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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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TNA Alumni Carnival brightens up weekend on campus



**SAGAR CHHETRI
GANGTOK, 07 MAR:**

The two-day Tashi Namgyal Academy Alumni Carnival 2021 ended with Sunday with a series of sporting and fun activities here at the TNA playground. The carnival, organised by Tashi Namgyal Academy Alumni Association [TNAAA], had attracted the participation of ex-students from the 1972 batch onwards to the present batch of 2021 and the campus was teeming with nostalgia and excitement over the weekend.

The VN Langer Cup, an Intra Alumni Futsal Tournament, was the main attraction of the carnival, participated in by 19 teams in the open category and eight sign-up in the veterans' category.

In the nail-biting final match in veterans' category, Remix-90s beat Batch of 98 [Men of Golden Temple] in a tie-break-

er after the final whistle blew with the score tied at 6-6.

In the tie-breaker decided through a penalty shoot-out, Remix 90s won 3-2. Doniv Rai was adjudged Man of the Series for his 8 goals in the tournament, while Devendra Gurung received the Man of the Final Match trophy in veterans' category.

Amok Football Club emerged champion in the open category by edging past Batch of 2021 in the tie-breaker. Regulation time had ended in a 3-3 draw and in the tie-breaker decided by a penalty shoot-out, Amok FC won 4-3.

The Man of the Series trophy was handed over to King Lepcha, while Sonam Zhamphel was adjudged Man of the Final Match in the open category.

The TNA Cricket Mela, which was organised in collaboration with Sikkim Cricket Association [SICA], also attracted

a good number of young cricket enthusiasts who participated in different promotional activities of the association.

Tenacian Wntreprenur Alumni Mela, an exhibition and sale of items produced by start-ups and entrepreneurs among the TNA alumni, also attracted a good number of people during the carnival.

In the online photography contest, Simon Subba was adjudged winner in category-1, while Sangay Tamang was declared winner in category-2.

The TNA Alumni Association was founded in 1986 and the present executive body took over in 2019.

TNA president, Jigme Namgyal, who was also the chairperson of the carnival, thanked every individual and organisation for their support towards ensuring a grand success of the carnival.

Bengal CM marches in Siliguri to protest runaway LPG and fuel price hikes

SMRITA KHAWAS

DARJEELING, 07 MAR:

In an irony that could not be missed, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee marched on foot in Siliguri today to protest the runaway hike in LPG and fuel prices while supporters in the thousands were bussed and trucked in to Brigade Ground in Kolkata where Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed a BJP campaign rally.

It is no secret that vehicular travel and even "gas cooking" have become expensive indulgences which the lay people are finding difficult to budget especially since inflation is picking up, earnings are scarce and jobs vanishing.

In Siliguri on Sunday, the Bengal CM led a "padyatra" of thousands of supporters, many of them, including the CM, holding cardboard replicas of LPG cylinders and condemning the BJP Govt's penchant to promise one thing, do something else and claim the opposite.

Non-subsidised liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) prices were most recently hiked by Rs 25 on 01 March, 2021. In February 2021, LPG prices were hiked almost three times.

The hike in LPG cooking gas rates comes at a time when the prices of petrol and diesel have touched all-time highs and petrol is Rs 100 a litre in some cities.

Explaining the reason behind the protest march, the CM said that "massive demonstrations" need to be organized to "make our voices heard."



"He says there is no poriborton in Bengal, poriborton in Delhi. The prime minister is lying everyday. Before election Ujjwala, after election there's jumla," she said.

The rally started at 2PM from Mallaguri in Siliguri, and crossing Mahananda via Hillcart Road, proceeded to Mahatma Gandhi Chowk and ended at Hashmi Chowk with the slogan, "Mahangi Gas Aur Mahanga Tael, BJP Har Kaam Mein Fail."

Ms Banerjee, in a public address, tore in the BJP Government at the Centre and claimed that the central government was attacking both the kitchens and the livelihoods of the people with the continuing hike in prices of cooking gas and fuel.

She also mocked the narciss-

ism of the PM in allowing the world's largest stadium named after Sardar Patel to be renamed Narendra Modi Stadium and accused the BJP of working exclusively in the interest of its corporate sponsors at the cost of interests of the common people.

She also reminded the people about the condition of women in BJP-ruled states and how atrocities were rampant there because of the saffron party's toxic attitude which respects neither women nor democracy.

She also played on Bengali sentiments by pointing out the BJP obsession with changing names and seeding divisions. "If Bengal is handed over to the BJP, then the BJP will split it again," she said.

Last month, the West Bengal CM had arrived to work on an electric scooter to drive home the point on spiralling fuel prices.

"Kerosene is not available. One crore people in Bengal use it. Petrol-diesel (prices are) up. Gas up...even last night. That's why I decided to take the scooter to work," she had said at the time.

"Modi is selling the country. This government is anti-people, anti-women, anti-farmer, and anti-young generation. We want this government to go," she stressed.

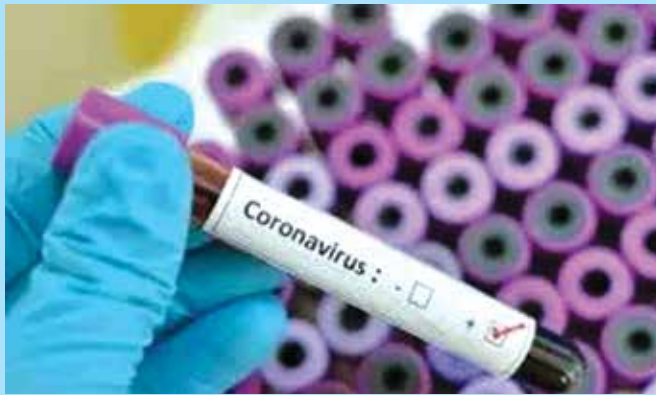
Elections to West Bengal's 294-seat Assembly are scheduled to be held in eight phases from March 27 to April 29 and the results will be declared on May 2.

7 new detections end Sikkim's fortnight-long record of under-50 active cases

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 07 MAR:**

After having remained below-50 for nearly a fortnight, the number of active cases of Covid-19 reached 50 in Sikkim again on Sunday with seven new cases being reported in the past 24 hours. The number of active cases in Sikkim had dropped below 50 on 22 Feb and had remained in that zone, even falling below 30 for a while, until today.

That said, the number of recovered cases also stands at a reassuring 5,892 with one person being discharged from isolation during the same 24 hours. Sikkim's



tally of confirmed cases of COVID-19 now stands at 6,174. This number includes positive cases which have migrated as well.

In his daily health bulletin on Sunday, Health Department State IEC Officer,

Sonam Gyaltsen Bhutia informed that the seven new cases were picked up in the testing of 204 samples on Saturday.

Of these seven, six were detected in RT-PCR testing of 176 samples, while one was

found in rapid antigen testing of 21 samples.

Among the new cases are two persons from below the Law College at Burtuk and one from Enchey Compound, Tibet Road, one person from Sang and one from Gelling-Baiguney.

While three of the new cases are from Gangtok, they were working in North District and authorities there have been informed to undertake contact tracing there.

Mr Bhutia added that a 26-year-old female from Sichey has also tested positive for COVID-19 but could not be contacted on the phone number provided by her.



**SHRI RAMASAMY MEMORIAL
UNIVERSITY SIKKIM**

NOTIFICATION

We are pleased to inform that the
2nd Convocation of SRM University
Sikkim is scheduled as under:

**Venue: Manan Bhavan, Development Area,
Gangtok, Sikkim**

**Date/Day/Time: 13th March 2021/
Saturday/11.00 a.m.**

**Registrar
SRM University Sikkim
5th Mile, Tadong, Gangtok - 737102
Phone: +91 3592231198, +91-3593331666, +91-3592232666**

WORLD GLAUCOMA WEEK

7TH TO 13TH MARCH 2021



**HEALTH & FAMILY WELFARE DEPARTMENT
GOVERNMENT OF SIKKIM**



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Former panchayats felicitated at SKM panchayat cell's coordination meet for Gnathang-Machong

SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 07 MAR:

Sikkim Krantikari Morcha's panchayat cell convened a coordination meeting for Gnathang-Machong constituency at the Pakyong community hall on Sunday.

An SKM press release issued by its general secretary [press & publicity], Boom Tshering Yonzon, informs that during the meeting, former and sitting Zilla Panchayat and panchayat members were felicitated for their "tireless contributions" towards the upliftment of society during their respective tenures in office.

The meeting had SKM in-charge for Gnathang-Machong constituency, Tshering Bhutia, as chief guest and was also attended by SKM vice-president in-charge [Panchayat Cell], Tenzing Norbu Lamtha, who is also the Advisor to In-



formation Technology Department, Advisor to SF & CS, Inching Bhutia, Advisor Cooperation Department, JB Basnet, and Chairperson Culture Board, Sonam Sherpa.

The release informs that the party honored former Zilla Panchayat, Damdi Bhutia, former Panchayats, Ari Bahadur Gurung and Pem Chuki Bhutia and sitting panchayat since the year 2000, Sangay Bhutia for their contributions to-

wards society.

The SKM Panchayat Cell vice president in-charge, Tenzing Norbu Lamtha, in his address, appealed to the Zilla and Gram Panchayats of Gnathang Machong constituency to work together for the betterment of the constituency and its people.

He also highlighted the amendments made to the Sikkim Panchayat Act by the SKM Government in March 2020

freeing panchayats from political parties by making panchayat elections non-partisan.

He highlighted that Chief Minister PS Tamang delivered on his promise to abolish political party based Panchayati Raj Institutions due to which political parties can no longer field candidates in Panchayat elections.

"We are very sure this will usher true democracy to grassroots governance and also show

how serious the present government is towards fulfilling promises made to the people of Sikkim," he added. The release informs that the meeting was also attended by SKM panchayat cell president, Bal Govind Rasaily, general secretary Karma Tshering Bhutia and other executive members, senior leaders and workers of the party along with sitting and former Zilla Panchayats, Panchayat Presidents and Panchayat members.

"PM has time for Bengal rally but not for protesting farmers": Sharad Pawar

RANCHI, 07 MAR: Targeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his public rally in poll-bound West Bengal, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) chief Sharad Pawar on Sunday said the Prime Minister has time to go to Kolkata but has no time to visit farmers in Delhi who have been protesting against farm laws since November last year.

Mr Pawar alleged that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is spreading "communal poison" in the country.

"The Centre's respon-



sibility is to establish brotherhood, but BJP spreading communal poison in the country. Farmers have been protesting for 100 days, PM has time to go to Kolkata, rally against the West

Bengal government, but no time to visit farmers in Delhi," Mr Pawar said while addressing a state-level party workers' meet at the Harmu ground, Ranchi along with the national office

bearers of the party.

Mr Pawar's comment comes in the light of PM Modi's rally at Brigade Parade ground in Kolkata today.

The NCP chief alleged that the Central govern-

ment is using central agencies to suppress the voices of Opposition in the states, where BJP is not in power.

"The Central government in a way that they use CBI, ED and other agencies to suppress Opposition voices in the states where they are not in the power. All the ministers of the central government are busy campaigning in poll-bound states and the government is misusing the agencies in those states too," he said.

"Rowdy" Indian passenger forces Paris-New Delhi flight to make emergency landing

LONDON, 07 MAR [PTI]: A "rowdy" Indian passenger on board an Air France flight from Ghana via Paris to New Delhi forced the plane to make an emergency landing at Bulgaria's capital, according to a media report.

The Indian national, whose identity was not made public, has been detained for 72 hours, Bulgarian News Agency BTA quoted Sofia City Prosecutor Iliana Kirilova as saying on Saturday.

"After the troublemaker's detention, the



flight proceeded to its destination," he said.

The Indian has been charged with endangering the safety of an aircraft while airborne, said Ivailo Angelov of the National Investigation Service.

If convicted, he faces

from 5 to 10 years' imprisonment, the report said.

The Indian national has been provided with a court-appointed defence lawyer and an interpreter, the report said, adding that the Embassy of India in Bulgaria has been in-

formed.

The Indian, whose motives are being clarified, rampaged right from the beginning of the flight but did not resist arrest at Sofia Airport, the report said.

"He realises what he has done but does not

behave quite adequately," Angelov said.

The report said that the "Air France flight overflying Bulgaria en route from Ghana via Paris to New Delhi had to make an emergency landing at Sofia Airport around 5 PM (local time) on Friday because of a rowdy passenger on board".

Commissioner Teodor Cheshmedjiev, Chief of the Border Police Department at Sofia Airport, said that the request for the emergency landing was received at 4:10 PM on Friday.

New York cinemas reopen, brightening outlook for theaters

NEW YORK (AP): After growing cobwebs for nearly a year, movie theaters in New York City reopen Friday, returning film titles to Manhattan marquee that had for the last 12 months instead read messages like "Wear a mask" and "We'll be back soon."

Shortly after noon at the Angelika Film Center on Houston Street, Holly Stillman was already feeling emotional coming out of the first New York showing of Lee Isaac Chung's tender family drama "Minari." "My mask is drenched," she said.

But she was equally overwhelmed by being back in a cinema. Though Stillman feared the experience would be too restrictive because of COVID-19 protocols, she instead found it euphoric.

"It was just you and the movie screen," said Stillman. "It was wonderful to smell the popcorn as soon as I got into the theater — even though I don't eat popcorn."

Less than half of movie theaters are open nationwide, but reopenings are quickening. Theaters in many other areas reopened last summer around the release of Christopher Nolan's "Tenet," but that attempted comeback fizzled. Throughout, theaters remained shut in the five boroughs. For a year almost to the date, one of the world's foremost movie capitals stayed dark.

For a theatrical business that has been punished by the pandemic, the resumption of moviegoing in New York — is a crucial first step in revival.

"It's a symbolic moment," said Michael Barker, co-president of the New York-based Sony Pictures Classics, which on Friday released the Oscar contenders "The Father" and "The Truffle Hunters" in Manhattan theaters. "It says that there is hope for the theatrical world to reactivate itself."

For some moviegoers who consider the big screen the only way to

see a movie, the long-coming day had almost religious significance.

"Moviegoing for me is like going to church," said JM Vargas, who had tickets Friday to "Minari," "The Last Dragon" and "Chaos Walking." "I've been waiting a year to go back to church."

Cinemas in the city are currently operating at only 25% capacity, with a maximum of 50 per each auditorium. As in other places, mask wearing is mandatory, seats are blocked out and air filters have been upgraded.

Many theaters were caught off guard when Gov. Andrew Cuomo said cinemas could, under those conditions, reopen. Some of the city's prominent theaters, including the Film Forum, the Alamo Drafthouse, the Metrograph and Regal Cinemas were targeting openings in the coming weeks. Some needed more time to prepare.

After sitting dormant all winter, the Cinema Vil-

lage in Manhattan two weeks earlier burst a pipe, flooding the lobby — one last bit of bad luck in a grueling year.

"This was the worst horror movie. I don't think any Hollywood director could have dreamed it up," said Nicolas Nicolaou, owner of the Cinema Village and theaters in Queens and New York. "We didn't realize we'd be 100% shutdown for this long."

New York, along with Los Angeles (where theaters are still closed), is one of the top movie markets. For smaller films, it's a vital epicenter of word-of-mouth. For blockbusters, it's a lucrative necessity. Without New York or Los Angeles open, Hollywood studios have pushed most of their larger productions until more theaters are open, or they've steered films to streaming services.

"The New York opening is very significant to the theater business in New York, in the nation

and in the globe," says John Fithian, president of the National Association of Theater Owners. "We in the movie theater business live off of movies that play all around the country and all around the world. We keep seeing those movies leave the theatrical release schedule to move to later dates because there just haven't been enough markets. New York is the most important of those markets."

Lately, with President Biden's prediction that every adult can be vaccinated by the end of May, the outlook for theaters has been brightening for the first time in a long time. Last weekend, "Tom & Jerry" overperformed at the box office with \$14.1 million in ticket sales, even while it streamed on HBO Max. Though Universal Pictures pushed the "Fast & Furious" sequel "F9" from late May to late June, other movies have moved up on the calendar, reversing the postponement tide.

Delhi HC pulls up police for leakage of charge sheet to media before cognisance

NEW DELHI, MAR 5 (PTI): The Delhi High Court Friday pulled up the Delhi Police for leakage of supplementary charge sheet filed in case related to communal violence in northeast Delhi last year to the media even before cognisance was taken by the concerned court, saying an offence is made out of the incident.

Justice Mukta Gupta asked the Delhi Police Commissioner to file an affidavit fixing responsibility on the person instrumental in leaking the information to the media.

It is a proved allegation (of leakage) once it comes in media. It no more remains an allegation now. You have to ascertain who has done it, the court told the counsel for the police.

Advocate Amit Mahajan, representing the Delhi Police, maintained that the contents of the supplementary charge sheet were not leaked to media by police.

He said the responsibility cannot be fixed on police as they have not leaked it.

To this, the high court said it was a property in the hands of a police officer and if your officer has leaked it it's abuse of power, if for sanction this was entrusted to someone else it's criminal breach of trust and if the media has taken it away then it's a theft. So in any case, an offence is made out.

The court was hearing a plea by JMI student Asif Iqbal Tanha alleging misconduct by police officials in leaking his disclosure statement, recorded by the probe agency during the investigation, to the media.

Advocate Siddharth Aggarwal, representing Tanha, contended that recently the police has filed a supplementary charge sheet in the criminal case before the trial court and portions of the documents were with the media the very next day without providing copies to the accused.

He said the trial court was yet to take cognisance of the supplementary charge sheet and then the trial court had to pass an order in which media was pulled up for

reporting exact contents of the charge sheet even before cognisance.

He sought time to file an additional affidavit in this regard.

The high court said that the earlier order was clear that there would not be any media briefing till charges are framed.

You file an additional affidavit, we will see what action has to be taken. We will see if they can do indirectly what they can't do directly, the judge said, adding that "don't do the inquiry as done by you earlier, you will have to answer the contentions of petitioner's counsel".

The high court listed the matter for further hearing on March 25.

In pursuance to the court's earlier order, Special Commissioner of Police (Vigilance) Sundari Nanda was also present in the hearing.

The high court had earlier expressed dissatisfaction over the police's vigilance inquiry report, conducted on the allegation of leaking to media confessional statement of Tanha, who was arrested in the case.

The court is yet to hear submissions of counsel for Delhi Police and media house, Zee News Media Corporation Ltd, represented through advocate Vijay Aggarwal.

Tanha's counsel submitted that apart from examining the question as to the steps taken by the police regarding the leak of documents, a cognisable offence has also been committed and it is necessary to take proper action.

He had contended that the action of the media houses -- Zee News Media Corporation Ltd and OpIndia -- in placing such documents in the media violated the programme code and sought time to file a written statement in this regard.

The high court had earlier questioned Zee News over broadcast of the alleged confession statement of Tanha in the riots case, saying such documents cannot be taken out and published.

It had directed the media house to file an affidavit disclosing the name of the source from

whom the concerned journalist got the documents.

Earlier, the Deputy Commissioner of Police (special cell) in an affidavit had said that Delhi Police was also aggrieved by the news report in which the alleged confessional statement of Tanha was leaked

out and that none of its officials involved in the investigation of the case leaked out the information to the media.

The plea has also sought direction to the media houses to take down the sensitive/confidential information leaked to them by the officials of Delhi Police.

Tanha, in his petition, said he was aggrieved by various publications reporting that he has confessed to orchestrating the Delhi riots and alleged that he was coerced to sign certain papers in the effective custody of police.

Tanha, who was arrested in May 2020, is currently lodged in judicial custody in the Delhi riots case.

Tanha, a third-year student of BA in Persian language, was earlier arrested in connection with the violence in the Jamia area during a protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019.

The police had said that Tanha, a resident of Abul Fazal Enclave in Shaheen Bagh, was a member of the Students Islamic Organization and was part of the Jamia Coordination Committee which spearheaded protests against the new citizenship law.

On December 15, 2019, protesters had turned violent, torching four public buses and two police vehicles and pelting stones at the police and civilians, near JMI. At least 40 people including students, policemen and fire fighters were injured in the incident.

Communal clashes had broken out in northeast Delhi on February 24, 2020 after violence between citizenship law supporters and protesters spiralled out of control leaving at least 53 people dead and around 200 injured.

China to connect Tibet with high-speed bullet trains before July: Official

KJM VARMA

BEIJING, MAR 7 (PTI):

China will operate bullet trains to Tibet, close to the Indian border in Arunachal Pradesh before July this year, marking the opening of high-speed train services to all Chinese mainland provincial-level regions, a senior official has said.

A 435-km rail link to the regional capital of Lhasa will run Fuxing high-speed trains powered by both internal-combustion and electricity, Lu Dongfu, board chairman of China State Railway Group Company Limited, told state-run Xinhua news agency on Saturday.

Construction started in 2014 on the railway line connecting Lhasa with Nyingchi in eastern Tibet. It is the first electrified railroad in Tibet and is slated to begin operations in June 2021.

The track-laying work was completed by

the end of 2020, the report said.

The railway has a designed speed of 160 km per hour, according to Tibet Railway Construction Company Limited, a subsidiary of China State Railway Group.

China aims to extend the total length in operation of its high-speed train network to around 50,000 km by 2025, up from 37,900 km by the end of 2020, Lu said.

The high-speed railway network will cover 98 per cent of cities with over 500,000 residents, he said.

China's self-developed Fuxing trains now operate at a speed range of 160 kmph to 350 kmph, Lu said.

China is ramping up the train network in the country's southeast Tibet Autonomous Region connecting its remote parts with the Chinese mainland.

Last December, the track-laying work was completed for a railway line linking the cities of Lhasa and Nyingchi in Tibet close to Arunachal Pradesh.

The Sichuan-Tibet Railway will be the second railway into Tibet after the Qinghai-Tibet Railway. It will go through the southeast of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, one of the world's most geologically active areas.

China has also included building of a passageway connecting Tibet with South Asia in the 14th Five Year plan which is due to commence from this year.

China will support Tibet in building the passageway to South Asia, the Xinhua report said, quoting the 14th plan document which was submitted to China's Parliament, the National People's Congress (NPC).

From farms to mills, it's a long wait for Western UP farmers just to get sugarcane weighed

JATIN TAKKAR AND KISHOR DWIVEDI MUZAFFARNAGAR (UP), MAR 7 (PTI): As thousands of farmers lay siege to Delhi borders for over 100 days demanding the repeal of three contentious farm laws, those staying back in Western Uttar Pradesh have to endure a different kind of long wait -- at times for multiple days just to get weighed quintals of sugarcane lying in tractor-trolleys on their way from farms to mills.

Some pass their time chit-chatting about the ongoing protests, others while smoking bidis or cigarettes, but all of them sound worried about loads of sugarcane drying under a scorching sun, while Punjabi and Haryanvi songs continue to blare out loudly, either from their mobiles or small speakers fitted in their vehicles.

Also, problems for them are much more beyond the three laws that have been in limelight due to the protests at the national capital borders. Almost a hundred tractor-trolleys, each loaded with 300 quintals of sugarcane on an average, can be seen parked in a barren field near the Bhopada weighing scale in Budhana tehsil here, barely two kilometres from the Dhampur sugar mill -- the final destination of the load and their carriers after a days-long 'weighing' halt.



Some drivers, many of them farmers with small landholdings, even have arrangements made for sleeping on cots fitted under their 'trollas' (customised and bigger trolleys used to transport sugarcane). "It has been two days since I am waiting at this weighing scale and looks like it will take me another two days for my work to be done so that I can take my stock to the sugar mill," Rohit Balyan, who hails from Kutba village, told PTI. "The exhausting long wait at weighing scales hurts farmers because the sugarcane load starts drying up under the sun and by the time one's turn comes for measurement, the weight comes down a bit, the 21-year-old Balyan said while lighting up a cigarette borrowed from a friend waiting next in the queue. A sugar mill official in Muzaffarnagar, which

is widely known as the 'sugar bowl' of India and also has Asia's largest gur mandi (jaggery market), told PTI the weight loss during the waiting time is only a few kilograms, but farmers argue this loss means a lot to them because their earnings go down by thousands of rupees. Farmers also claim that sugar mills are procuring sugarcane at Rs 325 per quintal, lower than the government-fixed minimum support price (MSP) of Rs 385. "We are not getting the MSP and then we have to wait here for days at the weighing scale. The sugarcane starts drying up after a couple of days and this means a reduction in weight and money for us," said Anuj Tomar, who hails from Kakda village. Tomar, 25, said he has been standing in the queue for days with sugarcane produced in his fami-

ly's 27-bigha land. Among those waiting at the weighing scale are also people who do not own land but are engaged in transporting sugarcane from farms to sugar mills after getting the yield measures at weighing scales. For them also, the loss of time during a peak work season means loss of money. Harsoli village resident Mukeem, 35, said he uses his tractor-trolly for the transport work like many others in the region, who are typically paid nearly Rs 12 per quintal of sugarcane from the mills. "It has been three days since I am standing here. I have got more than 300 quintals of sugarcane loaded on my trolly. If we get it measured quickly, then I can do more rounds and make more money," Mukeem said. He is also upset over an order of the National

Green Tribunal (NGT) that calls for phasing out old tractors in the National Capital Region (NCR). Muzaffarnagar, which thrives on sugarcane production, is among the areas affected by this order. "How are we supposed to phase out our tractors just because they are 15 or 20-years old. They are working fine for us. The price of diesel has gone up sharply in the last 10 years. The rate we get for transportation is still the same but nobody is bothered about these issues, he said. Also waiting for two days at the weighing scale are Raju Tyagi, 23, from Osika village and 23-years-old Saleem from Kethal village, both of whom strongly support protesting farmers' demand for a legal guarantee on the MSP and repeal of the three contentious agriculture laws.

Second part of Parliament's Budget session from Monday

NEW DELHI, 07 MAR [PTI]: The month-long second part of the Budget session of Parliament begins on Monday in the middle of a high octane campaign for assembly elections in four states and one UT.

The main focus of the government in the second part of the session is to get the various demands for grants for the year 2021-22 passed along with the Finance Bill which carries various tax proposals. Besides these mandatory agendas, the government has listed various bills for passage in the session which concludes on April 8. Some of the bills listed by the government include the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (Amendment) Bill, National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development Bill, Electricity



(Amendment) Bill, Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill. The part two of the session is taking place at a time when political parties have their focus on elections in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Kerala and Puducherry. The elections would take place in March-April. Senior leaders of various parties, especially the regional ones, are likely to skip most of the House sittings to focus on campaigning. The first part of the Budget session started on January 29 with the President's address to

joint sitting of both houses of Parliament. The address was boycotted by over 20 opposition parties, including the Congress, in support of the demand of the protesting farmers for the repeal of the three farm laws. The Union Budget was tabled on February 1. Thereafter, House proceedings were washed out for four consecutive days over the opposition's demand for separate discussion on farm issues. To compensate the session's lost time, the House sat till midnight for several days.

After Taiwan photos, Congress uses Jharkhand video to show Assam shooting

Guwahati, 07 Mar [NDTV]: Assam Finance Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday labelled the state Congress unit a "fake news factory" for using a video of a mock drill in Jharkhand as police brutality during protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019. Assam Congress had last Thursday shared a 2:47 minute-long video on what Assam has received and lost during the incumbent BJP-led government's rule. At 2:02 minute in the

video, the voiceover asks viewers if they remember the sacrifices of the five young men who died during the CAA protests while the video showed the police firing at a crowd on the street. According to a 'Fact Check' article published in December 2019, the video is from a police mock drill at Jharkhand that had been circulated by certain Twitter users as police firing during the CAA protest. The article also mentioned that the video had earlier been used to allege po-

lice firing in Kashmir. Mr Sarma on his Twitter said, "Congress is Fake News Factory! Check at 2 min, how they have misused a mock drill video from Jharkhand to call it shooting by Assam Police." The claims in the Assam Congress's video, however, weren't entirely wrong. During the protests against the CAA in December 2019 and January 2020, five young men - Sam Stafford, 17, Abdul Amin, 23, Ishwar Nayak, 25, Deepanjali Das, 19,

from Guwahati - had died in police firing. Another, Azizul Hoque, 45, also died in the protests when his truck was torched. According to journalists who extensively covered the protest, during one of the protests, street lights were put out before the police started firing. Responding to Mr Sarma's attack, the Congress tweeted, "You can try to sidetrack the issue as much as you like, but our (and Assam's) questions remain the same - Do you deny that 5 innocent people were killed

during CAA protest? Do you deny that hundreds of innocent were injured because of your Govt's Apathy?" The Finance Minister had earlier attacked the Congress for allegedly using the photos of tea estates in Taiwan and claiming them to be those of Assam. Assam had seen widespread protests after the new citizenship law passed in 2019 over concerns that it would legalise thousands of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh before 2015.

Stepping up vaccine coverage by May end will help check Covid spread: Expert

HYDERABAD, 07 MAR [PTI]: The spread of COVID-19 in the country would remain at low levels if the vaccination coverage is expanded substantially, possibly by inoculating those above 30 years of age and without comorbidities, by end of May, an expert has said. Though there has been a spike in the number of cases in some states, overall they have remained much on the lower side despite elections being held in some states, GVS Murthy, Director of Indian Institute of Public Health in Hyderabad, set up under the aegis of Public Health Foundation of India, said. "A sudden spike in cases has not been seen though civic polls were held in Hyderabad and local body elections took place in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh," he said. The infection is spreading, most probably after those who were leading protected lives got exposed as they moved out of their homes and mingled with others, he said. Citing the seroprevalence re-

ports recently announced in Hyderabad, he said 54 per cent of the city's population is estimated to have antibodies against COVID-19 (up to 70 percent in some wards), meaning that many people got infected during the last six months without realising it. Observing that protection stays on for around five to six months if a person is already infected, Mr Murthy said it is a good sign that spikes are not being witnessed. If the vaccination drive gathers pace even among those aged above 30 without comorbidities, it would help check the spread of the virus, he said. "If we can push vaccine coverage to a high level by May, based upon volume of vaccines available in the country, the situation in India will remain at low levels," Mr Murthy told PTI. After the nationwide vaccination drive covering health professionals and other frontline workers was launched in January, the country had from March 1 started inoculating

people aged above 60 and those over 45 with comorbidities, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi taking the first jab that day. Mr Murthy said that while the pandemic might not come to an end immediately, the situation would be under control as there has been an increase in vaccination coverage. As per available information, antibodies (in the infected) existed for about seven months and there is a possibility of them getting it again if the antibodies decline, he said. Since the highest caseload in the country was witnessed during August-September last year, those infected then may face the risk of getting it again by April-May, he opined. Therefore, those above 30 or 40 years of age can be covered if the vaccination drive is stepped up by about the end of May, he said. This can be achieved by allowing the private sector a bigger role in promoting vaccination, he said.

The increased vaccine coverage would provide protection to more people and it would also be difficult to infect others, he added. Mr Murthy said medical management of COVID-19 cases has improved since the beginning of the pandemic with deaths being reduced effectively and that the combination of vaccination and improved medical management would be very beneficial in handling the virus. However, COVID-19 precautions like wearing masks should be continued till the vaccination drive reaches the next stage and also because the efficacy of vaccines would be around 70- 75 per cent, he said. "It is still not time to give up protection like masks. Such a situation may not come this year," he added. The practice of wearing masks would have other benefits like decline in tuberculosis, pneumonia and infections. "We have to see what is the benefit to society on a bigger scale," Mr Murthy added.

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Protect Forests from Greed, Not Need

Yes, going genuinely green will require more effort

Some years ago, in the run-up to a National Art Festival that Gangtok was hosting, the sculptors had to twiddle their thumbs with no material to work with for two days because the wood they had ordered from Siliguri was held up as clearance from the Forest Department was taking too long. They might as well have contacted some locals who would have commissioned some others to chop down the required kind of wood. The worst that would have happened is that the woodcutters would have been arrested under some clause of the Forest Act. After all, much the same has transpired for much lesser a cause than Art at reserve forests across the State. Once, the people with the saws, all of them essentially daily-wagers were arrested for cutting down trees for timber reportedly required for the construction of an army garage. Only the porters languished in judicial custody, the string was never unspooled to reach to the better informed people who had placed the order.

The laws protecting our forests and wildlife are very strict. Apart from rape and murder, violations of the Forest Act are perhaps the only crimes that cannot be settled out of court or withdrawn. We have seen how strict forest officials can become when it comes to evicting encroachers from forest land when they are impoverished families like migrant labourers or rural folk who rely on the forests for sustenance. We often hear of woodcutters arrested for illicit felling and rural folk have been banned from taking their cattle to graze. How often have we heard of a raid on a palatial building which has consumed many trees just to get the flooring done and consumed still more trees for the paneling and the furniture? The porters who double as woodcutters might or might not be aware of the forest laws, they might even be felling trees knowing that it is illegal to do so, but they are driven by their need to do so. Those who order the wood from them are definitely aware of the laws against such activities and have only their greed to blame for their actions.

What has to be targeted is this greed.

No amount of legislations and laws and rules can succeed if the only people who get rounded up are those driven by their need. Greed, on the other hand, can be easily suppressed if some examples are set or a genuine stab made at raising awareness and transposing some guilt. People in need for a wage and some quick money are easily replaced so rounding them up does not address the problem until the demand remains. Our protectors of the forest have to start striking at places from where the demands are being placed from. Why is it that illicit wood is almost always caught in-transit or in houses serving only as warehouses? Why are those who place orders after which trees are felled, never booked?

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Hong Kong: ‘Patriotism Test’ for Public Officials Shows China’s Increasing Assertiveness

BOYANG SU & SOPHIE WUSHUANG YI
THECONVERSATION.COM

Tensions are running high in Hong Kong after the pro-Beijing government charged 47 democracy activists and politicians with sedition under the controversial new national security law.

The group is accused of running what has been described as an unofficial “primary” poll in July last year in which more than 600,000 Hongkongese voted to select candidates for a legislative election which was due to be held in September. The election was subsequently postponed by Carrie Lam, the territory’s pro-Beijing chief executive, who cited the coronavirus as the reason for delaying the vote.

The charges come just days after the Hong Kong government introduced new oath requirements for public officials – swearing loyalty not to their constituents but Beijing and the Communist Party. The oaths are part of a plan outlined on February 23 by Xia Baolong, the director of the State Council’s Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, for major electoral reforms to ensure only “patriots” can stand for office.

This is designed to ensure that pro-Beijing officials will hold all the offices in the city’s executive, legislature and judiciary branches as well as statutory bodies. The move echoes words from Chinese President Xi Jinping earlier in the month when he said: “Hong Kong must always be governed by patriots”.

Pro-democrats accused the Hong Kong government of narrowing the

scope for political participation, while the pro-establishment camp believed that the newly proposed requirements would work hand in hand with the National Security Law (NSL) to further eliminate “anti-China” elements from the city by providing it with a “patriotic” test. The NSL, imposed by Beijing in June 2020, has been widely criticised both by pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong itself and by the international community as effectively outlawing opposition movements.

CHANGING CHINA

The evolution of China’s posture towards the former British colony has largely tracked China’s development as a major global power. When the “one country, two systems” principle was agreed in the 1980s as part of the legally binding handover agreement between China and the UK, the city was given the assurance it could retain its own economic and administrative systems for 50 years with “a high degree of autonomy”.

At that stage, China was a rather marginal economic and geopolitical actor. But the rise of China to great power status, especially the country’s unprecedented economic growth, has inevitably caused a change in China’s perception of itself and others.

Hong Kong is one of the key examples of that change of perception. After handover in 1997, Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) but is – on every level – part of China. The former British colony still fulfils its function as a conduit between China and the world,

but even this has gradually become symbolic as China now has several other important financial hubs, principally Shanghai.

China’s economy has grown rapidly over the past two decades, while, on the other hand, the outside world – particularly the US and Europe – was pushed into recession by the 2008 financial crisis and had barely recovered when COVID-19 hit.

China’s changing global power has radically changed the context which the Hong Kong issue sits. Beijing has clearly found it difficult, if not possible, to maintain the same attitude towards the former UK territory as it had at handover in 1997, especially in the face of rising political instability in the city and the deterioration of US-China relations during the presidency of Donald Trump.

JURISDICTIONAL LOOPHOLES

The new US president, Joe Biden, made human rights in Hong Kong and elsewhere a focus of his first phone call with Xi Jinping at the beginning of February. Biden pressed Xi on Hong Kong, Taiwan and China’s treatment of its Uighur Muslim minority. The Chinese state broadcaster CCTV said Xi had pushed back on these concerns on China’s internal affairs, saying: “The US should respect China’s core interests and act with caution.”

The deterioration of relations between Washington and Beijing has been evident for some time, for example in 2019 when the US Congress passed Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which established that the

US would review its stance on Hong Kong annually with regard to China’s upholding of the 1997 Handover Agreement. China responded by cancelling the US navy’s Hong Kong visit in 2019.

Another important indication of China’s more assertive stance towards Hong Kong is that, 23 years after handover, the Central Military Dock was officially placed under the control of the People’s Liberation Army Navy on September 29 2020. The dock was part of a Sino-UK agreement made in 1994 on the arrangements for the future use of military sites in the former British colony.

It is evident that Beijing’s failure to uncouple Hong Kong from its colonial past created “jurisdictional loopholes” – the establishment of the national security law and the new oath requirement shows Beijing taking legal and legislative action to fully “decolonise” Hong Kong.

Hong Kong can still enjoy a certain degree of autonomy under the “one country, two systems” principle while remaining a Special Administrative Zone of China. But Beijing is expected to make more “loyalty” demands like the recent oath requirements to ensure that the notion of “one country” is a prerequisite for viability of Hong Kong’s “two systems” – at least, until the agreement ceases to have legal force in 2047.

[Boyang Su is PhD Researcher, Lau China Institute, King’s College London; Sophie Wushuang Yi is PhD Researcher in the Lau China Institute, King’s College London]

Forcibly Sterilized During Fujimori Dictatorship, Thousands of Peruvian Women Demand Justice

ÑUSTA CARRANZA KO
THECONVERSATION.COM

The regime of Peruvian dictator Alberto Fujimori sterilized 272,028 people between 1996 and 2001, the majority of them Indigenous women from poor, rural areas – and some without consent.

Now, in public hearings that began earlier this year, thousands of these women are demanding justice for what they say were forced sterilization procedures called tubal ligations.

Sterilization was a covert part of Fujimori’s “family planning” policy, which purported to give women “the tools necessary [for them] to make decisions about their lives.” But in fact, as revealed in government documents published by the Peru human rights ombudsman’s office in 2002, the regime saw controlling birth rates as a way to fight “resource depletion” and “economic downturn.”

These were euphemisms for what Fujimori, and past leaders of Peru, referred to as the “Indian problem” – higher birth rates among Indigenous people than Peruvians of European descent. And since Indigenous women of Quechua descent had the highest poverty rates in Peru, they were the government’s main target for “family planning.”

Rather than getting consultations on their reproductive rights, as other Peruvian women did when they visited public health clinics, Indigenous women were offered “family planning” methods, one of which was tubal ligation.

“Health officials took me to the hospital ... and forced me to undergo surgery,” testified Dionicia Calderón in a public testimony organized by the National Organization of Andean and Amazonian Indigenous Women in Peru in 2017.

Indigenous Peruvians are widely recognized as particular victims of the Fujimori dictatorship. But my research documenting Indigenous women’s stories finds that the crime of forced sterilization has been underplayed in Peru’s post-Fujimori reckoning with the past.

TRUTH AND JUSTICE

Victims and families of victims of forced sterilization began to seek legal recourse in 1998, two years before Fujimori’s downfall.

The family of María Mamérita Mestanza – who was coercively sterilized, suffered health complications and died on April 5, 1998 – filed charges with the national prosecutor’s office against the chief of the health center that performed her tubal ligation. But judges twice ruled that there were insufficient grounds to prosecute the doctor.

In 2004, official investigations by prosecutors began against Fujimori into his regime’s “compulsive application of sterilizations.” But after Fujimori was prosecuted and convicted by Peru’s Supreme Court for other human rights abuses, the sterilizations case was closed because it was not considered genocide or torture, and the crimes could not be charged within Peru’s existing penal code.

Investigations were reopened in 2011 after the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, an international legal body, pressured the state to investigate the case, citing the high number of



victims. By January 2014, Peru’s Public Ministry was pursuing charges against doctors for María Mamérita Mestanza’s death. But it re-closed 2,000 other cases, saying there was insufficient evidence to hold Fujimori himself accountable.

For years, the roughly 2,000 forced sterilization cases continued to bounce around the Peruvian criminal justice system. Every so often, authorities would open investigations into some low-level officials accused of participating in the “family planning” program, only to close them again because of “insufficient information.” This was part of general impunity surrounding Fujimori, whose son and daughter are both politicians.

Meanwhile, Indigenous groups were recording the testimonies of these women and creating an online archive in which Indigenous women recall their forced sterilization. Called “Quipu,” the database – along with pressure from international human rights groups like Amnesty International – helped pressure the government to holding public hearings on the topic.

In January of this year, the first official government hearings on coercive sterilizations began in Lima. But they were suspended after just one day, when Judge Rafael Martín Martínez determined the court needed more translators for the wide variety of Quechua dialects spoken by the victims.

Hearings resumed on March 1 in Lima, to “formalize the charges for mediated authorship on the crimes against life, body, and health; grievous bodily harm causing death,” according to prosecutor Pablo Espinoza Vázquez.

In addition to wrenching testimonies from victims, the prosecution presented damning evidence that Fujimori and his health ministers set an annual sterilization quota. For instance, in 1997, Fujimori’s government aimed to sterilize 150,000 people, the prosecutor alleged, regardless of their health condition or consent.

The majority of the victims of coercive sterilizations were of Indigenous descent.

DIFFICULT ROAD AHEAD

The hearings have given thousands of Indigenous women in Peru hope that their abusers may finally be held criminally accountable for violating their reproductive rights, depriving them of children and decimating the Indigenous population by preventing the births of future generations.

And recent legislative changes now entitle victims of forced sterilizations to medical, financial and educational reparations, and potentially an official apology. But former president Fujimori and his inner circle retain links with powerful people in politics. Despite efforts to punish them for the crimes of the dictatorship, they have largely escaped justice.

Fujimori was convicted in 2009 and jailed for crimes against humanity, but his conviction was overturned in 2017 on health-related grounds. This so-called “humanitarian” pardon was annulled in 2017, and in 2018 a court-appointed team of medical experts concluded the former dictator was fit to serve the rest of his sentence. Fujimori was ordered back to jail.

His daughter, Keiko Fujimori, a candidate in this year’s Peruvian presidential election, says she would consider pardoning her father if she won.

So the road to actually convicting Fujimori for reproductive violence against Indigenous women is long. His victims, telling their stories publicly now, know how often their cases were previously dismissed due to “insufficient information” and how marginalized their voices have been in Peru’s transitional justice process.

Despite the odds, victims and their families maintain hope that this time things will be different. As the daughters of two women who died of coercive sterilization-related medical complications declared, “Without judicial investigations, there is no truth, and without truth, there will be no justice.”

[the writer is Assistant Professor, School of Public and International Affairs, University of Baltimore]

Nepal's House of confrontation

BINOD GHIMIRE & ANIL GIRI
KATHMANDU, 07 MAR [KATHMANDUPOST]: When the meeting of the House of Representatives commences on Sunday, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli and his faction of the Nepal Communist Party will try their best to make it look like business as usual.

The government's priority, according to sources, will be presenting the ordinances in a semblance of providing business to the House and letting the House function as if everything is normal, unless the faction led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal takes a drastic step. Though the Dahal-Nepal faction wants to unseat Oli, it has yet to decide whether to file a no-confidence motion against him.

As per the preliminary business schedule published by the Parliament Secretariat on Saturday, the government will present as many as eight ordinances, including the one related to the amendment to the Constitutional Council (Functions, Duties and Procedures) Act-2010 issued on December 15.

Bishal Bhattarai, who was appointed the chief whip of the Nepal Communist Party by Oli on February 26 in place of Dev Gurung, told the Post that the government's priority will be getting the ordinances through Parliament.

"All the ordinances will be presented before the House on the very first day," said Bhattarai. "Getting them endorsed is the government's top priority."

The House meeting is commencing on Sunday after the Supreme Court on February 23 overturned Oli's December 20 decision to dissolve the House. Oli, however, has refused to resign on moral grounds and has decided to face the House. He has even challenged his opponents to remove him if they can.

The Dahal-Nepal faction had registered a no-confidence motion against Oli on December 20, hours after the government recommendation to dissolve the House of Representatives was endorsed by President Bidya Devi Bhandari.

The Dahal-Nepal faction is unlikely to revive the same no-confidence motion, in which it had proposed Dahal as the next prime minister.

Officials at the Parliament Secretariat said they have not heard anything about a no-confidence motion.

"There is no information regarding any no-confidence motion from any side," Gopal Nath Yogi, a secretary for the House of Representatives, told the Post.

The Nepali Congress' silence has put the Dahal-Nepal faction in a fix.

It is hesitant to file a no-confidence motion against Oli because it lacks the numbers to get it through Parliament.

The faction has been claiming that it has around 87 to 90 lawmakers on its side. Even then, without the support of the Congress party, which has 63 members (two suspended) in the House, its no-confidence motion will fall flat. In such a case, Oli will get a lease of life until March next year, as constitutional provisions don't allow another no-confidence motion for one year.

Narayan Kaji Shrestha, spokesperson for the Nepal Communist Party (Dahal-Nepal faction), told the Post that they have yet to decide on tabling a no-confidence motion against Oli, as they are still in discussions with the Nepali Congress and Janta Samajbadi Party.

The Janata Samajbadi Party has 34 members (two suspended) in Parliament.

"Our first and foremost demand is Oli should resign. He has plunged into the minority inside the party since as many as 115 lawmakers are against him. Oli cannot remain prime minister morally also because the Supreme Court overturned his decision to dissolve the House," said Shrestha.

"Second, he has lost the majority in the party as well. A majority of parliamentarians are against him. If he does not resign, then in consultation with the Nepali Congress and the Janata Samajbadi Party, a no-confidence motion will be registered."

If the Dahal-Nepal faction indeed has 115 lawmakers on its side, as claimed by Shrestha, the Janata Samajbadi Party's support will be sufficient to remove Oli.

In the 275-member House of Representatives, the magic number is 138.

The Janata Samajbadi Party, however, has already made it clear that for it to support the Dahal-Nepal faction, it first needs to say whether it is a "formal party".

The Nepal Communist Party, although it has split politically, legally continues to remain one, as the Election Commission has not given a verdict on the party legitimacy dispute.

The Janata Samajbadi Party wants concrete assurances also, if it were to support Dahal and Nepal, regarding its concerns—ranging from constitutional amendments to the release of its lawmaker Resham Chaudhary from jail.

The Congress party, which has held a series of internal meetings as well as talks with leaders from across the political spectrum, including Oli, Dahal and Nepal, has

said that it would make a decision only after the Nepal Communist Party sees a formal split.

And even if it were to support the Dahal-Nepal faction, will it be just to give a leg up to Dahal?

Multiple Congress leaders have told the Post over the past few days that the party would be interested in leading the government, rather than just backing one side—Oli or the Dahal-Nepal-led faction. In that case, if the Dahal-Nepal faction files a no-confidence motion against Oli with the Congress party's support, it should name Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba as the next prime minister.

Oli and Deuba too have been in touch for quite a while, but what understanding they have been discussing is not clear yet. One possibility is that Oli is seeking Congress party's support in case he seeks a vote of confidence. But leaders have stopped short of saying what that deal entails. A likely scenario is that Oli survives with Congress support and in return, he lets Deuba lead the government—for at least a year until the elections in 2022.

Despite Deuba's public statements that he is in no hurry to become prime minister, he has made it sufficiently clear that he is not averse to the idea.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court is likely to pass a verdict soon on a case filed by Rishiram Kattel, who claims that Nepal Communist Party name belongs to him. Kattel had registered the Nepal Communist Party with the Election Commission in 2013. When Oli and Dahal had approached the Election Commission in May 2018 after they announced the merger of their CPN-UML and CPN (Maoist Centre), the poll body had initially refused to register it saying that a party with the same name had already been registered. Oli and Dahal had then registered their Nepal Communist Party by adding Nekapa, or NCP, within brackets.

If the Supreme Court passes a verdict in favour of Kattel, thereby making the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) illegitimate, politics is likely to take a completely different course, with most making a prediction that the situation would return to the pre-May 2018 stage. That will mean two different parties—the UML and the Maoist Centre.

With Oli now having quite some former Maoists and the Dahal-Nepal faction having a number of former UML members, including leaders like Nepal, Jhala Nath Khanal, Yogesh Bhattarai and Ghanashyam Bhusal to name a few, more political complications are likely.

"The Nepal Communist Party

has not split yet legally, so there is no question of supporting one or the other," said Minendra Rijal, a Central Working Committee of the Nepali Congress. "First, we will see how Prime Minister Oli defends his unconstitutional move of dissolving the House when he appears before the reinstated House tomorrow. Oli faces a huge moral and political question."

Asked if the Congress party would be interested in filing a no-confidence motion of its own against Oli, with the support of the Dahal-Nepal faction, Rijal said the party has not thought along these lines yet.

"Such decisions are not taken overnight," Rijal told the Post.

While the Dahal-Nepal faction is claiming to have around 115 parliamentarians on its side, a similar claim is being made by the Oli faction—that it has even more parliamentarians with it.

The Dahal-Nepal faction held a meeting of its Parliamentary Party on Friday, where it claimed that around 115 parliamentarians—from the House of Representatives and the National Assembly—were present.

The Oli faction held a meeting of its Parliamentary Party on Saturday. It also claimed that around 115 parliamentarians were present—from the House of Representatives and the National Assembly in total.

Neither faction has divulged the number of lawmakers from the lower house present in their meetings.

When it comes to no-confidence motion and electing a new prime minister, lawmakers from the lower house matter, not those from the upper house.

Multiple leaders from the Dahal-Nepal faction said that they do want to unseat Oli and that a no-confidence motion against him is the only way but they admitted that they have not taken any decision to that effect yet.

Bhusal, a lawmaker from the Dahal-Nepal faction, said there is a lot of confusion regarding the filing of a no-confidence motion due to the party's legal status.

"The Nepali Congress also has a problem supporting us unless the party is legally divided," said Bhusal. "I don't think the no-confidence motion could be registered on Sunday."

With both factions led by Oli as well as Dahal and Nepal in a bid to prove their majority—not by actions but just by words, Sunday's House meeting could see confrontation, some observers say.

After being politically split, the party's lawmakers are likely to be split physically also when the House

meeting commences, as the Dahal-Nepal faction, which is acting like an "opposition", is likely to choose to sit on the other side of the aisle. But technically, lawmakers from the Dahal-Nepal faction are also part of the ruling party as of now.

Some leaders from the Dahal-Nepal faction have hinted that they would try to stop Oli from entering the House, as he was the one who had "killed" it, only to be saved by the Supreme Court.

"We are discussing this issue well," said Bhim Rawal, a lawmaker from the Dahal-Nepal faction. "We will make a decision by Sunday morning."

But how moral that move would be is a question and that apart, there are several issues that would make it too difficult for the House Speaker, according to people with good knowledge of parliamentary affairs.

Som Bahadur Thapa, a former secretary at the Parliament Secretariat, said had the Election Commission taken a decision on the Nepal Communist Party legitimacy row, things would have been much easier in the House.

"Sunday is going to be a tough day for the Speaker to ensure the House functions smoothly and decently," Thapa told the Post.

Speaker Agni Sapkota already faces accusations that he has been siding with the Dahal-Nepal faction. Sapkota was elected House Speaker in January last year after a weeks-long tug-of-war between Oli and Dahal.

Sapkota had made his reservations public about Oli's House dissolution, calling it an unconstitutional move. He had even held consultations with some parties regarding calling the House meeting even as the case was pending at the Supreme Court.

Taranath Ranabhat, a former Speaker of the House, said the Dahal-Nepal faction too has a moral question before it, as it has already sacked Oli as the leader of the Parliamentary Party and elected Dahal as the Parliamentary Party leader.

In a parliamentary system, the leader of the Parliamentary Party of the party that commands a majority is chosen for the prime minister's post.

"Oli will go to the House to prove his legitimacy, while the Dahal-Nepal faction will try to oppose his move," Ranabhat told the Post. "Confrontation is inevitable. The only question is whether it is limited to verbal or goes beyond."

Tika R Pradhan contributed reporting.

Mithun Chakraborty to participate in PM's Brigade rally



KOLKATA, MAR 7 (PTI): The participation of film star Mithun Chakraborty in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's brigade parade ground rally here on Sunday has generated considerable interest among BJP supporters turning out for the mega event. Chakraborty met BJP national general secretary in-charge of West Bengal Kailash Vijayvargiya after arriving here on Saturday evening. Many of the BJP supporters headed for the meeting ground from across the state said they were happy to know that the film star will participate in the rally.

Modi will be addressing the mega poll rally as West Bengal heads for an eight-phase assembly election starting March 27. BJP state president Dilip Ghosh has claimed that the election rally will be attended by nearly 10 lakh people.

No new COVID-19 case in Arunachal

ITANAGAR, MAR 7 (PTI): Arunachal Pradesh did not report any new COVID-19 case on Sunday, a senior health official said. The state's case-load stands at 16,839, of which three are active cases, while 16,780 people have recovered from the disease and 56 patients have succumbed to the infection so far, State Surveillance Officer Dr Lobsang Jampa said.

The recovery rate among the coronavirus patients in the state stands at 99.64 per cent, he said. The state has so far tested over 4.82 lakh samples for COVID-19, including 342 in the last 24 hours, the official said.

A total of 55,304 people have been vaccinated in the state so far, State Immunisation Officer Dimong Padung said.

Nepal Supreme Court awards NCP to Rishiram Kattel

TIKA R PRADHAN
KATHMANDU, 07 MAR [KATHMANDUPOST]: The Supreme Court has decided to award the Nepal Communist Party to Rishiram Kattel.

Justices Kumar Regmi and Bom Kumar Shrestha on Sunday passed the verdict on the almost three-year-old case, in which Kattel had challenged the Election Commission's decision to register Nepal Communist Party (NCP) under KP Sharma Oli and Pushpa Kamal Dahal in May 2018.

The bench has said that a new party cannot be registered with the Election Commission when it already has a party registered with a similar name.

"The Supreme Court has passed a verdict in our favour," advocate Dandapani Poudel, Kattel's lawyer, told the Post. "We have won the case."



Quashing the Election Commission's decision to award the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) to Oli and Dahal, the court has said then CPN-UML and then CPN (Maoist Centre) would return to the pre-merger stage and if they were to merge, they should apply at the Election Commission as per the Political Parties Act.

Oli's UML and Dahal's Maoist Centre had announced their merger in May 2018.

The decision comes just hours before the scheduled meeting of the House of Representatives

where the two factions of the Nepal Communist Party are battling to show their majority.

The court decision can have an impact on the party's equation in the House. In the 2017 elections, the UML had won 121 seats and the Maoist Centre 53.

Oli's December 20 House dissolution move, however, brought a rift in the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), with one faction led by Oli and the other by Dahal and Nepal.

Within the UML, Oli had nearly 80 members

on his side, while Nepal had around 40, while there were around 53 members from Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre).

Party insiders say the equations, however, could have changed by now.

After the Election Commission's initial refusal to award the Nepal Communist Party to Oli and Dahal, saying a party with the same name was already registered with it, Oli and Dahal had got their party registered as Nepal Communist Party (NCP).

But Kattel had challenged the Election Commission's decision to award the party to Oli and Dahal at the Supreme Court.

Advocate Poudel had filed a writ petition at the Supreme Court behalf of Kattel on December 7, 2018, demanding that the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) led by Oli and Dahal be scrapped as its registration violated Clause 6(e) of the Political Parties Act-2017.

The clause states that a new party cannot be registered if the name and party's emblem resemble those of a party already registered with the Election Commission.

Poudel in his petition claimed that the ruling party had used power to get Nepal Communist Party (NCP) registered even though Nepal Communist Party was already registered in the name of Kattel.

Always felt at home in West Bengal: Gambhir

NEW DELHI, MAR 7 (PTI): BJP leader and MP Gautam Gambhir who is likely to join party's campaign in poll-bound West Bengal on Sunday said he always felt at home in the state.

The former top order Indian batsman is likely to begin campaigning in West Bengal from March 22. He will campaign in all eight phases of the assembly polls in the state as well as in three phases of the Assam assembly polls, said an aide of the East Delhi MP.

This will be Gambhir's first full-fledged election campaign for the BJP outside Delhi. Earlier, he had campaigned for former hockey player Sandip Singh in Haryana assembly polls last year. His plans for a visit to Jammu and Kashmir during the district development council (DDC) polls in December 2020 did not materialise.

Gambhir said he felt "sad and dejected" over West Bengal Chief Min-

ister Mamata Banerjee's remarks that the BJP was a party of "outsiders" and it had no place in the state.

"Not even for a brief moment was I made to feel that I was an outsider and was not born or brought up in Kolkata or anywhere else in Bengal, that I had not attended Presidency College or Jadavpur University or that I did not have egg rolls from Park Street while growing up."

"I always felt like a part of this huge and happy family which showered me with love and blessings every time I visited the state," the former cricketer said.

Gambhir, under whose captaincy Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) won two finals of the IPL, has a fan following among the youth of the state where polls for 294 assembly seats will begin on March 27.

The fate of the West Bengal people and the state cannot be decided

by bombs and bullets, Gambhir said expressing concern over "incessant and mindless" killings of political workers and violent clashes between parties.

Multiple reports of bomb making factories working in overdrive have surfaced in recent times, he said.

"Intimidation, threats and violence have been made new normal by the Left and the Trinamool Congress for decades and it has now become a part of the political culture of Bengal?," he alleged.

He said the ruling party is willing to go to any extent to silence any opposition in the state. This is not the ethos of Bengal and the voters in the state must make it clear, the BJP leader said.

People in Bengal have to put their foot down and decide whether they want the rule of "syndicate" or a 'sonar Bangla', nepotism or merit, and whether they want crime and corruption or 'poribortan', he added.

'It's a constant fight': Four top players discuss the future of women's football

LONDON, 07 MAR [THEGUARDIAN]: For International Women's Day on Monday, the Observer and Common Goal, which helps players invest 1% of their income back into the game, organised a round table comprising four professional female players with a combined 178 caps. They came together to discuss why female footballers give back and what needs to change as the game continues to grow.

Despite having a much smaller slice of the football pie, half the football players involved in Common Goal are women, why is that?

CAROLINE WEIR Manchester City and Scotland: For me, it's about visibility. I would have loved to have seen a group of women play football when I was younger. It's just about that and also showing girls how powerful a group of women can be. That it makes the voice so much louder if we're all singing from the same hymn sheet.

PAULINE BREMER Wolfsburg and Germany: I agree. We're also really lucky in the professional leagues now, with all the possibilities we have. So that's the reason why I chose, or we chose, to give back. We know that in other countries or in other parts of the world it's not the same and if we chip all together, we can make stuff happen.

ISABELLA ECHEVERRI Sevilla and Colombia: Football is so powerful, it can get to every single spot in the world. As women, and all the players that are in Common Goal, we know how powerful football is and how that small 1% can change the lives of so many different kids or organisations.

SOFIE JUNGE PEDERSEN Juventus and Denmark: I also hope

that this movement makes it become the norm that you join Common Goal, and you give something back when you're a professional player. There's so much money in the football industry and I think we must give back 1%, that is not a lot really.

Common Goal is not the only way women athletes are elevating each other, their voices and their sports. Across the world women are moving into leadership positions in sports and other industries. In the US the actor Natalie Portman and World Cup winner Abby Wambach are two of those involved in the new club Angel City and the tennis star Naomi Osaka is backing North Carolina Courage.

CW: Being part of a group of women, we're used to being in teams as players, but being part of this kind of team and seeing high-profile women draw attention to the women's game is great. We're in fortunate positions now and hopefully the next generation will be even better off and able to do the same.

IE: It's a very positive thing. I'm just proud of being part of that generation of women that are trying to change the status quo, trying to lift each other up, especially women in sports.

Gender equality is not just a women's issue, what changes would you like to see in different areas of the football industry to accelerate change?

SP: So many big men's team are investing in women's football now but I also understand that they have to run as a business. But bigger associations, Uefa and Fifa, definitely need to invest more in



women's football, the difference between the amount they give to women's football and men's football is way too big. Why shouldn't they invest the same in men's and women's football? That could really make a big difference.

IE: The investment has to be there for us to just bring the game up and to level conditions and the opportunities that we as women in sports have. We need more women in powerful positions, women in places that can make decisions. But we also need the support right now from the people that are in those positions and that can change the reality of the game. Those people right now are mostly men that have been in the in the job for a while. So maybe they're not as open to women's football.

PB: To make it work you need to increase the attention on the

woman's game as well and that starts with media coverage. When people can see women's football and it's attractive they will come into the stadiums and that's when it's worthwhile for clubs to invest in women's football.

CW: I totally agree with what's been said. I'd also like to see more women just working in football. We need more women and girls playing, but there's also all the staff that go with a team, a lot of those roles are male. You look at managers as well, male managers manage women's teams but it's not the same the other way around. That starts from a younger age, girls being interested in football, not necessarily playing or wanting to be a professional player, but just being involved, wanting to work in football in some way.

What would your IWD message to young girls and young women who want to become football players be?

CW: Growing up there was lack of role models and opportunities to play in Scotland, I played with boys. But I was lucky that when I reached 18-19 the game was going professional in England, so I could move down there. As much as a lot of teams are professional and facilities have improved there's still a lot where that's still quite far behind. The challenge now is for women just to feel comfortable enough to actually challenge things and to speak out. As much as the game has grown so much in the last five to 10 years, the challenge will be to continue to push the boundaries. We're grateful for the way the game's gone but we need to continue to push for better

things. If you've got a dream to be a professional footballer and you're a wee girl, there's absolutely no reason why that can't happen now, fortunately.

PB: It's important to follow your dream and know that nothing is now impossible. Women played football when it wasn't allowed, when it was banned, and they achieved things, so the possibilities to achieve in the game now are huge.

IE: I don't like to compare women's football to men's in Colombia because it's a completely different sport. They have every single thing and today we are still fighting for a professional league that plays for longer than two months. The facilities are not the same, even in my national team. It's a constant fight. It's a constant reminder that you're still a woman and you're worth less, so to speak, than the men's players. Latin American culture is very, very masculine and soccer more so. It's been tough, but for me to be able to speak up and be part of the generation that can change things is something to be proud of. I would tell them that they are strong, they're stronger than they know, they're more powerful than they know. If they have a dream, they have to work hard to achieve it. Nothing is impossible if you set your mind and your heart to it. Being a girl or a woman you are not less, you just have to work a little bit harder.

SP: But also know that if you don't get professional, you can still get something out of playing football. There's so many things to achieve from being part of a football team. Just have fun.

England's young guns learning on the job speaks to a systemic failing

ANDY BULL
LONDON, 07 MAR [THEGUARDIAN]: There was a weary inevitability about the last day of the series. England 10 for one, 10 for two, 20 for three, 30 for four, the wickets dropping like tired eyelids, loss washing over them like sleep falling on an exhausted man.

It leaves their winter split neatly in two: three handsome victories – two in Sri Lanka by seven wickets and then six wickets, and one in India by 227 runs – followed by three ugly defeats by 317 runs, 10 wickets and an innings and 25 runs.

Joe Root argued insistently that the bad should not eclipse the good, like Sri Lanka's Akila Dananjaya talking up the hat-trick he took in a T20 against the West Indies on Wednesday at the expense of Kieron Pollard hitting him for six sixes in his next over.

"We have to look at the winter as a whole," Root said. "There have been three very good performances when the ball has spun and we've dealt with it better." All of them are coloured by the three very poor performances when it spun more and they did not.

The watershed coincided with the turn in Root's form, from 684 runs at an average of 114 in his first half-dozen innings to 110 at an average of 18 in the second. While he was quick to say he was disappointed he had not been able to carry on like in those first three matches, the real problem was that England's fortunes were bound so tightly

to him.

Without Root, there was not a lot left to fall back on. After he was dismissed in the first innings of the first Test, England's batsmen made three fifties in 82 innings: one from Ben Stokes, one from Zak Crawley and one, at the very dog end, from Dan Lawrence, the last man out in this final innings.

None of them managed to press on past 55. Worse, the team did not manage a fifty partnership in those seven innings, the best being the 48 Stokes put on with Jonny Bairstow on the first day of this Test. In that same time, India made 10 fifty-plus scores, three of them hundreds and shared eight half-century stands.

The series turned into one long vivisection of England's batting, their techniques clinically dissected by Ravichandran Ashwin and Axar Patel, who took 59 wickets between them at a cost of 12 runs apiece.

Which brings us around to England's other glaring weakness, the lack of a spinner to back up Jack Leach, who proved himself a tough, artful and cunning bowler. He finished the series with 18 wickets but he does not have a central contract or the voluble support of his captain. Root was asked whether Leach had earned the right to be considered the first-choice spinner and said instead that, as well as he had bowled, it was a question to ask again at the start of the summer.

André-Frank Zambo Anguissa: 'If Scott Parker tells you it's possible, you believe it's possible'

ANDY BRASSELL
LONDON, 07 MAR [THEGUARDIAN]: Unusually among footballers, André-Frank Zambo Anguissa enters our Zoom meeting on time. It might be in keeping with his demeanour – polite, friendly and engaged – but it is somewhat out of kilter with his career arc. "I arrived late," he says of coming into the professional game.

That is true by modern standards but having developed "in the streets, playing after school with my friends every single day" in his home city of Yaoundé, Cameroon, rather than being hot-housed in an academy, Fulham are reaping the benefits of his less-than-linear path. The 25-year-old is one of the surprises of this fluctuating Premier League season, a beacon of consistency in a sea of oscillating performers.

Zambo Anguissa thinks he nailed that at Villarreal, where he was loaned after Fulham were relegated in 2019. "It was so specific in terms of pressing and passing," he says, "and the coach [Javi Calleja] said: 'If you can't do it exactly as I want it, don't worry – I've plenty of other good players who know how to do it.'"

"Everyone knew how to play. It made me progress so much more in terms of what I demanded of myself, and in terms of concentration. I knew that if I didn't do the work, there was somebody there to take my place."

When Calleja told him towards the end of the season that he was proud



of him it felt good.

Not that the Cameroon international midfielder is just about graft. Opta revealed that only four players in Europe's leading five leagues have managed more dribbles than Zambo Anguissa – a table led by Adama Traoré and Lionel Messi. In the season Zambo Anguissa spent in La Liga, only Messi and Nabil Fekir completed more dribbles than him. "The statistics are flattering," he says with a smile, "but it's about the work you do for the team."

As a youngster he was always a proficient dribbler – "It's the story of my childhood" – but he only started to think about the possibility of football becoming a career, he says, when aged 14 he met his agent, Maxime Nana, in one of the annual G8 trials Nana sets up in Mban-komo, to the south-west of Cameroon's capital.

Zambo Anguissa was spotted there by Jean-Philippe Durand, the former Marseille midfielder (and 1993 Champions League winner) who was then working for the club as a recruiter, but when he made the move to Europe at 18 it was not directly to Marseille but north to Reims.

Zambo Anguissa toughed out a steep learning curve with no route into the first team,

but Durand stayed in touch. "Even when he was in Marseille and I was at Reims," he says. "He would make the [800km] trip to come and see me playing for the reserves in the DH [fourth tier]. It's not everyone who does that for you."

Zambo Anguissa was, in the words of Rudi Garcia, one of his former Marseille coaches, with whom he still exchanges messages, "doing his formation [academy training] as a professional". He learned a lot tactically under Franck Passi, who had been Marcelo Bielsa's assistant when he was at the club. "He was someone who knew how to channel my energies," says Zambo Anguissa.

"I was a young player who ran a lot, who gave everything, but who was sometimes a bit clumsy. I wanted to do everything – to dribble, to carry the ball, everything. He understood that I was coming from Africa and just said to take the time to find your feet, do the simple things well.

"At first it was hard for me to accept. I knew I had other things to offer to the team and I felt restricted. But he told me what I needed to hear at the time. He said: 'You'll have the moment to express yourself and show

us everything you can do.'"

Later encouraged to build on his grounding in the holding role by Garcia, Zambo Anguissa was a mainstay of the Marseille team that went to the 2018 Europa League final. Though they were well beaten by Atlético Madrid, it convinced Fulham to lay out a club-record fee of £30m for him shortly after.

"I know a lot of people wondered why I was leaving Marseille," he says. "A huge club in France that played in Europe for a team that was playing to stay up in the Premier League. It's about going step by step. Some young players might go straight to Tottenham, Manchester United or wherever, they don't really know the league and they get burned."

Zambo Anguissa's diligence has worked for him, taking something from every coach, with Calleja's box-to-box role for him at Villarreal supercharging his return to England.

"Over there I found an attacking freedom that I could make the most of, as well as defensive discipline," he says. "When you can combine those two things in the Premier League, it helps you out."

That first season in London had been tough – arriving after pre-season, with injuries and a revolving cast of coaches and players muddying the waters. "The team is much more solid than before," he says. "What we've done this season is not insignificant. We've had the confidence to play, to pass the ball, against good teams.

New Zealand claim series over Australia with big win in T20 decider

CHRISTCHURCH, 07 MAR [THEGUARDIAN]: Australia fell at the final hurdle in their T20 tour of New Zealand, coming back from two games down only to lose Sunday's series decider by seven wickets.

Martin Gupthill powered the Black Caps past Australia's 142-8, which looked short of a competitive total. The opener smashed three sixes off one Adam Zampa over - including one out of the stadium and onto the roof of Wellington's "Cake Tin" - on his way to a thumping 71.

Conway, elevated to open the batting at Tim Seifert's expense, helped the pair notch a century partnership with 36 runs of his own.

Riley Meredith gave Australia hope when he removed Conway and had captain Kane Williamson trapped lbw next ball. In Meredith's next over, Gupthill asserted his authority with a booming straight drive that missed the Tasmanian by centimetres.

Gupthill holed out off Jhye Richardson's bowling soon after, but the damage was done, New Zealand winning with 27 balls to spare. Spinners Ashton Agar and Adam Zampa went wicketless in the decider after their efforts helped Australia back into the series.

"It would have been nicer if we were walking away with the trophy," Australia captain Aaron Finch said.

"But I was really pleased with our resilience through the series to bounce back from 2-0 down. There was a lot of character."

Australia took an 18-man squad to New Zealand, but only used 12 - handing

debut to Josh Philippe and Riley Meredith off the back of strong Big Bash League seasons as Tests stars including Pat Cummins and David Warner remained at home.

Finch nominated the efforts of Philippe and Meredith as two of the major positives. "Josh made a couple of 40s. If he kicks on to 60s and 70s, which has been doing in domestic cricket, that'd be great for his confidence," he said, implying Philippe will stay with the T20 squad through to India.

Australia would rue their own stuttering innings on Sunday after winning the toss and electing to bat.

A promising powerplay made way to a mid-innings squeeze, with Williamson throwing the ball to part-timers Glenn Phillips and Mark Chapman, the latter put in the side for the ailing Kyle Jamieson.

Matthew Wade top scored with 44, ending his miserable run with the bat this tour. Finch (36), Marcus Stoinis (26) and Mitch Marsh (10) were the only others to reach double figures.

Philippe was elevated to opener but looked uncomfortable before being trapped leg before by Trent Boult, while Maxwell found a fielder with his first attempted slog. Finch was dropped on 32 but cut Ish Sodhi straight to point two balls later.

Sodhi - who was named man of the series - took the wickets of Stoinis and Ashton Agar with consecutive full tosses in the 18th over.

After losing the series, Australia aren't sticking around in the New Zealand capital - chartering a flight home on Sunday evening.

Pope Francis visits churches destroyed by Isis in northern Iraq

MOSUL, 07 MAR [THEGUARDIAN]: Pope Francis arrived in northern Iraq on Sunday, to pray in the ruins of churches damaged or destroyed by Islamic State extremists and celebrate an open-air mass on the last day of the first-ever papal visit to the country. The Vatican hopes that the landmark visit will rally the country's Christian communities and encourage them to stay despite decades of war and instability. Francis has also delivered a message of tolerance and fraternity between religions to Muslim leaders, including in a historic meeting Saturday with Iraq's top Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Francis headed to the northern city of Mosul, which was heavily damaged in the war against Isis, to pray for Iraq's war victims. In a scene unimaginable just four years ago, he mounted a stage in a city square surrounded by the remnants of four damaged churches belonging to some of Iraq's myriad Christian rites and denominations. A jubilant crowd welcomed him.

Isis overran Mosul in June 2014 and declared a caliphate stretching from territory in northern Syria deep into Iraq's north



and west. It was from Mosul's al-Nuri mosque that the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, made his only public appearance when he gave a Friday sermon calling on all Muslims to follow him as "caliph".

Mosul held deep symbolic importance for Isis and became the bureaucratic and financial backbone of the group. It was finally liberated in July 2017 after a ferocious nine-month battle. Between 9,000 and 11,000 civilians were killed, according to an AP investigation at the time. Baghdadi was killed in a US raid in Syria in 2019.

Francis will later travel by helicopter across the Nineveh plains to the small Christian community of Qaraqosh, where only a fraction of the

number of families who fled the Isis onslaught in 2014 have returned. He will hear testimonies from residents and pray in the Church of the Immaculate Conception, which was torched by Isis and restored in recent years.

He wraps up the day with a mass in the stadium in Erbil, in the semi-autonomous northern Kurdish region, which is expected to draw as many as 10,000 people. He arrived in Erbil early on Sunday, where he was greeted by children in traditional dress and one outfitted as a pope.

Iraq declared victory over Isis in 2017, and, while the extremist group no longer controls any territory, it still carries out sporadic attacks,

especially in the north. The country has also seen a series of recent rocket attacks by Iran-backed militias against US targets, violence linked to tensions between Washington and Tehran.

The Isis group's brutal three-year rule of much of northern and western Iraq, and the gruelling campaign against it, left a vast swathe of destruction. Reconstruction efforts have stalled amid a financial crisis lasting years, and entire neighbourhoods remain in ruins. Many Iraqis have had to rebuild their homes at their own expense.

Iraq's Christian minority was hit especially hard. The militants forced them to choose between conversion, death or the payment of a special tax for non-Mus-

lims. Thousands fled, leaving behind homes and churches that were destroyed or commandeered by the extremists.

Iraq's Christian population, which traces its history back to the earliest days of the faith, had already rapidly dwindled, from around 1.5 million before the 2003 US-led invasion that plunged the country into chaos to just a few hundred thousand today.

Francis hopes to deliver a message of hope, one underscored by the historic nature of the visit and the fact that it is his first international trip since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

Public health experts had expressed concerns before the trip that large gatherings could serve as "super-spreader" events for the coronavirus in a country suffering from a worsening outbreak where few have been vaccinated.

The Vatican has said it is taking precautions, including holding the mass outdoors in a stadium that will only be partially filled. But throughout the visit, crowds have gathered in close proximity, with many people not wearing masks. The pope and members of his delegation have been vaccinated but most Iraqis have not.

Leak reveals UK Foreign Office discussing aid cuts of more than 50%

PATRICK WINTOUR LONDON, 07 MAR [THEGUARDIAN]: Some of the poorest and most conflict-ridden countries in the world will have their UK aid programmes cut by more than half, according to a leaked report of discussions held in the last three weeks among Foreign Office officials.

The cuts include slashing the aid programme to Somalia by 60% and to South Sudan by 59%. The planned cut for Syria is reported at 67% and for Libya it is 63%. Nigeria's aid programme would be cut by 58%.

The bare percentages include cuts of 50% in the west Balkans, and 60% in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. UK funding in the Sahel is listed as falling from £340m to £23m.

The numbers, marked "official sensitive", passed to the investigative website openDemocracy, are the first wider glimpse of the scale of aid cuts being contemplated after ministers' decision to cut aid spending this year from the legal target of 0.7% of gross national income to 0.5%. The UK aid programme over two years is being cut from £15bn to £10bn.

The Foreign Office would not comment on the figures but said the "seismic impact of the pandemic on the UK economy has forced us to take tough decisions, including temporarily reducing the amount we spend on aid".

It added: "We are still working through what this means for individual programmes and decisions have not yet been made."

The scale of the cuts to individual aid programmes seems plausible after the government this week announced it was reducing aid to war-torn and famine-threatened Yemen by 59%. The UK contribution to what is probably the UK's most high-profile aid programme is being reduced to "at least" £87m this year, down from £164m pledged last year.

The UN secretary general, António Guterres, described the

overall cut in the UN's aid programme this year as "a death sentence".

UK ministers say the UK contribution is a floor, and not a ceiling, and more than £1bn has been given to Yemen since the civil war started five years ago.

The cut for Yemen discussed at the Foreign Office official meetings was 45% lower than that eventually announced.

According to the leaked document, the cut for Yemen discussed at the recent Foreign Office official meetings was 45%, lower than eventually announced.

Ministers have been making strenuous efforts not to give details of the practical impact of the cuts being contemplated by ambassadors and head office officials.

The full scale of the cuts for 2021-22 by country would not normally be published by until autumn 2022. The Foreign Office has rejected all freedom of information requests regarding the cuts in 2020-21, but the former international development secretary Andrew Mitchell this week told MPs the cuts in Yemen were "harbingers of terrible cuts to come".

Mitchell is organising a backbench rebellion but ministers are seeking to avoid a Commons vote.

He said: "The foreign secretary assured parliament that he would protect seven strategic priorities from cuts, including humanitarian relief. He also told the select committee he would reply to the former solicitor general's determination that cuts would be unlawful without a change to legislation. Nothing like what is being suggested here should be considered until parliament has given its express consent, which I rather doubt will be forthcoming."

James Wani, Christian Aid's country director in South Sudan, said: "Cuts on the scale being reported couldn't come at a worse time for a country in crisis. The peace talks are at an extremely delicate stage, and FCDO funding has been crucial to Christian Aid's work with local churches – as one of the most trusted institutions – in ending the

conflict.

"Without funding for peacebuilding, the talks risk failure. And without peace, development and humanitarian work can't succeed. People in South Sudan cannot afford for that to happen."

At prime minister's questions on Wednesday, Boris Johnson challenged Keir Starmer's priorities when the Labour leader used all six of his questions to urge the Foreign Office to rethink its aid cuts.

Ministers are confident that aid cuts during the Covid crisis are supported by a public that wants to see belt-tightening across the board, but the popularity of the cuts, and the damage to the UK image abroad, may change once the practical impact becomes clear.

Four previous prime ministers – Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Theresa May – have urged Johnson to consider the damage to the standing of the UK when no other G7 country is cutting its aid programme in this way.

Lady Sugg, a political ally of Cameron, quit as a Foreign Office minister in protest.

David Miliband, the president of the International Rescue Committee and a former Foreign Office minister, condemned the UK government's decision, saying: "The phrase 'global Britain' rings hollow. As the UK prepares to host the G7, the reduction of assistance to Yemen is a stark warning of what is to come as the government delivers on widespread cuts across the entire UK aid portfolio. "Make no mistake, as the UK abandons its commitment to 0.7%, it is simultaneously undermining its global reputation." Meanwhile, more than 100 UK charities have condemned the government's decision to cut aid to Yemen.

The UK has pledged at least £87m in aid, down from £160m in 2020 and £200m in 2019.

In a letter to Boris Johnson, they say the government has made a "misjudgment" by thinking the public is happy to turn away from countries affected by poverty, war and disease.

China posts record exports as global demand recovers from COVID

BEIJING, 07 MAR [ALJAZEERA]: China's export growth jumped to the highest level in more than two decades, official data showed, with imports also surging in a sharp bounce back from the coronavirus outbreak that had brought activity to a near halt.

Exports surged 60.6 percent over a year earlier in the first two months of 2021, after factories reopened and global demand started to recover from the coronavirus pandemic, customs data showed on Sunday. Exports rose to \$468.9bn, accelerating from December's 18.1 percent gain and nearly double the growth expected by forecasters.

Electronics and textile exports such as masks contributed to the spike in outbound shipments, as demand for work-from-home supplies and protective gear against the virus outbreak soared during the pandemic.

Imports jumped 22.2 percent to \$365.6bn, up from December's 6.5 percent increase.

Chinese authorities combine trade data for the first two months to compensate for fluctuations due to the Lunar New Year holiday, which



falls at different times each year in January or February. Factories shut down for up to two weeks, then restock after they reopen.

Exporters benefitted from the relatively early reopening of China's economy after the ruling Communist Party declared victory over the disease last March while foreign competitors still face anti-virus controls.

Forecasters say the Chinese export surge should decelerate as demand for masks and other medical supplies eases and overseas competitors return to global markets. Trade officials have warned that the global situation still is "grave and complex".

Exports to the United States soared 87.3 percent over last year to \$80.5bn in January and February, despite former President Donald Trump's tariff hikes imposed in a fight over trade, technology and security. They have been left in place by his successor, Joe Biden, who took office in January.

Economists and political analysts expect few changes under Biden due to widespread frustration in Washington with China's trade and human rights records, and complaints about technology theft and spying.

On Friday, China's top economic official, Premier Li Keqiang, announced plans to acceler-

ate technology development and reduce reliance on other countries.

That threatens to worsen tensions with Washington and Europe, which complain Beijing violates its market-opening pledges by shielding its suppliers from competition.

DEMAND REBOUNDS The latest trade figures look especially dramatic compared with early 2020, when the ruling party shut factories to fight the virus and trade plunged.

Then, global exports tumbled 17.2 percent in 2020's first two months from the previous year. Exports to the US plunged 27.7 percent.

Li announced an

economic growth target of "over 6 percent" this year, which should help to propel demand for foreign oil, iron ore, food, consumer goods and other imports.

Beijing promised to buy more American soybeans, natural gas and other exports in the "phase one" agreement last January aimed at ending the tariff war. The two sides agreed to postpone more tariff hikes, but penalties on billions of dollars of each other's goods remain.

China fell behind on meeting those commitments but started to catch up as demand rebounded.

This year, China's global trade surplus for January and February was \$103.3bn, compared with a \$7.1bn deficit in the same period last year.

Imports of US goods rose 66.4 percent to \$29.3bn. China's trade surplus with the US narrowed by 17.7 percent from the same time last year to \$20.9bn.

Exports to the 27-nation European Union rose 62.6 percent over January and February last year to \$73.7 bn. Imports of European goods gained 32.5 percent to \$45.9bn.

Refugee rescuers charged in Italy with complicity in people smuggling

LORENZO TONDO PALERMO, 07 MAR [THEGUARDIAN]: After an investigation lasting almost four years, Italian prosecutors have charged dozens of rescuers, from charities including Save the Children and Médecins Sans Frontières, who were accused of collaborating with people smugglers after saving

thousands of people from drowning in the Mediterranean.

Investigators in Trapani, Sicily, formally closed the inquiry on Monday and charged more than 20 people, including boat captains, heads of mission and legal representatives, with crimes carrying sentences of up to 20 years.

As reported by La Re-

pubblica, at least three rescue boats are at the centre of the charges: Iuventa, a former fishing vessel run by the German NGO Jugend Rettet, Vos Hestia, operated by Save the Children, and Vos Prudence, run by MSF.

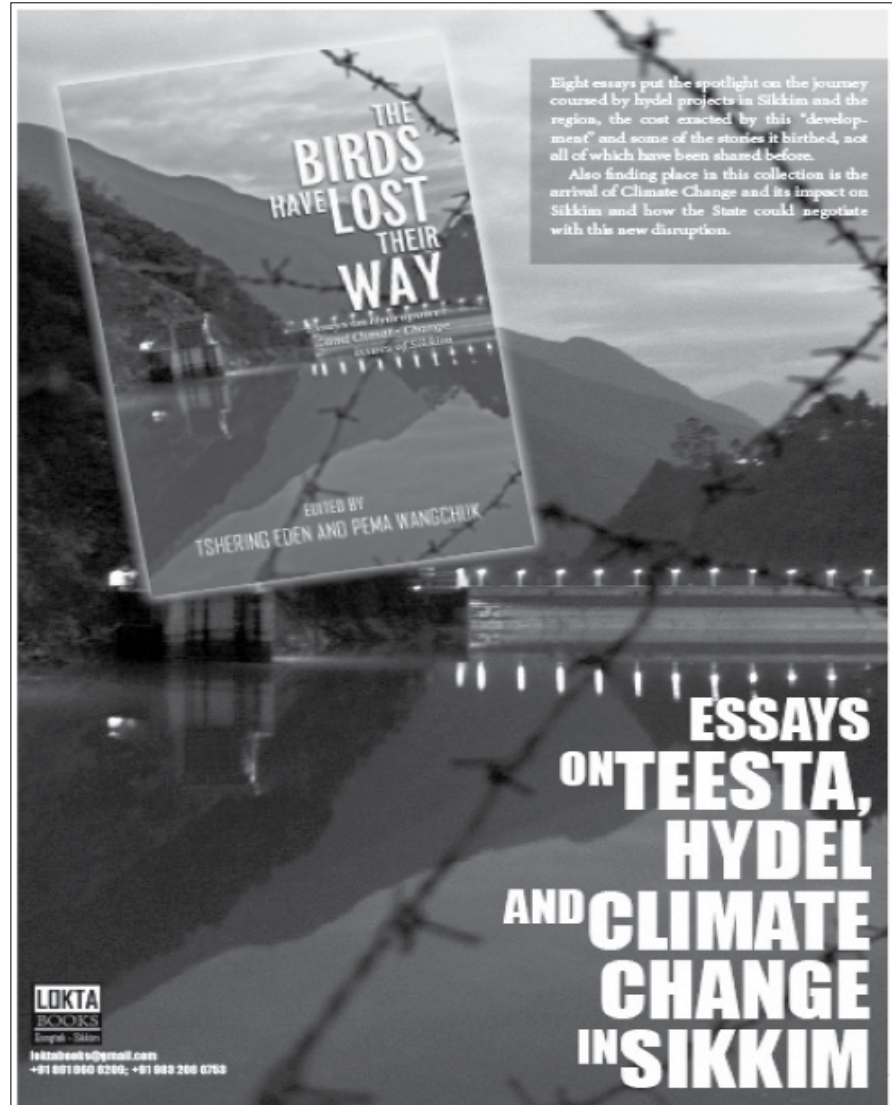
Prosecutors claim rescuers arranged a direct handover of the refugees and migrants from smug-

glers' boats, returning the boats to be reused.

The Iuventa crew, MSF and Save the Children deny all the accusations.

"Saving lives is never a crime," Francesca Cancellaro, lawyer for the Iuventa crew, told the Guardian. "We will prove that all the operations of the Iuventa crew were absolutely lawful. While the EU turned

away from the Mediterranean, transforming it into a mass grave for Europe's undesirables, the crew of the Iuventa headed to sea as volunteers, in order to protect the fundamental rights to life and to seek asylum, as required by international law and even more importantly, human solidarity."





COUPLE GOALS! The pair of Chrissy Teigen & John Legend look super stylish while out and about in New York City.

Steven Spielberg, Duffer Brothers team up for The Talisman adaptation

Veteran filmmaker Steven Spielberg is collaborating with Stranger Things creators Matt and Ross Duffer for an upcoming adaptation of celebrate author Stephen King's The Talisman.

The book, which was penned by King and Peter Straub in 1984, will be turned into a series for streamer Netflix, according to The Hollywood Reporter. The Duffer brothers, whose smash hit Netflix show Stranger Things has been heavily inspired by King's work, will executive produce the series.

Netflix will produce the project in association with Spielberg's Amblin Television and Paramount Television Studios. Curtis Gwinn, who worked as a writer-exec producer on Stranger Things, will serve as writer and showrunner of the show.

The Talisman tells the story of Jack Sawyer, a 12-year old boy who sets off on an epic



road-trip quest to save the life of his dying mother. He is in search of the Talisman, a powerful relic that can not only heal his mother but, as he learns, save the world. Sawyer's journey criss-crosses two realities: the America we know and its dangerous, fantasy-world twin, The Territories.

Matt and Ross Duffer will executive produce via their Monkey Massacre Productions, along with Spielberg, Darryl Frank and Justin Falvey for Amblin TV. King also would serve as an executive producer, along with Paramount Television.

'A symbolic moment': Harry and Meghan's Oprah interview marks turning point

EDWARD HELMORE

NEW YORK, 07 MAR [THEGUARDIAN]: It may be an American coronation of sorts. When Oprah Winfrey's highly anticipated and potentially explosive interview with the Duke and Duchess of Sussex airs in its primetime spot on Sunday evening, millions across the US are expected to watch. It will be the couple's first interview since stepping back from their royal duties in early 2020, but it could also mark the moment that the Sussexes evolve from British royalty to Hollywood elite.

"Having a big interview with these royals, or ex-royals, and having it done by Oprah Winfrey, begs the question – as it always does – who is the bigger star here, the interviewer or the interviewees?" said Robert Thompson, a professor of TV and film at the Newhouse School at Syracuse University.

While Meghan already had a successful career as an actor and was well known in the US before her marriage to Harry, since their move to the States last year the couple have dominated drug-store magazines and online gossip sites, all obsessed with tracking their lives in California as well as every twist and turn of their rifts with the royal family, which appeared to deepen even further this week.

While some in the UK have been concerned over the timing of the interview, as Prince Philip remains in hospital, commentators in the US have mainly focused on the claims that the palace appeared to be attempting a "smear" campaign prior to it airing, and the further revelations that could be in store.

"You've said some pretty shocking things here," Winfrey says to the pair in one teaser clip from the two-hour interview released this week.

"How do you feel about the palace hearing you speak your truth today?" Winfrey asks Meghan at the start of another. "I don't know how they could expect that after all of this time, we would still just be silent," Meghan responds.

Having secured lucrative deals with Netflix and Spotify that will finance their new independent lives, the couple

have been speaking out on a range of hot-button issues in the US, from racism and police brutality following the killing of George Floyd to voting rights.

A January cover story in People magazine credited the "progressive" couple with having "changed the royal family forever" and continuing to "shake up the monarchy" while settling into their California lives with their young son, Archie.

In the interview, Britain, as well as the couple, will be under the microscope. Winfrey is expected to question the pair on the racism Meghan faced while living in the UK, how the couple felt "hounded" by the British tabloid press, and the role these played in their decision to move stateside.

"I know that many women of color have been fairly horrified by the undercurrents of racism and classism that have defined much of the coverage of Meghan Markle, particularly in the British press," said Keli Goff, a US columnist.

Maiysha Kai, managing editor of the Glow Up and co-host of The Root Presents: It's Lit, said the couple had been strategic in their choice of interviewer.

"I don't think their divestment from daily obligations of being royal means they're going to drop some big betrayal but I do think there's an opportunity here to clear the record a bit on what the world came to know as 'Megxit,' a term we've all used but is implicitly racist," she said.

"Meghan's color should have been irrelevant to the issue, but then we saw that despite the endorsement of the marriage by the royal family, we saw a backlash from some in the

media and the public."

Winfrey has played a prominent role the couple's life in the US, initially helping them to find a temporary home (the Beverly Hills estate of her friend Tyler Perry, the film producer). Now, the Sussexes and Winfrey are neighbors in a seaside Santa Barbara county enclave, home to a slew of Hollywood heavyweights, and they even exchanged Christmas presents.

To complete what Thompson called "a ritualistic transition", the couple will "confront stepping into the new territory and stepping out of the old". And it's Winfrey, as she has for decades with countless others, who will be a ceremonial guide, and is expected to bring her loyal audience of millions to watch.

"A primetime Oprah interview maybe one of the really symbolic moments of arrival because Oprah is, and always was, always about reinvention," Thompson added.

Though a recent Morning Consult poll found that the Queen remains the favorite royal among Americans, with Kate, Duchess of Cambridge, second, Harry and Meghan rank highly, coming third and fourth respectively. But whether they will draw audiences to rival those of the Netflix drama The Crown (seen by 78 million households worldwide, according to the streaming service) remains to be seen.

Buckingham Palace announced last month that Harry and Meghan would not be returning as working members of the royal family following their 12-month trial separation. The statement meant the couple, and their son Archie, would formally – and finally – step away from royal duties.

Mark Borkowski, a British brand expert, believes this formalized break could give the couple the freedom they need to complete their re-invention or rebranding in more contemporary terms.

"The point is, they are on a journey and much depends on what momentum they get around them," Borkowski says. "This is about where she could be in 15 or 20 years time. Could she have a shot at the presidency? I think she probably could."

Priyanka Chopra launches Indian restaurant in New York, performs 'puja' with Nick Jonas

Actor Priyanka Chopra is making sure she not only brings Indian stories and storytellers to the west, but also give it a taste of her roots, literally. The White Tiger star on Saturday announced she is opening a restaurant, Sona, in New York that will serve Indian cuisines. Priyanka wrote an Instagram post, making the announcement, and shared that Sona will embody "the flavours that she has grown up with".

"I'm thrilled to present to you SONA, a new restaurant in NYC that I poured my love for Indian food into. SONA is the very embodiment of timeless India and the flavours I grew up with. The kitchen is helmed by the incredible Chef @harinayak, a masterful talent, who has created the most delicious and innovative menu, taking you on a food journey through my amazing country," Priyanka wrote.

The actor informed the fans that the restaurant will open later this month. She accompanied the post with three pictures, one of the restaurant and two from the small prayer ceremony she and her family, including husband Nick Jonas, performed in 2019 before beginning work on the food joint.



THE DAY AHEAD

Aries: The Universe gives us not what we want, but what we need. Food for thought, Aries. You may feel like your heart is falling apart. Truth is, she's coming together, becoming stronger and more resilient with each breath you take. Let this breakdown be a breakthrough in your journey, one that teaches you the importance of self-love and takes you closer to the light. Remember, the present is where the magic is at. Release the bonds of a life long gone by.

Taurus: This is a period of transition for you, Taurus. Your cheat code to survival: accept that you are being guided by a higher power. A seed germinates only when it is pushed deep under the ground. The phoenix rises from its own ashes. In the same way, this destruction is paving the way for your rebirth. Embrace the change.

Gemini: Often, we tend to be our own worst enemies. If you're feeling stuck and at the mercy of your circumstances, you are the reason for it. But this conversation isn't about beating yourself on what happened. It's about learning from

your past mistakes and reclaiming the reins. Make an empowered decision to change the course of your life.

Cancer: Patience is the virtue of the wise, Cancer, one that's being bestowed upon you today. The Universe is asking you to hit pause so that you can reflect on how far you have come and where you have to go from here. Keeping account of your progress will motivate you further. Trust your instincts when it comes to business matters. If you are unsure of yourself, take your time to figure things out.

Tip: Reflect before taking any action.

Leo: Having the right people walking by your side promises to be your biggest asset, both personally and professionally. Curate a circle that inspires you and supports your growth. Leo, this is the week to make magick with your good vibes tribe. Dissatisfied with your current work environment? Be a harbinger of change. When you vibrate at the frequency of love, so will those who interact with you. Some of you may be thinking about starting a venture with a sibling or an old friend. If you feel like there is

mutual understanding between the two of you, the answer is yes.

Virgo: There are endless forces working in your favour, Virgo. All you have to do is keep faith. The wheel is on the verge of completing its current cycle and starting a brand new one. In other words, all the work that was stuck will now move towards the finish line in fast forward. This is also a period of rewards, as the hard work you have put in is bearing fruit. Review your progress and set intentions for the next cycle today.

Libra: If you constantly think about a yellow car, you are bound to notice only yellow cars. Similarly, if you only think about what you don't have, you will only see things that support this belief. It's time to change your perception drastically. An Abraham Hicks' favourite to help you make space for the good things to pour in:

Scorpio: It's a good thing to be this invested in what you are creating. However, if you want to get ahead in the game, you're going to have to adopt a

level-headed approach. Know when to keep your emotions out of the workspace, Scorpio. For some of you, this may be a time of syncing forces with a loved one. Be cognisant of the wisdom they have to share. You don't have to apply all of it to your business, just the bits that resonate.

Sagittarius: An array of opportunities are being offered to you, ones that resonate with you on a deep level. The key to moving forward with grace: finding a balance between the head and the heart. The best decisions are made when you are in a neutral space. Some of you may also have the opportunity to sync forces with somebody who shares your vision, and is just as invested in the project. Be receptive to what they have to say and apply the bits that will help grow your business.

Capricorn: If you wake up to tidings that have you grinning from ear to ear, you have your stars to blame. That and the work you have consistently been putting in to move the energy and clear the blocks. This week also brings with

itself the opportunity to work with your good vibe tribe. People who support your vision and want to see the project flourish. Your task in the days to come:

Aquarius: Our perception colours our reality. If your world is rife with disappointment, there's a good chance you're choosing to look at the cup as half empty. What you want to do instead: weigh the blessings. This will help you realise that you are living a charmed life. As for your personal relationships, remember that there's little you can do to change people or influence their thought patterns.

Pisces: The situation you have found yourself in is not an easy one. Only you can answer the question 'which way to go from here?' To simplify the process, make a list of pros and cons and then throw the sheet away so you can listen to your heart. This is the key to moving forward with dignity and grace. Remember, you are not harming anybody in the bargain. You are simply choosing yourself. Release the guilt.