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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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New cases calm down, but fatalities remain a worry

SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 31 MAY:

The number of daily cases in Sikkim appear to be calming down with 146 new cases detected in the past 24 hours to take the State's tally of confirmed cases to 15,317 on Monday. This is a substantial lowering given that earlier this week Sikkim has broken the 400-mark and had many days of 300-plus daily cases.

While Mondays usually see a low number because the VRD Labs where RT-PCR tests are conducted are closed on Sundays, today is different because extensive Rapid Antigen Tests more than made up for the usual drop in testings on Sundays.

Yesterday, a staggering 927 RAT tests were carried out across the State to pick up all the 146 of the new cases. In comparison, only 395 RAT tests had been carried out last Sunday, 23 May, and had still picked up 100 cases. Five samples screened through TruNat all returned negative for COVID-19.

While the drop in daily cases is reassuring, fatalities continue to remain a worry and Sikkim's COVID death toll reached 253 with three more Covid patients succumbing to the virus in the last 24 hours. Two COVID deaths were reported from Central Referral Hospital and one COVID patient passed away in home isolation in West Sikkim.

Here, one needs to bear in mind that fatalities, experts have often pointed out, usually hit after a gap of 15-20 days. Given this timeline, fatalities remain high for a couple of weeks since after the infections have started going down. Hopefully,



this will not be the case for Sikkim and serious complications will also go down and lowered load on health facilities will lead to even more focussed care for the more grievously ill leading to improved recovery among them.

Meanwhile, the number of active cases of coronavirus in Sikkim crossed the 4000-mark for the first time today and now stands at 4,021.

Official Government of India data reveals that of the Covid cases detected in the State thus far, 26.11% are currently active underlining how the second wave in Sikkim has led a majority of the infections and how a high number of people are still recovering from the virus.

There are currently, 216 people in hospital. 24 of them in ICU, while 3,805 are in facility or home isolation, the symptoms under control and not requiring hospitalisation.

Also today, 83 more persons were discharged from home isolation on Sunday to further improve the number of recovered cases of COVID-19 in Sikkim to 10,829.

In the year that has passed since Covid arrived on the scene, Sikkim has carried out nearly 1.20 lakh tests, or which, as mentioned, 15,317 have returned positive.

Of the latest count, 22 new cases were registered in East District, 68 in West District, 50 in South District and six in North District. It is not often that East Sikkim is beaten in the number of daily cases, but given the outbreaks in rural areas, West and South districts have beaten East today.

Agri Minister inspects pest outbreak in Luving Thamidara Maize fields

GANGTOK, 31 MAY [IPR]: Minister, Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Services, Lok Nath Sharma, carried out a field visit to Luving/ Thamidara, East Sikkim, today.

In view of the infestation of pest in an economically important cereal, Maize, the Minister inspected the affected area under Luving Thamidara Gram Panchayat Unit.

He was accompanied by officials including Joint Director (East), Agriculture Department, Rachana Gurung, Joint Director, Integrated Pest Management (IPM), RK Sharma, Agriculture Development Officer Tshering Yuden, Panchayat President DR Panday, field functionaries and others.

While carrying out the field inspection, Minister Sharma also interacted with the progressive farmers and informed that the concerned department has been working tirelessly to mitigate the further spread of disease



and ensure quality yields of farmers' produces.

He directed the concerned officials and field functionaries to be vigilant and quick in responding on any complaint of farmers with

regard to the infestation of pest in maize. He also informed that the concerned field staff have been spraying neem-based herbal medicines and have controlled the disease in most of the affected areas.

The Minister also assured to provide three power tillers and six green houses for six wards of the GPU to boost up the progressive farming community in the area.

Speaking to the media, the Minister appealed to everyone to adopt agriculture for good health and sustainable livelihood.

He also shed light on the vision of the Chief Minister to benefit the farmers with encouraging agricultural activities and farming friendly initiatives like financial incentives, conceptualization of "Agriculture is Future" and to make Sikkim a self-reliant State.

It may be noted that the spread of disease has now been mitigated to a large extent after conducting the spray a week ago and the concerned farmers have expressed their gratitude to the State government for promptly addressing the infestation of pests, and for other important initiatives.

Sikkim's North Pointers fundraise to thank Covid Warriors

SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 31 MAY:

North Point Alumni Association [NPAA], Sikkim Chapter, undertook a week-long fundraising drive from 17 to 23 May to aid and assist people working tirelessly and selflessly during this COVID pandemic.

The Covid Relief fundraiser was a grand success with donations totalling Rs 8,50,000, informs an NPAA-Sikkim Chapter press release.

The release adds that at an event following strict Covid guidelines and social distancing held on Monday at STNM Hospital, an NPAA team handed over Rs 1 lakh in cash to Safai Karmacharis and Ward Attendants who are currently attached to the COVID ICU and Wards and "who all are not financially

sound."

Likewise, at another similar event today itself at the Gangtok Municipality Corporation, Rs 5,000 each was handed over to seven COVID Heroes who have been undertaking cremation of Covid-19 fatalities of the State and eight COVID Heroes who have been taking care of COVID waste and sanitization work at STNM Hospital and isolation centers, it is informed.

The release adds that their hard work and sacrifice in the past 15 months are worthy of not just praise but also reward in kind and that the NPAA-Sikkim is indebted to all the front-line workers.

The release informs that the association also handed over Rs 2 Lakh to the Rector of St. Joseph's School North Point,



Darjeeling, in aid of the Sursum Corda Covid-19 Care and Relief which consists of a 50-bed isolation center. The center which is housed in the College premises has been providing patients with food, supplements, medicine etc. "The bugle which was blown by the school has definitely encouraged the alumni members to step forth

our own in Sikkim," the release states.

"Furthermore, NPAA, Sikkim Chapter procured 200 Microtek Pulse Oximeters to specifically cater to those who are in home isolation and come from economically weaker section and 2000 medical grade N95 masks to be given to Aganwadi workers who are taking

care of COVID patients who are put up in COVID Care Centre. These items will be handed over to be distributed through 26 PHC's throughout Sikkim," it is informed.

The release mentioned that as onslaught of the second wave of the Coronavirus Pandemic has hit us all adversely affecting many of us especially the economically

weaker section of the Society so the association taken this initiative to "lend a hand to a faltering brother". The unique and salient feature of this fundraiser was that it not only included the alumni members of St Joseph's School, North Point, Darjeeling but Sikkimese from all walks of life.

NPAA, Sikkim chapter would also like this opportunity to thank each and every one who stepped up and contributed to our cause generously.

The alumni members are in active talks and hold regular video conferences to chart the future course of action. Rest assured, NPAA, Sikkim Chapter will continue on this mission of ours and we will be there to aid and assist their brothers and sisters in these times of crisis.

Petrol, Diesel Prices Hiked Again; Petrol Crosses Rs. 100/Litre Mark In Pune

NEW DELHI, 31 MAY [NDTV]: Prices of petrol and diesel have yet again reached new highs today, and Pune has become the newest city to cross the Rs.100 per litre mark.

Today, on May 31, the price of petrol in Pune stands at Rs 100.09 per litre, while diesel has reached Rs 90.66 per litre mark. In the nation's capital, Delhi, petrol price has reachedRs 94.23 per litre, while diesel price stands at Rs85.15 per litre.

At the same time, in Mumbai, petrol and diesel prices have touched - Rs 100.47 per litre and Rs 92.45 per litre, respectively. This is the 16th time fuel prices have been hiked in the month of may 2021.

Among other metros, petrol price in Chennai today stood at Rs 95.76 per litre, while the rate of diesel in the region went up to Rs 89.90 per litre.

At the same time, petrol price in Kolkata has reached Rs 94.25 per litre, while diesel is priced at Rs 88 per litre. In Bengaluru, the price of petrol has reached Rs 97.37 per litre, while diesel rate has touchedRs90.27 per litre. Overall, in the metro cities, petrol rates have gone up by up to 29 paise, while diesel has become expensive by up to 28 paise today, on May 31, 2021.

In Maharashtra, petrol prices in the Ahmednagar district too crossed the Rs 100 mark, currently standing at Rs 100.13 per litre, while diesel is priced at Rs 90.71 per litre in the region.

However, petrol prices are still the most expensive in Sri Ganganagar, Rajasthan, where it currently stands at Rs 105.24 per litre, while diesel is priced at Rs Rs 98.08 per litre, slowly creeping towards the Rs100 mark.

Other regions where petrol and diesel rates have already crossed the Rs 100 and Rs 90 per litre mark, respectively, include - Anuppur, Rewa, Jaisalmer, Banswara, Indore, Bhopal, Gwalior, Ratnagiri, Aurangabad, Kolhapur, Nashik, and Parbhani.

Right now, oil marketing companies like - Indian Oil Corporation, Bharat Petroleum, and Hindustan Petroleum are revising domestic fuel prices on a daily basis.

Changes in fuel prices are usually implemented at 6 am every day, however, since the last two weeks, we are seeing a revision is priced once every two days. Fuel rates differ from state to state depending on the incidence of local taxes such as value-added tax (VAT).

Mass testing in North Sikkim picks up 18 SARS-Cov2 cases from 769 samples

MANGAN, 31 MAY [IPR]:

In the on-going Covid testing programme in North District by the District Hospital (Mangan), the villages of Tingchim, Tinje and Jhushing were covered today with Rapid Antigen Testing. A total of 769 people were screened and 18 reported positive for Novel Coronavirus.

For Tingchim, the testing centre was Tingchim school while the centre for Tinje and Jhushing was Mangshila school.

With assistance from ADM (North), SDM Mangan, BDO Mangan and the administration team as well as the police along with logistic assistance from Village Covid Management Committee

(VCMC) members, a total of 769 people were tested, out of which, 18 reported positive.

Those who tested positive were instructed to remain under home isolation.

One patient from Tingchim was sent to the district hospital for isolation whereas one patient from Mangshila was sent to the Zilla Covid Care Centre.

The testing programme will continue in the district and the next identified area where people will be tested is Mangan Bazar area, informed DMS (North) Dr. Rinzing. D. Bhutia.

Covid kit supplied by the Government of Sikkim was also distributed to the concerned patients assiduously.

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Bengal Chief Secretary quits, named Chief Adviser to Mamata Banerjee

KOLKATA, 31 MAY [NDTV]: Hours after Mamata Banerjee wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi that she would not send top Bengal officer Alapan Bandyopadhyay to Delhi, she announced that he had retired as Chief Secretary and would now serve as Chief Adviser to her government for three years.

Mamata Banerjee had made it clear that she would not follow the Centre's order shifting Mr Bandyopadhyay to the Centre in the middle of her state's Covid fight. The Centre, she said, responded by insisting that he has to report to Delhi.

After Mr Bandyopadhyay's retirement, HK Dwivedi has taken over as Chief Secretary, she announced.

"They have given no reason. I am shocked. I have decided we need his service for the Covid pandemic. For Covid and



for Cyclone Yaas, he must continue his service to the poor, the state, the country, the affected people..." the Chief Minister said.

"If a bureaucrat is insulted after he has dedicated his life to his work, what message is the government and PM sending out? Are they bonded labourers? There are many

Bengali cadre officers at the Centre. Can I recall them without consultation, Mr Prime Minister? Mr Busy Prime Minister? Mr Mann-ki-baat Prime Minister?"

The Chief Secretary was ordered to report to the Centre at 10 am today in a recall order issued hours after Mamata Baner-

jee skipped a Cyclone Yaas review meeting with PM Modi.

She met with the Prime Minister briefly after his helicopter landed at the Kalaikunda air base in Bengal and left for another meeting. Top central government sources called her "petulant" and said "never before in the history of

the Indian Republic has a Chief Minister of a state behaved in such an ugly, disrespectful and arrogant manner" with a Prime Minister.

In her letter, Ms Banerjee had written to PM Modi: "The government of Bengal cannot release, and is not releasing, its Chief Secretary at this critical hour, on the basis of our understanding that the earlier order of extension, issued after lawful consultation in accordance with applicable laws, remains operational and valid."

She added: "I am sure you will not inflict further suffering on the people of this state by taking away the services of an experienced officer, suddenly without any consultation and with no prior notice, whose continued presence in my state in these difficult times was accepted to be vital and necessary by your government four days back."

Mass testing at Lower Sripatam



SUMMIT REPORT YANGANG, 31 MAY:

Yangang PHC team led by Dr Chandani Pokhrel carried out mass Covid-testing for residents of Lower Sripatam

under Rangang-Yangang Constituency today.

The testing initiative was supervised by BDO Yangang, BishnuThapa, and was also joined

by SKM's CLC Covid Management Task Force team, a press release informs.

Results of the tests are expected tomorrow, it is informed.

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MYM-Siliguri begins seven-day sanitation if ward no. 9

Marwadi Yuva Manch, Siliguri branch, with support from ex-Councillor of ward no.9 of Siliguri, Pradeep Goyal, started a seven-day sanitation program of the ward. [from SANJAY AGARWAL]

India reports lowest daily Covid cases in 50 days

NEW DELHI, MAY 31 (PTI): India reported the lowest daily new coronavirus infections in 50 days with 1,52,734 cases, taking India's total tally to 2,80,47,534, while the active case-load further declined to 20,26,092, according to the Union Health Ministry data updated on Monday.

The death toll climbed to 3,29,100 with 3,128 daily deaths, the data updated at 8 am showed.

Recoveries continued to outnumber the daily new cases for the 18th consecutive day.

The number of people who have recuperated from the disease surged to 2,56,92,342, with 2,38,022 patients having recovered in a span of 24 hours, while the case fatality rate stands at 1.17 per cent, the data stated.

Also, 16,83,135 tests were conducted on Sunday, taking the total cumulative tests conducted so far in the country to 34,48,66,883, while the daily positivity was

recorded at 9.07 per cent. It has been less than 10 per cent for seven consecutive days, the ministry said.

Weekly positivity rate has declined to 9.04 per cent.

The active cases have further reduced to 20,26,092, comprising 7.22 per cent of the total infections, while the national COVID-19 recovery rate has improved to 91.60 per cent.

India's COVID-19 tally had crossed the 20-lakh mark on August 7, 30 lakh on August 23, 40 lakh on September 5 and 50 lakh on September 16.

It went past 60 lakh on September 28, 70 lakh on October 11, crossed 80 lakh on October 29, 90 lakh on November 20 and surpassed the one-crore mark on December 19.

India crossed the grim milestone of 2 crore on May 4.

The cumulative number of COVID-19 vaccine doses administered in the country has exceeded 21.31 crore.



A total of 21,31,54,129 doses have been administered through 30,28,295 sessions, according to the provisional report till 7 am on Monday.

The 3,128 new fatalities include 814 from Maharashtra, 493 from Tamil Nadu, 381 from Karnataka, 186 from Kerala, 142 from West Bengal, 138 from Uttar Pradesh and 127 from Punjab.

A total of 3,29,100 deaths have been reported so far in the country, including 94,844 from Maharashtra, 28,679

from Karnataka, 24,151 from Delhi, 23,754 from Tamil Nadu, 20,346 from Uttar Pradesh, 15,410 from West Bengal, 14,432 from Punjab and 13,016 from Chhattisgarh.

The Health Ministry stressed that more than 70 per cent of the deaths occurred due to comorbidities.

"Our figures are being reconciled with the Indian Council of Medical Research," the ministry said on its website, adding that state-wise distribution of figures is subject to further verification and reconciliation.

Nearly 25 Cr vaccine doses likely by August: Central Covid Panel

NEW DELHI, 31 MAY [NDTV]: With ramping up of production capacities, nearly 25 crore 'Made in India' vaccines are expected to be available by August, a senior official has said and noted that it will go a long way in meeting the target of vaccinating one crore people daily against COVID-19.

There has been shortage of vaccines after it was decided to open up vaccination to all those above 18 years.

"Yesterday, SII in a letter mentioned that they will be manufacturing 10-12 crore of vaccine doses, which is almost 50 per cent ramping up (of their capacity) by June-end. Similarly, Covaxin is also going to increase its production and by July-end they will also produce between 10-12 crore doses (per month)," said Dr NK Arora, Chairman of COVID-19 work-



ing group under National Technical Advisory Group on Immunization (NTAGI).

Pune-based SII (Serum Institute of India) manufactures Covishield vaccine against COVID-19 while Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech manufactures Covaxin.

"By August we will have 20-25 crore vaccine doses per month, another 5-6 crore doses from

other manufacturing units or if we get international vaccine doses. The objective is to vaccinate one crore people every day," Dr Arora said.

He said India may start in few weeks testing the feasibility of a regimen "that mixes two different doses of COVID vaccines to see if it helps boost the immune response to virus". The researchers in such a study

would see the effects of giving a different vaccine in the second dose.

At present, the country has availability of 7-7.5 crore doses of Covishield and Covaxin per month.

India's daily COVID-19 cases continue to decline and 1,52,734 new infections were recorded in the last 24 hours, the lowest in 46 days.

"Next, sedition case for this TV channel?": Top Judge's scathing remark

NEW DELHI, 31 MAY [NDTV]: During a hearing on the centre's oft-criticised vaccination policy, Supreme Court Justices DY Chandrachud and L Nageswara Rao on Monday referred to visuals aired by NDTV of a dead body - a suspected COVID-19 patient - being dumped into a river in Uttar Pradesh.

Justice Chandrachud and Justice Rao referred to that horrific sight as part of a sarcastic exchange to underline their displeasure at the many sedition cases filed recently, including one by the Andhra Pradesh government against two news channels for airing the comments of a rebel MP.

"Yesterday we saw pictures of a dead body being thrown in a river," Justice Rao observed.

"Yes. There was a picture of body being

thrown into river. I do not know whether complaint of sedition (has been) filed against the news channel for showing it," Justice Chandrachud replied.

The exchange came hours before a bench including the same two judges put on hold Andhra Pradesh's action against the two TV channels, and said: "It's time we define limits of sedition."

"The Andhra Pradesh government's act of filing sedition cases against the channels is muffling channels. It is time the court defines sedition," Justice Chandrachud said in that hearing.

The court also said: "We are of the view that provisions of 124A and 153 of the IPC (Indian Penal Code) require interpretation, particularly on the issue of rights of press and free speech."

Section 124 A deals

with sedition and 153 with provocation for riots.

In March the court, while dismissing a petition against Jammu and Kashmir MP Farooq Abdullah, said expressing views that are different from government opinion cannot be termed "sedition".

That was in response to a petition claiming Mr Abdullah had sought the help of China and Pakistan against India on the Article 370 issue. The petitioners were also fined ₹ 50,000.

On May 1 the court sought the centre's response to a PIL challenging the validity of the sedition law.

The PIL was filed by two journalists, Kishorechandra Wangkhemcha from Manipur and Kanhaiya Lal Shukla from Chhattisgarh, who said the provision violated the freedom of speech and

expression.

The journalists alleged frequent misuse, misapplication and abuse (of the law) since 1962.

The petition also pointed out that sedition as a crime had been repealed in other post-colonial democracies, and condemned as undemocratic, undesirable and unnecessary.

Criticism of the sedition law - which activists say is used by the government to muzzle dissent and opposing views - is a long-standing point of concern in the country.

In December last year former Supreme Court judge Madan B Lokur said the sedition law was being misused to curb free press and speech. He said "a lethal cocktail of use and misuse of law" was being used to adversely impact the liberty of those who spoke up against the government.

“Time to set limits of sedition”: Supreme Court relief to Telugu channels

NEW DELHI, 31 MAY [NDTV]: The Supreme Court today put on hold Andhra Pradesh's action against two TV channels and issued notice to the state government asserting, “It's time we define limits of sedition.”

The Andhra Pradesh government should not take any coercive steps against Telugu news channels TV 5 and ABN Andhra Jyoti, the Supreme Court said.

“The Andhra Pradesh government's act of filing sedition cases against the channels is muffling channels. It is time the court defines sedition,” said Justice DY Chandrachud.

At a separate hearing on Covid vaccination, the word “sedition” came up again in a caustic remark by Justice Chandrachud.

Justice L Nageswara Rao noted that pictures of “a dead body being picked up and thrown in a river” were seen on TV yesterday. NDTV had shown the shocking visuals of the body, apparently of a Covid patient, being flung into the river by relatives.

Justice Chandrachud said, “Yes. There was picture of body being lifted and thrown into river. I do not know whether complaint of sedition filed against the news channel for showing it.”

The Andhra TV channels were charged in an FIR with sedition allegedly for airing the comments of a rebel MP of Andhra Pradesh's ruling YSR Congress, Kanumuri Raghurama Krishnam Raju. Mr Raju had been very critical of his own government's handling of Covid.

The news channels challenged the FIR before the Supreme Court, arguing that the Andhra government had violated a recent court order that restrained governments from punishing citizens for flagging Covid-related grievances.

TV5 also said Mr Raju's speeches were broadcast by several media outlets.

The MP, Mr Raju, was arrested on May 14, weeks after he asked a CBI special court to cancel the bail granted to his party founder, Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy, in a disproportionate assets case.

The Supreme Court granted bail to him on May 21, saying there was a possibility he was “ill-treated in custody”.

In March, the Supreme Court had said that expressing views that were dissenting and different from government opinion cannot be termed “sedition”.

The case involved a petition's allegation that Jammu and Kashmir MP Farooq Abdullah had sought the help of China and Pakistan against India on Article 370 on special status for Jammu and Kashmir, which was scrapped in August 2019.

Addl PS to CM & team reach supplements to convalescing monks

SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 31 MAY:

A team comprising of Additional Political Secretary to the CM [East], Tshering Wangchuk Lepcha, area MLA Sonam Venchungpa, SKM CLC president Roshan Upreti, CLC general secretary, BDO Martam and others visited various isolation centres and COVID Care Centres where monks who recently tested positive for Covid-19 are convalescing under isolation.

The team reached supplies of immunity booster diets and other essential items to the monks, it is informed.

A press release from Mr Lepcha informs that the visit was on the directions and on behalf of the Chief Minister and that the supplies included immunity-boosting sup-



plements like Chawanprash, Amul Milk, Dry fruits, Corn flakes, Real juice etc.

The team reached the supplies to Yangthang JHS School Isolation Centre where 78 monks

are under isolation, Lingtam Monastery COVID Care Centre [152 are isolated], Karma

Shri Nalanda Institute Rumtek [78] and Khelgoan, Reshithang [1 female and 1 male].

Private initiative sets up 25-bed free Covid Care Centre in Siliguri

SUMMIT REPORT SILIGURI, 31 MAY:

Siliguri Welfare Organisation, Indian Chamber of Commerce (ICC) North Bengal Chapter, Liver Foundation and Forum for Humanity opened a Covid Care Centre at Tinbatti More here in Siliguri today.

This centre will have doctors on call



24x7 and will be attended by a paramedical team, provide oxygen

support, beds and medicines and meals. All facilities at this centre are

free of cost.

Starting with 25 beds, this facility will increase

beds when needed, the groups inform. The idea was formulated by Dr Abhijeet Choudhary of the Liver Foundation.

Working president, Siliguri Welfare Organisation, Abhijit Mazumdar, explains that the CCC aims to cater to the requirements of the economically underprivileged.

Public Sector Banks to offer unsecured loans up to Rs. 5 lakh for Covid treatment

NEW DELHI, 31 MAY [NDTV]:

Public sector banks will be offering unsecured personal loans between ₹ 25,000 to ₹ 5 lakh to salaried, non-salaried and pensioners for meeting Covid treatment, Indian Banks' Association and State Bank of India said in a press release.

As part of the newly created Covid loan book under the guidelines of the Reserve Bank of India,

the banks will also offer healthcare business loans for setting up oxygen plants under Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS). Loan up to Rs. 2 crore capped at 7.5 per cent will be provided to hospitals, nursing homes for setting up oxygen plant, IBA and SBI said.

Business loans for healthcare facilities up to Rs.100 crore will be provided to setup

or expand healthcare infrastructure and to manufacturers of healthcare products and unsecured personal loans will be provided to individuals from ₹ 25,000 to ₹ 5 lakhs for salaried, non-salaried and pensioners for meeting Covid treatment.

Earlier this month, Reserve Bank of India said that it will provide a term-liquidity facil-

ity of ₹ 50,000 crore to ease access of funds for emergency medical service. The liquidity support came at a time when India emerged as the coronavirus hotspot and surging cases overwhelmed the healthcare system.

“The initiatives taken by all the PSBs by coming together and announced today is a significant step in the right direction to mitigate the financial

impact due to Covid resurgence on all affected segments of the borrowers,” State Bank of India and IBA said in a press release.

In regard to Resolution Framework 2.0, public sector banks have also formulated templated approach for restructuring of loans for small businesses and micro-small and medium enterprises (MSMEs).

NEET, JEE: NSUI writes to Centre for age relaxation, extra attempts

NEW DELHI, 31 MAY [NDTV]:

The National Students' Union of India (NSUI) in a letter to Minister Jitendra Singh has demanded age relaxation and extra attempts for students appearing for competitive exams including engineering entrance test (JEE) and medical entrance tests (NEET UG, PG).

The students union has also asked the Centre to vaccinate all the students before holding any exams offline.

NSUI has emphasized on the fact that due to the ongoing Covid pandemic many aspirants of various exams like NEET and JEE are losing out the opportunity to sit in the exams hence government must immediately form a policy to protect the attempts of all such candidates.

NSUI President Neeraj Kundan in the letter emphasised that, “..apart from the demands of age relaxation and extra attempts for the aspirants, it is extremely important to form a vaccination policy for all such candidates before making any decision about any of the examinations.”

“The candidates going to appear in exams like UPSC, CA, NEET (UG & PG), JEE, SSC-CHSL, UGC NET, INCET, should be vaccinated on priority basis as soon as possible,” the letter added.

NSUI gave the slogan of ‘Pehle Suraksha, Phir Pariksha’ and has been demanding immediate action from the Centre to make sure that none of the students' future, who will be appearing in the competitive examination, is compromised.

NSUI last week had opposed the Central Government's decision to conduct the Class 12th board exams amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and termed it as a “wrong call”.

Following the proposals of the Union Government to conduct exams, Questioning the government decision to conduct this exam, the NSUI further asks, “If the government is ready to come up with an evaluation formula for many other subjects why can't they do the same for these 19 subjects as well?”

Conducting exams for these 19 subjects, NSUI said, could be equally dangerous as it would have been for all the subjects and considering the present conditions in the country this is not the risk which Modi Government should take.

32 kids orphaned in COVID-19 pandemic in Delhi: Child rights panel chief

NEW DELHI, MAY 30 (PTI):

The Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR) has identified 32 children who were orphaned during the COVID-19 pandemic in the national capital.

Ten more children have been identified who have lost their single parent to the viral disease, DCPCR chairman Anurag Kundu said.

He said a survey was started earlier this month to trace children in similar distress.

“Sixteen children have been identified who lost their parents during the second wave. We have been enquiring about them whether they require medical attention, rations, counselling, immunisation etc,” said DCPCR member Ranjana Prasad.

“We are providing them the help they ask for,” she added.

She said details of younger children and toddlers have been

shared with their nearest Anganwadis.

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal had on May 14 said the Delhi government will bear the cost of education and upbringing of children who were orphaned during the pandemic.

The government has also planned to give Rs 2,500 per month to such children, and a proposal is likely to tabled before the Cabinet soon for approval, a senior official said.

Kundu said the findings of the survey will be shared with the government.

“We will ensure they are enrolled within a week of the notification,” he said.

The panel has started a helpline to address the needs of children orphaned during the pandemic.

The helpline (+91 9311551393) also addresses the concerns of kids whose parents are hospitalised or who are facing any other distress. The helpline has received over 2,200 calls till now.

Jio reintroduces Rs. 98 prepaid recharge plan with 1.5GB daily high-speed data for 14 days

NEW DELHI, 31 MAY [NDTV]:

Reliance Jio has reintroduced the Rs. 98 prepaid recharge plan for its customers, a little over a year after its discontinuation. The comeback doesn't bring any additional benefits and instead carries reduced validity of 14 days from the earlier 28 days. The Rs. 98 Jio recharge plan brings high-speed data access along with unlimited voice calling benefits. It also offers access to Jio apps, such as JioTV, JioCinema, and JioNews. The relaunch of the Rs. 98 prepaid plan brings down the Jio recharge plan portfolio starting price from Rs. 129 to Rs. 98.

As initially reported by OnlyTech, the Rs. 98 Jio prepaid recharge plan has silently been launched by the Mumbai-based telco. The plan brings 1.5GB daily high-speed data as well as unlimited voice calls for 14 days. It also includes access to Jio apps.

In May last year, Jio discontinued the Rs. 98 prepaid plan from its portfolio and made the Rs. 129 plan as the lowest for its cus-

tomers. That discontinuation came just months after the telco had revised the Rs. 98 plan with the 300 SMS messages benefit — alongside existing 2GB high-speed data allocation, and free Jio-to-Jio calls — for 28 days.

The revised Rs. 98 Jio prepaid recharge plan is available for purchase through the Jio.com site as well as MyJio app. Customers can also recharge their prepaid numbers with the Rs. 98 plan to get its new benefits through third-party apps including Google Pay and Paytm.

Earlier this month, Jio expanded the list of recharge plans available for the Jio Phone users by introducing Rs. 39 and Rs. 69 prepaid plans. Both carried 14 days of validity and included unlimited voice calling. However, the Rs. 39 plan brings 100MB data per day, while the Rs. 69 plan offers a daily data benefit of 0.5GB.

Jio also recently offered benefits such as 300 minutes of free calling and a buy-one-get-one recharge offer for its Jio Phone customers.

Lockdown moments threaded into a film



SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 31 MAY:

Moments - a film on Lockdown 2020, by Dip & Draw Productions was released online on 30 May.

The movie is a story on seclusion, hopelessness and loneliness due to the lockdown of 2020. It captures the impact of the virus on relationships as well as on one's physical and psychological health.

Set in Sikkim, the story follows the lives of two housemates forced into their confinement due to the pandemic.

The director and producer of the film, Deependra Mohora, shot the film entirely indoors once the national lockdown was lifted.

The story of the film is penned by Basant Sharma.

It was a challenging task to film the movie as there was limited equipment, a small crew and little time, says Mr Mohora.

The director took extreme care to ensure that

all Covid-19 protocols were strictly maintained while shooting.

The movie is shot entirely on DSLR cameras operated by Gachen Bhutia.

With a run time of a little over 30 minutes, Moments has an engaging storyline and keeps the viewers engaged.

Basant Sharma, Aadarsh Chettri and Trishala Tamang are in lead roles and offer convincing performances. The story also has a twist which is bound to surprise.

‘Rukho Rukho’ the original song in this film has been soulfully rendered by Sunil Mohora, who has songs like ‘Peepal Botay’ and an album, Prayas, to his name. The song is penned by Suman Gazmer.

The film is edited by Dilip Rai of Darjeeling Mail fame, colour correction is by Kunal Tamang and Timothy Rai steps in as production head.

The movie is available on the YouTube page of Dip & Draw Productions.

SummitTIMES

ON TOP OF THE NEWS

When Mountains Sweat, Pay Heed

Let's take better care of the water towers

Not just experts, even lay people and mass media are now noticing the change in weather patterns all over the world. The mountains are getting warmer, the plains getting colder and weather hitting extremes at unexpected times.

All these are symptomatic of Climate Change, a fact that cannot be denied or wished away anymore. Even as the debate continues over the developed world's attempts at browbeating the third world nations to sacrifice more to manage the world environment, regions close to ice need to get more concerned and start undertaking studies and working solutions on their own. Ice caps – the polar regions and the glacier fields – feel the impact of climate change first. North and west Sikkim are crisscrossed by many glaciers which are the frozen fountains of life for the State. Most times people do not realise the importance of glaciers to Sikkim since life does not directly depend on glacier-fed rivers in Sikkim and most times people tap into mountain springs for water. But such disconnect is only superficial and at the end of the day, the water cycle goes back to glaciers. Hence, the cultivation, the rivers and their hydel potential are all sourced from these glaciers and now that hydro-power has so much invested in it as the economic deliverer for the State, it becomes imperative that the source of this potential is better studied and understood.

Sikkim has had its glaciers studied and while the commissioning of the study was welcome, it has to be a continuing effort and a glacier watch needs to be set up. Some of Sikkim's glaciers have increased, some reports suggest and even that is not necessarily good news. Elsewhere, Himalayan glaciers are reported to be receding at the rate of 10 to 15 metres on an average every year. The longest glacier in the Eastern Himalaya – the 10 mile long Zemu Glacier in north Sikkim is believed by many to not be in the best of health. This glacier feeds the Teesta on which many hydel projects have been planned. The glaciers of West Sikkim have also been in fast recession for nearly a century now and most of them are hanging glaciers now, their course in the valley now just a litter of glacial debris.

Given the fact that 70 percent of the world's fresh water is frozen in glaciers, it is surprising that not enough is being done to save them and contain their recession. This is probably because the scientists and decision makers prefer the plains and share their data only among their clique and have seldom made their findings coherent enough for the stakeholders to understand. But the problem is already too clear and present to waste time pointing fingers. The finds of the study of glaciers commissioned by the State Government should be considered for inclusion in school curriculums so that the young can grow up learning how things are and then hopefully develop a connection with the canaries of climate change and learn to take better care of the water towers.

GABRIEL RECCHIA

THECONVERSATION.COM

Experts got it catastrophically wrong, according to Dominic Cummings, UK prime minister Boris Johnson's former chief adviser. Cummings has argued that the UK government's official scientific advice in March 2020 hugely misunderstood how the pandemic would play out, leading to a delay in locking down that cost thousands of lives.

According to Cummings, it was certain specialists with less knowledge of pandemics or medicine – such as data scientist Ben Warner, artificial intelligence researcher Demis Hassabis of DeepMind, and mathematician Tim Gowers – who gave more accurate forecasts at this point.

Cummings is also known to be a fan of Superforecasting by Philip Tetlock, a book about people who predict future events more reliably than most. Some superforecasters have been praised for their predictions about the pandemic, while others have also been critical of the experts' record.

So should governments make greater use of superforecasters instead of relying on scientific experts? The evidence isn't quite that clear cut. But there certainly seem to be things governments could learn from superforecasting.

In a famous American study on superforecasters published in 2014, they were an elite crew. Only the top 2% of contenders performed well enough in a geopolitical forecasting tournament to win the title. Their task was to assign probabilities to possible answers to dozens of questions.

The researchers provide a few illustrative examples. Who would be the president of Russia in 2012? Will North Korea detonate another nuclear weapon in the next three months? How many refugees will flee Syria next year?

Of course, just because someone does well one year doesn't prove that they're more skilled than anyone else. Maybe they just got lucky. We have to look at how well they did in the following years to evaluate how "super" they really are.

Impressively, these superforecasters maintained their edge as the tournament wore on for three more



years. In fact, after being combined into "superforecasting teams" containing only other top performers, their performance increased by a substantial margin. The researchers also found that working in teams and taking relevant training improved performance for other forecasters, compared to forecasters in a control condition.

TEAMS AND TRAINING

Whether or not we take Cummings at his word that the UK's pandemic planning suffered from a "classic group-think bubble", we know that teams don't always make wise decisions. What was it that made the teams more successful in the US study?

It's hard to say for sure, but the researchers specifically encouraged the teams to ask precise questions to encourage clearer thinking about the evidence supporting a particular forecast, to "look for evidence that contradicts your current prediction", and to constructively introduce alternative points of view.

Such debate may well improve collective judgment and guard against groupthink. Nor were team members required to come to a consensus. Although they shared information and opinions, they still made individual predictions which were combined by algorithm. Superforecaster teams in particular were highly engaged, frequently sharing information with and asking questions of other team members.

Another study took a closer look at which specific training techniques seemed to help most. Three techniques were particularly associated with higher accuracy. The first

was the use of so-called comparison classes.

For example, if I am trying to predict the probability that Benedict Cumberbatch and Sophie Hunter will still be together in five years, it can be helpful to think about other "classes" that are relevant – say, the class of celebrity marriages, or even marriages in general. This allows me to look to history to inform my predictions: What percentage of celebrity marriages end in any given five-year period?

The second was to make use of mathematical and statistical models, when available, to help inform one's views. The third was to "select the right questions" – a recommendation to spend more time predicting answers to questions where you know more than others about the topic, or on which additional research is likely to pay off. However, the researchers stressed that all components of the training may have contributed holistically to better performance.

Research has also shown that accuracy improves when we keep track of our past performance – but the kind of feedback matters. Did outcomes you thought would happen 20% of the time actually happen 20% of the time? What about outcomes you thought would happen 90% of the time? Performance improves for those who receive this kind of information.

CAN GOVERNMENTS DO BETTER?

Could the UK government have done better on COVID-19 by soliciting input from teams of superforecasters? It's possible. Su-

perforecasters at Good Judgment Open and practised forecasters at Metaculus (in which I've participated) each seem to have done well on COVID-19, with Metaculus claiming to have outperformed experts in June 2020. That said, in a recent series of COVID-19-related predictions, trained forecasters were not always more accurate than experts. The researchers behind the survey are experimenting with ways of combining predictions from domain experts and trained forecasters into a "consensus forecast".

It also seems plausible that even the training that helped the non-supers make better forecasts would have been useful. For example, Cummings claimed that although there was much attention to epidemiological models, evidence that contradicted the models' assumptions – such as data being reported by intensive care units – was ignored. It certainly seems plausible that someone trained to "look for evidence that contradicts your current prediction" might have spotted this earlier.

Of course, not all recommendations from the literature are practical in government settings. In theory, governments could test such recommendations for themselves, adopting any that seemed beneficial. Unfortunately, you can't improve what you don't measure.

In Superforecasting, Tetlock emphasises that any organisation serious about improving its forecasts must attach concrete numbers to them, at least internally. A phrase like "serious possibility" may mean a 20% chance to one person and an 80% chance to another.

This is almost certainly what Cummings was referring to when he said: "A guy called Phil Tetlock wrote a book and in that book he said that you should not use words like reasonable and probable and likely, because it confuses everybody." Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us if organisations that do not make forecasts in a way that they can be evaluated are not equipped to learn how to make them better. To improve, you first have to try.

[the writer is Research Associate, Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication, University of Cambridge]

Local Newspapers Can Help Reduce Polarization With Opinion Pages That Focus on Local Issues

JOHANNA DUNAWAY, JOSHUA P. DARR & MATTHEW P. HITT

THECONVERSATION.COM

If you're confused about opinion journalism and what it is, you're not alone. Many Americans are. But even so, the editorials, opinion columns and letters to the editor that fill the op-ed pages could help bridge political divides in the U.S. and offer some help to struggling local news outlets.

Two-thirds of Americans polled by Gallup in 2017 said that the news media do not distinguish between fact and opinion, an increase from 42% in 1984. Only 43% of people in another poll said that they can easily tell the difference between news and opinion online. Half of Americans are unfamiliar with the stock opinion journalism term, "op-ed," which is shorthand for an opinion column.

As the lines between opinion and news blur in many Americans' minds, trust in media is falling. Local news sources – daily newspapers and local television news programs – are seen as more trusted, caring and unbiased than national news sources, but even that trust is fraying.

Like nearly everything else in American politics, trust in the media is polarized along party lines: Democrats trust the media far more than Republicans do, and the most ideological members of each party have the most different ideas about media's trustworthiness.

Given this confusion and disagreement, it might seem unlikely that opinion journalism could be a positive influence. But our research shows that it can.

We are scholars who study politics and the media. We have found that local newspapers – and local opinion journalism in particular – can bridge political divisions and attract more readers.

VIBRANT COMMUNITY FORUM

Opinion journalism is not news reporting; it is distinguished by its stated point of view. It has three basic formats: editorials; opinion columns, or "op-eds"; and letters to the editor.

Editorials are written in the newspaper's voice by the editorial board, often composed of editors, owners and community members. Op-eds are typically written by professional columnists or community leaders. Letters are written by regular readers.

Op-eds ensure that perspectives from nonjournalists appear in the newspaper; help the general public interpret major events and can change readers' minds on the issues. The best op-ed pages operate almost like a town square, allowing readers to discuss and debate issues important both to their communities and beyond.

But the economic crisis in local news is making it harder for the opinion page to realize its potential as a vibrant community forum. Falling revenues and diminished numbers of staff have forced local newspapers to use more syndicated columnists from outside of the paper's community and whose work usually has a national focus. Some papers have cut the position of opinion editor completely.

Without a dedicated staffer to seek out community writers and edit their work, newspapers' reliance on syndicated columns means more opinion columns focused on "right versus left" ideological conflicts between the two national political extremes, not local issues.

NO MORE NATIONAL POLITICS?

Our book shows how doing the opposite – getting rid of national politics on the opinion page and reinvesting in local opinion content – can help newspapers attract readers and cool tensions in their community.

community.

The Desert Sun of Palm Springs, California, tried this for the month of July 2019: no syndicated columns, no cartoons about national politics, no letters about then-President Donald Trump.

We measured the ways this experiment changed the material that was published and the attitudes of the people in the community.

It was a major shift. In June, the month prior to this change, half of The Desert Sun's op-ed page was nationally syndicated columns, and one-third of all columns referenced Trump. In July, national syndication disappeared, as did all stories mentioning the president. California topics were the focus of less than half of all columns in June, but 96% focused on California in July. Mentions of the Democratic and Republican parties dropped by more than half, from 25% of all columns to 10%.

Local issues filled the page: Issues like artistic and cultural preservation, traffic and downtown development, and education and the environment got much more attention. The unique character of Palm Springs shone through, once given a chance.

We surveyed readers before and after The Desert Sun's experiment, in Palm Springs and a different city, Ventura, whose local newspaper, the Ventura County Sun, didn't change its opinion page. We wanted to see if the change in opinion journalism shifted how people think and feel about their political opponents.

Political polarization, which is when people feel far apart from the opposing party, slowed significantly in Palm Springs compared to Ventura among certain groups:

- Those who read the newspaper;
- Those who know a lot about politics; and
- People who participate most in politics.

These groups are the people most likely to share their views and inform others, potentially spreading the newspaper's influence into the broader community. Even if only a fraction of the community reads the newspaper regularly – The Desert Sun's total circulation is just over 26,000 – a change like this could have larger spillover effects.

The Desert Sun's readers enjoyed the change: Online readership of opinion pieces nearly doubled in July, and in reader surveys we fielded after the experiment, almost five times as many readers said they approved as said they disapproved of the experiment. The experiment helped the newspaper recruit more opinion writers, who then continued to write in the months that followed.

REINVESTING IN OPINION

Supporters of local news could follow the lessons of this research by raising money to pay for opinion editor positions and funding creative thinking like The Desert Sun's experiment.

The alternative is that opinion pages will wither and cease to reflect their communities. A local-only opinion page won't restore the economic model that supported newspapers in decades past, but our research shows it can bring back some readers and bridge some of the political divides that can drive American communities apart.

By keeping the focus local, the opinion page could play a small part in restoring trust and helping local newspapers survive these trying times.

[Johanna Dunaway is Associate Professor of Communication, Texas A&M University; Joshua P. Darr is Assistant Professor of Political Communication, Louisiana State University; Matthew P. Hitt is Assistant Professor of Political Science, Colorado State University]

Bihar extends lockdown till June 8, curbs eased:
Nitish Kumar

PATNA, 31 MAY [PTI]: The Bihar government on Monday extended the lockdown by another week, till June 8, but eased some of the restrictions in order to facilitate business activities.

Chief Minister Nitish Kumar made the announcement on social media after chairing a meeting of the crisis management group that comprises his cabinet colleagues and top officials.

“In view of the corona outbreak, a decision has been taken to extend the lockdown by a week, till June 8. However, some extra concessions will be made for business activities. People are requested to wear masks and maintain social distancing,” Mr Kumar tweeted in Hindi.

Detailed guidelines regarding the extended period of the lockdown will be released later in the day, officials said.

20 new cases push COVID-19 tally of Andamans to 6,984

PORT BLAIR, MAY 31 (PTI): The COVID-19 case-load in Andaman and Nicobar Islands rose to 6,984 as 20 more people tested positive for the disease in the Union Territory, a health department official said on Monday.

Two new patients have travel history and others were detected during contact tracing, he said.

The death toll rose to 114 as one more fatality due to the infection was reported in the last 24 hours, the official said.

At least 23 people were cured of the disease during the period, taking the total number of recoveries in the archipelago to 6,683.

The Union Territory now has 187 active cases.

The local administration has been strict to contain the spread of the disease and has adopted an approach of tracking, testing and treating, he said, adding that people arriving here from the mainland are mandatorily required to undergo rapid antigen test.

Information, publicity and tourism secretary Sunil Kumar Singh urged people to cooperate with the administration to combat the spread of the virus. He appealed to them to maintain discipline by strictly adhering to COVID appropriate behaviour.

Altogether, 1,25,285 people have been inoculated and 17,363 of them having received both doses of the vaccine.

Of the total number of people inoculated so far, 6,695 citizens in the age group of 18 to 44 years have received vaccine shots, the official said.

The Andaman and Nicobar administration has conducted 3,85,988 sample tests for COVID-19 so far, and the positivity rate stands at 1.81 per cent.

Panic over oxygen subsides in Kathmandu but hoarding of cylinders adds to problem

SHUVAM DHUNGANA KATHMANDU, 31 MAY [KATHMANDUPOST]: Hamro Team Nepal, a non-governmental organisation that has been providing free oxygen for underprivileged Covid-19 patients, gets hundreds of phone calls every day.

“We receive hundreds of calls every day from people who are in need of oxygen cylinders,” said Nilam Kumar Bogati, vice chairman of Hamro Team Nepal. “Many people who are in home isolation also contact us pleading for oxygen saying they didn’t get a hospital bed but need oxygen urgently.”

But the people who took cylinders from the group are not returning them even after patients have recovered from Covid-19.

“Many people after using the cylinders want to keep them saying they might need them in future,” said Bogati. “This has affected our service to make oxygen cylinders available to those in need of them.”

After the number of cases soared in India in early April and reading reports of scarcity of oxygen cylinders there, the group had collected 50 containers from various sources like oxygen plants and industries before the lockdown.

As the number of cases soared in Nepal, the group helped individuals and hospitals by providing full cylinders, according to the group’s president Bimal Panta.

“For the underprivileged who need oxygen, we provide cylinders for free and after it finishes, we bring it back to refill them,” said Panta.

While the shortage of oxygen in Kathmandu has eased somewhat compared to two weeks or so ago when there were people queuing at oxygen plants for the sake of their loved ones at home and in hospitals, the demand for oxygen is still high, according to manufacturers.

Nepal on Friday recorded 8,407 new infections, with 2,447 in Kathmandu Valley. This figure for the Valley is well below the 4,198 on May 9 when 8,777 new cases were recorded in the country.

The nationwide infection tally now is 497,052, of which 116,192 cases are active.

On Friday the Ministry of Health and Population reported 177 more deaths, taking the total toll to 6,024.

The gradual decline in the number of cases in the Valley is reflected in the number of people crowding at oxygen plants.

“There is no panic



buying of oxygen now but demand continues to be high,” said Gaurav Sarda, director of Kantipur Oxygen.

With hospitals under strain, thousands of infected people are in home isolation.

According to manufacturers and the Health Ministry, people need a doctor’s prescription to get oxygen from manufacturers who provide them after taking a deposit for cylinders.

“But we don’t give out large cylinders of 60 litres capacity to individuals,” Sarda, who is also the president of Oxygen Manufacturers Association, told the Post. “We have only given out small 10 litre-cylinders to individ-

uals after taking a deposit but even those are not being returned.”

If there is a shortage of oxygen cylinders there must be a leakage somewhere, according to him.

Shanker Lal Agrawal of Shanker Oxygen Gas said that he does not give oxygen cylinders to individuals as far as possible because they may be hoarding cylinders.

“But in case hospitals ask for them, we provide them after taking a deposit,” Agrawal told the Post. “Otherwise we just give smaller cylinders to individuals against cash deposits.”

When Hamro Team Nepal contacts a patient’s family to get back oxygen cylinders, many make excuses saying

they gave the cylinders to their relatives as they were in need of oxygen too.

“While some people do not return cylinders thinking they might need them in future, others do if we convince them saying that they can call us anytime in future,” Bogati told the Post.

The lack of empathy and hoarding of oxygen cylinders have roused ire on social media.

“Someone at Teaching needed an oxygen cylinder last week.

@Ravimemoirs came to the rescue. The covid patient was discharged from hospital & is recovering well. Ravi Singh, flooded with oxygen requests, sent her a text

message requesting the cylinder back, yesterday. No response. He called her today. They didn’t take the call. Apparently, she hasn’t used the oxygen BUT the family - an upper middle class working for INGOs in Kathmandu - refuses to return the cylinder saying they might need it. Look at humanity.” wrote a Twitter user.

“People may be hoarding cylinders as until some days ago it was difficult to get oxygen due to the government decision,” said Dr Sher Bahadur Pun, chief of the Clinical Research Unit at Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital in Teku.

He was referring to an earlier government decision as per which the Covid-19 Crisis Management Centre was allocating cylinders to hospitals and hospitals were turning away patients since the allocation was not enough.

“Therefore, people might be saving it thinking they may need it in future,” Pun told the Post.

The demand for cylinders has also meant that some people are selling them for a premium. On Tuesday Lalitpur Metropolitan Police Range arrested three people on the charge of selling oxygen cylinders in the black mar-

ket.

According to Senior Superintendent Kiran Bajracharya, chief of the Lalitpur Metropolitan Police Range, they were found charging up to Rs41,000 for an oxygen cylinder which costs between Rs15,000 and Rs20,000.

Nepal Police has also collected over 9,000 oxygen cylinders so far in different parts of the country and distributed them to hospitals.

“Oxygen cylinders kept at homes or in stock at different factories, gas welding workshops, stores, godowns and other sites for purposes other than health are being collected,” said Senior Superintendent Basanta Bahadur Kunwar, spokesperson for the Nepal Police.

But no matter how many cylinders are available, there may be shortages if people hoard them.

According to Pun, only critical patients need oxygen and if they don’t get it on time, it could cost their lives too.

“Hoarding cylinders can create artificial shortages, which could cost many people’s lives,” Pun told the Post. “The demand for oxygen and cylinders is high even now and if people started hoarding cylinders, it could prove fatal.”

Bengal chose TMC as main anti-BJP force in polls, but overlooked important issues: CPI(M)

KOLKATA, MAY 30 (PTI): Days after being completely routed in the recently concluded assembly polls, the CPI(M) state committee on Sunday said people of West Bengal chose the TMC as the main anti-BJP force in the state and voted for the ruling party, “overlooking the issues of corruption and lawlessness”.

The party said in

a statement that the Samyukta Morcha, comprising the Left Front, the Congress and the ISF, suffered electoral reverses in the assembly polls and its political campaign did not find favour from the voters.

“The electoral defeat of the coalition was due to political and organisational reasons. People of the state did not have

confidence in our front and policies. The call for an alternative government was rejected.

“We could not reach out to the people with our views in a proper manner,” said the statement issued by the CPI(M) after its state committee meeting held on May 29.

The virtual meeting was chaired by veteran party leader Biman

Bose.

The Left and the Congress, which ruled the state for decades, have no representation in the assembly this time as their alliance with the ISF the Samyukta Morcha mustered a vote share of around 8 per cent.

The Trinamool Congress romped home in Bengal, pocketing 213 of the 292 assembly

seats that went to polls and secured a third straight term in office.

The Mamata Banerjee-led party’s main challenger, the BJP, bagged 77 seats, while the ISF, which contested with the symbol of the Rashtriya Secular Majlis Party, and an Independent, managed one seat each.

During the announcement of elections, there was “a strong anti-estab-

lishment, anti-TMC sentiment that was replaced by anti-BJP feeling” in the wake of the saffron party’s aggressive campaign, the state CPI(M) said.

“With strong anti-BJP sentiment, people chose the TMC as the main competitor of the saffron camp in Bengal,” the Left party said in its analysis.

Interestingly, the statement had no reference to the views expressed

by political analysts who have questioned the election strategy the CPI(M) followed and the alliance it had formed with the Indian Secular Front ahead of the assembly polls.

Compared to the Lok Sabha elections, the CPI(M)’s poll percentage increased in 94 of the 138 assembly seats where the party contested, the statement claimed.

Ladakh records 49 fresh COVID-19 cases, one more death

LEH, MAY 31 (PTI): Ladakh recorded 49 fresh COVID-19 cases, taking the infection tally to 18,497 while the death toll reached 188 with one more fatality, officials said on Monday.

Of the 49 new cases, 39 were reported from Leh and 10 cases from Kargil.

Ninety-six people were discharged from hospitals after recuperating from the infec-

tion, pushing the total number of recoveries to 16,754, the officials said.

With the death of one more COVID-19 patient in Kargil, the total number of fatalities in

Ladakh has reached 188 -- 136 in Leh and 52 in Kargil.

There are 1,555 active cases in the Union Territory -- 1,342 in Leh district and 213 in Kargil district.

Politics still pack a punch(line) for Iranian-American comic

DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (AP): For Iranian-American MazJobrani, a stand-up show in Dubai marked the first time he’s been in front of a major live audience overseas since the start of the coronavirus pandemic — and he feels it.

“Doing stand-up comedy is kind of like going to the gym — you have to get up on stage five, 10 times a week,” said Jobrani, sitting in a Dubai hotel overlooking BurjKhalifa, the world’s tallest building. “You have to keep going or the muscles are going to be rusty.”

Jobrani had a calm demeanor during a recent interview with The Associated Press. It was a far cry from the exaggerated expressions and dancing he’s known for

in his performance.

Taking to the stage at the recent Dubai Comedy Festival, Jobrani broke into an Iranian dance routine to one of DuaLipa’s hit pop songs, drawing laughter from an audience eager to be out as the coronavirus pandemic still rages across much of the world. The United Arab Emirates has one of the world’s highest per-capita vaccination rates and its economy largely has reopened.

Being on stage has become a luxury for comedians, Jobrani said, with some not being able to perform for over a year. After venues shut down last year, extra creativity was required. First, Jobrani started doing shows on Instagram, updating his fans on

what he did daily during the lockdown, or doing workouts using random objects.

Then he tried drive-in shows, which posed the same problem for stand-up comedy as online video calls: “You don’t hear their laughter,” he said. “You need to remind them: ‘If you like what I’m saying, if you like the joke, please honk,’” he recounted. “So people would honk at you, you tell a joke (and) they would honk at you.”

In some U.S. states, he performed at outdoor venues to a limited capacity audience. At others he performed indoors. In Arizona and Florida he performed in comedy clubs, where he said he felt nervous because it was before the

vaccine was rolled out.

“Comedians need interaction — we’re best in a room, with an audience, laughing, talking,” he said. “And this remote world took that away from us but again I think we adapted, a lot of people adapted.”

Jobrani, originally from Iran, moved to California at age 6 with his family. Like many Iranians they had fled the country’s 1979 Islamic Revolution. He grew up in the San Francisco area.

His acting credits begin just after the Sept. 11 attacks with a major role in the American action series “24,” in which he played a member of an Afghan militant group hoping to detonate a nuclear bomb in Los Angeles.

Rohingyas stage protest against living conditions on Bangladesh island



DHAKA, 31 MAY [AFP]: Several thousand Rohingyas staged “unruly” protests Monday against living conditions on a cyclone-prone island off Bangladesh where they were moved from vast camps on the mainland, police said.

Since December, Bangladesh has shifted 18,000 out of a planned 100,000 refugees to the low-lying silt island of Bhashan Char from the Cox’s Bazar region, where some 850,000 people live in squalid and cramped conditions.

Most of them had fled a brutal military offensive in neighbouring Myanmar in 2017 that United Nations (UN) in-

vestigators concluded was executed with “genocidal intent”.

Monday’s protest involved up to 4,000 people, police said, and coincided with an inspection visit by officials from the refugee agency, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

“The Rohingyas, who are there, became unruly the moment the UNHCR representatives landed (on the island) by helicopter today,” local police chief Alamgir Hossain told AFP.

“They broke the glass on warehouses by throwing rocks. They came at the police... Their demand is they don’t want to live here.”

One Rohingya man

confirmed to AFP that bricks were thrown and that police prevented them from entering a building where the UNHCR officials were present.

After the first transfer on December 4 to the flood-prone island in the Bay of Bengal, several Rohingyas told AFP that they were beaten and intimidated into agreeing to be relocated.

The claims have been echoed by rights groups.

The Bangladesh government has rejected the allegations, saying the island was safe and its facilities far better than those in the Cox’s Bazar camps.

The UN said it has not been involved in the process.

Serena, Federer roll back years at French Open

PARIS (AP): The Latest on the French Open (all times local): 11:00 a.m. Evergreen 39-year-olds Serena Williams and Roger Federer will be attempting to roll back the years on Day 2 of the French Open, where first-round play is underway on the sun-kissed clay courts and Iga Swiatek will begin the defense of her title.

Federer, the oldest player in men's singles this year, is scheduled for the third match on Court Philippe Chatrier. It will be the first Grand Slam match since the 2020 Australian Open for the holder of 20 major titles, making a comeback from double surgery on his right knee.

Federer plays Denis Istomin from Uzbekistan. Istomin reached the main draw via the qualifying competition. He has not advanced beyond the second round in 10 previous Roland Garros appearances. Federer is seeded eighth this year.

Williams plays after Federer vs. Istomin, in the last match on Philippe Chatrier, not scheduled to start before 9 p.m. Matches at last year's tournament — held exceptionally in autumn — also stretched late into the night on newly floodlit courts. But scheduled night sessions are a novelty this year at Roland Garros.

Williams, chasing a record-tying 24th Grand Slam singles title, plays Irina-Camelia Begu from Romania. Begu's best result in nine previous appearances in Paris was reaching the fourth round in 2016.

Swiatek opens her title defense against Kaja Juvan of Slovenia, in the first match on Chatrier. Swiatek, who turned 20 on Monday, didn't drop a set on her way to victory last year.

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Australian softball squad flies to Japan for Olympic camp

SYDNEY (AP): Australia's Olympic softball squad left Sydney bound for Japan on Monday and will be among the earliest arrivals for the Tokyo Games.

The so-called Aussie Spirit will be in camp in Ota City, north of Tokyo, and will narrow the squad down from 23 to 15 ahead of their opening Olympic game against host Japan on July 21 — two days before the official opening ceremony.

The softball squad will be arriving at a time of mounting pressure on Japanese organizers, with polls in Japan showing a majority of people want the Olympics delayed again or canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fans from abroad have already been barred from attending the Olympics, and there's increasing speculation that games will be held in empty stadiums.

A state of emergency in Tokyo, Osaka and other prefectures was last week extended until June 20 as COVID-19 cases continue to put the medical system under strain.



Cancellation pressure grows daily on Tokyo organizers and the International Olympic Committee as more questions arise about the risks of bringing 15,000 Olympic and Paralympic athletes from more than 200 countries and territories into Japan.

The IOC says more than 80% of athletes and staff staying in the Olympic Village on Tokyo Bay will be vaccinated. They are expected to remain largely in a bubble at the village and at venues.

Softball Australia chief executive David Pryles said the squad, which hasn't played international opposition

since February 2020, would be taking the "utmost care" in terms of keeping themselves and the public safe.

"All staff and players heading to Japan today are fully vaccinated thanks to the Australian Olympic Committee," Pryles said. "They'll also be undergoing stringent testing and checks as soon as they land at the airport and throughout their camp and (the) Olympics."

Pryles said player movements would be restricted to one level of the team hotel in Ota, which would include meals, meetings

and gym work, and the stadium where they'll play a series of games against local professional teams and two games against Japan's national team.

"We're incredibly grateful the people of Ota City and their government for hosting the squad who will respect the restrictions placed upon us," he said.

Ian Chesterman, the head of Australia's Olympic contingent, said athletes and officials were "very comfortable" with the precautions being put in place for the Tokyo Games.

"These athletes... are committed to not only

look after themselves but do the right thing by the Japanese population as well, and be ready for the games," Chesterman said. "And I think we're very comfortable with the protocols that have been put in place to manage not only this group of athletes but the Australian team when we get there."

Australia is targeting its first Olympic softball gold medal, having collected either silver or bronze in 1996, 2000, 2004 and 2008 before the sport was cut from the program for the 2012 and 2016.

"It's certainly a giant challenge that they face but they are up for that challenge, they want that challenge, and they want to get over there and represent their country and continue the very proud tradition that this team has in Olympic games," Chesterman said. "It's an exciting time for all of us involved with the Olympic team because it really is another key milestone that we pass, just have our first athletes heading off to Japan, ready in preparation for the games."

Larson gives Hendrick record-breaking win at Coca-Cola 600

CONCORD, N.C. (AP): The first thing Rick Hendrick thought about as Kyle Larson crossed the finish line to win the Coca-Cola 600 was April 29, 1984.

That's when Hendrick won for the first time as a NASCAR Cup Series owner when Geoff Bodine took the Sovran Bank 500 at Martinsville Speedway.

Little did Hendrick know that 37 years later he would become the winningest owner in NASCAR Cup Series history. Larson's dominating win at Charlotte Motor Speedway gave Hendrick Motorsports a record-setting 269th win, passing Petty Enterprises.

"Unbelievable," Hendrick said. "I can't get in my brain around it right now."

"With nearly 40 years of excellence, Hendrick Motorsports has set the gold standard for race team success," said NASCAR Chairman and CEO Jim France. "Rick Hendrick has already cemented his legacy as a NASCAR Hall of Famer, and now adds another incredible accomplishment to an exemplary NASCAR career."

Hendrick said he's glad to have the record



behind him, while quickly praising Richard Petty for his role in NASCAR.

"Richard Petty is the king of NASCAR and he has done so much for this sport," Hendrick said.

Hendrick called it "pretty neat" that Larson broke the record driving the No. 5 car — the same number on Bodine's car several decades ago.

"It feels great to be the guy to help Mr. H break that record," Larson said.

Hendrick said he didn't care which of his four Cup drivers won Sunday — as long as one of them did.

And it seemed all four of them had that chance.

It was an impressive night for Hendrick Motorsports with all four drivers finishing in the top five — Chase Elliott was second, William Byron fourth and Alex Bowman fifth.

Kyle Busch was third for Joe Gibbs Racing.

It also was the sixth win in 16 races this season for Hendrick Motorsports — and this one wasn't even close.

Larson, who joined Hendrick this season, ended six years of struggles at Charlotte, leading 328 of 400 laps and winning four stages.

Larson's previous best finish at Charlotte was fifth in 2016 and he had only one top-10 finish at the Coca-Cola 600. Larson dominated most of the race, becoming the first driver since Busch in 2018 to sweep every stage. It gave Larson a series-high 10 stage wins this year.

"He is an awesome talent as you see by some of the moves he makes," Hendrick said. "And he wants to win and is super dedicated. He is all business."

Busch seemed resigned to the fact he wasn't going catch Larson even with about 100

laps remaining.

When asked after the first three stages by Fox Sports commentators what he had to do catch the leader, Busch joked "I'm going to have to wreck him — they're too fast."

In a year of parity in which 11 drivers won in the first 14 races, Larson became only the third driver with multiple wins this season. He also won at Las Vegas.

Martin Truex Jr., a two-time winner of the Coca-Cola 600, was one of the favorites to win the race but his hopes ended when his left front tire went completely flat with 60 laps remaining and his pit crew struggled to remove the tire from the rim, ruining any chances of winning.

More than 50,000 fans attended the event after COVID restrictions were lifted about a week before the race.

SPECIAL GUESTS

Two-time heavyweight champion boxer Tyson Fury and singer Pitbull were in attendance. Carolina Panthers running back Christian McCaffrey served as the honorary pace car driver and Jay Leno and Kevin Eubanks were the grand marshals.

WHO'S HOT

Hendrick has won six of the 15 races run this season. It was the 12th career Coca-Cola 600 win for Hendrick Motorsports, but the organization's first since Jimmie Johnson took the checkered flag in 2014.

WHO'S NOT

Denny Hamlin, who won seven races last season, continues to search for his first victory of the year with 16 races in the books. Hamlin simply hasn't had much success at Charlotte Motor Speedway, failing to register a Cup Series win here in 30 Cup Series races. He finished seventh.

"I'm doing all I can, but what I got is not good," Hamlin said on the radio with about 70 laps to go.

UP NEXT

NASCAR heads to California for the Save Mart 350 at Sonoma Raceway next Sunday for a return to road racing.

Nets rout Celtics, Boston fan throws bottle at Kyrie Irving

BOSTON (AP): The Boston Celtics opened up to full capacity just in time for the local fans to jeer and swear — and worse — at Kyrie Irving every time he touched the ball.

It might have been their last chance.

Irving had 39 points and 11 rebounds to quiet the first post-pandemic full house at the TD Garden, and Kevin Durant scored 42 points to give the Brooklyn Nets a 141-126 victory over Boston on Sunday night and a 3-1 lead in the first-round playoff series.

Afterward, as Irving walked off the court he was nearly hit by a bottle thrown from the stands. Irving and Nets guard Tyler Johnson turned to the stands and pointed; police surrounded a man in a Kevin Garnett jersey before leading him out in handcuffs.

"Fans have got to grow up at some point," Durant said. "I know that being in the house for a year and a half with the pandemic has got a lot of people on edge, has got a lot of people stressed out. But when you come to these games you've got to realize: These men are human. We're not animals. We're not in the circus."

"You coming to the game is not all about you as a fan. So have some respect for the game. Have some respect for the human beings. And have some respect for yourself. Your mother wouldn't be proud of you throwing water bottles at basketball players, or spitting on players or tossing popcorn. So grow the (expletive) up and enjoy the game," he said. "It's bigger than you."

The incident mirrored others in which a Philadelphia fan threw popcorn at Wizards star Russell Westbrook and one in New York spit at Atlanta's Trae Young. Both have been banned from their respective arenas.

A spokeswoman for the TD Garden said Boston Police arrested one person Sunday night "for throwing an object."

"We have zero tolerance for violations of our guest code of conduct," spokeswoman Tricia McCorkle said. "And the guest is subject to a lifetime ban from TD Garden."

But Irving said he didn't think banning or even arresting unruly fans would be enough to solve the problem, ascribing it to "underlying racism and treating people like they're in a human zoo."

"People feel very entitled out here," said Irving, who played for the Celtics from 2017-19 and said last week he experienced racism during his time in the city.

"As a Black man playing in the NBA, dealing with a lot of this stuff, it's fairly difficult. You never know what's going to happen," he said. "It's just unacceptable for that stuff to be happening. But we move on."

"One had seed doesn't mean that the whole fruit is poisoned," Celtics guard Marcus Smart said. "Our fans have been great. We just had a knucklehead do something knucklehead-ish and it got taken care of, so we're happy for that."

James Harden added 23 points and a career postseason-high 18 assists for Brooklyn. Game

5 is in New York on Tuesday night, when the Nets will try to advance to the Eastern Conference semifinals for the first time since 2014.

The 104 points scored by Durant, Irving and Harden tied an NBA playoff record for three teammates set by Boston's John Havlicek, Jo Jo White and Dave Cowens in 1973 and matched in 1986 by Dominique Wilkins, Randy Whitman and Spud Webb.

Brooklyn coach Steve Nash said he wasn't surprised Irving bounced back after scoring 16 points on 6-for-17 shooting in the Game 3 loss on Friday.

"It's Kyrie Irving. He didn't have a great game last time out. My money's on him any time after a performance he had," Nash said. "I loved his will, to take some of this adversity and have a great game."

Jayson Tatum scored 40 points for the Celtics, following up his 50-point effort in a Game 3 victory. But with Jaylen Brown and Kemba Walker out with injuries, Tatum couldn't save the season on his own.

Smart had 16 points and nine assists for the Celtics, who reached the Eastern Conference finals in three of the previous four seasons.

After dropping the first two games in Brooklyn, the Celtics were hoping their home crowd would help them make a series of it. Tatum delivered one win in front of a quarter-capacity crowd on Friday, before the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted as of Saturday.

The Bruins had 17,400 for their playoff game against the Islanders on Saturday — the biggest crowd in the NHL this season. The Celtics left several rows around the benches empty on Sunday and officially announced a sellout crowd of 17,226, about 1,500 fewer than the building's official capacity.

The fans — most of them attending their first home playoff game in more than two years — gave Durant the New York Yankees treatment in pregame warmups, chanting his name derisively and cheering for each missed practice shot. They were even more foul-mouthed toward Irving, who professed his love for Boston and the Celtics before opting out of his contract in 2019 to join the Nets.

"We know how these people here are in Boston. We know how passionate they are about Kyrie in particular — they're still upset at him," Durant said. "That's no reason for them to act childish. Glad we got the 'W.' Hopefully, we don't have to come back here this year."

TIP-INS

Nets: Durant's 17 points were the most in the first quarter for a Net since Kenyon Martin's 17 in Game 4 of the 2002 NBA Finals against the Lakers.

Celtics: Walker (knee) and Robert Williams III (ankle) sat out after playing in the first three games of the series, joining Brown (season-ending wrist surgery) on the injury report.

Stars carry Clippers at Mavs again, 106-81 rout evens series

DALLAS (AP): A little cat-and-mouse game between the coaches over the size of the lineups didn't amount to much, as entertaining as it was early for another boisterous crowd in Dallas.

The big dogs of the Los Angeles Clippers were the difference on the road again, and their team is back in control of the first-round series.

Kawhi Leonard had 29 points and 10 rebounds, Paul George scored 20 points and the Clippers manhandled the Mavericks, winning 106-81 in Game 4 on Sunday night to keep the road team perfect in a

Western Conference series now tied 2-2.

Reggie Jackson added 15 points, and the fourth-seeded Clippers are headed home for Game 5 on Wednesday night much more sure of themselves than when they left LA in a two-game hole.

"We're where we were supposed to be," said Nicolas Batum, who was at the center of the lineup swap as a smallish 6-foot-9 starter over 7-footer Ivica Zubac. "We're supposed to be at 2-2, technically. So we're going to go home and have to take care of home court."

Luka Doncic started

slowly after being listed as questionable because of a cervical strain, the diagnosis for the Dallas sensation after he said following Game 3 that he felt pain in his neck and down his left arm.

Playing with medical strips on his left shoulder, and wearing a large pad in that area when he wasn't playing, Doncic scored 19 points after averaging 38 in the first three games.

Grimacing at times and grabbing his neck at others, the 22-year-old star was 9 of 24 with series lows in rebounds and assists with six apiece.

"I don't think that mat-

ters right now," Doncic said. "Injuries are a part of basketball. I was 100%. But I played terrible. Just got to move on to the next one."

Coach Rick Carlisle disagreed, and said the best hope for Dallas was two full days between games for Doncic to get rest and treatment.

"He's in pain," Carlisle said. "It appeared to me he couldn't turn left, couldn't look to his left, couldn't turn his neck to the left. That's difficult for a guy that relies on peripheral vision and basically has played his whole life with his head

on a swivel. His neck issue certainly contributed to a 9-for-24 night and him having some real unusual struggles."

The Mavericks came home filled with hope of ending a 10-year run without a playoff series victory since the franchise won its first championship, knowing the number of fans was about to more than triple with loosened COVID-19 restrictions.

Instead, a pair of crowds exceeding 17,000 didn't get much after a huge jolt of energy in Game 3 carried the Mavericks to a 19-point lead in the first quarter be-

fore Leonard and George took over.

The LA superstars didn't give fans much of a chance to get into Game 4, beyond the early gamesmanship between the coaches.

After a smaller lineup turned Game 3 in LA's favor, Lue chose that approach from the beginning in going with Batum.

"His mindset is great," Lue said. "I thought he did a great job on Luka getting up the floor, trying to deny him the basketball, pressure him a bit. Nico starting allowed us to do more defensively, switch more."

China easing birth limits further to cope with aging society

BEIJING (AP): China’s ruling Communist Party said Monday it will ease birth limits to allow all couples to have three children instead of two in hopes of slowing the rapid aging of its population, which is adding to strains on the economy and society.

The ruling party has enforced birth limits since 1980 to restrain population growth but worries the number of working-age people is falling too fast while the share over age 65 is rising. That threatens to disrupt its ambitions to transform China into a prosperous consumer society and global technology leader.

A ruling party meeting led by President Xi Jinping decided to introduce “measures to actively deal with the aging population,” the official Xinhua News Agency said. It said leaders agreed “implementing the policy of one couple can have three children and supporting measures are conducive to improving China’s population structure.”

Leaders also agreed China needs to raise its retirement age to keep more people in the workforce and improve pension and health services for the elderly, Xinhua said.

Restrictions that limited most couples to one child were eased in 2015 to allow two, but the total number of births fell



further, suggesting rule changes on their own have little impact on the trend.

Couples say they are put off by high costs of raising a child, disruption to their jobs and the need to look after elderly parents.

Comments on social media Monday complained the change does nothing to help young parents with medical bills, low incomes and grueling work schedules known popularly as “996,” or 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days a week.

“Every stage of the problem hasn’t been solved,” said a post on the popular Sina Weibo blog service signed Tchaikovsky. “Who will raise the baby? Do you have time? I go out early and get back late. Kids don’t know what their parents look like.”

Another, signed Hyongmok, joked bitterly: “Don’t worry about aging. Our generation won’t live long.”

China, along with Thailand and some other Asian economies, faces what economists call the challenge of whether they can get rich before they get old.

The Chinese population of 1.4 billion already was expected to peak later this decade and start to decline. Census data released May 11 suggest that is happening faster than expected, adding to burdens on underfunded pension and health systems and cutting the number of future workers available to support a growing retiree group.

The share of working-age people 15 to 59 in the population fell to 63.3% last year from 70.1% a decade earlier. The group aged 65 and older grew to 13.5% from 8.9%.

The 12 million births reported last year was down nearly one-fifth from 2019.

About 40% were second children, down from 50% in 2017, according to Ning Jizhe, a statistics official who announced the data on May 11.

Chinese researchers and the Labor Ministry say the share of working-age people might fall to half the population by 2050. That increases the “dependency ratio,” or the number of retirees who rely on each worker to generate income for pension funds and to pay taxes for health and other public services.

Leaders at Monday’s meeting agreed it is “necessary to steadily implement the gradual postponement of the legal retirement age,” Xinhua said.

It gave no details, but the government has been debating raising the official retirement ages of 60 for men, 55 for white-coll

ar female workers and 50 for blue-collar female workers.

The potential change is politically fraught. Some female professionals welcome a chance to stay in satisfying careers, but others whose bodies are worn out from decades of manual labor resent being required to work longer.

The fertility rate, or the average number of births per mother, stood at 1.3 in 2020, well below the 2.1 that would maintain the size of the population.

China’s birth rate, paralleling trends in other Asian economies, already was falling before the one-child rule. The average number of children per Chinese mother tumbled from above six in the 1960s to below three by 1980, according to the World Bank.

Demographers say official birth limits concealed what would have been a further fall in the number of children per family without the restrictions.

The ruling party says it prevented as many as 400 million potential births, averting shortages of food and water. But demographers say if China followed trends in Thailand, parts of India and other countries, the number of additional babies might have been as low as a few million.

In post-pandemic Europe, migrants will face digital fortress

PEPLO, GREECE (AP): As the world begins to travel again, Europe is sending migrants a loud message: Stay away!

Greek border police are firing bursts of deafening noise from an armored truck over the frontier into Turkey. Mounted on the vehicle, the long-range acoustic device, or “sound cannon,” is the size of a small TV set but can match the volume of a jet engine.

It’s part of a vast array of physical and experimental new digital barriers being installed and tested during the quiet months of the coronavirus pandemic at the 200-kilometer (125-mile) Greek border with Turkey to stop people entering the European Union illegally.

A new steel wall, similar to recent construction on the U.S.-Mexico border, blocks commonly-used crossing points along the Evros River that separates the two countries.

Nearby observation towers are being fitted with long-range cameras, night vision, and multiple sensors. The data will be sent to control centers to flag suspicious movement using artificial intelligence analysis.

“We will have a clear ‘pre-border’ picture of what’s happening,” Police Maj. Dimonsthenis Kamargios, head of the region’s border guard authority, told the Associated Press.

The EU has poured 3 billion euros (\$3.7 billion) into security tech research following the refugee crisis in 2015-16, when more than 1 million people — many escaping wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan — fled to Greece and on to other EU countries.

The automated surveillance network being built on the Greek-Turkish border is aimed at detecting migrants early and deterring them from crossing, with river and land patrols using searchlights and long-range acoustic devices.

Key elements of the network will be launched by the end of the year, Kamargios said. “Our task is to prevent migrants from entering the country illegally. We need modern equipment and tools to do that.”

Researchers at universities around Europe, working with private firms, have developed futuristic surveillance and verification technology, and tested more than a dozen projects at Greek borders.

AI-powered lie detectors and virtual border-guard interview bots have been piloted, as well as efforts to integrate satellite data with footage from drones on land, air, sea and underwater. Palm scanners record the unique vein pattern in a person’s hand to use as a biometric identifier, and the makers of live camera reconstruction technology promise to erase foliage virtually, exposing people hiding near border areas.

Testing has also been conducted in Hungary, Latvia and elsewhere along the eastern EU perimeter.

The more aggressive migration strategy has been advanced by European policymakers over the past five years, funding deals with Mediterranean countries outside the bloc to hold migrants back and transforming the EU border protection agency, Frontex, from a coordination mechanism to a full-fledged multinational security force.

But regional migration deals have left the EU exposed to political pressure from neighbors.

Earlier this month, several thousand migrants crossed from Morocco into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta in a single day, prompting Spain to deploy the army. A similar crisis unfolded on the Greek-Turkish border and lasted three weeks last year.

Greece is pressing the EU to let Frontex patrol outside its territorial waters to stop migrants reaching Lesbos and other Greek islands, the most common route in Europe for illegal crossing in recent years.

Armed with new tech tools, European law enforcement authorities are leaning further outside borders.

Not all the surveillance programs being tested will be included in the new detection system, but human rights groups say the emerging technology will make it even harder for refugees fleeing wars and extreme hardship to find safety.

Patrick Breyer, a European lawmaker from Germany, has taken an EU research authority to court, demanding that details of the AI-powered lie detection program be made public.

“What we are seeing at the borders, and in

treating foreign nationals generally, is that it’s often a testing field for technologies that are later used on Europeans as well. And that’s why everybody should care, in their own self-interest,” Breyer of the German Pirates Party told the AP.

He urged authorities to allow broad oversight of border surveillance methods to review ethical concerns and prevent the sale of the technology through private partners to authoritarian regimes outside the EU.

Ella Jakubowska, of the digital rights group EDRi, argued that EU officials were adopting “techno-solutionism” to sideline moral considerations in dealing with the complex issue of migration.

“It is deeply troubling that, time and again, EU funds are poured into expensive technologies which are used in ways that criminalize, experiment with and dehumanize people on the move,” she said.

Migration flows have slowed in many parts of Europe during the pandemic, interrupting an increase recorded over years. In Greece, for example, the number of arrivals dropped from nearly 75,000 in 2019 to 15,700 in 2020, a 78% decrease.

But the pressure is sure to return. Between 2000 and 2020, the world’s migrant population rose by more than 80% to reach 272 million, according to United Nations data, fast outpacing international population growth.

At the Greek border village of Poros, the breakfast discussion at a cafe was about the recent crisis on the Spanish-Moroccan border.

Many of the houses in the area are abandoned and in a gradual state of collapse, and life is adjusting to that reality.

Cows use the steel wall as a barrier for the wind and rest nearby.

Panagiotis Kyrgiannis, a Poros resident, says the wall and other preventive measures have brought migrant crossings to a dead stop.

“We are used to seeing them cross over and come through the village in groups of 80 or a 100,” he said. “We were not afraid. ... They don’t want to settle here. All of this that’s happening around us is not about us.”

French magistrates question fugitive auto magnate in Beirut

BEIRUT (AP): A team of French investigators began questioning ex-Nissan boss Carlos Ghosn in Beirut on Monday over suspicions of financial misconduct, Lebanese judicial officials said.

The meeting marks the first opportunity for the auto magnate-turned-fugitive to defend himself against French allegations of financial misconduct since his 2018 bombshell arrest in Japan and escape to Lebanon a year later.

The questioning at the Palace of Justice in Beirut — expected to last several days — was attended by members of the Lebanese judiciary, the officials said. They said seven French judges, most of them investigative magistrates and a prosecutor, were taking part in the questioning, which was attended by Lebanese prosecutor Imad Qabalan.

The officials spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

Ghosn is campaigning



to clear his name against multiple legal challenges in France after Japanese accusations triggered scrutiny of his activities there. In a wide ranging interview with the AP last week, he said he hopes the visit by French investigators to Lebanon will be his first real opportunity to defend himself. He also said he had much more confidence in the French legal system than the Japanese system he had fled.

Ghosn has not so far been charged with anything in France, but could be, given preliminary charges of fraud, corruption, money laundering, misuse of company assets, or aggravated breach of trust.

The French investigators are looking into

Lebanon a year later in a Hollywood-style escape that stunned the world. Meanwhile, several associates are in jail or on trial in Japan and Turkey, in cases related to his financial activities or escape.

Ghosn’s Lebanese and French lawyers said in a statement earlier Monday that their client will be questioned by “French investigating judges, in the context of legal proceedings organized by the Lebanese judicial authorities.” The statement added that the “hearing is a voluntary step taken” by Ghosn.

Ghosn will be assisted by one Lebanese and two French lawyers during the questioning.

Ghosn’s defense team said they have “already identified serious procedural irregularities in the French dossiers.” The defense team said “abnormalities, which undermine the judicial process, are the result of the peculiar methods of the Japanese investigation” that was the primary source for building the French cases.

It is an unusual move for French magistrates to question a suspect abroad. Ghosn, who was given sanctuary by Lebanese authorities, grew up in Lebanon and has Lebanese citizenship. Lebanon will not extradite him.

Monday’s interrogation comes days after Ghosn was questioned by French investigators as a witness in a different case — a probe over Renault’s pollutant emissions, according to two Lebanese officials.

Renault, along with other carmakers, is facing a probe that dates back to 2017 over cheating emission tests, a charge the company denies. The probe follows earlier investigations by French anti-fraud authorities who found abnormally high emissions from some of Renault’s diesel engineered cars.

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view on North Korea “takes a calibrated and practical approach that is open to and will explore diplomacy” with the North.

U.S. officials have suggested Biden would adopt a middle ground policy between his predecessors — Donald Trump’s direct dealings with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Barack Obama’s “strategic patience.” Some experts say Biden won’t likely provide North Korea with major sanctions relief unless it takes concrete denuclearization steps first.

The North Korean statement criticized the Biden administration’s review indirectly, saying the new policy was viewed by other countries “as just trickery.”

North accuses US of hostility for S. Korean missile decision

SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA (AP): North Korea said Monday the U.S. allowing South Korea to build more powerful missiles was an example of the U.S.’s hostile policy against the North, warning that it could lead to an “acute and instable situation” on the Korean Peninsula.

It’s North Korea’s first response to the May 21 summit between the leaders of the United States and South Korea, during which the U.S. ended decades-long restrictions that capped South Korea’s missile development and allowed its ally to develop weapons with unlimited ranges.

The accusation of U.S. policy being hostile to North Korea matters because it said it won’t return to talks and would enlarge its nuclear arsenal

as long as U.S. hostility persists. But the latest statement was still attributed to an individual commentator, not a government body, suggesting North Korea may still want to leave room for potential diplomacy with the Biden administration.

“The termination step is a stark reminder of the U.S. hostile policy toward (North Korea) and its shameful double-dealing,” Kim Myong Chol, an international affairs critic, said, according to the official Korean Central News Agency. “It is engrossed in confrontation despite its lip-service to dialogue.”

“The U.S. is mistaken, however. It is a serious blunder for it to pressurize (North Korea) by creating asymmetric imbalance in and around the Korean

Peninsula as this may lead to the acute and instable situation on the Korean Peninsula now technically at war,” he said.

The United States had previously barred South Korea from developing a missile with a range of longer than 800 kilometers (500 miles) out of concerns about a regional arms race. The range is enough for a South Korean weapon to strike all of North Korea but is short of hitting potential key targets in other neighbors like China and Japan.

Some South Korean observers hailed the end of the restrictions as restoring military sovereignty, but others suspected the U.S. intent was to boost its ally’s military capability amid a rivalry with China.

The commentator Kim accused Washington of trying to spark an arms race, thwart North Korean development and deploy intermediate-range missiles targeting countries near North Korea.

The South Korean government said it “prudently watches” North Korea’s reaction, but Unification Ministry spokeswoman Lee Jong-joo wouldn’t comment otherwise, since the remarks were attributed to an individual, not an official statement from the North Korean government.

The North Korean statement comes as the Biden administration shapes a new approach on North Korea amid long-dormant talks over the North’s nuclear program. During their summit, Biden and South Korean President Moon Jae-in said a new U.S. policy re-

view on North Korea “takes a calibrated and practical approach that is open to and will explore diplomacy” with the North.

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Ex-‘Tarzan’ actor among 7 plane crash victims in Tennessee

SMYRNA, TENN. (AP): Investigators on Sunday continued searching for the bodies of seven people believed killed in the crash a day earlier of a small jet into a Tennessee lake, including an actor who portrayed Tarzan in a 1990s television series.

Rutherford County Fire Rescue Capt. John Ingle said in a statement Sunday that recovery efforts were ongoing at Percy Priest Lake near Smyrna. He said efforts also were focused on examining a half mile-wide debris field in the lake.

County officials identified the victims in a news release late Saturday as Brandon Hannah, Gwen S. Lara, William J. Lara, David L. Martin, Jennifer J. Martin, Jessica Walters and Jonathan Walters, all of Brentwood, Tennessee. Their names were released after family members had been notified.

Gwen Shamblyn Lara founded the Remnant Fel-



lowship Church in Brentwood in 1999 and wrote a faith-based weight loss book. Her husband of nearly three years, known as Joe Lara, was an actor featured in the TV series “Tarzan: The Epic Adventures.”

The Federal Aviation Administration said the Cessna C501 plane was heading

from nearby Smyrna Rutherford County Airport to Palm Beach International Airport when it crashed Saturday morning. Authorities did not release registration information for the plane.

Smyrna is located about 20 miles (32 kilometers) southeast of Nashville. Percy Priest Lake is a reservoir

created by the J. Percy Priest Dam. It is a popular spot for boating and fishing.

“With dive teams in the water, we are strongly urging civilian boaters to stay away from the public safety boats,” Ingle said.

The National Transportation Safety Board had a lead investigator at the site.

Fueling box office rebound, ‘Quiet Place’ opens with \$58.5M

NEW YORK (AP): Moviegoing increasingly looks like it didn’t die during the pandemic. It just went into hibernation.

John Krasinski’s thriller sequel “A Quiet Place Part II” opened over the Memorial Day weekend to a pandemic-best \$48.4 million, according to studio estimates Sunday. Including the Monday holiday, the studio forecasts the film will gross \$58.5 million in North America. It added another \$22 million in ticket sales overseas.

The film’s performance cheered a movie industry that has been punished and transformed by the pandemic. Paramount Pictures’ “A Quiet Place Part II,” which was on the cusp of opening in March 2021 before theaters shut, was the first big film this year — and one of the only larger budget COVID-era releases beside Christopher Nolan’s “Tenet” — to open exclusively in theaters.

Chris Aronson, distribution chief for Paramount, called the opening “an unqualified success.”

“It’s a huge sigh of a relief and a sense of optimism for sure,” Aronson said. “Movies, moviegoing, movie theaters aren’t dead. Yes, they’ve been threatened but they’re proving once again that they’re resilient and that people do want to have that communal experience.”

Many studios have trotted out hybrid release plans during the pandemic, debuting films simultaneously in the home. The Walt Disney Co. did that this weekend with its live-action PG-13

Cruella De Vil prequel, “Cruella,” making it available to Disney+ subscribers for \$30. In theaters, it grossed \$21.3 million, Disney said, and an estimated \$26.4 million over the four-day weekend. “Cruella” also added \$16.1 million in 29 international territories. Disney didn’t say how much the film made on the company’s streaming platform.

“A Quiet Place II” will also turn to streaming after 45 days in theaters when it becomes available on Paramount+. One clear result of the pandemic is that the theatrical window has shrunk, probably permanently. Three months was once the customary length of a movie’s run in theaters. The year’s previous best debut belonged to Warner Bros.’ “Godzilla vs. Kong,” which opened with \$32.2 million, or \$48.5 million over its first five days, while simultaneously streaming on HBO Max.

The contrasting release strategies between “A Quiet Place Part II” and “Cruella” offered a test case for Hollywood. How much does a day-and-date release cost a movie like “Cruella” in ticket sales? Is it worth it? Without knowing how much “Cruella” benefitted Disney+, a true comparison isn’t possible. But the strong returns for the theater-only “A Quiet Place Part II” are telling, says Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst for data firm Comscore. He called it a “pivotal weekend” for the movie industry that proved predictions of the movie theater’s demise “flat-out wrong.”

“That ‘Quiet Place Part II’ did so well makes a strong case that a theatrical-first release for a big movie is the way to go,” Dergarabedian said. “This is the best possible news for an industry that’s been dealing with probably the most profoundly challenging chapter in the history of the movie theater.”

The debut of “A Quiet Place Part II” was much watched throughout Hollywood as the kickoff to its delayed summer movie season. After largely sitting out the pandemic, or diverting to streaming platforms, a lineup of blockbusters are again queuing up. On tap are Warner Bros.’ “In the Heights,” Universals’ “F9” and Disney’s “Black Widow.”

Last week, Universal Pictures’ ninth installment in the “Fast & Furious” franchise, “F9,” opened with \$162 million in ticket sales in eight international markets, and \$135 million in China alone. In its second weekend, “F9,” which opens in North America on June 25, raced toward \$230 million worldwide.

“A Quiet Place Part II” had already had its red-carpet premiere in March last year, and spent some of its marketing budget. But it opened remarkably in line with predictions of how many tickets it would sell before the onset of the pandemic. In the intervening months, Paramount sold off many of its films to streamers — “Coming 2 America,” “The Trial of the Chicago 7” — but Krasinski and the studio felt strongly that the hushed intensity of “A Quiet Place Part II” worked

best on the big screen.

In an interview ahead of the film’s release, Krasinski said a theatrical release was “non-negotiable.” And Krasinski worked hard to stoke excitement, traveling the country in the week leading up to release to surprise moviegoers. Still, given the circumstances, he had little idea whether audiences would come out.

“As bizarre as the entire year has been is how bizarre whatever opening weekend is,” Krasinski said. “I don’t really know what it is anymore.”

In the end, “A Quiet Place Part II” performed a lot like how the first one did. That 2018 hit, which ultimately grossed \$340 million globally on a \$17 million budget, launched with \$50.2 million in North American ticket sales. Sequels usually do better than the original but “Part II” had far more challenges due to pandemic.

Rich Gelfond, chief executive of IMAX, where “A Quiet Place Part II” earned \$4.1 million domestically, called the film “the first domestic release this year to cross the threshold from ‘great opening weekend given the pandemic’ to ‘great opening weekend, period.’”

Memorial Day weekend, usually one of the busiest for theaters, still didn’t look like it normally does at the movies. Total box office exceeded \$80 million but that’s about a third of the holiday weekend’s normal business. Last Memorial Day, when nearly all operating theaters were drive-ins, ticket sales amounted to \$842,000, according to Comscore.



BEACH BABE! The reality tv star, Bethenny Frankel hangs out at the beach in Miami beating the heat.

Religious leaders, artists honor George Floyd in concert

HOUSTON (AP): Religious leaders, musical guests, spoken word artists and politicians gathered for a concert in Houston, the home town of George Floyd, to commemorate the anniversary of his death.

Pastors Remus E. Wright and Mia K. Wright welcomed the Floyd family on Sunday at The Fountain of Praise, a church that held one of his funeral services, and more than 450 live viewers on Facebook.

“It’s been an incredible year and a very emotional year, so much grief and loss, so much angst and anxiety, worldwide protests, the insurrection at the Capitol, but I guarantee you one thing — that none of us will forget May 25, 2020, the day that George Floyd’s life was taken from us,” Mia Wright said.

Floyd, who was Black, died last year after a white Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, knelt on his neck, pinning him to the ground for about 9 1/2



minutes as Floyd pleaded for air. Floyd’s death sparked worldwide protests and calls for change in policing in the U.S. Chauvin was fired after Floyd died and was later convicted of murder and manslaughter in his death.

“The tragedy of his murder becomes even more profound as your strength in seeking justice sparked a reckoning too long overdue,” voting rights advocate Stacey Abrams said of the Floyd family.

CANCER:

What happens to the tears we refuse to cry or the sadness that isn’t given the chance to express itself? Do these emotions disappear into the multiverse or continue to shadow us, only to rear their ugly heads in our weak and vulnerable moments? You already have the answer to this one, Cancer: Remember, you are important and so is your mental health. So, don’t deny yourself the healing process. If you feel called to work with a healer, counsellor or therapist, now is a good time to approach one that you trust.

LEO:

What’s your poison, Leo? Going back to an ex who made you feel worthless, trying to demean those around you in order to feel better about yourself, or turning to intoxicants in times of distress? The eclipse season could bring out the worst in you today. So beware of the shadows that come out to play. At the same time, don’t shy away from acknowledging the darkness within. Remember, it is the light of awareness that leads to inner transformation.

VIRGO:

Virgo, you’re a student of life. One who has learned about the cosmic laws simply by being present to what the signs have revealed to you through the years. But, it’s now time for the student to become the teacher. To step into the role of a guide and share your findings with those who have chosen the same path. Remember, you don’t have to know everything—you cannot possibly. You can, however, share your personal experiences, and that shall suffice for now.

Libra:

We all like the thrill of a brand new adventure. The thrill of flirting with a suitor who only has eyes for us. While the suitor at hand may be a new one, their pattern is all-too-familiar: What the cards want you to remember, Libra: you’re not obliged to put up with inconsistent behaviour. On the work front, it’s all about making technological advances and reinventing the social media game. Remembering that the cover is just as important as the book will help you perfect your public image.

SCORPIO:

Could it be that it is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us? That when we look within we come face-to-face with power in its raw, most unadulterated form? Scorpio, you are more gifted than you will ever know, and the ability to look beyond the veil is already within you. So call upon your higher self and access portals that you have never accessed before. Something tells us you’re about to chance upon pure gold.

SAGITTARIUS:

It’s all about high intensity workouts in the Sagittarius HQ. Achieving an ideal body weight isn’t the goal, though. Expressing yourself through movement and finding a sense of home within your physical vessel is what you are focusing on right now. You’ll find that your creative juices are also activated as a result of this cosmic climate. Pay attention to the ideas that you are streaming directly from Source. An ‘aha’ moment you have in the days to come could give a whole new dimension to your work.

Tip: You’re in the mood to express yourself through movement.

CAPRICORN:

We’ve been raised with all kinds of limiting beliefs about money—beliefs that have convinced us that material success and happiness cannot co-exist in our lives. But this is far from the truth, Capricorn. There is an inner revolution within you that’s helping you step into the energy field of miracles—an energy field where your hard work is beginning to bear sweet and luscious fruits. So, allow yourself to savour life’s many pleasures in the company of those you love. Allow yourself to sip and swirl on that vintage merlot you’ve been saving for a while now. Remember, the more relaxed you are, the easier it is to be in the flow. The more in the flow you are, the easier it is to *allow* in what has always been yours.

AQUARIUS:

Nothing that is truly yours can be taken away from you. Read that again, Aquarius. As you do, stop repeating the story that you’ve somehow missed your train or that the Universe has been unkind towards you. The truth is, everything is unfolding as per the divine plan. The delays and difficulties have been a test of sorts too.

PISCES:

There are two kinds of teachers in the world. Those who fall into the first category tend to enforce their truth upon others as the ultimate truth. The ones who belong to the second encourage seekers to find their own truth. Something tells us that you’re the kind of guide who’s helping others embrace the virtues of authenticity and freedom. Pisces, we see you, we hear you, and we acknowledge your contribution. This physical reality of ours needs you to keep sowing the seeds of higher consciousness.