegrown player who instantly became a hero for his last-gasp winner in Barcelona's memorable 6-1 rout of Paris Saint-Germain in 2017, was booed when he was substituted after being completely outplayed by Bayern's Alphonso Davies.

Coach Ronald Koeman and club president Joan Laporta have asked

for their fans to be patient, but the pressure will be immense on the team to respond with a convincing victory when the winless Granada visits on Monday.

Atlético's talented attack was stymied by Porto in a scoreless stalemate on Wednesday, when Antoine Griezmann weathered an unpleasant welcome at Wanda Metropolitano Stadium.

The France forward was booed both before kickoff and when he came on as a second-half substitute. Many Atlético fans are still angry that he left the team for Barcelona two years ago, only to come back on loan at the end of this summer's transfer market when Barcelona needed to shed his wages.

But an attack that can also field Luis Suárez, João Félix, Ángel Correa and Yannick Carrasco could still not find a way to break down Porto, which was deprived of victory only by a video review that annulled a late would-be goal.

"We have recovered

an extraordinary player. We hope that he can get back to his best and respond to the people who are criticizing him," coach Diego Simeone said about Griezmann. "He is facing a big challenge."

Griezmann will get another chance to win back the hearts of Atlético's faithful on Saturday against the unbeaten Athletic Bilbao.

When Sevilla visits Real Sociedad on Sunday, it will hope to avoid the amateurish mistakes that cost it a 1-1 draw with Salzburg.

Sevilla committed three penalties, all from rash tackles, in the first half on Tuesday. Sevilla ended up considering the point a good result after striker Youssef En-Nesyri was sent off shortly after halftime with a second booking for simulating a foul in the box.

Villarreal likewise drew with Atalanta 2-2 and remained winless in five matches across all competitions in this campaign. Last season's Europa League winner will try to break its bad run when it travels to Mallorca on Sunday.

Friction among Taliban pragmatists, hard-liners intensifies

KABUL, SEP 16 (AP): Friction between pragmatists and ideologues in the Taliban leadership has intensified since the group formed a hard-line Cabinet last week that is more in line with their harsh rule in the 1990s than their recent promises of inclusiveness, said two Afghans familiar with the power struggle.

The wrangling has taken place behind the scenes, but rumours quickly began circulating about a recent violent confrontation between the two camps at the presidential palace, including claims that the leader of the pragmatic faction, Abdul Ghani Baradar, was killed.

The rumours reached such intensity that an audio recording and handwritten statement, both purportedly by Baradar himself, denied that he had been killed. Then on Wednesday, Baradar appeared in an interview with the country's national TV.

I was travelling from Kabul so had no access to media in order to reject this news Baradar said of the rumour.

Baradar served as the chief negotiator during talks between the Taliban and the United States that paved the way for the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, which was completed in late August, two weeks after the Taliban overran the capital of Kabul.

Shortly after the Kabul takeover, Baradar had been the first senior Taliban official to hold out the possibility of an inclusive government, but such



hopes were disappointed with the formation of an all-male, all-Taliban lineup last week.

In a further sign that the hard-liners had prevailed, the white Taliban flag was raised over the presidential palace, replacing the Afghan national flag.

A Taliban official said the leadership still hasn't made a final decision on the flag, with many leaning toward eventually flying both banners side by side. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not allowed to discuss internal deliberations with the media.

The two Afghans familiar with the power struggle also spoke on condition of anonymity to protect the confidentiality of those who shared their discontent over the Cabinet lineup. They said one Cabinet minister toyed with refusing

his post, angered by the all-Taliban government that shunned the country's ethnic and religious minorities.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid has denied rifts in the leadership. On Tuesday, the Taliban foreign minister, Amir Khan Mutaqi, dismissed such reports as propaganda.

Baradar had been noticeably absent from key functions. For instance he was not at the presidential palace earlier this week to receive the deputy prime minister of Qatar, Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, who is also foreign minister and was making the highest-level foreign visit yet since the Taliban takeover.

Baradar's absence was jarring since Qatar had hosted him for years as head of the Taliban political office in the Qatari

capital of Doha. But in the interview shown Wednesday, Baradar said he did not participate in the meeting because he was not aware about the foreign minister's visit to Kabul. I had already left and was not able to return back, Baradar said.

Several officials and Afghans who are familiar and in contact with Baradar told The Associated Press earlier that he was in the southwestern provincial capital of Kandahar for a meeting with Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada. Another Taliban figure said Baradar was visiting family he had not seen in 20 years of war.

Analysts say the friction may not amount to a serious threat to the Taliban - for now.

We've seen over the years that despite disputes, the Tali-

ban largely remains a cohesive institution and that major decisions don't get serious pushback after the fact, said Michael Kugelman, Asia program deputy director at the Washington-based Wilson Center.

I think the current internal dissension can be managed," he said. Still, the Taliban will be under a lot of pressure as it tries to consolidate its power, gain legitimacy, and address major policy challenges. If these efforts fail, a stressed organization could well see more and increasingly serious infighting.

However, Taliban divisions today will be more difficult to resolve without the heavy-handed rule of the group's founder, the late Mullah Omar, who demanded unquestioned loyalty.

China to host virtual meeting on Afghanistan

BEIJING, SEP 16 (AP): China says it will host a virtual meeting of Central and South Asian state leaders to discuss the situation in Afghanistan.

The meeting of members of the China and Russia dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is scheduled for Thursday.

Afghanistan is an observer member of the grouping, but it wasn't clear if any representatives from the Taliban leadership would be attending.

China hasn't said whether it will recognise the new Afghan authorities who have excluded outside parties and women, although it has courted its leadership and kept its Kabul Embassy open.

The government and state media have accused the United States of destabilizing Afghanistan

through what it calls a hasty and chaotic withdrawal of its troops, even as the Taliban swiftly overcame Afghan government forces over recent weeks.

China has used the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to boost its standing in Central Asia through political dialogue and joint military exercises, aimed largely at diminishing U.S. influence in the region.

Beijing has also called on the Taliban to hold to its pledge to restrain militants seeking independence for the traditionally Muslim northwestern region of Xinjiang, Foreign Minister Wang Yi has urged the group to keep border crossings open, while offering USD 31 million in humanitarian assistance, along with 3 million doses of Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccines.

Ireland's Ryanair aims to hire another 5,000 new staff



LONDON (AP): Irish airline Ryanair said Thursday that it's planning to create 5,000 jobs over the next five years as part of its recovery from the shock of the coronavirus pandemic.

The additional pilots, cabin crew and engineers will mean that the company will have more than recouped the 3,000 jobs it got rid of at the start of the pandemic last year.

CEO Michael O'Leary said the carrier has been snapping up slots that have been vacated by airlines that have either collapsed or retrenched over the past 18 months or so.

"Ryanair will open 10 new bases across Europe this year as we work with airport partners to help them recover traf-

fic and jobs post-COVID, and take up slot opportunities that are being vacated by competitor airlines who have collapsed or significantly reduced their fleet sizes," he said before the company's annual shareholder meeting in Dublin.

Ryanair also upgraded forecasts for growth over the next five years, with projections that passenger numbers will grow by 50%, compared with 33% predicted previously. That equates to 226 million passengers by March 2026, 25 million more than previous targets.

"We can recover strongly from the COVID pandemic and deliver higher-than-expected growth in both traffic and jobs over the next five years," O'Leary said.

France calls killing of Islamic State leader big victory

PARIS (AP): France killed the leader of Islamic State in the Greater Sahara because the group attacked French aid workers, African civilians and U.S. troops, French officials said Thursday, calling him "enemy No. 1" in protracted anti-terrorism efforts in the Sahel.

French President Emmanuel Macron announced the death of Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi overnight. According to Macron's office, al-Sahrawi personally ordered the killing of six French aid workers and their Nigerian colleagues last year, and his group was behind a 2017 attack that killed U.S. and Niger military personnel.

He was killed in a strike by France's Barkhane military operation "a few weeks ago," but authorities waited to be sure of his identity before making the announcement, French Defense Minister Florence Parly told RFI radio Thursday.

She did not disclose details of the operation or where al-Sahrawi was killed, though the Islamic State group is active along the border between Mali and Niger.

"He was at the origin of massacres and terror," French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Thursday on France-Info radio. He urged African governments to fill the void and seize back ground taken by the Islamic State extremists.

Rumors of the militant leader's death had circulated for weeks in Mali, though authorities in the

region had not confirmed it. It was not immediately possible to independently verify the claim or to know how the remains had been identified.

Al-Sahrawi had claimed responsibility for a 2017 attack in Niger that killed four U.S. military personnel and four people with Niger's military. His group also has abducted foreigners in the Sahel and is believed to still be holding American Jeffrey Woodke, who was abducted from his home in Niger in 2016.

The extremist leader was born in the disputed territory of Western Sahara and later joined the Polisario Front. After spending time in Algeria, he made his way to northern Mali where he became an important figure in the group known as MUJAO that controlled the major northern town of Gao in 2012.

A French-led military operation the following year ousted Islamic extremists from power in Gao and other northern cities, though those elements later regrouped and again carried out attacks. The Malian group MUJAO was loyal to the regional al-Qaida affiliate. But in 2015, al-Sahrawi released an audio message pledging allegiance to the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria.

France, the region's former colonial power, recently announced that it would be reducing its military presence in the region, with plans to withdraw 2,000 troops by early next year.

Indonesian court rules president negligent over pollution

JAKARTA, INDONESIA (AP): An Indonesian court ruled Thursday that President Joko Widodo and six other top officials have neglected citizens' rights to clean air and ordered them to improve the poor air quality in the capital.

A three-judge panel at the Central Jakarta District Court notched a victory for a healthy living environment, siding with 32 residents who filed a lawsuit two years ago against Widodo and the ministers for environment, health and home affairs, as well as the provincial governors of Jakarta, Banten and West Java.

The verdict was initially scheduled for May 20, but had been postponed several times. The judges voted 3-0 in favor of the plaintiffs under the Coalition for the Clean Air Initiative.

Presiding Judge Saifuddin Zuhri ordered the seven officials to tighten national air quality standards so they are "sufficient to protect human health, the environment and ecosystems, including the health of sensitive populations, based on science and technology."

"They have been negligent in fulfilling the rights of citizens to a good and healthy environment," said Duta Baskara, a member of the panel. The judges dismissed a part of the lawsuit alleging Widodo violated human rights.

The plaintiffs, who included activists, public figures, motorists and pollution disease victims, did not ask for financial compensation and instead demanded a more robust supervision and sanctions for offenders.

"We hope the defendants would accept their defeat wisely and choose to focus on making efforts to improve air quality conditions rather than doing useless things, such as legal efforts to fight in appeals," said AyuEza Tiara, one of the lawyers for the plaintiffs.

It is unclear if the government will appeal. Lawyers for the defendants declined to comment and there was no immediate response from the presidential office.



Jakarta counts 10 million people and three times more including those living in its greater metropolitan area. The severe air pollution in Jakarta stems mostly from vehicle emission, factories and coal-fired power plants located in the neighboring provinces of Banten and West Java, according to the Center on Energy and Clean Air in its 2020 report. It identified 136 industrial facilities, including power plants, as contributing to pollution.

The Climate Action Tracker, an independent scientific analysis organization, said in its report in April that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a reduction of air pollution in many countries. However, due to the number of coal-fired power plants in the vicinity of major urban centers, the effect is not observed in Indonesia, where South Tangerang, in Jakarta's metropolitan area, was the world's 25th most polluted city.

Prone to flooding and rapidly sinking due to uncontrolled ground water extraction, Jakarta is the archetypal Asian megacity. It has been creaking under the weight of its dysfunction, causing massive pollution to rivers and contaminating the ground water that supplies the city. Congestion is estimated to cost the economy \$6.5 billion a year.

Yuyunismawati, one of the plaintiffs, said in a statement Thursday that if Widodo's administration ig-

nored the court's decision, health costs will continue to increase.

The Jakarta administration data released last year showed more than 5.5 million cases of diseases related to air pollution in the city. The data also said the estimated burden of medical care costs from cases of non-communicable diseases due to air pollution in 2020 could reach 60.8 trillion rupiah (\$4.2 billion).

In an amicus curiae brief submitted in support of the lawsuit, the U.N. special rapporteur for human rights and the environment, David R. Boyd, said that protecting people from the harmful effects of air pollution is a constitutional and legislative obligation of the Indonesian government, and not an option.

Boyd said air pollution is a major problem in Indonesia, causing hundreds of thousands of premature deaths annually. He said levels of PM 2.5 — fine particulate matter smaller than 2.5 millionths of a meter — in Jakarta were well above national and regional standards as well as World Health Organization recommended limits.

"Yet air pollution is a problem that is amenable to solutions that are well known," Boyd said.

Thursday's verdict has tarnished Widodo's credibility in improving infrastructure and the environment in the Southeast Asia's largest economy, which has been his signature policy that helped him win a second term in 2019.





ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER HOT LOOK!

Machine Gun Kelly & Megan Fox - The couple's style streak continues with another fashionable outing in New York City.

Anthony Mackie to lead 'Twisted Metal' series

LOS ANGELES, SEP 16 (PTI): "The Falcon and the Winter Soldier" star Anthony Mackie is set to lead the series adaptation of "Twisted Metal" video game.

The project comes from Sony Pictures TV and PlayStation Production, according to The Hollywood Reporter.

In the series, Mackie will portray John Doe, a milkman with no memory of his past who's offered a chance at a better life -- if he can deliver a mysterious package across a post-apocalyptic wasteland.

With the help of a trigger-happy car thief, he'll face savage marauders driving vehicles of destruction and other dangers of the open road, including a deranged clown who drives an all too familiar

ice cream truck.

"Twisted Metal" is based on an original idea by "Deadpool" writers Rhett Reese



and Paul Wernick.

Michael Jonathan Smith will write and executive produce the series alongside Reese, Wernick, Will Arnett and Marc Forman.

Mackie most recently featured in Disney Plus series "The Falcon and the Winter Soldier", in which he re-

turned as the character of Sam Wilson aka The Falcon.

He will next star in "Captain America 4" for Marvel Studios.

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He will next star in "Captain America 4" for Marvel Studios.

resplendent that's been waiting to be born through you.

Tip: Gemini, go into that state of flow.

Cancer:

Everything seems right on paper, yet you can't seem to shake off the feeling that something is amiss. Your intuition never lies, Cancer. So stop second guessing yourself and approach the given situation from a space of wisdom. If you are being guided to make a choice here, make a choice that serves *you* without bringing shame into the equation. You are enough, beautiful, and you deserve nothing less than the best. Don't settle.

Tip: Choose yourself.

Leo:

Art, beauty, and creativity are finding a whole new meaning in the Temple of the Lion. You're finding new ways to tap into the stream of creative consciousness, honour the divine feminine and establish rituals that make you feel like the most glorious version of yourself. That glow of self-love looks good on you, beautiful. What's more, you've got the Goddesses of Fertility and the Gods of Virility on your side too. So, if you and your beloved are thinking of starting a family, think of this as a blessed time.

Tip: Art, beauty, and creativity are finding a whole new meaning in the Leo HQ.

Virgo:

This human mind of ours is limited in so many ways. It is

hell bent on protecting the ego and giving more power to the small, three-dimensional self. Could this be true in your case too? Are you continuously repeating a tale of pain and victimhood? It's time to wake up to your truth, Virgo. You may not be able to change the past, but you can certainly make peace with it. Forgive who and what you need to so you can move forward on the path of freedom.

Tip: It's time to forgive your past and free yourself from the old story.

Libra:

The connection you share is both sensual and soulful—a rare and precious bond that cannot be put into words. Thursday sees you awakening your kundalini and making that metaphorical journey from sex to superconsciousness. Yes, you are a yogi(ni), Libra, one who is blessed with supernatural powers to transmute the darkness within and walk the path of liberation. So, honour the other as a deity—a manifestation of Divine Consciousness, who has been sent into your life for a specific reason.

Tip: You have been brought together into this lifetime for a reason.

Scorpio:

The cards are talking about the law of karma. The principle of cause and effect, which states that every thought, word, and action, sets off a wave of energy through the

unseen realms. What is the effect you wish to have on the macrocosm, Scorpio? Do you want to plant the seeds of revenge and misery or become a beacon of light for those around? It's time to call upon your higher self and act from a space of awareness.

Tip: Be mindful of the seeds that you are planting today.

Sagittarius:

Truth bomb, Sagittarius: you're too close to the situation. Given where you are standing, you will never gain perspective. So, step back and observe. Divine wisdom will strike as lightning in moments of deep contemplation. Another good way to ground your energy is to spend time in Mother Nature's company. If running off to the wilderness is an option, plan the getaway you've been dreaming about stat!

Tip: You need to step away to gain perspective.

Capricorn:

You're feeling all kinds of introspective today, and it's making you look back at the trajectory of your life through the lens of wisdom. There have been so many twists and turns on your way here. Speed bumps that threatened to throw you off course as well. But, these speed bumps are what you're most grateful for as they have made you bulletproof, Capricorn. What the cards want you to remember: there is light at the end of the tunnel and that they are personally helping you make your way out of

the darkness.

Tip: Honour this as a time of looking within.

Aquarius:

Every time you take a step in the direction of what you love, your fears rear their ugly head, threatening to take you a few steps back in the journey. Become aware of this Tango, Aquarius. Open your eyes to how you are sabotaging your own growth. Remember, you are more courageous than you give yourself credit for. Word for the wise: it's time to look them demons in the eyes as you walk them to the exit door.

Tip: You are more courageous than you give yourself credit for.

Pisces:

You are in a good place, Pisces. A place where you are coming out of the dark night of the soul and are able to look at the trajectory of your life through the lens of wisdom. Word for the wise: acknowledge all the ways in which you moved past your own limitations and evolved. But the transformation doesn't end here, does it, beautiful? There is a lot more that you are meant to discover about yourself on this path. Know that the Universe is holding space for you to discover your hidden potential and come into your own.

Tip: This is a time of healing the old wounds and finding your true freedom.



Vishal Bhardwaj to direct spy thriller film 'Khufiya' for Netflix

MUMBAI, SEP 16 (PTI): Celebrated filmmaker Vishal Bhardwaj is teaming up with Netflix for a spy thriller film, titled "Khufiya", the streamer announced on Thursday.

Produced and directed by Vishal Bhardwaj, the movie will feature his frequent collaborator Tabu as well as actors Ali Fazal, Wamiqa Gabbi and Ashish Vidyarthi.

"Khufiya" is inspired by true events and based on the popular espionage novel "Escape to Nowhere" by Amar Bhushan, Netflix said in a press release.

The film presents the story of Krishna Mehra, a R&AW operative who is assigned to track down the mole selling

India's defence secrets. All along, grappling with her dual identity of a spy and a lover.

"With 'Khufiya', my attempt is to create an edgy espionage film that contrasts the slow burn of intelligence & surveillance work with one's deep rooted emotional conflicts," Bhardwaj, who will write the movie with Rohan Narula, said.

It marks the second project for Tabu with streamer Netflix after the 2020 series "A Suitable Boy", directed by Mira Nair.

With Bhardwaj, the actor has worked in critically-acclaimed feature films "Maqbool" and "Haider".

"'Khufiya' is a one of a kind project, extremely close to my heart and I am excited to be a part of this gripping spy thriller. As always, it's a delight working with VB (Vishal Bhardwaj) again, and feels like homecoming," Tabu said.

Pratiksha Rao, director of Films and Licensing at Netflix India, said the company is excited to partner with Bhardwaj for "Khufiya".

"His films are known to brilliantly showcase inherent conflicts between different characters and their worlds through moving stories, and we can't wait for our members to experience this through the incredible story of Khufiya," she added.

Shilpa Shetty undertakes pilgrimage to Mata Vaishnodevi shrine

JAMMU, SEP 16 (PTI): Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty on Wednesday undertook a pilgrimage to the holy cave shrine of Mata Vaishnodevi in Jammu and Kashmir's Rea-

si district.

She arrived at Katra, the base camp of the cave shrine on Wednesday, police officials said.

Soon after arrival, Shet-

ty, accompanied by police personnel, undertook the journey to the shrine on a horse, they said. She chanted 'Jai Mata di' during the journey.

Talking to reporters, she said, "I am very happy to be here. It was due to the goddesses' call that I came all the way to pay obeisance to her."

Gwendoline Christie boards 'Wednesday' series at Netflix

LOS ANGELES, SEP 16 (PTI): "Game of Thrones" alum Gwendoline Christie is the latest actor to join the cast of the "Addams Family" spinoff series "Wednesday".

The live-action show, set up at Netflix, will focus on the character of Wednesday Addams, to be played by "You" star Jenna Ortega, according to The Hollywood Reporter.

It comes from filmmaker Tim Burton, known for films like "Beetlejuice", "Edward Scissorhands" and "Alice in Wonderland".

Billed as a coming-of-age comedy, "Wednesday" will be penned by "Smallville" creators Al Gough and Miles Millar. The series will follow Wednesday's years as a student at Nevermore Academy, where she attempts to master her emerging psychic ability.

She is also trying to foil a monstrous killing spree that has terrorised the local town,

and solve the supernatural mystery that embroiled her parents -- Gomez and Morticia -- 25 years ago as she navigates new, complex relationships. Christie will play Larissa Weems, the principal

of Nevermore Academy who still has an axe to grind with her former classmate Morticia Addams. Hollywood star Catherine Zeta-Jones will portray Morticia Addams, while Luis Guzman will play Gomez Addams.

Besides Christies, actors Isaac Ordonez, Victor Dorobantu, George Burcea, Tommie Earl Jenkins, Iman-Marson, William Houston, Luyanda Unati Lewis-Nyawo, Oliver Watson, Calum Ross and Johnna Dias Watson have also joined the cast.

Gough and Millar will serve as showrunners and executive producers. Burton will double up as executive producer. Andrew Mittman, Kevin Miserocchi, Kayla Alpert, Jonathan Glickman for Glickmania and Gail Berman will serve as executive producers as well.

The series hails from MGM/UA Television.

Christie broke out with her role of Brienne of Tarth in the HBO fantasy-drama series "Game of Thrones". She also played Captain Phasma in "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" and "Star Wars: The Last Jedi".

Elton John postpones European shows after hip injury



LONDON (AP): Elton John says he is postponing European dates on his world tour until 2023 so that he can have an operation on an injured hip.

The 74-year-old singer-songwriter had been due to play cities in Britain and Europe this year as part of the Farewell Yellow Brick Road tour, followed by shows in the U.S. in 2022.

But he said a fall on a hard surface in late summer had left him in pain.

He said in a statement on Thursday that "despite intensive physio and specialist treatment, the pain has continued to get worse and is leading to increasing dif-

ficulties moving. I have been advised to have an operation as soon as possible to get me back to full fitness and make sure there are no long-term complications."

He said that "it is with great sadness and a heavy heart that I am forced to reschedule the 2021 dates of my Farewell Yellow Brick Road tour in Europe and the UK to 2023."

He promised fans that "the shows will return to the road next year and I will make sure they are more than worth the wait."

John said he planned to start the U.S. leg of the tour in January 2022 in New Orleans.

Aries: This is a time of inner blossoming, Aries. A time of shedding the old skin and coming into your own. The process of coming out of denial and into the light is seldom easy. So, give yourself the pat on the back you deserve. What you need to keep in mind as you move forward and onwards is that aspects of your old life will fall away. What is yours will never pass you by. As for what is being taken? You already have the answer to that, beautiful.

Tip: This is a time of inner blossoming.

Taurus:

The week ahead sees you working through those abundance blocks, transmuting the negative thought patterns and calling in the wealth you desire and deserve. Your relationship with money hasn't always been easy, but it's going through a major transformation right now. What the Universe wants you to keep in mind, now and for the rest of your life: both your needs and your wants will be taken care of.

Tip: From lack to abundance.

Gemini:

Movement is medicine, beautiful. Art, music, and theatre? Divine arts with the marvelous ability to heal the soul. What the cards are guiding you to do today: follow the creative urges of your soul and you give yourself the permission to go into a state of flow. There is something

resplendent that's been waiting to be born through you.

Tip: Gemini, go into that state of flow.

Cancer:

Everything seems right on paper, yet you can't seem to shake off the feeling that something is amiss. Your intuition never lies, Cancer. So stop second guessing yourself and approach the given situation from a space of wisdom. If you are being guided to make a choice here, make a choice that serves *you* without bringing shame into the equation. You are enough, beautiful, and you deserve nothing less than the best. Don't settle.

Tip: Choose yourself.

Leo:

Art, beauty, and creativity are finding a whole new meaning in the Temple of the Lion. You're finding new ways to tap into the stream of creative consciousness, honour the divine feminine and establish rituals that make you feel like the most glorious version of yourself. That glow of self-love looks good on you, beautiful. What's more, you've got the Goddesses of Fertility and the Gods of Virility on your side too. So, if you and your beloved are thinking of starting a family, think of this as a blessed time.

Tip: Art, beauty, and creativity are finding a whole new meaning in the Leo HQ.

Virgo:

This human mind of ours is limited in so many ways. It is