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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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Sikkim all set to launch COVID-19 vaccination IN FIRST LOT, 12500 DOSES TO ARRIVE ON 14 JAN

SAGARCHHETRI

GANGTOK, 12 JAN:

Sikkim is set to begin vaccination against COVID-19 on 16 Jan with 12,500 doses of the Covishield vaccine scheduled to arrive in the state on 14 Jan. In the first phase, the vaccine will be provided to health workers of the state. So far, 9414 health workers of the State and 148 health workers of the Centre have registered for the vaccination.

The State Steering Committee meeting was held at Secretariat today to discuss various issues related to COVID-19 vaccination. A press conference was held following the meeting wherein the Health Department informed that the state is all set to launch the COVID-19 vaccination process.

It may be mentioned that Covishield is developed by the Oxford University and pharma major AstraZeneca and is being manufactured in India by Serum Institute of India. It is one of the two vaccines approved by the Drug Controller General of India (DCGI) for distribution.



The other vaccine is the one developed by Bharat Biotech called Covaxin. Both are two-dose vaccines, which will have to be administered at a 28-day gap. Covishield is being priced at Rs 200 per dose and is for active immunization for individuals above 18 years of age.

Addressing the press conference, Principal Director-cum-Secretary, Health Department, Dr Pema T. Bhutia said that the COVID-19 vaccination in the State will be launched on 16 January

with health workers and will continue in different phases to cover different groups of people as per the norms of the Centre.

He informed that the first phase of vaccination will cover health workers followed by the second group which includes police, home guard, civil defence, municipal workers, disaster management and revenue personnel, prison staff and paramilitary. The third group of people to be vaccinated include those above 50 years and then the fourth group of

people are those below 50 years with comorbidities.

Dr Bhutia stated that the state has the required facilities, logistics and trained manpower to carry out the vaccination. He added that the department has already conducted two dry runs for the vaccination in all districts.

Health Department Principal Secretary, K. Srinivasulu stated that the vaccination is a continuous process and will cover everyone in different phases.

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GOVT RESOLUTION SUPPORTING INCLUSION OF 12 LEFT-OUT COMMUNITIES IN SCHEDULED TRIBES LIST

Left-out communities commend govt for “strong” and “historic” step



SAGAR CHHETRI

GANGTOK, 12 JAN:

Representatives of the twelve “left-out” communities of Sikkim have expressed gratitude towards the State Government and Chief Minister PS Tamang for adopting the Government Resolution seeking inclusion of these left out communities in the Scheduled Tribes list.

Extending their “wholehearted” support to the government resolution passed during the one-day session of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly on Monday, they expressed confidence that these communities will soon receive tribal status thanks to the “strong” and “historic” initiative of the State government.

Addressing a press conference here this afternoon, the “Eleven Indigenous Ethnic Communities of Sikkim” president, Dr SK Rai, put the gratitude on record and congratulated the CM for taking this substantial step forward on the basis of Article 371F and historical documents.

While there were 11 communities earlier counted among those left-out of the ST list, the number was recently increased to 12 with the inclusion of

the Majhi community to the list.

Dr Rai also thanked the Minister for Social Justice, Dr MK Sharma for placing the resolution in the Assembly and all MLAs for having fully supported the resolution in the Assembly to secure justice for the left-out communities of Sikkim.

Dr Rai went on to add that the left-out communities of Sikkim will soon receive tribal status due to the “commitment, guidance and benevolence” of the CM.

Likewise, Akhil Sikkim Khas [Chettri-Bahun] Kalyan Sangh president, Raju Basnet, also echoed the sentiment and also thanked the CM for his address in support of the resolution on the basis of historical documents and other facts.

Mr Basnet also informed that the CM had invited representatives of all twelve communities on the initiative of the OBC Chairperson, Pabitra Bhandari, on 05 January and assured all-out effort on the tribal status issue.

He add that to pass the resolution immediately after his assurance at a meeting with them shows the commitment of the government towards the issue.

Daily Covid infections remain in single digits in Sikkim

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 12 JAN:

Seven persons tested positive for COVID-19 in the last 24 hours in Sikkim taking the state’s tally of confirmed cases to 5,996 on Tuesday.

On the other hand, 16 more COVID-19 patients were discharged from isolation to further improve the figure of recovered cases in the State to 5,459.

There are now 313 active cases of novel coronavirus in Sikkim, of whom three are currently admitted in the ICU facility of the COVID-dedicated STNM Hospital.

In the daily health bulletin on

Tuesday, Health Department State IEC Officer, Sonam Gyaltzen Bhutia, informed that the seven new cases were detected from the testing of 190 samples on Monday - four in RT-PCR testing of 123 samples, one in TrueNat testing of 12 samples and two in rapid antigen testing of 55 samples.

Of the seven new cases, six were detected in East District and one reported from South Sikkim.

While providing details of the new cases, he informed that three persons from Pakyong, one from Tingmoo, one from MG Marg, one from Aritar, and one from Palum in South District were found positive for COVID-19.

Covid vaccine recipients will not get to choose from 2 options for now: Centre

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN [PTI]: The government hinted on Tuesday that for now, the COVID vaccine recipients will not have the option to choose from the two vaccines recently approved for restricted emergency use in India.

Replying to a question at a press conference, Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan said, “At many places in the world, more than one vaccine are being administered, but presently, in no country, vaccine recipients have the option of choosing the shots.”

India has recently approved two vaccines for the viral disease for restricted emergency use -- Oxford University’s Covishield and Bharat Biotech’s Covaxin.



Mr Bhushan said there will be a gap of 28 days between two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine and its effectiveness can be seen only after 14 days.

“So we urge people to keep following COVID appropriate behaviour,” he said.

India will launch its COVID-19

vaccination drive from January 16 with priority to be given to nearly three crore healthcare and frontline workers.

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Mr Bhushan said 54.72 lakh of the entire stock of COVID-19 vaccine doses ordered so far were received by the designated national and state-level vaccine stores till Tuesday afternoon, with the coronavirus inoculation drive set to begin from Saturday.

He said all the orders -- 1.1 crore doses of Covishield from the Serum Institute of India and 55 lakh doses of Covaxin from Bharat Biotech -- will be received by January 14.

MP inaugurates 30-bed hostel for girl footballers at Dentam

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 12 JAN:

A 30-bed Girls Hostel for Dentam Senior Secondary School, West Sikkim, was inaugurated by MP, Lok Sabha, Indra Hang Subba, today, a press release informs.

The Girls Hostel will be exclusively used for housing football players of Dentam Senior Secondary School, West Sikkim.

MP, Indra Hang Subba had been instrumental in establishing the hostel for aspiring girl footballers of the district and garnered the support of all stakeholders for the project, the release mentions.

On the special direction of the MP, the hostel has been constructed by the District Administration, and has been fully furnished with all amenities.

The District Administration was able to furnish the hostel from the CSR funds provided by Rural Electrification Corporation. Under the CSR Support of REC CSR Foundation, funds to the tune of Rs2000 will be provided to each child every month for their boarding and fooding facilities. A sum of Rs1,80,000 for the provision of fooding and boarding expenses for a period of three months for the hostel and further funds will be provided on submission of utilization certificates.

MP, Mr Subba who was the chief guest thanked all the stakeholders who had come together in helping set up the hostel for Girls football academy. He also commended the role of District Administration in setting up the hostel and stated that the vision of the State Government is to promote sports in a big way at Dentam.

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ASKCBKS welcomes resolution on left-out communities as “historic”

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 12 JAN:**

Akhil Sikkim Khas Chhetri Bahun Kalyan Sangh [ASKCBKS] has termed the resolution passed by Sikkim Legislative Assembly on 11 Jan historic.

“This is a historic resolution as it is for the first time a resolution to this effect was sponsored by the Treasury Bench and supported by the members of a National Party BJP that is in power at the Centre,” a press release from the Sangh states.

The Sangh has said that during a

meeting held on 05 Jan representatives of all the left-out communities viz. Bhujel, Gurung, Jogi, KiratKhambuRai, K i r a t Y a k h a D e w a n, Khas (BahunChettri), Majhi, Mangar, Newar, SanyasiGiri, Sunwar and Thami were invited by the Chief Minister for discussion on the demands of different communities.

In the meeting, the representatives of the 12 left-out communities had presented a joint memorandum unanimously requesting the passage of resolution in the State Assembly for

inclusion of all the left-out communities in the list of Scheduled Tribe.

“We the members of Khas (ChettriBahun) community of Sikkim heartily welcome the steps taken by the Government. We are confident that the Resolution will be assented and supported the Hon’ble Governor of Sikkim and sent to the Central Government for early introduction of a bill in the Parliament for inclusion of all the left-out communities of Sikkim in the list of Scheduled Tribes of Sikkim based on

the terms of 8th May Agreement and Article 371 F of the Constitution,” the release mentions.

The Sangh has thanked Minister Dr M K Sharma for introducing the resolution in the House as Minister in-charge of Social Welfare Department, Member, Sonam T Venchungpa for seconding the Resolution, Members, D R Thapa, T T Bhutia and AdityaGolay for supporting the Resolution.

The Sangh has also thanked Chief Minister, PS Tamang for facilitating the resolution.

Law College observes National Youth Day

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 12 JAN:**

Sikkim Government Law College observed National Youth Day commemorating the 158th Birth Anniversary of Swami Vivekananda based on this year’s theme “YUVAA”, a press release informs.

The program was organized by the Department of Political Science, Sikkim Government Law College, using Google Meet platform.

The programme was attended by Principal Dr. T.D. Lama, Dean of Students, Dr Dilip Pandey, Assistant Professors and students of Sikkim Government Law College. The programme started at 11 a.m. with welcome address by Asst



Professor, Palmu Kaleon highlighting important aspects of Swami Vivekananda’s work focusing on his concept of Humanism based on spiritual upliftment of mankind.

A documentary was presented by Neha Gupta, student of 6th semester on Swamiji’s early childhood, his teachings as active preacher of Vedantic Philosophy, his message of universal peace, brotherhood and service

to mankind.

PemLham Lepcha of 5th semester spoke on the role of youth in politics and its significance focusing on bigger representation and participation of youth in the political system as youth representation is declining in the Parliamentary bodies of India.

A poem in Nepali was presented by Prayash Pradhan of 5th semester while

SonamNichen Bhutia of 5th semester gave a speech on international and national action for empowering youth where he highlighted the different initiatives taken at the global and national level for youth empowerment.

Principal of the college, Dr T.D. Lama congratulated the students and teachers for successfully organizing the webinar and motivated the students to organize more such programmes in future.

The webinar ended with a pledge taken by students of Sikkim Government Law College to strive towards the path of excellence, service to mankind and constantly walk on an ethical and honest path of progress.

Skill development training at Kameray

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 12 JAN:**

Three-day skill development training on the theme ‘Wealth from waste’ at Kameray village concluded today, a press release informs. The training was organised by State Institute of Rural Development & PanchayatiRaj in collaboration with ward panchayat, Kameray.

The training was attended by 6 SHGs and villagers. Trainees



learnt how to make bouquet, trays, tea plate, and baskets using plastic

waste. Villagers, SHGs and ward panchayat, CP

Bhattaraithanked SIRD & PR and other resource persons for the training.

Supreme Court puts 3 Farm Laws on hold, forms committee for talks

NEW DELHI, 12 JAN [NDTV]: The three new laws at the heart of massive farmer protests near Delhi will not come into force for now. The Supreme Court today pressed pause on the laws enacted in September in a huge blow to the government. The top court also said a committee of agricultural experts would take over negotiations with farmers to end the crisis, and called it a “victory of fair play”.

“We are staying three farm laws until further orders,” Chief Justice SA Bobde said, announcing the order.

“While we may not stifle a peaceful protest, we think that this extraordinary order of stay of implementation of the farm laws will be perceived as an achievement of the purpose of such protest

at least for the present and will encourage the farmers bodies to convince their members to get back to their livelihood, both in order to protect their own lives and health and in order to protect the lives and properties of others.”

The government had told the court that the laws “were not hurriedly made”, that they were the result of two decades of deliberations.

In eight rounds of talks with farmers’ unions over the past month, the government had firmly ruled out withdrawing the laws but had offered to make amendments.

Noting that “no solution was in sight”, the Supreme Court said it was trying to solve the problem in the best way and had the power to

suspend the laws.

“These are matters of life and death. We are concerned with laws. We are concerned with lives and property of people affected by the agitation. We are trying to solve the problem in the best way. One of the powers we have is to suspend the legislation,” the Chief Justice said.

“We want to solve the problem and that’s why we are making the committee,” he added.

The names suggested by the Supreme Court include agricultural economist Ashok Gulati, Anil Ghanwat (Shetkari Sanghatana), Bhupinder Singh Mann (former Rajya Sabha) and Pramod Joshi (International Food Policy Research Institute). All four are known to support the farm laws.

Former Chief Justice

of India RM Lodha, widely tipped to head the panel, told NDTV he had declined the offer.

The top court also issued notice to farmers’ unions on a Delhi Police plea to stop a tractor rally on January 26, during Republic Day parade.

The judges rebuffed the lawyer for protesting farmers, ML Sharma, as he said farmers would not participate in the committee as Prime Minister Narendra Modi had refused to talk to them. “We cannot ask the PM anything, he is not a party before us,” said the Chief Justice.

“This is not politics. There is a difference between politics and judiciary and you will have to cooperate.”

Yesterday, the Supreme Court had said it was “extremely disappointed” by the government’s handling of the crisis.

ASBHWA demands an end to culture of subletting trade licences

**RUDRA KAUSHIK
GYALSHING, 12 JAN:**

Subletting of trade licences is a common trend, and in West Sikkim, it has become a matter of hot debate of late. The All Sikkim Business Holders Welfare Association [ASBHWA] has joined the debate and its recently constituted body for Gyalshing today demanded a complete ban on such subletting in the town.

Referring to the practice of subletting trade licences as illegal and against the interest of the local business community, ASBHWA members told a press conference here today that the practice, apart from harming the interests of genuine Sikkimese business persons, also paved the way for influx of outsiders in trade and business affairs of the state.



ASBHWA has also demanded that payment of bills and other monetary transactions be done only in the name of the original trade licence holder and if a licence holder hires someone to operate his/ her business [as is often claimed when these licences are sublet], then provision of provident funds and life insurance for the so “hired” persons should

be ensured by the business owners.

A S B H W A president, LB Rai, stressed that trade licence holders who sublet these licences should understand the drawback of this practice and how it was directly affecting the prospects of the youth in dire need of employment.

The association has demanded that the concerned department

issue trade licences only after proper verification of documents.

The association has also demanded that shops not be allowed to sell items not prescribed in trade licences issued to them.

Santosh Gautam, the ASBHWA general secretary, called for unity among business persons and associations of the town for redressal of their shared issues.

NIFAA launches blood plasma donation drive Samvedna in Sikkim



**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 12 JAN:**

National Integrated Forum of Artists and Activists [NIFAA] has set the target to collect 90,000 units of blood by organizing blood donation camps in 15 different States of India on the occasion

of SaheedDiwas on 23 March. For the same, NIFAA has launched its nation-wide initiative, Samvedna, an international blood & plasma donation awareness campaign, to create mass awareness in blood donors. NIFAA is a social, art and cultural based

organization from Karnal, Haryana.

NIFAA, Sikkim unit has also launched this initiative, Samvedna in the State today with the support of Voluntary Blood Donors Association of Sikkim, Blood Army of Sikkim and others.

Samvedna was

officially launched in a function held at Singtam community hall in East District on Tuesday, which has the Tourism Minister BS Panth as the chief guest and was accompanied by a NIFFA founder and president, Pritpal Singh Pannu among other dignitaries.

SKM Youth Cell organizes National Youth Day

AARON RAI

GANGTOK, 12 JAN:

Sikkim Krantikari Morcha Youth cell organized National Youth Day today at Rangpo Football Ground. Urban Development Minister, Arun Upreti was present as the chief guest, accompanied by Minister Bhim Hang Subba, Minister Sanjit Kharel, MLA Aditya Golay, MLA Vishnu Khatiwada, MLA Sunita Gajmer and others as special guests.

The SKM Youth Cell organized THE National Youth Day cum coordination meeting for youth of five constituencies.

In his address, chief guest Minister Arun Upreti said that the achievements of the SKM

government will be the main slogan for the 2024 election and the same achievements will lead to the victory of SKM.

Speaking about the recently passed resolution in the State Assembly on the inclusion of left-out communities in the Scheduled Tribes list, Minister Sanjit Kharel also addressed the gathering wherein he said that the SKM Government has done in nine months what the former government could not do in 10 years.

He said that the present government has succeeded in uniting the society which was divided under the previous government.

MLA Aditya Golay said that the youth have made

a great contribution in bringing SKM to power and government is doing all it can for the youth of the state. The government has come up with many schemes to provide employment to the youth, he added.

On behalf of the Chief Minister, Political Secretary to CM, Jacob Khaling wished the gathering on National Youth Day and spoke about Swami Vivekananda’s contributions.

He said that the resolution on the left-out communities passed by the Assembly on 11 Jan was a historic one.

Attacking the previous SDF government, Mr Khaling alleged that Pawan Chamling was against the majority

Nepali community in Sikkim and his absence in the Assembly session on Monday is not in the interest of Sikkim.

He stated the SKM government has done more than was expected in the past 20 months despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nareish Chhetri, a motivational speaker, highlighted the good deeds of Swami Vivekananda while the State Level Chief Coordinator of SKM Youth Cell, Sahadev Sharma said that Krantikari youth is always ready for the security of Sikkim.

The program was conducted by P u j a n R a i M o k t a n, General Secretary of the Youth Cell.

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Workshop introduces youth to basics of film craft

SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 12 JAN:

Around 70 participants attended a workshop on acting and technical aspects of filmmaking here at Tathangchen on Tuesday.

The daylong workshop was a personal initiative of the Advisor to the Information Technology Department, Tenzing Lamtha, in collaboration with Sikkim Film, a production house.

Professional film technicians from Kolkata and Mumbai were present as resource persons and provided participants an introduction to the basics of acting and other technical aspects of



filmmaking.

Speaking to media persons, Sikkim Film founder, Raj Sitaula, said that although interest in the process of filmmaking and acting has been increasing among the youth here, in the absence of even basic training on the craft,

they lacked confidence to audition.

As for today's workshop, it covered introduction to the basics of acting, videography, still photography and drone operation.

Mr Sitaula thanked Mr Lamtha for taking a personal interest and initiative in the growth of

filmmaking in the State.

Such efforts would continue in the days to come, he added.

Mr Sitaula also shared plans of making short films with artists and technicians from Sikkim in the near future and promote local artists in web series.

Rotary Club extends support to Burtuk NGO



SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 12 JAN:

Rotary Club of Gangtok donated clothes and blankets to the Association for Social Health, Sikkim

Chapter situated near Helipad, Burtuk, today. A press release informs that there were 5 new born babies, few children aged 10-14 years and

some women aged around 20 years. Most of them were abandoned by their family members, and few were dealing with psychiatric problems.

MP inaugurates 30-bed hostel...

The State Government is in the process of constructing Sports Stadium in Dentam and all necessary proposals have been prepared in this regard, he informed. He added that the execution would start soon and the youth of Dentam and surrounding areas will immensely benefit from the sporting facilities.

He also lauded the support of REC foundation in providing support to the hostel and also acknowledged the role of NarayDahal [Government Contractor] for providing a sum of Rs50,000 to support the hostel during the pandemic.

Speaking on the occasion, District Collector, West, Karma R Bonpo, stated that taking forward the vision of the Chief Minister of Sikkim, PSTamang, the District Administration decided to streamline the hostel using funds from various schemes and the CSR support of Rural Electrification Corporation.

The District Collector thanked REC CSR foundation for the support and stated that he hoped that many future stars would be produced from the Hostel. He also stated that a committee under the chairmanship of SDM Dentam would look after the day-to-day functioning of the hostel with active support and guidance from SKM Area In-charge, Dentam Constituency, Purna Hang Subba.

Also present were ADC (Dev), SuratGurung, SDM Dentam, N.K Karki, Deputy Director, Education Department, Principals of Dentam, HeeYangthang and Uttarey Senior Secondary School.

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SAATHI observes National Youth Day

SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 12 JAN:

SAATHI, supported by Titan Company Ltd, organized a Community Outreach program at Jagriti Integrated Rehabilitation Center, Sichey, East Sikkim today, a press release informs.

The objective of this event is to motivate our youth by conducting counseling and interactive session on the occasion of National Youth Day, the release mentions.

The program began with a welcome note by representative of Jagriticentre, followed by an orientation on SAATHI by DrKunjan Lama from



Adolescent Health Clinic, Health Care & Family Welfare Department, Government of Sikkim, as a resource person.

He spoke on the topic "Substance Abuse" where he highlighted the difference between habits and addiction, and emphasized on

how our youth are the future of our country and the state. He gave information on how a human brain gets damaged by the misuse of substance and how the brain functions and it is up to an individual to train our mind by practicing patience.

An interactive session was held wherein Dr Lama answered various queries of patients. One of the patients of the facility shared the hardship he faced in his life due to his bad habits. The program ended with a vote of thanks by SAATHI team.

Leading human rights group calls Israel an 'apartheid' state

JERUSALEM (AP): A leading Israeli human rights group has begun describing both Israel and its control of the Palestinian territories as a single "apartheid" regime, using an explosive term that the country's leaders and their supporters vehemently reject.

In a report released Tuesday, B'Tselem says that while Palestinians live under different forms of Israeli control in the occupied West Bank, blockaded Gaza, annexed east Jerusalem and within Israel itself, they have fewer rights than Jews in the entire area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.

"One of the key points in our analysis is that this is a single geopolitical area ruled by one government," said B'Tselem director Hagai El-Ad. "This is not democracy plus occupation. This is apartheid between the river and the sea."

That a respected Israeli organization is adopting a term long seen as taboo even by many critics of Israel points to a broader shift in the debate as its half-century occupation of war-won lands drags on and hopes for a two-state solution fade.

Peter Beinart, a prominent Jewish-American critic of Israel, caused a similar stir last year when he came out in favor of a single binational state with equal rights for Jews and Palestinians. B'Tselem does not take a position

on whether there should be one state or two.

Israel has long presented itself as a thriving democracy in which Palestinian citizens, who make up about 20% of its population of 9.2 million, have equal rights. Israel seized east Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 war — lands that are home to nearly 5 million Palestinians and which the Palestinians want for a future state.

Israel withdrew troops and settlers from Gaza in 2005 but imposed a blockade after the militant Hamas group seized power there two years later. It considers the West Bank "disputed" territory whose fate should be determined in peace talks. Israel annexed east Jerusalem in 1967 in a move not recognized internationally and considers the entire city its unified capital. Most Palestinians in east Jerusalem are Israeli "residents," but not citizens with voting rights.

B'Tselem argues that by dividing up the territories and using different means of control, Israel masks the underlying reality — that roughly 7 million Jews and 7 million Palestinians live under a single system with vastly unequal rights.

"We are not saying that the degree of discrimination that a Palestinian has to endure is the same if one is a citizen of the state of Israel or if one is

besieged in Gaza," El-Ad said. "The point is that there isn't a single square inch between the river and the sea in which a Palestinian and a Jew are equal."

Israel's harshest critics have used the term "apartheid" for decades, evoking the system of white rule and racial segregation in South Africa that was brought to an end in 1994. The International Criminal Court defines apartheid as an "institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group."

"There is no country in the world that is clearer in its apartheid policies than Israel," said Nabil Shaath, a senior adviser to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. "It is a state based on racist decisions aimed at confiscating land, expelling indigenous people, demolishing homes and establishing settlements."

In recent years, as Israel has further entrenched its rule over the West Bank, Israeli writers, disillusioned former generals and politicians opposed to its right-wing government have increasingly adopted the term.

But until now B'Tselem, which was established in 1989, had only used it in specific contexts.

Israel adamantly rejects the term, saying the restrictions it imposes in Gaza and the West Bank are temporary measures needed for security.

Most Palestinians in the West Bank live in areas governed by the Palestinian Authority, but those areas are surrounded by Israeli checkpoints and Israeli soldiers can enter at any time. Israel has full control over 60% of the West Bank.

Itay Milner, a spokesman for Israel's consulate general in New York, dismissed the B'Tselem report as "another tool for them to promote their political agenda," which he said was based on a "distorted ideological view." He pointed out that Arab citizens of Israel are represented across the government, including the diplomatic corps.

Eugene Kontorovich, director of international law at the Jerusalem-based Kohelet Policy Forum, says the fact that the Palestinians have their own government makes any talk of apartheid "inapplicable," calling the B'Tselem report "shockingly weak, dishonest and misleading."

Palestinian leaders agreed to the current territorial divisions in the Oslo accords in the 1990s, and the Palestinian Authority is recognized as a state by dozens of nations. That, Kontorovich says, is a far cry from the territories designated for Black South Africans under apartheid — known as bantustans — to which many Palestinians compare the areas governed by the PA.

Kontorovich said the use of the word

"apartheid" was instead aimed at demonizing Israel in a way that "resonates with racial sensitivities and debates in America and the West."

Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli consul general in New York, rejects the term. "Occupation, yes. Apartheid, absolutely not."

But he acknowledged that critics of Israel who had refrained from using the term, or who had used it and been attacked, "will now conveniently say, 'Hey, you know, Israelis are saying it themselves.'"

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, head of the Union for Reform Judaism, which estimates its reach at more than 1.5 million people in 850 congregations across North America, says the situation in the West Bank and Gaza is a "moral blight" and an "occupation," but not apartheid.

"What goes along with saying that, to many in the international community, is that therefore Israel has no right to exist," he said. "If the accusation is apartheid, that is not simply a strong critique, it's an existential critique."

El-Ad points to two recent developments that altered B'Tselem's thinking.

The first was a contentious law passed in 2018 that defines Israel as the "nation-state of the Jewish people." Critics say it downgraded Israel's Palestinian minority to second-class citizenship

and formalized the widespread discrimination they have faced since Israel's founding in 1948. Supporters say it merely recognized Israel's Jewish character and that similar laws can be found in many Western countries.

The second was Israel's announcement in 2019 of its intention to annex up to a third of the occupied West Bank, including all of its Jewish settlements, which are home to nearly 500,000 Israelis. Those plans were put on hold as part of a normalization agreement reached with the United Arab Emirates last year, but Israel has said the pause is only temporary.

B'Tselem and other rights groups argue that the boundaries separating Israel and the West Bank vanished long ago — at least for Israeli settlers, who can freely travel back and forth, while their Palestinian neighbors require permits to enter Israel.

There have been no substantive peace talks in more than a decade. The occupation, which critics have long warned is unsustainable, has endured for 53 years.

"Fifty years plus, that's not enough to understand the permanence of Israeli control of the occupied territories?" El-Ad said. "We think that people need to wake up to reality, and stop talking in future terms about something that has already happened."

Bengal govt asks districts to be vigilant against Bird Flu



KOLKATA, JAN 11 (PTI): As the number of states affected by bird flu is growing, the West Bengal government on Monday directed the districts to step up vigil to check the spread of the disease from sick or dead birds to humans and other domesticated animals.

The state Health Department wrote to the chief medical officer of health (CMOH) of all districts, asking them to keep people exposed to dead or sick birds under surveillance.

"Considering the serious situation and the possibility of spread of the disease to humans and other domesticated animals, birds, the ministry of environment, forest and climate change has requested all states to take all possible steps for containing the spread of the disease," the health department's letter said.

Unusual number of deaths of common wild birds or poultry birds

Advocate urges PHE to introduce online bill payment

SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 12 JAN:

Senior Advocate, Narendra Rai has written to the Chief Engineer, Public Health Engineering Department, requesting for introduction of online payment for water supply bills.

In the letter, Mr Rai mentions the errors that occur due to miscommunication between State Bank of Sikkim and the department wherein the consumer then has to run to the department with proof of their paid bills. He also mentions instances when Bank Receipts [BR] have been siphoned off.

Mr Rai states that online payment of bills can eradicate these problems, moreover, even the Government of India encourages online payment of various bills to curb corruption.

He has listed out various advantages of online payment system that will help the consumer as well as the department.

must be informed to the officers of the Animal Resources Development department and Public Health (PH) officials at the block and district level without delay, it said.

"Significant number of cases, cluster of cases or deaths due to the influenza like illness has also to be brought promptly to the notice of the PH officials," the letter said.

At a virtual meeting with chief ministers to discuss the COVID-19 situation and the vaccination roll-out in the country, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday asked all states to remain alert also on the spread of avian influenza.

Bird flu outbreak has been confirmed in nine states - Kerala, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Maharashtra.

Trolled You

Kirtey-parcha draftsmen playing with new toys

One are the days when trolls were these imaginary creatures which would jump out from under bridges and play villains in children's storybooks. They were almost cute, and invariably outwitted. Nowadays, trolls are almost always anonymous, but definitely always insecure, creatures of the online world who are bawled into duty when reasoned debate becomes too difficult to engage in for the pettiness which marshals these, to borrow from Hillary, "basket of deplorables".

So, who are these modern-day trolls?

These are people, some using real names and then also using several online avatars, who find meaning in their life by being mean online. Being mean is no crime, but when the meanness degenerates to threats and obvious nuisance, something needs to be done. Cops in Sikkim as well as elsewhere pick up drunkards and book them for causing nuisance and public disorder even if they are just screaming gibberish on the streets in their drunken rants. And yet, agent provocateurs take nuisance and public disorder to offensive levels without any action. And so they get stronger. Roadside Romeos are often shamed and locked-up, and yet, in the online space, much worse than eve-teasing is played out on a regular basis and it is allowed to continue. Good policing, at least the kind that genuinely looks out for the people without first having received orders to do so, of course, is a bit too much to expect in our country of VIPs and VIPs in the making, but what about the audience? Shouldn't they agree on a policy which immediately blocks trolls the moment one jumps up? Trolls purposefully stir up trouble in social media communities by being vicious, deceitful and nasty. While being nasty or even vicious is a personal choice which should not attract public comment, trolling starts venturing into criminality when the name-calling starts dealing in lies and character assassination. Sikkim knows these kinds well since it has a long history of engaging in political debate through the medium of kirtey-parchas - the anonymous pamphlets - which proved that politicians think that the people are stupid and were convinced that politicizing means dealing in fiction not facts. But that trade appears to be doing well for all sides (accept it, all side did and are using trolls to fight their battles). Modi-bhaktas have taken this form of assault to a new, very scarily well-organised level, but it is not as if Sikkim does not see its own "local" trolls in offensive action as well. Much as trolls need to be condemned, sometimes, also spare them some sympathy. One needs to be dredging very deep in the pits which suck out self-respect to do obviously shameful things just to rise in the ranks of sycophants.

As for the targets of trolling, let's please not call them victims because that will give too much credibility to the sorry armies of trolls, they can begin by feeling good about it because only the important and significant voices are searched out from the sea of online voices for such treatment. And never feed the troll. Responding to them, or even noticing them, makes them relevant, feeds their hate. Ignore them, and this is not just for the targets but also for all those who even find them sitting on their timelines, and they will crawl back into the nothingness they have emerged from. Come on, we have managed to lose our morals and even our Gods by ignoring them; trolls could not be stronger than that. Since it is leaders who the trolls are out to impress more than the targets they appear to be hounding, maybe people should also consider unfriending/ blocking all leaders who share, forward or fail to condemn trolls. In fact, leaders - political and social, okay, also religious - need to take the initiative in such efforts. But they probably won't, or will do so, like always, selectively, and that does not work; so it will have to be the lay people who spit the trolls out of social media spaces.

Meanwhile, has anyone noticed that the young appear to have grown disgusted with us muddying their media (read Facebook) and have moved on to other platforms for social online engagements?

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World Economy in 2021: Here's Who Will Win and Who Will Lose

STEVE SCHIFFERES
THECONVERSATION.COM

The coronavirus has crippled the world economy. Global GDP suffered its sharpest drop since the end of the second world war in 2020, millions were unemployed or furloughed, and governments pumped trillions of dollars into their economies to prevent greater damage.

Nevertheless, a 2021 recovery is very uncertain. China's economy is growing strongly again, but many of the world's richest nations may not fully rebound until 2022 at the earliest.

Inequality is also rampant. While America's 651 billionaires have increased their net worth by 30% to US\$4 trillion, a quarter of a billion people in developing countries could face absolute poverty, and up to half the global workforce may have lost their livelihoods.

ADVANTAGE ASIA

The speed at which the pandemic can be contained will have a huge bearing on how the world economy performs. In the race between new virulent strains of the virus and the vaccine roll-out, early victory is by no means assured. Even rich countries that have secured most of the available vaccines may fail to inoculate enough people to provide herd immunity until the end of 2021. In developing countries, where vaccines will generally be scarce, the virus is expected to spread further.

The big winners are likely to be countries like China and South Korea that succeeded in suppressing COVID-19 early. China's economy is projected to grow in 2021 by 8%, over twice that of the most successful western countries even before the pandemic.

China's export-led economy has actually benefited from lockdowns in western countries. Western demand for services like entertainment and travel may have declined, but demand for household consumer goods and medical supplies has increased. Chinese exports to the US have reached record levels despite the high tariffs imposed by the Trump administration.

China is also expanding its economic influence throughout Asia, with a new free trade area in the Pacific and huge infrastructure projects along its trade routes to



Europe and Africa. It is investing in advanced technologies to reduce its dependence on western supply chains for components such as semiconductors. China could now overtake the US as the world's largest economy within five years, twice as fast as previously predicted.

HARDER TIMES ELSEWHERE

For rich countries such as the US, UK and those in mainland Europe, the picture is less rosy. After brief recoveries in summer 2020, their economies stagnated. This was driven as much by the second wave of the pandemic as lockdowns. In the US, for instance, employment and growth closely tracked the pandemic rather than the unevenly applied lockdowns as business and consumer confidence slumped. Even with some recovery next year, these economies are expected to be 5% smaller in 2022 than if the crisis had not occurred.

The biggest losers of 2021, however, are likely to be developing countries. They lack both the economic resources to acquire enough vaccines, and the public health systems to treat large numbers of COVID patients. They also can't afford the huge government subsidies that have prevented mass unemployment in Europe and the US. With demand for their raw materials crippled by the recession in the west, and little aid available from rich countries to alleviate their large debts, they can ill afford further lockdowns.

Even formerly fast-growing countries like Brazil and India are facing hard times. Many millions of poor workers in the informal

sector are being forced back to their villages and urban slums to face mass poverty and even starvation.

Meanwhile South Africa, the wealthiest country in Africa, may have left it too late to obtain enough vaccines to stem the rapid rise in infections. It has taken a collective approach by becoming a member of the COVAX programme. The programme aims to ensure that poorer countries do not lose out, but it has yet to achieve results.

THE NEW DIVIDE

The economic effects of the pandemic have been hugely varied across society. Those in full-time work, often in highly paid jobs working from home, have accumulated substantial savings since there is less to spend wages on.

The very rich, especially in the US, have benefited from huge stock market increases driven by pandemic successes like Amazon, Netflix and Zoom - and this looks likely to continue. The big question for the economy is whether in the coming year those with secure jobs and high incomes will return to their previous spending patterns, or hold on to their savings in the face of continuing uncertainty.

In contrast, many who have lost jobs or businesses or been furloughed will struggle to find new work or return to their previous income levels - especially since low-wage sectors such as retail and hospitality are unlikely to recover fully after the pandemic. This group includes many younger people, women and ethnic minorities.

The inequality could be

increased as rich governments scale back the huge subsidies being used to keep many workers employed or furloughed. Rishi Sunak, the UK chancellor, gave clear indications of this intention in his November spending review.

In the US, the political deadlock over further relief spending was only resolved at the last minute, and Republicans will probably now aim to minimise Biden-administration spending despite the profligacy of the Trump years. Europe has just reached an unprecedented agreement to provide EU-funded aid to member states most affected by the pandemic, but tensions over the extent of the package and the recipients will probably continue.

Cooperation could ease the adjustment to a post-pandemic world. But international cooperation during the pandemic has been weak, and economic tensions have further undermined the world's commitment to free trade - not a good start for Brexit Britain. Domestically, redistribution of wealth and income through higher taxes could give western governments more resources to deal with the victims of the pandemic, but will be politically difficult in a continuing recession.

Social unrest has been one consequence of previous pandemics. Let's hope that this time, we find the wisdom to tackle the gross inequalities revealed by COVID-19, and build a fairer world.

[the writer is Honorary Research Fellow, City Political Economy Research Centre, City, University of London]

COVID-19 Immunity: How Long Does it Last?

SHEENA CRUICKSHANK
THECONVERSATION.COM

Millions of people across the world have been infected with SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. Countries are also now embarking on massive vaccination campaigns to control the virus and protect their most vulnerable citizens. One of the biggest questions remaining is whether vaccination and/or prior infection with SARS-CoV-2 offers lasting protection against this deadly virus. The good news is that immunology is at last revealing some clues.

To understand whether immunity is possible - and why this has even been questioned - it is important to consider the nature of SARS-CoV-2. It is a betacoronavirus, and several betacoronaviruses already circulate widely in humans - they are most familiar to us as a cause of the common cold. However, immunity to cold-causing viruses is not long-lasting, leading many researchers to question whether longer term immunity to SARS-CoV-2 is possible.

However, studies considering the closely related betacoronaviruses that cause the diseases Mers and Sars offer a glimmer of hope. With these viruses, immunity has proved more durable. Could this be true for immunity to SARS-CoV-2 too?

WELL-TRAINED PROTECTION

The first of the body's immune cells to respond to an infection are designed to attack the invading substances to try to control the infection's spread and limit the damage done. The immune cells that respond later that are responsible for immunity are known as lymphocytes, which include B cells and T cells. Lymphocytes need time to learn to identify the threat that they are facing, but once trained they can be rapidly deployed to seek and destroy the virus.

Our T cells and B cells work together to combat infection, but they have quite different functions that enable them to deal with a huge variety of threats. B cells make antibodies that neutralise infections. T cells are broadly divided into two types - T helper cells and cytotoxic T cells. Cytotoxic T cells directly kill viruses and cells that viruses have infected. T helper cells support the functioning of B cells and cytotoxic T cells. Collectively these are known as "effector" cells.

Studies have now demonstrated the critical role that these effector cells play in the fight against COVID-19. Once the infection is gone, these cells should then die off in order to avoid causing excessive damage in the body.

But some effector cells persist. In an early piece of research yet to be reviewed by other scientists, functional T cells have been detected six months after infection. Similarly, even patients who have had mild COVID-19 have detectable antibodies six to nine months after infection. However, antibodies do wane over time, so these antibodies against SARS-CoV-2 could eventually disappear.

REMEMBERING THE DANGER

Such discoveries raise real optimism about protection from reinfection. But what happens if or when effector lymphocyte levels finally drop off? Well, our immune system has another trick up its sleeve to protect us for the long term, even after people's effector cells and antibody levels have fallen. Once lymphocytes have been trained to deal with a virus, a pool of the cells remember it and are kept for the future. These "memory" cells can then be rapidly deployed if the threat is encountered again.

Memory cells are incredibly powerful tools for our immune system and can be very long-lived, with studies showing memory B cells for smallpox persisting at least 60 years after

vaccination and for Spanish flu at least 90 years after the 1918 pandemic. In order to understand whether long-term immunity to SARS-CoV-2 is possible, it's therefore critical to consider not just effector cells but all types of memory cells - B, T helper and cytotoxic T memory cells.

Fortunately, memory cells can be identified by specific structures and proteins that they express on their surfaces, enabling researchers to distinguish them from effector cells. Now that COVID-19 has been with us for a year, researchers are becoming able to make great leaps in understanding about memory responses to COVID-19. Evidence is emerging of memory T cell responses lasting six to nine months after infection, and a recent preprint study (yet to be reviewed by other scientists) has also identified what appear to be memory B cell responses.

Studies have also been investigating whether prior exposure to the virus confers protection, with research showing that in the UK's second wave, previously infected health workers were either completely protected from reinfection or were asymptomatic if they picked up the virus again. Such observational studies give real hope for the durability and potential of protective immunity.

We still have much to learn about the immunology of COVID-19, but the pace of research is astounding, and the more we learn, the more we are empowered to beat this virus. Our immune system is incredibly powerful, and these studies showing persistent immune responses nine months after infection are real cause for celebration. They give us confidence that, with vaccination, we have a real chance to win the war against COVID-19.

[the writer is Professor in Biomedical Sciences, University of Manchester]

“Misinformation”: Congress slams BJP’s JP Nadda over Assam Tribes claim

GUWAHATI, 12 JAN [NDTV]: The Congress in poll-bound Assam has criticised BJP national president JP Nadda for claiming that the centre has granted Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to six communities in the state, when consultation with stakeholders was still on.

Congress leaders called Mr Nadda’s statement “uninformed” and “unfortunate”, and accused the ruling party of running the show by “spewing misinformation and lies”.

Mr Nadda made the statement while addressing BJP’s first Vijay Mahasabha (victory rally) - a campaign launched ahead of Assam Assembly elections due this April - in Cachar district’s Silchar town.

“The BJP government has identified the plight of the six communities and granted them ST status without affecting any other tribes of the state. Congress never showed such courage,” he had said flanked by Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, senior minister



Himanta Biswa Sarma, and state BJP president Ranjeet Kumar Dass, besides others.

As per the latest update on the grant of ST status to the six communities - Koch Rajbongshi, Tai Ahom, Chutia, Matak, Moran and Tea Tribes - the issue was still pending.

A Group of Ministers (GoM), constituted by the Assam government for preparing modalities to grant ST status, was

reportedly yet to submit its final findings, which would then be sent to the central government.

“It is very unfortunate that the BJP president would make such an uninformed comment. I can tell you that a bill to grant ST status to the six communities has not even been tabled in the Parliament and has thus not received the President’s nod. Without passing a bill to the effect, how can BJP

government grant them ST status?” Congress member in the Rajya Sabha and party’s state unit chief Ripun Bora questioned.

He added that either Mr Nadda was uninformed or despite knowing the truth, he had misled the people of Assam for political mileage.

“In either sense, it is very unfortunate,” he said.

“Such incorrect

information coming from the president of a ruling national party makes it very clear that the BJP is indeed run by spewing misinformation and lies,” another Congress parliamentarian Pradyut Bordoloi said.

He further appealed to all leaders of the six communities, who have been “fighting for the ST status to question the basis for the party’s comment”.

Assam reports 45 new COVID-19 cases, three more deaths

GUWAHATI, JAN 11 (PTI): Assam’s COVID-19 tally rose to 2,16,635 on Monday as 45 more people tested positive for the infection, while three fresh fatalities pushed the death toll to 1,064, a bulletin issued by the National Health Mission said.

At least 64 patients were cured of the disease and discharged from hospitals during

the day, taking the total number of recoveries to 2,12,567, it said.

The recovery rate among coronavirus patients in the state stands at 98.1 per cent.

The current rate of fatality due to the infection is at 0.49 per cent, while 1,347 COVID patients have died for other reasons, the bulletin said.

The forty-five new cases were detected from 19,033 sample tests conducted during the day with a positivity rate of 0.24 per cent.

Assam now has 3,001 active cases, and three COVID patients have migrated to other states.

The northeastern state has so far conducted 61,98,370 sample tests.

10 more COVID-19 cases push Nagaland’s tally to 11,997



KOHIMA, JAN 12 (PTI): Nagaland’s COVID-19 tally rose to 11,997 as 10 more persons tested positive for the infection, state Health Minister S Pangnyu Phom said on Tuesday.

Twelve more people were cured of the disease, taking the total number of COVID-19 recoveries in the state to 11,667, he said.

“10+ve cases of #COVID-19 have been detected today.

Dimapur- 6, Kohima- Mokokchung- 2 each. Also 12 +ve patients have recovered. Dimapur- 6, Kohima- 5, Kiphire- 1,” the minister said in a tweet.

Altogether 85 people have succumbed to the infection so far, of which 74 are due to contagion and 10 had comorbid conditions while one is under investigation, a health department official said. Another 140 patients have migrated to other states, he said.

Dimapur has reported 6,443 COVID-19 cases followed by Kohima (3,730), Mon (604), Peren (504), Tuensang (244), Mokokchung (184), Zunheboto (142), Phek (47), Kiphire (41), Wokha (39) and Longleng (19).

Of the total COVID-19

cases in the state 4,921 are traced contacts, 4,659 are armed forces or security personnel, 1,846 returnees from other states and 571 frontline workers, he said.

Nagaland now has 105 active COVID-19 cases with 64 patients in Dimapur followed by Kohima (30), Mokokchung (7), Peren (2), Mon (1) and Longleng (1), the official said.

The state has tested 1,22,223 samples for COVID-19 till date, including 72,715 through RT-PCR, 36,879 on TrueNat and 12,629 on Rapid Antigen Test, the official added.

Webinar on effective Covid-19 vaccination process

GANGTOK, 12 JAN (PIB):

Technology and Knowledge Infrastructure to be vital and crucial for effective Covid Vaccination Process, experts opined in a Webinar organised by Press Information Bureau, Guwahati on the topic ‘Strategic Infrastructure endeavour for effective Covid-19 Vaccination Process’ here today. Experts from Medical along with academicians deliberated and discussed about Covid-19 Vaccination process and its awareness from medical, psychological, academic, societal and policy perspective.

Talking about a strategic Infrastructure for Covid-19 Vaccination process, MS(Surgery), DrManzoor Ahmad, ZVM Unani Medical College and Hospital, Pune talked about capacity to store Covid vaccine and transportation of vaccines at an apt temperature. He said that India runs one of the largest immunization programme in the world, with emphasis

to vaccination for more than 26 million babies born and 29 million pregnant women. He said that quintessentially the programme mechanisms are being strengthened to effectively tackle the huge and diverse population of the country.

With optimism, Psychologist and Clinical Hypnotherapist, Sayantani Sinha said that as various phases of vaccine trials were done for safety and efficacy so Covid vaccine introduction she opined would be as effective as one introduced by any other country. She said that in that endeavour doctors and scientists of India have done an arduous work with technology and science playing a vital component. She said that also in the communication and awareness perspective, technology would be of high-priority.

HoD, Sunil Kalai, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication,

Tripura University, Suryamaninagar, Agartala, Tripura said that technological and scientific infrastructure has helped the medical fraternity to have a Covid vaccine in the first instance. He said that technology would further facilitate the vaccination process. He said that awareness programme such as PIB webinars are technology endeavours in that direction and information communication is going to be vital and crucial so that timely information reaches all the citizens of the country.

Advocate Delhi High Court, Abdur Rahman Mallick said that during this Covid-19 scenario, the work culture and work environment has also metamorphosis with technology. He said that justice delivery systems have become system driven and eCourts and documentation in system is changing the arena of law and justice. He said that medical profession has also

become more supple and nimble with technology driving the information communication in the medication process. Talking about a common question as to how anyone would be aware whether that person would be eligible for vaccination, he said that technology would be playing its vital role in awareness as well as communication during vaccination. He said that eligible beneficiaries would be informed via mobile numbers regarding the Health Facility for vaccination and its scheduled time.

The informative and knowledge webinar was planned and coordinated by Joint Director (M&C), Samrat Bandyopadhyay, PIB, Guwahati. Senior officers of PIB were present in webinar.

Field Exhibition Officer, Hiramani Das, Regional Outreach Bureau, Guwahati concluded with the summary talking about the webinar which delved into details on the various aspects of the topic such as

Covid information management including in the arena of health, efficacy of communication, among others. The interactive Webinar has enthusiastic participation of students, academicians and medical fraternity as they said that this information cum knowledge Webinar would help them in informed decision making and to be aware about the Covid precaution and about Vaccination process.

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

Odisha logs 225 new COVID-19 cases, two more deaths

BHUBANESWAR, JAN 12 (PTI): Odisha’s COVID-19 tally on Tuesday mounted to 3,32,331 as 225 more people tested positive for the disease, while two fresh fatalities pushed the death toll to 1,894, a health department official said.

Of the new cases, 131 were reported from various quarantine

centres and 94 detected during contact tracing. Sundargarh district recorded the highest number of fresh cases at 38, followed by Bargarh and Bolangir at 16 each.

Five districts - Dhenkanal, Kendrapara, Koraput, Malkangiri and Nabarangpur - did not report any new case since Monday.

Two persons from Khurda and Ganjam succumbed to the infection while under treatment in hospitals, the official said.

Fifty-three COVID-19 patients have died due to comorbidities, he said.

Khurda district, of which state capital Bhubaneswar is a part, accounted for 330 fatalities, followed by Ganjam (248),

Sundargarh (169), Cuttack (140) and Puri (117).

Odisha now has 2,113 active cases, while 3,28,271 patients have so far recovered from the disease.

The state has so far conducted over 72.29 lakh sample tests for COVID-19, including 28,212 on Monday, and the positivity rate stands at 4.6 per cent.

CoMSO agitation over ILP, unresolved issues on M’laya Day

SHILLONG, JAN 11 [SHILLONGTIMES]: The Confederation of Meghalaya Social Organisations (CoMSO) has decided stage a state-wide agitation over various unresolved issues, including ILP, on January 21, a day when Meghalaya turns 49.

Speaking to reporters here on Monday, CoMSO chairman Robert June

Kharjhrin said, “We will agitate on January 21 in Shillong and other parts of the state. It is sad to see that in all these 49 years there are many issues that are pending, be it ILP, border problems, Harijan Colony (relocation of residents) and incorporation of Khasi language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.”

“We are not opposing Meghalaya Day and we are not against people celebrating it,” Kharjhrin said.

He further said members of the organisation would meet stakeholders across the state to strengthen the movement and put pressure on the state government to implement ILP besides

asking the Governor to give his assent to the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Amendment Bill.

He said the intention of CoMSO was to enhance participation of people in the movement for ILP. “Besides, the 60 MLAs can also agitate in Delhi to press for the ILP demand,” Kharjhrin said.

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Patriots coach Belichick declines Medal of Freedom from Trump

TIM MCLAUGHLIN BOSTON, 12 JAN (REUTERS): New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick said on Monday he has decided not to accept the Medal of Freedom from U.S. President Donald Trump in the wake of last week's siege of the Capitol by the president's supporters.

Politico reported on Sunday that Trump had planned to bestow the highest civilian honor on Belichick.

Trump faces an attempt by Congressional Democrats to remove him from office after he urged supporters to march on the Capitol during a rally where he repeated false claims that the Nov. 3 election was "rigged" against him.

At least five people died in the attack.

"I was offered the opportunity to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom," Belichick said in a statement. "Subsequently, the tragic events of last week occurred and the decision has been made not to move forward with the award."

Belichick said above all he was an American citizen "with great reverence for our nation's values, freedom and democracy."

"I know I also represent my family and the New England Patriots team," he continued. "...Remaining true to the people, team and country I love outweigh the benefits of any individual award."

The White House was not immediately available for comment.

News that Belichick was being lined up for the Medal of Freedom sparked widespread negative reaction on social media.

"If this story about Bill Belichick accepting a Medal of Freedom from the disgraced occupant of the White House is true, he's dead to me," Bob Ryan, a Boston Globe sports columnist emeritus, wrote on Twitter. "Say it ain't so, Bill."

In 2016, Trump read a glowing letter from Belichick while on the campaign trail, in which the coach praised his courage and leadership.

It was criticized by some fans but did not seem to affect Belichick's standing with players in the locker room. Robert Kraft, owner of the Patriots, is also friendly with Trump.

The U.S. president has had a long-running fight with the National Football League over players kneeling during the national anthem, a gesture that was first adopted by some Black players to protest against racial disparities in the criminal justice system.

Trump called on the league to ban players from kneeling in protest.

In the Patriots' home state of Massachusetts, Trump received only 32% of votes cast in the presidential election in November.

Joe Biden is set to be sworn in as the 46th U.S. president on Jan. 20.

Australia let themselves down in search of victory over India

GEOFF LEMON SYDNEY, 12 JAN [THEGUARDIAN]: There is nothing like a Test on the line going deep into its fifth day. It's a slow-growing excitement that spreads through you into grandly hidden proportions, like a citadel of underground fungus beneath a forest. Fifth days are special because they're tough. After all the strain and heat and effort, four nights of easing sore bodies into bed, the game asks for its denouement.

Those batting find the pitch at its worst, chance at its most capricious. Those bowling have their weariness consume their skill. We too readily conflate sporting achievement with courage, but here it applies.

India were brave against Australia at the SCG on Monday. Having been smashed up for 36 runs in Adelaide, they came back to win in Melbourne. Having lost seven, eight, nine senior players through the tour to absence and injury, they faced the last day of the third Test two wickets down, 309 runs behind.

Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane were the only two with the credentials to bat all day. The latter was out in the second over. But Pujara was brave in the way he dug in for 205 balls



and Rishabh Pant was a different kind of brave in the way he came up the order to bat at No 5, still with a badly bruised arm from the first innings, and counterattacked audaciously for 97.

The prospect of a miracle win rose and then fell and from then on a different bravery was required. Hanuma Vihari had a bad hamstring, Ravichandran Ashwin has had a bad tour with the bat, yet somehow they faced a battering from short bowling to bat through 258 balls and saved the game. Australia's bowlers were brave too: the 48 luckless overs sent down by Nathan Lyon, the ferocious accuracy from Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood, and the late threat from Mitchell Starc.

But none of the

toughness was conveyed by Tim Paine, the wicketkeeping captain standing up to the stumps behind Ashwin during a Lyon over late in the day, directing a stream of petty sniping into the cars and headphones and living rooms of millions of people around the world.

The chat isn't worth quoting: start with cricketing threats in the classless vein of Michael Clarke, take a turn into childish territory about no friends and end by carrying on about Ashwin being unwanted by T20 teams. On the historical spectrum of sledging this was probably mild enough to be menthol. But it jarred nonetheless because it was Paine, the captain who for three years has driven the effort to build a better reputation and

meet a better standard. Under the duress of a Test win slipping away, his standard slipped with it.

It's all part of the one sorry tradition. Last week, Cricket Australia's website published a piece about a teenage Shane Watson's first-class debut for Tasmania in 2001, in which he was verbally abused non-stop with the Queensland captain, Stuart Law, the antagonist. Cricket's magical thinking says that sharing a beer after a game can wash away any sins committed during it. In relating how Watson declined to offer this absolution, Law managed to make himself sound like the aggrieved party.

This week Warne and Andrew Symonds on Fox Sports didn't realise they were on air while disdaining current player Marnus Labuschagne. For Labuschagne's part, he was insufferable through the Sydney Test, leading appeals with wordless screams, chuntering endlessly from short-leg, no longer the shy new kid but feeling like the cock of the walk.

Maybe we'd have less veneration for players' past if we'd had to sit through all their inane verbiage, but this is the age we live in. Paine knows where the stump

is. He's used them to his advantage, winning fans with family-friendly chatter when India toured two years ago. He knew they would pick him up this time.

You would think that during a match when the major story was Indian players being abused from the stands, and making their own stand against it, and when the previous evening Ashwin had been their eloquent spokesman on how hurtful that was – you would think that an Australian hopping into him the very next day would obviously be a terrible look.

Playing late on the fifth day is hard. The cumulative strain comes to bear. Paine had dropped two catches and would soon drop another. He was trying to manage his bowlers and was having the now-familiar dread that a Test win was slipping away. He was losing his rag.

All of that will be offered by way of excuse, but the hard moments are when your ideals are tested. When repairing a reputation, the work of years can be undone in seconds. Over those years, Australia's captain has kept saying his team wants to play tough cricket, but this time he couldn't keep it together when the cricket got tough.

Breaking the silence on diversity has put cricket on hopeful ground

EBONY BRENT LONDON, 12 JAN [THEGUARDIAN]: The past year has thrown up challenges like no other in our lifetimes, but as we look ahead hopefully to the return of some kind of normality in 2021, to the delayed launch of the Hundred, a hectic international schedule for England's men including home and away series against India, and the start of a period of real excitement and potential in the women's game, I'm optimistic. We've had a hard reset, but we might just come out of it better positioned to face the future.

When we first went into lockdown and all sport temporarily ended my fear was that the women's game would be completely parked until the crisis was over; with all attention going to more high-profile action. In many sports it did feel like women were sent to the back of the queue, for obvious commercial reasons, but in cricket what I saw was a shift in the narrative.

We have come a long way over the past three or four years and instead of sidelining women the England and Wales Cricket Board delivered. Arranging a five-match Twenty20 series against West Indies at the last minute, doing everything possible to get it on, showed how far the game has already come. At Surrey we played a women's game under lights before any men's cricket was played and to be sitting in meetings where the chief executive was insisting the women's game had to be back was a different conversation to the one we would have had five years ago.

There has been powerful progress, women's sport is now valued, valuable and necessary and the game has the massive potential boost of women's cricket at the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham next year; a World Cup that has been rescheduled from next month to early in 2022 and a Twenty20 World Cup in 2023.

Internationally, there are some issues. Australia have really kicked on in the past few years, having a good domestic structure in place and followed that with investment in the game. England are playing catch-up, with a good head coach in Lisa Keightley and a chance to get the formula right. But the pandemic has caused more problems elsewhere: Australia got in a full Big Bash, India had the Women's T20 Challenge, the ECB organised a 50-over tournament and the West Indies tour so the fully funded nations, even in the most challenging time, had some high-quality domestic and international cricket. The fear is the gap between the top three nations and the rest has been extended. Support has to be built in from governing bodies to ensure it doesn't become too big, which could significantly damage the game. The big advance over the past year was with diversity – not so much taking action, but breaking the silence. This is something I experienced and I had never spoken about racism in the way I did in July, when Michael Holding and I did a piece

for Sky. I have to give a lot of credit to Mikey – I wouldn't have done it without him. He has the strength of character; which he demonstrated throughout his career, and a depth of experience that gave me the support I needed to speak up. Sky deserve credit as well, for making the decision to use its platform to start that conversation. Once I had been enabled to speak, through Mikey and through a global movement that was building at the time, I sent messages of support to others, such as Azeem Rafiq, who were then able to open up.

The hardest thing is to speak in isolation and fear exposure, but the events of 2020 allowed a number of voices to be heard. Lungi Ngidi spoke about his experience in South Africa, Ish Sodhi about his in New Zealand. It was a year for discussion, a chance to speak and to be listened to, and the ECB, like governing bodies across the world, was forced to pay attention. That led to some difficult conversations, and many of those continue, but you can't improve without that.

One thing we need in future is to move away from BAME as a reporting tool and talk about the more specific needs of individual communities. The Pakistani community has different needs to the Indian community, for example, but in cricket inequality of opportunity is not limited to skin colour. We don't talk about the white working-class enough; in Surrey we have a massive Portuguese community who we need to get involved. Counties need to formulate clear plans for how they're going to engage with their local communities.

We are miles behind football, which has its own problems but does have access, reach and engagement. Everybody feels football is a game for them and we need to get cricket to a place where it starts to feel reflective of society. The ECB is setting up an independent commission to investigate inequality and discrimination, which is a smart move because it allows new voices to come in and challenge the game rather than just keeping the old echo chamber going. It will be a long and difficult journey, but cricket has such great potential if it can become more representative.

The pandemic has made this task even more challenging, because people became less active. Lower socio-economic and more ethnically diverse communities have suffered in particular from the reduction in school and community sport that successive lockdowns forced upon us. At Surrey we saw real excitement and engagement in our community programmes even though they were stop-start, and we received £540,000 funding from Sport England, which will allow us to go further in the future, but 2020 was extremely challenging for community sport. I have read heartbreaking reports from Sport England about the impact this will have not just on physical fitness but on mental health and self-esteem.

Bayern fall to old nemesis as Neuhaus caps glorious Gladbach comeback

ANDY RASSELL BERLIN, 12 JAN [THEGUARDIAN]: Few would have blamed Marco Rose for being self-congratulatory or even a bit smug. That is not really the Borussia Mönchengladbach coach's style, so he went for plainly, patiently and concisely explaining his tactical plan that worked to perfection for the benefit of viewers after the match. A plan, by the way, that worked on not just any opponents, but on Bayern Munich.

Any time Bayern stumble it's a shock, and particularly so in the thus far imperious Hansi Flick era. There are, however, degrees of shocks and if any team was going to not just wrestle the champions to the floor, but pin them down, it was almost certainly going to be Gladbach. After Friday night's meeting they have now won six and drawn one of their last dozen meetings with Bayern, an unparalleled and quite extraordinary achievement in this reign of bigger-than-ever-before turbo dominance. It was the eighth time Gladbach have beaten Bayern since 2011 overall.

This, however, was that little bit more remarkable. Bayern had rolled ominously into a two-goal lead in a little more than 25 minutes, and we all know how it normally goes from there. Maybe Flick's team felt a touch of vertigo after going behind in their previous eight



Bundesliga matches (none of which they lost, by the way). If that sounds improbable, it is not much more so than the events that unfolded after Leon Goretzka's firm finish had put Bayern totally in charge.

Florian Neuhaus was the turnaround in microcosm, morphing from villain to hero in some 23 minutes of play either side of half-time. Just as Gladbach are perhaps the Bundesliga neutral's gourmet restaurant of choice, the 23-year-old is the peak of the connoisseur's tasting menu; stylish, elegant and dashing. So it was jarring to see him look so ungainly in lurching to concede the penalty from which Robert Lewandowski eventually netted the opener, a penalty that instinctively felt harsh as Harm Osmer needed VAR notification to spot Neuhaus's handball – "the ball touched no more than two fingertips," as Rheinische

Post's Jannik Sorgatz and Karsten Kellermann put it – though the midfielder made no excuses, calling it "stupid."

"I made up my mind not to dwell on it for long, but to just get on with my game," Neuhaus reflected afterwards with characteristic understatement. After a Jonas Hoffmann double brought the hosts level, it was Neuhaus who scored the winner, hitting a delicious, rising shot around Manuel Neuer from the edge of the area. The craft in the finish made it feel like a nod to the titanic Gladbach-Bayern struggles of the 1970s, an expression of high skill that was necessary to finish a top-class confrontation.

Neuhaus grew up in Bavaria to the west of Munich, the son of a big Bayern fan. He wondered aloud after the game if Neuhaus senior might have privately cursed his son's winning goal. If he did, he would have done

it with a smile.

Lars Stindl, though, had been even more integral to Gladbach's conquest, arguably having his best-ever season at 32 – and he was key to the coach's plan. The pre-match idea, Rose explained, had been that Hoffmann, nominally on the left, and second striker Stindl would broadly exchange spaces – Stindl dropping deep, as he does so well, to orchestrate, with Hoffmann's bursts forward from further back aiming to catch Bayern out. It couldn't have worked any better, with their combination on the two goals that brought Gladbach level the scheming made flesh. Stindl follows in a tradition of Gladbach forwards, like the legendary Raffael, who like to drop off and find space. It has at least partly informed their great successes over Bayern in recent years.

With some catchup

to the top four required, Rose now needs his team not to get carried away. Last season's early December win for Gladbach in this fixture – back in the days of a full Borussia-Park – was a rousing occasion. It was also followed by a very indifferent spell of form which saw Rose's men ousted from the top of the table and dumped out of the Europa League.

"We have to find sustainability and defend against every other team just as passionately and just as single-mindedly," said Rose. Bayern's defending could do with work too. The last time they conceded this many after 15 games was in 1981-82 – and the figure would be even worse without the excellent Neuer. That said, Flick and company won't face this Gladbach excellence every week. The question for Rose and his team is if the rest of the Bundesliga can face this Gladbach too.

1st US execution of female inmate in 67 years halted

MISSION, KAN. (AP): A judge has granted a stay in what was slated to be the U.S. government's first execution of a female inmate in nearly seven decades — a Kansas woman who killed an expectant mother in Missouri, cut the baby from her womb and passed off the newborn as her own.

Judge Patrick Hanlon granted the stay late Monday, citing the need to determine Montgomery's mental competence, reported the Topeka Capital-Journal. Lisa Montgomery faced execution Tuesday at the Federal Correctional Complex in Terre Haute, Indiana, just eight days before President-elect Joe Biden, an opponent of the federal death penalty, takes office.

Montgomery drove about 170 miles (273.59 kilometers) from her Melvern, Kansas, farmhouse to the northwest Missouri town of Skidmore under the guise of adopting a rat terrier puppy from Bobbie Jo Stinnett, a 23-year-old dog breeder. She strangled Stinnett with a rope before performing a crude cesarean and fleeing with the baby.

She was arrested the next day after showing off the premature infant, Victoria Jo, who is now 16 years old and hasn't spoken publicly about the tragedy.

"As we walked across the threshold our Amber Alert was scrolling



across the TV at that very moment," recalled Randy Strong, who was part of the northwest Missouri major case squad at the time.

He looked to his right and saw Montgomery holding the newborn and was awash in relief when she handed her over to law enforcement. The preceding hours had been a blur in which he photographed Stinnett's body and spent a sleepless night looking for clues — unsure of whether the baby was dead or alive and no idea what she looked like.

But then tips began arriving about Montgomery, who had a history of faking pregnancies and suddenly had a baby. Strong, now the sheriff of Nodaway County, where the killing happened, hopped in an unmarked car with another officer. He learned while en route that the email address fischer4kids@hotmail.com that was

used to set up the deadly meeting with Stinnett had been sent from a dial-up connection at Montgomery's home.

"I absolutely knew I was walking into the killer's home," recalled Strong, saying rat terriers ran around his feet as he approached her house. Like Stinnett, Montgomery also raised rat terriers.

Bobbie Jo Stinnett's mother, Becky Harper, sobbed as she told a Missouri dispatcher about stumbling across her daughter in a pool of blood, her womb slashed open and the child she had been carrying missing.

"It's like she exploded or something," Harper told the dispatcher on Dec. 16, 2004, during the desperate yet futile attempt to get help for her daughter.

Prosecutors said her motive was that Stinnett's ex-husband knew she had undergone

a tubal ligation that made her sterile and planned to reveal she was lying about being pregnant in an effort to get custody of two of their four children. Needing a baby before a fast-approaching court date, Montgomery turned her focus on Stinnett, whom she had met at dog shows.

Montgomery's lawyers, though, have argued that sexual abuse during Montgomery's childhood led to mental illness. Attorney Kelley Henry spoke in favor of Monday's decision, saying in a statement to the Capital-Journal that "Mrs. Montgomery has brain damage and severe mental illness that was exacerbated by the lifetime of sexual torture she suffered at the hands of caretakers."

Her stepfather denied the sexual abuse in videotaped testimony and said he didn't have a good memory when confronted with a transcript of a divorce

proceeding in which he admitted some physical abuse. Her mother testified that she never filed a police complaint because he had threatened her and her children.

But the jurors who heard the case, some crying through the gruesome testimony, disregarded the defense in convicting her of kidnapping resulting in death.

Prosecutors argued that Stinnett regained consciousness and tried to defend herself as Montgomery used a kitchen knife to cut the baby girl from her womb. Later that day, Montgomery called her husband to pick her up in the parking lot of a Long John Silver's in Topeka, Kansas, telling him she had delivered the baby earlier in the day at a nearby birthing center.

She eventually confessed, and the rope and bloody knife used to kill Stinnett were found in her car. A search of her computer showed she used it to research caesareans and order a birthing kit.

Stinnett's husband, Zeb, told jurors his world "crashed to an end" when he learned his wife was dead. He said he didn't return for months to the couple's home in Skidmore, a small farming community that earlier gained notoriety after the 1981 slaying of town bully Ken Rex McElroy in front of a crowd of

people who refused to implicate the killer or killers. That crime was chronicled in a book, "In Broad Daylight," as well as a TV movie, the film "Without Mercy" and the miniseries "No One Saw a Thing."

Recently, on Victoria Jo's birthday, he sent Strong, the sheriff, a message through Facebook Messenger thanking him.

"I just wept," Strong recalled. "He is going to constantly be reminded of this whether in his nightmares or somebody is going to call and want to interview him. The family doesn't want to be interviewed. They want to be left alone. The community of Skidmore has had a troubling past and history. They didn't want this. They didn't deserve this."

Montgomery originally was scheduled to be put to death on Dec. 8. But the execution was temporarily blocked after her attorneys contracted the coronavirus visiting her in prison.

The resumption of federal executions after a 17-year pause started on July 14. Anti-death penalty groups said President Donald Trump was pushing for executions prior to the November election in a cynical bid to burnish a reputation as a law-and-order leader.

U.S. officials have portrayed the executions as bringing long-delayed justice for victims and their families.

Malaysia under virus emergency in reprieve for embattled PM

KUALA LUMPUR, JAN 12 (AP): Malaysia's king on Tuesday approved a coronavirus emergency that will suspend parliament at least until August and halt any bids to seek a general election in a political reprieve for embattled Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin.

Muhyiddin assured citizens in a televised speech that the emergency was not a military coup and curfew will not be enforced. He said his civilian government will remain in charge during the emergency, that will last until August 1 or earlier depending on the situation.

The emergency declaration came as a surprise just a day after Muhyiddin announced that Malaysia's biggest city Kuala Lumpur, the administrative capital Putrajaya and five high-risk states will return to a near-lockdown from Wednesday for two weeks.

It also comes amid threats by the United Malays National Organisation, the largest party in the ruling coalition, to withdraw support from Muhyiddin so an early general election could be held. Many in UMNO are unhappy that the party is playing second fiddle to Muhyiddin's own Malay party.

Muhyiddin said he will call a general election

once the pandemic has eased when it is safe to hold polls.

Oh Ei Sun, a senior fellow at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, said most people could understand the need for movement curbs but an emergency declaration appeared overblown as it is unclear how that could help slow the virus spread.

It's very clearly a political move from the Muhyiddin side to preempt political challenges from both his rivals in his ruling coalition as well as the opposition," he said.

Malaysia last declared an emergency in 1969 after bloody racial riots that killed hundreds. The king, which can declare a state of emergency that allows the country to be governed through ordinances that cannot be challenged in court, had in October rejected Muhyiddin's request to declare an emergency.

King Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah said at the time that existing laws were sufficient to halt the virus spread. But in a palace statement, the monarch said he took into account public safety and the country's best interest in giving his consent after meeting Muhyiddin late Monday.

Malaysia's virus cases have spiralled from just over 15,000 three months ago to 138,224, including 555 deaths.

Uganda's opposition cites 'untold violence' before election

KAMPALA, UGANDA (AP): Opposition figures in Uganda are criticizing widespread violence by security forces ahead of Thursday's presidential election, while main challenger Bobi Wine said soldiers who raided his home Tuesday morning arrested a security guard and beat two gardeners badly.

"The terror, frankly, is unprecedented," said Kizza Besigye, a veteran opposition leader who challenged longtime President Yoweri Museveni in four elections. "Violence, terror seem to be scaled up with every coming election. This election has witnessed untold violence. It gets worse and worse by the day."

The army spokeswoman did not respond to a request for comment. The police spokesman was unavailable.

Wine, a popular singer and lawmaker whose real name is Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, spoke alongside other opposition figures in the capital, Kampala, on the last day of campaigning as they seek to deny Museveni another term.

The atmosphere is increasingly charged. The military is in charge of all security operations in the Kampala metropolitan area. Wine, who insisted his campaign is nonviolent, urged his supporters not to be intimidated by the security forces.

Wine and other leading opposition candidates said they had launched a concerted

effort to protect against vote-rigging at polling stations. They are urging their supporters to stay within 100 meters of polling stations rather than return home as the electoral commission is demanding. That means potential confrontations with security forces.

Police and military personnel now patrol the streets in parts of Kampala.

Ugandan authorities also appeared to shut down Facebook on Tuesday in retaliation over its decision to censor many Ugandan accounts linked to Museveni that were allegedly engaged in inauthentic behavior.

Many Ugandans said WhatsApp also was not working.

A presidential spokesman on Monday accused Facebook of meddling in the East African country's election.

A spokesman for the Uganda Communications Commission, the regulator, did not respond to requests for comment.

Ugandan authorities have asserted an urgent need to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in imposing restrictions on presidential candidates, including a ban on campaigns in Kampala and other urban areas.

Many among Wine's campaign team are now in detention. Wine has been arrested many times and sometimes beaten in the past year for alleged offenses such as disobeying lawful orders. He has not been convicted of any charges.

Bodies pile up at crematorium in Germany's virus hot spot

MEISSEN, GERMANY (AP): The caskets are stacked three high in the Meissen crematorium's somber memorial hall, piled up in empty offices and stored in hallways. Many are sealed with plastic wrapping, others are labeled "infection risk," "urgent" or simply "COVID."

A surge of coronavirus deaths in this corner of eastern Germany has boosted business for crematorium manager Joerg Schaldach and his staff, but nobody is celebrating.

"The situation is a little bit tense for us at the moment," Schaldach said as another undertaker's van pulled up outside.

The crematorium would typically have 70 to 100 caskets on site at this time of year, when the flu season takes its toll on the elderly.

"It's normal for more people to die in winter than in summer," said Schaldach. "That's always been the case."

Now he has 300 bodies waiting to be cremated and each day dozens more are delivered to the modernist building on a hill overlooking Meissen, an ancient town better known for its delicate porcelain and impressive Gothic castle.

On Monday, Meissen county once again took the unwanted lead in



Germany's COVID-19 tables, with an infection rate three times the national average. The state of Saxony, where Meissen is located, includes six of the 10 worst-hit counties in Germany.

Schaldach says the crematorium is doing its best to keep up with demand, firing up the twin furnaces every 45 minutes and managing 60 cremations a day.

"The ashes still end up in the right urn," he said.

But whereas staff would normally try to ensure the deceased look good for relatives to bid their final farewells, infection rules now mean the caskets of COVID victims have to remain shut throughout, making the entire process even harder for

those involved.

"It's our business, we've seen death many, many times," said Schaldach. "The problem we see is that the grieving relatives need our help. And at the moment, there's a greater need for words of consolation because they've given their deceased loved one to the ambulance and then they never see them again."

Some have linked Saxony's high infection rate to wider anti-government sentiment in a state where over a quarter voted for the far-right Alternative for Germany party at the last national election. Its lawmakers have objected to the need to wear masks, limits on people gathering and the closure of stores. A

few have even denied the existence of a pandemic outright.

Other commentators have noted the state's large number of elderly and its reliance on nursing home workers from the neighboring Czech Republic, where COVID-19 infections are even higher.

Officials in Meissen, including the head of the county administration, the local doctors association and the lawmaker representing the region in parliament, an ally of Chancellor Angela Merkel, all declined to be interviewed about the situation.

Saxony's governor, Michael Kretschmer, acknowledged in a recent interview with daily Freie Presse that he had underestimated the

impact of the pandemic in his state and paid too much attention to those calling for businesses and schools to remain open.

A video showing Kretschmer talking to anti-lockdown protesters outside his home Sunday ends with him walking away after one person dons a mask made to look like the German Imperial War Flag, a symbol favored by far-right extremists.

Schaldach, the crematorium manager, says most people in Saxony accept the rules. But he, too, has read comments on social media branding reports about bodies piling up at his crematorium as fake news.

"Those who believe in



SELLING IT! Selling Sunset star Christine Quinn glammed it up during a photoshoot for Cosmopolitan Magazine in Bel Air, California.

First look of 'Ashwatthama' out, Vicky Kaushal says exploring new technology alongside acting

MUMBAI, JAN 11 (PTI): The first look of the forthcoming science fiction feature 'Ashwatthama', fronted by Vicky Kaushal, was revealed by the makers on Monday and the actor said he is looking forward to start shooting for the project.

The film will see Kaushal playing the titular mythological character who was given the boon of immortality.

Directed by Aditya Dhar and produced by Ronnie Screwvala, "Ashwatthama" is described as a "futuristic sci-fi, based on a character from the chapter of Mahabharata".

As per the epic, Ashwatthama was the son of guru Dronacharya, who fought for the Kauravas in the battle of Kurukshetra.

Calling it Dhar's "dream project", Kaushal said "Ashwatthama" required the backing of Screwvala to bring the "spectacle" to the audiences. "It's going to be a new space for me as an actor, exploring the newest form of technology alongside acting. Can't wait to start the journey soon with this wonderful team," the 32-year-old actor said in a statement.

The first look was revealed to celebrate the

second anniversary of the trio's blockbuster, "Uri - The Surgical Strike".

The director said the team is working hard to create a never seen before "visual spectacle" and promised the project would not just be a film, "but an experience".

"More than the pressure, I am taking this film as a responsibility of telling this epic story, in the way it is meant to be told, and I hope, audiences shower the same love to 'Ashwatthama', as they did to 'Uri'," Dhar said.

Screwvala said the film, scheduled to go on floors this year, is the most ambitious movie he has ever attempted.

"It's high on story telling, deep in characters and revering in the world and visual effects. Language is not a barrier for this movie. We roll this year. I can't wait to see Aditya's vision translate to this spectacle on screen.

"I have to say this is by far the most ambitious movie I have attempted and we would love to see this one reach out to the widest audiences in India and around the world," the producer added.

your only limitation. So, instead of beating around the bush or blaming your circumstances for where you are, take charge. Make the required change. Move forward. For some of you, it may be time to pack your bags and leave a certain person, place, or situation behind. Trust that your guides are holding space for you and helping you cross over to calmer shores.

LEO: There are two options, Leo: To let the anger and the disillusionment poison you, or become the fuel that helps you rise higher and higher. You have so many mountains to climb. Don't give up now. For some of you, the crisis may be more existential than physical. In such a case, it's best to turn your gaze inwards. Meditation and other mindful practices will help you remember your inherent connection with Source.

VIRGO: Here's the thing, Virgo: you could have the best ideas in the world, yet there will be people who disagree with your point of view. It's not about winning or losing. It's not about impressing others either. It's simply about getting the work done and making sure the project moves forward. So, let your higher wisdom guide you to take the next step. For some of you, the chaos may manifest on the domestic front. As always, stay in your centre and respond from a place of love.

LIBRA: You're in a good place in your life, Libra, with a handful of accomplishments under your belt. But should that

Mindy Kaling teases 'Legally Blonde 3': We have a lot of fan favourites from original

LOS ANGELES, JAN 11 (PTI): Actor-writer Mindy Kaling, who is penning "Legally Blonde 3" with "Brooklyn Nine-Nine" co-creator Dan Goor, says the new movie will definitely pay homage to the original.

Hollywood star Reese Witherspoon will be returning as attorney Elle Woods for the much-anticipated MGM project and will also be producing via her Hello Sunshine banner along with franchise's original producer Marc Platt.

In an interview with Access, Kaling said as a fan of the franchise she was thrilled to come on board to write the upcoming installment.

I love the franchise so much. I love Elle Woods as a character and when Reese asked me to write it I was like, Absolutely!" the "Office" alum said.

The first "Legally Blonde" movie, which released in 2001, revolved around a lively sorority sister trying to win back her ex-boyfriend by getting a law degree from Harvard University. The film also featured Luke Wilson, Selma Blair, Matthew Davis, Victor Garber, Jennifer Coolidge and a Chihuahua named Bruiser.

Rasika Dugal wraps up 'Out of Love' season two

MUMBAI, JAN 11 (PTI): Actor Rasika Dugal on Monday said she has finished shooting for the second season of the web series "Out of Love".

She was shooting in Ooty and Coonoor for nearly two months.

On the first season of the show, the "Mirzapur" star played the role of a physician, Dr Meera Kapoor, who discovers her husband (Purab Kohli)'s infidelity and struggles to deal with this revelation.

Dugal said she is fortunate to have wrapped up the shoot despite the challenges posed by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

"Shooting for the second season of 'Out Of Love' felt like a work vacation



The sequel, "Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde", set in Washington, DC, came out in 2013.

Kaling teased that there will be a good dose of the iconic "bend and snap" and other fan favourites moments from the first two movies.

Bend and Snap is forever. We definitely have a lot of fan favorites from the original movie," she said.

Asked about the tentative release date of "Legally Blonde 3", Kaling said audiences will have to wait a bit longer for the movie as the team is still figuring out the ways to shoot the film amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"I don't know when we'll be able to shoot movies again but it would be great to, if Reese likes the script, shooting it this year would be awesome.



in the mountains! I am blessed to be living an actor's life and to be shooting outdoors despite the constraints and the challenges of the current times.

"I am glad that I got to be Dr Meera

Bruce Langley on 'American Gods' season three: More of rollercoaster than train ride

MUMBAI, JAN 11 (PTI): British actor Bruce Langley says the latest installment of his fantasy-drama series "American Gods" will feature several fan favourite moments as the third season falls back to the narrative of Neil Gaiman's book.

Based on Gaiman's 2001 novel of the same name, the series primarily revolves around a war brewing between the Old Gods of ancient mythological roots and the New Gods of modern technology.

While the first season of "American Gods" was received well with showrunner Bryan Fuller and Michael Green its follow-up saw a mixed response, which had "Lost" producer Jesse Alexander replacing the duo.

Last month, when the trailer for season three was out, Gaiman wrote on Facebook that the show is "back to the book and back on track. Judge for yourself."

In an interview with PTI over Zoom call from Los Angeles, Langley said season three closely follows Gaiman's structure of storytelling.

"The fan base of the show is really smart. In season three, we fall back to the narrative of the book. There are many fan favourite sections.

"We get to go back to Neil's structure. It's more of a rollercoaster than a train ride. If there's a track, we are back on it. I am excited for people to see it."

Charles Eglee, screenwriter and executive producer of "Dexter" and "The Walking Dead", serves as the showrunner for season three, currently streaming on Amazon Prime Video.

The ten-episode series brings back Langley as the Technical Boy- the new God of technology.

The 28-year-old British-born actor said there's pressure

to deliver on fans' expectations "to a certain extent" but believes Gaiman's contribution to "American Gods" is its biggest strength.

On season three, Gaiman is attached as the writer and executive producer.

"We have the benefit of coming from such a high pedigree in terms of our production team. We have, basically, Neil on tap when we need to. So I know while coming in that we will have some good stuff to play with as a foundation. That's a huge weight off your shoulders."

Before landing "American Gods" in 2017, Langley had featured in the 2015 horror-thriller "Deadly Waters" and was busy doing theatre in London.

The show gave him the opportunity to co-star alongside an ensemble of Ricky Whittle, Ian McShane, Emily Browning, Yetide Badaki among others.

"In season one, I went to work with people who I had watched on TV for years. But I went in with the attitude that it wouldn't be practical, in any way, shape or form to go in afraid or idolising them in any way. They are professionals there to do a job, exactly the way I am.

"It's my job to come in and do as good a job, if not more, than them. So I do all the work I need to do, before hand, to come in ready to play. Then it's just like dancing, it's good fun."

The actor credits the show for opening him to a global audience and said the impact of "American Gods" has been "huge" in his career.

"I have not worked on anything of this scale before. I've never been on a project with so many minds, hands and people working towards the same thing. It has been an amazing experience. It has changed my life," he added.

to help you get to the desired destination overnight. A Universal truth an earth sign like yourself understands rather well. 2021 sees you focusing on your long term goals and putting in the work that will help you expand your empire. You may not have the abundance you desire right now, and that's okay. You know that the crops you're cultivating with love and care will bear fruit in due course of time.

AQUARIUS: 2021 sees you become wiser (read: less frivolous) when it comes to your financial decisions. You're focusing on investing in your business and putting away your coins for the future. Trust that your cautiousness will help you feel more secure than you have in a long time. If you're thinking about reaching out to a larger audience, turn to social media. Yes, organic marketing will work well too as long as you're certain about the quality of your service/product.

PISCES: Not all relationships are meant to last forever. Some people merely come into our lives for a season, helping us get from one phase to the other. You're wise enough to recognise the transience of these connections. So, let go of that which has served its purpose with love. It will be easy for you to see yourself as a victim in this story. Remind yourself that things are happening for you (rather than *to* you) and keep moving forward.