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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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Covid breaks into Sikkim's jails

18 UNDERTRIALS TEST POSITIVE AT BOOMTAR DIST JAIL, 79 FOLLOW SUIT AT STATE JAIL, RONGNECK

**BIKASH CHETTRI
NAMCHI, 19 DEC:**

Novel Coronavirus has broken into Sikkim's prisons, starting with the district jail at Boomtar, Namchi, South Sikkim, and exploding at the State Jail at Rongneck, Gangtok. For most of the time, jails can be expected to be at a safe social distance from the rest of the population, but with new inmates and under-trials, the restricted nature of prison life also makes it the ideal environment for an outbreak. And this has been proven by the situation at Sikkim's two prisons where nearly 100 have tested positive in the past ten days.

The first Covid-19 case at District Prison, Boomtar, came to light on 08 December when an inmate under judicial custody there tested positive.

Tests conducted over the next ten days have returned



18 positive cases, all males. The reassuring news from the Boomtar prison is that all the 143 people – personnel and inmates and primary contacts – at the jail have been tested and the number has stopped at 18.

When contacted, DC-South,

M Bharani Kumar, confirmed the numbers and informed that the Covid-positive inmates have been isolated in a separate cell and the entire prison complex sanitized. None of the 18 positive inmates have any co-morbid conditions, he adds.

All eighteen cases are asymptomatic and all are keeping well at present.

Further, the Medical Officer concerned from the District Hospital has visited the prison and examined and counseled all the positive inmates and other staff there. The staff nurse at the prison has also been instructed on all the precautionary measures to be taken. After the sanitization drive, additional supplies of masks, gloves, PPE kits and other required items were also provided to the prison authorities.

As a precautionary measure,

new inmates will be placed under two-week quarantine and only then assigned to their respective cells, it is informed.

The outbreak has been much bigger at the State Jail, but that was to be expected since it also lodges many more inmates and has a larger roll of personnel. In Gangtok, both under-trials and convicted prisoners are housed, albeit separately, while the Boomtar Jail primarily has under-trials.

At Rongneck, the virus was first detected a few days back with two inmates testing positive. Since all inmates and staff at the jail were primary contacts, tests conducted since returned 79 positive cases today taking the total positive cases there to 81.

The State Jail has now been declared a Covid Care Centre and doctors stationed there, health authorities inform.

Hee Gaon to be developed as showcase of Limboo heritage: CM



**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 19 DEC:**

Chief Minister PS Tamang today announced that Hee Gaon in West Sikkim will be developed as a showcase celebrating Limboo heritage and more earnest efforts put in to establish the area for an immersive experience of Limboo way of life, beliefs and culture.

The CM was speaking at the final day of Chasok Tongnam, a Limboo festival, at Yangthong-Soreng in West Sikkim.

In a Facebook post about the day, the CM writes: "To carry on the legacy of the Limboo heritage, I also notified them about the Government's initiative to enhance Hee-gaon and adjacent areas. Moreover, we look forward to establishing a museum, research centre, meditation centre and more to educate people regarding the community and also revamp the statue established in the memory of Sirijunga,

if required. The Government will also be tendering numerous developmental works from next year and will provide equal opportunity to everyone to apply for it."

The Sirijunga statue and Limboo research centre project, it may be recalled, have been in the making for a while now and much delayed for a variety of reasons.

The location is well picked since the area has traditionally been seen as a Limboo domain with much of the community's historic and cultural moments of significance in Sikkim centred in this vicinity.

In his address today, the CM also reiterated his commitment to "provide sovereignty to all organizations and committees, granting full autonomy to such groups" and stressed that it was no longer necessary for groups to associate themselves with political parties and "also not suitable to politicise such matter for the greater good of

society."

He reminded the audience that Chasok Tongnam will be a Government holiday from next year onwards with the dates determined according to the Limboo calendar.

He also appealed to the gathering to uphold the sanctity of communal harmony, peace and unity in the state and strengthen their resolve to work towards a common goal of taking Sikkim to newer heights.

"We have abandoned the policy of divide and rule which was prevalent before in the State," he stated while reiterating that all of Sikkim will be developed unitedly and constituency or community singled out and ignored.

The CM, it is informed, plans to meet the people of the constituency on Sunday and "strive towards resolving their grievances at the earliest."

The organizing committee also felicitated the CM today.

Sikkim records its second-highest single-day spike of 122 new Covid cases

**SAGAR CHHETRI
GANGTOK, 19 DEC:**

The number of active Covid cases in Sikkim shot up to 401 on Saturday with State registering its second-highest single-day spike so far of 122 fresh cases of novel coronavirus being reported in the last 24 hours. The record for the highest single-day spike is held by 14 August, 2020, when 149 people tested positive. Today's numbers, much like 14 August, comprise primarily of an outbreak in a contained area. 79 inmates at the State Jail at Rongneck tested positive today while on the day that Sikkim set its record, 143 workers at the Alkem pharma unit at Samardung [all lodged in the complex

at the time] were among the 149 new cases on 14 August.

Today was also the third time that Sikkim broke the 100-mark of infections in one day. The other time this happened was on 04 September when 105 new cases were detected in one day. The August-September period was when Sikkim was in the thick of the Chanatar-outbreak and the virus had spread furiously through employees at pharma units in that belt.

With the 122 new cases reported today, Sikkim's tally of confirmed cases of COVID-19 is now stands at 5,561, while 4,943 of these cases have already been discharged

from facility and home isolation. There are currently two patients in the ICU facility of the COVID-dedicated STNM Hospital.

In his daily health bulletin on Saturday, Health Department State IEC Officer, Sonam Gyaltsen Bhutia, informed that of the 122 new cases, 113 were reported from East District, two from West District and seven from South District.

He added that these new cases were picked up from the testing of 321 samples on Friday - 120 from RT-PCR testing of 285 samples and two from the rapid antigen testing of 32 samples.

The cases from the State Jail were detected from testing of the

primary contacts of two persons from Rongneck Jail who had tested positive a few days back.

Among the other cases reported from in and around the capital are four persons from the police quarters, two from Sichey, one from upper Sichey, one from Lal Bazaar, one from Tibet Road, one from Gangtok, one from Development Area, one from DPH area, one from Deorali, one from Arithang, one from Bojoghari and one patient admitted in the Emergency Ward of STNM hospital.

Likewise, five persons from Tadong tested positive for COVID-19, of whom two are from near Greendale School, two from Tadong

bazaar and one from Tadong housing colony.

Similarly, two persons from Rongli, one from Nimtar, one from Khani Khola-Majhitar and one from near Kishan School in Ranipool in East District have also tested positive for COVID-19.

Two persons from Majhigaon-Jorethang, two from Namchi, one from Niya Brum, one from Melli, one from Lower Wok, one from JNV-Rabongla, one from Jorethang, one from Lower Kitam and one from Biring in South District and two persons from Salangdang, one from Daragaon, Soreng and one from Gyalshing of West District were also found positive for COVID-19.

Shillong Chamber Choir unveils special Christmas album

SHILLONG, DEC 18

[SHILLONGTIMES]: Connecting to the world in a language once spoken by Jesus Christ himself, the Shillong Chamber Choir (SCC) on Friday evening released their album called 'Come Home Christmas' which comprises songs sung in Middle-Eastern languages such as Farsi, Hebrew, Modern Aramaic, Ancient Aramaic and also Khasi.

The Christmas gift to the world from the choir does not end here as the group is also contemplating to make its presence felt in the world of opera. A Pnar album of the group is also likely to take the stage soon.

The album was released by none other than the Founder, Director, Conductor of the SCC, and Padma Shri-awardee, Neil Nongkynrih, at his residence in Shillong.

The album 'Come Home Christmas' is a multilingual Christmas carol album that consists of eight of their music piece and is also available on

multiple streaming platforms. The physical edition is now available exclusively with the Taj group of hotels via their Qmin App.

"We wanted not to do the usual Christmas album. It is one of most exciting project I have done. It's the music of Christmas that I love so much and a revelation of using Middle-Eastern languages," said Nongkynrih

Talking about the song numbers, Nongkynrih said that in every song there is a reference to the Messiah, whether a big chunk of it or small.

He said that other than the Middle-Eastern Language there is also a small part where they have sung in Khasi.

The Founder Director also said that the SCC had really worked hard to get the album



together as it involved learning the languages.

Stating that a global effort was put in to get the album together, Nongkynrih said, "The first draft could have been ready by two months but the languages took the time".

He said that the Choir managed to find an old man from Switzerland who spoke the Ancient Armani language and he helped translate the

verse while another lady from London also lent a hand in translation.

"We are not alone in this. We had to learn a lot and to be able to learn and teach is one of the biggest things we can achieve in life," he added.

Meanwhile, one of the choir members said, "It was a welcome challenge. It was a challenge in a sense that we had never heard

anyone speak Ancient Aramaic. A wonderful experience although some songs were really challenging".

Talking about the opera project, Nongkynrih said, "It is a three-hour-long opera in Khasi and one of the biggest works I am doing. I'm hopeful of finishing it by 2021".

Informing that the three-hour long opera will be done globally, he said expressed hope that the SCC will figure in the opera map globally.

The SCC will be hosting a virtual event on December 22 from 7 pm onwards and the tickets can be booked at www.feelitive.co.in.

The funds collected from the event will go to 'Save Little Hearts', a programme initiated by Genesis Foundation to facilitate medical treatment for critically-ill underprivileged children with heart disorders.

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ViewPoint

OFOJ should be seen as Sikkim's gift to world economy

PRASHANT BABU

The subject of One Family One Job (OFOJ) scheme has grabbed people's attention and headlines ever since this term was first coined in Sikkim in mid 2018. It has been a matter of debate and controversies owing to its implementation with both merits & demerits.

The scheme primarily being an employment guarantee scheme to one person of one family who had no government or any form of employment (MR, Adhoc, Co-Terminus etc) in the state of Sikkim due to various factors in getting employment in the government sector. When the OFOJ scheme is about to celebrate its 2nd anniversary since its inception in Jan 2021 it has once again become a matter of debate in the state.

However, in my own understanding there are merits that the scheme of One Family One Job had directly or indirectly contributed towards the economic, social and human development growth of Sikkim. Here are few points:-

i) the famous OFOJ scheme have directly resulted in the growth of rural economy. With the increased income there has been a growing trend in the purchasing power capacity of people at large which has ensured fund flow in the market economy. Since a major percentage of OFOJ employees are employed in rural areas, a trend of higher fund flow in the form of salaries in rural markets have been witnessed which a great sign for the growth and development of state economy in long run. For example an average amount of ₹ 50 lacs per constituency are paid by the government in the form of monthly salaries to the OFOJ employees the purchasing power of individual buyers have increased providing better opportunities for the sellers to increase their sales and cash flow. Therefore there is a reciprocal increase in the incomes of both buyers & sellers. With this development the young entrepreneurs of state are finding better market avenues to start up new business ventures due to the higher income flow and change in the purchasing trend of people.

ii) with the introduction of the OFOJ scheme in the state it will directly or indirectly help in reduction of poverty rates or a sudden jump from BPL to APL category for families those rallied under below poverty lines for long. This change will help Sikkim better its standing amongst other states in the national economy. As an average beneficiary family

under OFOJ scheme earns an amount of ₹1.2 lakhs per annum that that is way above the fixed national rate or say per capita income.

iii) the various social issues related with suicides, drug abuse, theft, robbery etc has seen a decreasing trend those were a common practises in the state and one of the reason for such social stigma were due to low income, unemployment, early marriages etc. As the majority of young people are now engaged in one or the other form of employment under the OFOJ scheme this has directly resulted in better social stability in Sikkim.

iv) unemployment that is one the growing concern of any developed, developing or an underdeveloped economy and the state of Sikkim is not left far behind this global phenomenon. However, with the introduction of the such employment guarantee scheme the rate of unemployment has seen a decline in rate of unemployment which is an effective approach to fight against this global challenges and employment opportunities.

v) although, with the introduction of the OFOJ scheme it could have caused a major impact at the state exchequer due to the financial burden added on the already relying state economy. However, the policy decision makers must look at the merits for it to make the best possible use of the Human Resource's that is available at government disposal. Better training's facilities, job guarantee can be introduced that will serve the larger interest of common citizens of the state and boost the general morale of the employees under OFOJ. A more refined data collection (eg educational qualification, professional experiences) can be conducted of the employees under OFOJ schemes as the number of beneficiaries are well qualified under this scheme will help in proper Human Resource management.

There are end number of merits attached with the scheme of One Family One Job and this in my knowledge shouldn't be an act of controversies or to prove individual achievements rather it should Sikkimese gift scheme to the world economy those are fighting the menaces of unemployment, terrorism, drug abuse etc. And there is no denying the fact the Shri Narendra Modi himself has announced his ambitions "One Family One Job plan 2020", that has made ever individual Sikkimese people proud, as we were the first to coin this "One Family One Job".

[the writer is spokesperson, Sikkim Democratic Front]

GJM YOUTH COMMITTEE FORMED IN KALIMPONG

SUMMIT REPORT
RANGPO, 19 DEC:

Gorkha Janmukti Morcha formed its constituency-level youth committee for Kalimpong in the presence of GJM Yuva Morcha Kalimpong District chief convenor, Topden Bhutia.

Uttam Khawas was nominated as president followed by Umesh Kujur as vice president, Anup Khawas as secretary, Dipen Khawas, Sanju



Tamang, Ajay Chhetri and Krishna Sharma as joint secretaries, Sanjay Rai as deputy cashier along with three chief

advisors in Sures Dewan, Firoz Gurung and Shyam Kumar Rai.

Losoong-Namsoong celebrations at Melli-Aching.

PRITAM LAMA
GYALSHING, 19 DEC:

Losoong/Namsoong celebration is underway at Melli-Aching under Yuksam-Tashiding constituency with each day bringing special guests among the people. Today, Sikkim Legislative Assembly Deputy Speaker, Sangay Lepcha, was present as the chief guest and visited the various traditional stalls put up at the venue.



While addressing the gathering, he detailed the SKM government's plans and proposals for further development and

promotion of tourism in west district.

He expressed happiness on witnessing the celebration and

underlined the need to celebrate festivals of all communities jointly.

He stressed that the SKM Government was committed to support all the people of the state celebrate and preserve their respective cultures and traditions.

The Celebration Committee's patron, SK Sampang of Melli-Aching, also addressed the gathering and spoke about the historical and cultural significance of Losoong/ Namsoong.

UCWSS Silver Jubilee Calendar released

SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 19 DEC:

A delegation representing United Christian Welfare Society

of Sikkim [UCWSS] called on Minister Lok Nath Sharma at his residence on Friday evening and discussed

the upcoming silver jubilee celebrations of the organization. UCWSS is completing 25 years in 2021.

The Minister also released the Silver Jubilee Calendar 2021 of the organisation during the meeting.

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KUTSHE SHEGU



Karma Tshering, Karma Yezore and Sherap Palden Bhutia (sons) & all family members

The 49 day Kutshe Shegu of Late Norbu Tshering Bhutia of Tumin East Sikkim falls on 21/12/2020.

All friends, relatives and well wishers are requested to join us in offering prayers for the departed soul at our residence at Tumin, East Sikkim.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank all those who sood by us in our time of bereavement and regret our inability to thank them individually.

7872961204/ 7908416300/ 9883510232

KUTSE SHERGU



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

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

Diki Bhutia (Daughter)
Hon'ble Advisor, Commerce & Industries, GoS
Chumzey Bhutia (Daughter)
Kado Tshering Namka, Yap Tshering Namka
Fuchung Tshering Namka, Sonam Namka (Son)
Dechen Phigu Bhutia (Son-in-law)
Honble Advisor SMPB, GoS
Karma Rinchen Bhutia (Daughter-in-law)
Lhaki Bhutia (Daughter-in-law)
Sonam Topgay Bhutia (Son-in-law)
Pem Kicho Bhutia (Daughter-in-law)
Doma Tshering Bhutia (Daughter-in-law)
Susangla Diki Bhutia (Grand Daughter)
Kesangla D Lhasungpa (Grandson)

What is Novel Coronavirus - nCoV?

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

Symptoms of nCoV

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

Treatment

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

Precautions to Prevent nCoV

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

If you seek help, you may call :

- Toll free no. 104
- District surveillance Officer
- EAST : 7029372100
- WEST : 9593297809
- NORTH : 9641957468
- SOUTH : 7407691463
- New STNM
- AMS : 9434711402

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & FAMILY WELFARE
GOVERNMENT OF SIKKIM

AFFIDAVIT

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

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

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~ SummitTIMES ~ CLASSIFIEDS

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A land measuring an area for 50x32 1/2 at Road-side just below housing colony is for sale. It is just a one minute walking distance from Namchi bazaar taxi stand. Interested party may contact 9593373387 and 9434406761

LAND FOR SALE

An area measuring 1 acre at Sadam South Sikkim near Loretto Convent School at Gupti road. Price negotiable any one interested can contact: 78640-04501, 62970-03235, 98320-48410

FOR RENT

Two and half storeyed (1st to 3rd floor) complex is available for rent in the heart of Ranipool Baazar (Opposite UCO Bank). The building area is 35'x60' appx. in each floor and is fit for offices, shopping complexes, guest houses, banks etc. Contact: 8509755220, 8348007688.

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General land sale at Lower Sichey, suitable for construction, good locality, near the road, Total size: 90x55ft, (30x55ft each plot). genuine person may contact@9734122366.

BUILDING FOR SALE

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

Namsoong concludes grand at Wok

AARON RAI
GANGTOK, 19 DEC:

The five-day long Namsoong celebrations organized by Rong Ong Tarzum concluded at Wok with Transport Minister Sanjit Kharel at the festivities as the chief guest.

The festival, which had started on 15 Dec, featured women's and men's futsal tournaments, with the Mangar Boys winning the men's futsal and the Sikkep BAC winning the women's tournament.

On previous days, grand celebrations, including a captivating performance by Sofiyum, arguably the State's most refined folk and fusion band, on the Friday evening being a highlight of Namsoong at Wok.

Today, Minister Kharel handed over



the winning prize of Rs. 70,000 cash with medals to the men's team and Rs. 50,000 to the winning women's futsal team along with medals.

Various cultural programs, lingay ping, traditional food and drink of different communities, tambola etc. were the center of attraction of the festival.

According to

the organizers, the celebration was put together to promote the village, and also to make the new generation aware about Lepcha culture and traditions, and to eliminate discrimination between different castes and unite them.

The chief guest lauded the initiative and stated that under the leadership of Chief



Minister PS Tamang, Sikkim has been united.

What was unique about the celebration at Wok was the hosting of this Lepcha festival by

members from all communities residing here - Rai, Gurung, Mangar and Bhutia - all came together to make the celebration grand.

Glory of Sikkim 2020 beauty pageant selects its top-11 finalists

SUMMIT REPORT
SINGTAM, 19 DEC:

Hannah Presents Glory of Sikkim 2020 beauty pageant has begun its grooming session after having shortlisted the top-11 for its grand finale.

50 contestants had participated through online and offline processes from different parts of Sikkim. At the mega audition held at Rongli Village Paradise Resort, Makaibari, on 17 Dec, 11 contestants were selected for the finale. Sristi S Pariyar was the judge of the mega audition.

Speaking on the occasion, Founder CEO, Glory of Sikkim, Dinah



Bishwakarma, said that the beauty pageant aims to provide an opportunity to girls from 12-26 years age group. The uniqueness of the

pageant is that it is held on the theme, "Beauty comes in every shape, size and colour" and seeks to go beyond the stereotypes of beauty.

Farooq Abdullah assets worth Rs 12 Cr seized in money laundering probe

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC [NDTV]: Assets worth ₹ 11.86 crore of National Conference president Farooq Abdullah have been attached by the Enforcement Directorate in connection with the Jammu and Kashmir Cricket Association (JKCA) money laundering case, the agency said on Saturday.

The Enforcement Directorate, which investigates financial crimes, is looking into money laundering allegations connected to the J&K cricket body. The CBI had in 2018 filed a chargesheet against

Mr Abdullah, a National Conference MP, and three others, for alleged misappropriation of ₹ 43.69 crore between 2002-11.

The Enforcement Directorate claimed it has found that between 2006 and 2012, Mr Abdullah misused his position to launder JKCA funds. More than ₹ 45 crore appear to have been siphoned off including large cash withdrawals, it said.

His assets attached include three residential and one commercial properties and four plots of land in Jammu and Kashmir. While the book

value of these attached properties is ₹ 11.86 crore, their market value is about ₹ 60-70 crore, officials in the agency told news agency PTI.

Mr Abdullah, who was questioned twice in Srinagar in the case in October, and his party have linked the investigation to the recent move by the 83-year-old to bring together all Jammu and Kashmir parties in a campaign for restoring special status.

"The letter from the Enforcement Directorate came after the Gupkar declaration. It is clear political vendetta after

the 'People's Alliance' was formed in Kashmir," a National Conference spokesperson said.

"We knew it was coming," said the party, adding that the ruling BJP at the centre was using its agencies to fight the new political formation because it "couldn't fight it politically".

"This is the price one faces when opposed to the BJP's ideology and divisive politics. Recent history is witness to how the BJP has been employing coercive and intimidatory measures through various departments to target opposition leaders

across the country. The recent ED summons to Farooq Abdullah is a case in point," said the National Conference.

Last year, Mr Abdullah was summoned by the agency was in July, days before the centre's August 5 move to end special status to Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 and divided it into two union territories.

Mr Abdullah, his son Omar Abdullah and their rival-turned-ally Mehbooba Mufti - all former Chief Ministers - were among scores of politicians detained at the time.



SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 19 DEC:

Grace Inter Rehab Futsal Tournament 2020 kicked off here at Paljor Stadium on Saturday.

A total of 18 teams from Sikkim and North Bengal are participating in this two-day tourney being organized by Gangtok-based, Grace Detoxification Centre.

Upper Tadong MLA, GT Dhungel, was present as the chief guest for the opening ceremony, accompanied by Advisor, Culture Department, Bhim Kumari Sharma, as guest of honour and Additional

Political Secretary to the CM [East], Tshering Wangchuk Lepcha, who is also the chief patron of the organizing committee.

The inaugural day featured matches up to the quarter-final round, with the semi-final and final matches scheduled to be played on Sunday.

Freedom Facility, Gangtok, will take on Recovering Fellow Brothers, Gangtok, in the first semi-final followed by a Goodwill United, Siliguri, versus United Fellowship, Siliguri, semifinal. The final match is scheduled to be played at 1:30pm.

While speaking to media persons, the Upper Tadong MLA appreciated the initiative of the organizers in helping recovering members begin the process of returning to the mainstream through sporting and healthy activities.

The chief patron of the organizing committee also appreciated the initiative of rehab centres to generate mass awareness on substance abuse and stressed the need to engage the young in sports and creative pursuits to keep them away from unhealthy and anti-social distractions.

There may not be second peak of COVID-19 in India: Experts

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC [PTI]: Healthcare experts have said that there may not be a second peak of COVID-19 in the country, and even if it occurs, it is unlikely to be as strong as the first one.

The comments come as the country's COVID-19 caseload surpassed the one crore mark, though the number of daily cases and daily fatalities have been continuously coming down.

Noted virologist Dr Shahid Jameel said India's curve for daily cases is on a downward slope since a peak in mid-September.

"At this time, we are getting about 25,500 cases daily compared to over 93,000 cases per day in mid-September. I believe the worst is over. But there will be small peaks in the future just as we witnessed in late November," he said.

"I don't think there would be a second peak as we have gone through the festive season (Dussehra to Diwali) and

a state election without a significant jump. What is the reason for this? If we go by the second national sero-survey, likely cases were 16 times confirmed cases. By that factor, India would have 160 million cases now," he told PTI.

It is possible that by now there are over 300-400 million infections in the country, Jameel said.

"By that token, we are seeing large parts of the population getting protected and breaking transmission of the virus," he said.

"Unexposed and susceptible people will continue to get infected. If immunity lasts a year or less, then we may have small peaks at regular intervals for the next few years. Good vaccine coverage will control this effectively," he said.

When asked about a possible second peak of COVID-19, noted clinical scientist Dr Gagandeep Kang opined the transmission will not be as rapid as was seen the first time and the peak

will not be as high.

"I don't think the exposure is enough to say that we have herd immunity and won't need to worry about it again, but I think it is enough to ensure that we will have some level of protection so that the transmission will not be as rapid as was seen the first time and the peak will also be not as high," she said.

"The problem has not gone away it will not go away with herd immunity, but I don't think necessarily we will see second higher peaks as has been seen in the West," Dr Kang said.

Dr KK Agarwal, an eminent cardiologist, said there is still 30-40 percent population in India which has not been infected by COVID-19. He said India, Argentina and Poland are the three countries among the 15 nations having the highest number of COVID cases that are not showing a second peak.

"By all probability, India may not have a second peak, and if the second peak comes, it will only come due to the 501 new variant. Two of them have been described, one in south of England and one in South Africa.

"If you don't get that strain, then there will not be a second peak. If India starts its vaccination programme by the end of this month and vaccinates around 30 crore people, we should be able to control this disease by March 25," Mr Agarwal told PTI.

However, if there is a second wave, he said, then it would be a new variant of the virus which will mean more cases but lesser mortality and the second peak will help in building herd immunity.

Asked if the worst was over for India, Dr Samiran Panda, the Head of Epidemiology and Communicable Diseases at the Indian Council of Medical Research, said the epidemiological curve has come down for some states, while there is a fluctuation for others.

"In more states, we have seen effective control while in some of the states we need to be mindful and watchful. The state scenarios are different from each other," Dr Panda told PTI.

India on Saturday crossed the somber milestone of one crore COVID-19 cases, adding 10 lakh infections in nearly a month, even as the virus spread slowed and recoveries surged to over 95.50 lakh, according to Union Health Ministry data.

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SummitTIMES

Stonewalling without Alternatives is Unfair on Sikkim

The wait for reserved seats stretches for Limboos and Tamangs in the absence of consensus

Another year draws to a close, and while Sikkim has much to celebrate for the year going by, there are some matters which remain unresolved and stranded at where they were nearly a decade and a half back. Reserved assembly seats for the Limboo and Tamang communities in keeping with their having become Scheduled Tribes is one of them. The two communities were included in the Scheduled Tribes list on 07 January 2003. This automatically entitled them to contest from Schedule Tribes seats, but when it comes to the Legislative Assembly of Sikkim, they have not been able to do so despite the four assembly elections which have taken place since then.

That said, reserving seats for the Limboo and Tamang communities is not an issue that is easily resolved. The enormously long time that has passed since they became entitled to such seats and the continuing delay has already established prove that. The delay, it is also important to accept, is not because there are agencies working against the interest of the two communities because no agency is so powerful so as to keep constitutional provisions at bay. The delay because of a mathematical conundrum to begin with and lack of clear social and political consensus on the way forward, and this consensus building is hamstrung by the complicated distribution of seats in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly and the history behind it.

At one level, it is very straightforward in that with the inclusion of the two communities in the Scheduled Tribes list, assembly seat reservation for them becomes a mandated by the Constitution of India, right? The prescribed calculation – seats in proportion to their population composition in Sikkim – is simple in understanding and demanding what is required, but complicated in how one can arrive at that figure or find the seats.

Yes, things are rarely ever very simple in Sikkim. Thumb-rule apportioning of seats cannot be undertaken for the exacting and keenly specific requirements of matters which involve the Constitution and when the matter needs to be processed through multiple Ministries. The calculations are further vexed because they do not offer an easily worked out or universally acceptable proportion because of the existing set of reserved seats, which, because they do not follow the proportionate-to-population allotment, make additional reservations unreasonable for the populations left outside the reserved seats in the Assembly. A situation like this cannot be resolved solely by mathematics or rules and laws or even amendments to the Constitution of India and requires involved deliberations at all levels. The political rhetoric that has hounded the issue has however effectively kept such deliberations and hence the required consensus at bay.

The only clearly spelled out solution was made in 2008 when the Assembly strength was proposed to be increased to 40, BL seats maintained at 12, Sangha at one and SC at two, and then, from the remaining 25 seats, seats marked out for the Limboos and Tamangs as Scheduled Tribes from their proportion to the population. More than a decade has passed since and while demands, all earnest and valid, have been raised often, no alternate “formula” presented. Admittedly, the proposal at hand is complicated, but this was never going to be a simple issue to resolve. If nothing else, this should have been taken as a starting point to begin deliberating how the seats are to be secured.

Criticisms and even condemnations are necessary reactions in a healthy democracy, but the affected communities would have been better served if these responses were backed by alternate proposals on how the political rights of the Limboos and Tamangs as Scheduled Tribes could be delivered without compromising the political expressions of any other community or section of the Sikkimese population. What is required is an unambiguous and consensual resolution ideally one passed by the Legislative Assembly but more necessarily one which has across the board endorsement of all sections of the Sikkimese society and polity.

PS: There is no central data yet on the proportion of Limboos and Tamangs to Sikkim’s population but a Socioeconomic Survey by the State Government has posted the Limboos and Tamangs as making up 16.5% of Sikkim’s population. Complications will begin with population data itself because the Centre will want the Directorate of Census Operations to attest this number and as things stand, the Directorate does not count individual communities and counts Scheduled Tribes as a collective group not broken down into individual communities. Its existing count of the ST population in Sikkim includes the Bhutias and Lepchas along with the Limboos and Tamangs. And therein sits another complication. Technically speaking, the new seats will be reserved for Scheduled Tribes [that is the Constitutional provision], and Sikkim will need to leverage its unique status as a part of India to work out how the ST seats will be apportioned since BLs already have reserved seats protected under Article 371F. But if their population is counted among the ST census, how will seats required to Limboos and Tamangs be worked out? There are many more complications round the corner, and Sikkim’s refusal to arrive at a clear consensus has kept it stranded at the starting block for twelve years now. This should begin to change.

Granny’s on Instagram! In the COVID-19 era, older adults see time differently and are doing better than younger people

MARCIA G. ORY
THECONVERSATION.COM

Time in the era of COVID-19 has taken on new meaning. “Blursday” is the new time word of the year – where every day seems the same when staying home and restricting socializing and work.

As a public health and aging expert and founding director of the Texas A&M Center of Population Health and Aging, I have been studying the impacts of COVID-19 with an interest in debunking myths and identifying unexpected positive consequences for our aging population.

It is common to view older adults as especially vulnerable. Public health statistics reinforce the picture of older adults infected with SARS-CoV-2 as more likely to have serious complications, to be hospitalized and to die.

But what do we know about how older adults themselves are responding to social distancing restrictions in place to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19? And what does this changing sense of time mean for them?

CALMNESS, INTEREST AND GRATITUDE

Despite popular notions that older adults would have more negative reactions to forced social isolation, a recent national survey revealed that older adults – despite their awareness of increased risk – are generally not reporting more feelings of anxiety, anger or stress than younger age groups.

They are actually expressing more positive emotions – feelings of calmness, interest and gratitude. Indeed, other surveys suggest it’s the youngest adults – ages 13 to 23 – who are experiencing the most stress.

This surprising finding has been attributed partly to older adults’ perceptions of time and their coping mechanisms developed over a lifetime.

Many older people have redefined their experiences in terms of time left to live, and they focus on what is most meaningful now. They let go of what they can’t do anything about. Instead of looking back, older adults are motivated to enjoy the time they have left.

What have been difficult are the changing definitions of time and the persistence of a “blursday” existence. Being isolated during spring and summer seemed almost bearable. The uncertainty of knowing when – if – things will return to pre-COVID life is likely to be taking a toll on even the most robust older adults.

Older adults who have been self-isolating for months have been looking forward to getting together with their families over the holidays. Not seeing their families during the holiday season may be particularly difficult.

When I was talking to an older friend the other day, she indicated she was “basically doing fine.” She was staying in touch with her family through regular Zoom calls. But she was “a bit sad about the upcoming holidays,” and what she “missed most was not being able to hug” her children – “especially over the holidays.”

FROM EXPECTATION TO REALITY

During a recent SiriusXM Doctor Radio show on which I was the guest “expert,” I heard many real-life challenges families face: An older woman with underlying health conditions worrying about not getting to travel to see her children



and grandchildren. Adult children who were weighing what would be worse – possibly infecting their older relatives by visiting or not being able to see their elderly relatives in person for what could be the last time.

While vaccinations are now authorized for emergency use, their rollout will take time and we can’t expect them to be an immediate solution for such hard decisions.

Public health guidelines still recommend using face masks and adhering to social distancing rules. They also recommend limiting travel well into the new year.

This push-pull, from expectation to reality, can be an especially hard adjustment. Instead of a one-time cure, will we be thinking of COVID-19 vaccinations as a perennial event, like with flu shot, and COVID-19 precautions as a fixture in our everyday lives?

GRANDMA IS ON INSTAGRAM

Contrary to stereotypes that cast older adults as tech-phobic, many older people are learning new skills to become more familiar with technology. That way, they can stay socially connected and accomplish tasks of daily living such as bill paying and grocery shopping.

Some older adults are even more likely than before to communicate with their loved ones during COVID-19 times using social media platforms.

HEALTH CARE CHANGING WITH THE TIMES

Health and social organizations are more attuned to negative impacts of social isolation and are instituting screening tools and referral sources for care. For example, a social isolation risk screener asks brief questions to

detect early signs of social isolation and link older adults to needed services.

Another silver lining: Mental health problems may not be so stigmatized when many people have such obvious reasons for unhappiness.

Health care itself is changing, with benefits for patients’ time. Instead of expecting older adults to spend hours getting up and out of the house for a 15- to 30-minute appointment, telemedicine has come into many older adults’ homes.

There is renewed interest in advanced care planning as well. While doctors, older adults and their families may have been previously uncomfortable about bringing up the topic, such discussions are becoming more common, due in part to the high number of serious complications and fatalities in the older population.

And finally, as an aging expert, I see one more positive change: a de-stereotyping of older adults.

Beyond the statistics portraying the seriousness of COVID-19 among older adults, there is also a growing recognition that older adults are not all the same. COVID-19 experiences will be affected by existing physical and mental health as well as the social conditions in which older adults live.

While many older adults may be coping well, it’s important not to overlook those socially isolated older adults with persistent mental health challenges or difficulties getting access to technologies that can help them connect to others.

[the writer is Regents and Distinguished Professor of Environmental and Occupational Health, Texas A&M University]

International Statistic of the Year: Race for a COVID-19 Vaccine

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Significant Figures:
332

The number of days between sequencing the coronavirus genome and administering the first vaccine doses to the public.

Scientists in China published the complete genetic sequence of SARS-CoV-2 on Jan. 10, 2020. On Dec. 8, 2020, health officials in London began administering an effective coronavirus vaccine to the public. The global scientific community successfully developed a COVID-19 vaccine in just 332 days.

I am a statistician, and this year I was on the judging panel for the Royal Statistical Society’s International Statistic of the Year. Much like Oxford English Dictionary’s “Word of the Year” competition, we choose one statistic that is meant to capture the zeitgeist of the year.

The statistic 332 days was the clear, standout winner. After a year of terrible tragedy, economic hardship and sorrow, this number represents an unparalleled collaboration in the history of medicine that gives hope for a return to normality in 2021.

FASTEST VACCINE DEVELOPMENT EVER

In 1981, researchers established the link between human papillomavirus and cervical cancer, a disease that still causes hundreds of thousands of deaths per year worldwide. But it wasn’t until 2006, over 25 years later, that the first HPV vaccine was developed in the U.S.

On average, it takes over 10 years to develop a vaccine. Prior to this year, the fastest vaccine development was for the mumps vaccine. That took four years.

In April 2020, The New York Times played out multiple scenarios with vaccine experts as to how long it would take to get a SARS-CoV-2 vaccine. Under normal circumstances, experts estimated, a vaccine would be ready by November 2033.

So how is it possible that researchers got a vaccine to market in just 332 days?

GOVERNMENT FINANCIAL INVESTMENT

A number of things helped to get this vaccine done fast, including international collaboration of unseen proportions, an expedited trial phase process and the biology of the virus itself. In addition to these efforts, one very important



reason for the incredible speed was the huge amount of investment made by governments at the very beginning of the pandemic.

Usually, pharmaceutical companies have limited resources they are willing to spend on vaccine development, and usually, governments are not willing to sink endless money into a process that they aren’t sure is going to work.

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the entire playbook to the wind. As of writing this, 641 therapies and 189 vaccines related to COVID-19 are under development, most of which are government-funded.

The U.S. government invested in multiple vaccines with the understanding that some of them wouldn’t work, but with the hope that a few would. Under Operation Warp Speed, the U.S. government quickly pledged almost US\$9 billion to fund vaccine development and production. Moderna – whose vaccine is expected to become the second authorized for U.S. use after Pfizer’s, received a little under \$1 billion of federal funding, with a

further \$1.5 billion for 100 million doses. While this number alone is not surprising – vaccines tend to cost between \$521 million and \$2.1 billion to develop – this was just one of many expensive projects.

Funding from governments and private donors also went toward building manufacturing facilities with the assumption that a vaccine was imminent and the usual regulatory hurdles would be passed quickly. For example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation helped fund seven factories back in April, even though only one or two of the factories will actually be used.

This influx of money into multiple vaccines and early preparation for manufacturing was instrumental toward getting a vaccine developed and distributed in record time. The development of COVID-19 vaccines is a testament to the ingenuity, dedication and collaborative efforts of the scientific community. At the end of a seemingly hopeless year, there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

[the writer is Professor of the Practice of Data Science, Washington University in St Louis]

Assam MPs urge Karnataka CM to take action against rape and murder of Barpeta student in Bengaluru

GUWAHATI, 19 DEC [SHILLONGTIMES]: Two Assam MPs – Abdul Khaleque of Congress representing Barpeta and AIUDF chief, Badruddin Ajmal representing Dhubri parliamentary constituency, have written letters to Karnataka chief minister B.S. Yediyurappa seeking exemplary action against the culprits involved in the alleged rape and murder of a student from Barpeta in Bengaluru on Wednesday.

"She was from Howli, Barpeta (Assam) under my parliamentary constituency (Barpeta) and a student of East-West College of Bangalore. I request the Karnataka government to take all necessary action against the culprit. Also, I request you to take all necessary action for the safety and security of all the other students and working professionals

from Assam residing temporarily in the state of Karnataka," the letter from the Barpeta MP, Khaleque read.

Dhubri MP, Ajmal also sent a letter to the Karnataka chief minister on Thursday seeking exemplary action against "all the culprits and murderers."

Meanwhile, police have arrested the prime accused, Anisur Rehman (21) who was known to the victim and who had taken the girl in "an unconscious state" to the hospital where doctors declared her dead.

The post mortem report of the deceased is awaited.

Police said the girl had arrived in Bengaluru on Monday and that her admission in the college was done through Anisur, a student of the same college and a native of Goalpara in Assam.

A case was registered

under sections 376 (rape) and 302 (murder) of IPC on Wednesday on the basis of the FIR filed by the landlord. Investigation is on.

The last rites of the deceased were performed at her native place on Friday.

Meanwhile, a candlelight protest march comprising hundreds of protesters, was taken out at Howli, Barpeta on Friday evening, demanding "justice for the victim" and capital punishment for the accused.

A member of the All Assam Minorities Students Union (Barpeta district) condemned the incident and appealed to the state government to provide security and ensure a safe environment for all students who leave the state with high aspirations for pursuing various courses in other states.

BJP will form next govt in Bengal: Suvendu Adhikari



MIDNAPORE (WB), DEC 19 (PTI): BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari on Saturday vowed to oust the Mamata Banerjee regime in the 2021 assembly elections in West Bengal, exuding confidence that his new party will form the next government.

Adhikari, who joined the BJP at Home Minister Amit Shah's rally here, claimed that the TMC came into existence because of the saffron party.

"I had first met Amit Shah during the 2014 Lok Sabha polls... When I was down with COVID, my former party did not enquire about

my health, while Amit Shah twice enquired about how I am," he said addressing the rally.

Noting that the BJP believes in nationalism and pluralism, Adhikari alleged that the TMC wants to divide the state on the lines of "insider" and "outsider".

"Shame on the TMC for such narrow politics," Adhikari said as the crowd roared.

"I am being called a traitor by those who themselves (TMC) are traitors. Had the BJP not been there, TMC would have never come into existence. In the next assembly polls, BJP will win Bengal and TMC will be defeated," he said.

3 killed in fire at market near Kolkata



BHANGAR (WB), DEC 19 (PTI): Three persons were killed as a fire broke out at a market in West Bengal's South 24 Parganas district in the early hours of Saturday, officials said.

A short-circuit caused the blaze that first broke out at a kerosene outlet in the Ghatakpukur Bazar area in Bhangar, around 20

km from Kolkata, they said.

Drums of kerosene stocked in the shop started exploding, following which the flames spread to an adjacent eatery, a shop and a house, they said.

The owner of the eatery, in his early 50s, along with two teenagers who used to work in it went inside the shop

in order to save some valuables and douse the blaze, officials said.

However, they couldn't come out in time and were killed.

It took five hours for three fire tenders to bring the blaze under control, officials said.

Goods worth lakhs of rupees were gutted in the fire, they said.

NFR to operate Dibrugarh-Howrah special trains



GUWAHATI, 19 DEC [SHILLONGTIMES]: Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) will run two pairs of special trains between Dibrugarh and Howrah later this month to clear the extra rush of passengers.

One special train will run via Bogibeel Bridge while the other will run via Guwahati.

"The Dibrugarh-Howrah Express Special (via Bogibeel) will run two days in a week leaving Dibrugarh at 11.55pm on Thursday

and Sunday with effect from December 27, 2020 and from Howrah at 6pm on Monday and Friday with effect from December 28, 2020," an official statement here said on Friday.

The Dibrugarh-Howrah Express Special (via Guwahati) will run five days in a week leaving Dibrugarh at 6.40 pm except on Thursday and Sunday with effect from December 26, 2020 and from Howrah at 6pm except on Monday and Friday with effect from

December 29, 2020.

Moreover, NF Railway has also decided to run a daily express special train between Silchar and Guwahati from December 24, 2020. The train will leave Silchar at 7.20 am and return from Guwahati at 11.55pm.

"The details of stoppages and timings of these trains are available on the IRCTC website. Passengers are requested to follow the COVID-19 protocols before undertaking the journey," the statement said.

HC relief for man booked under UP's anti-conversion law

ALLAHABAD (UP), DEC 19 (PTI): The Allahabad High Court has directed the Uttar Pradesh Police not to take any coercive action against a man booked under the recently promulgated Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020 for allegedly trying to marry a woman with intentions of converting her to other religion.

A division bench comprising Justice Pankaj Naqvi and Justice Vivek Agarwal was hearing a writ petition filed by Nadeem against whom an FIR was lodged at Mansoorpur police station in Muzaffarnagar.

Appearing on behalf of the petitioner,



senior advocate SFA Naqvi argued that the ordinance is ultra vires of the Constitution and any criminal proceeding initiated under provisions of the ordinance shall be quashed.

Nadeem had sought quashing of the FIR lodged against him under sections 504, 506 and 120 B of the IPC and section 3/5 of the Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020.

According to the FIR, the petitioner often used to visit the complainant's house and by taking undue advantage of acquaintance with the wife of the complainant, was attempting to persuade her to change

her religion so that he may marry her.

He also gifted a mobile phone to the complainant's wife.

The bench observed, "There is no material before us that any force or coercive process is being adopted by the petitioner to convert the wife of the informant."

"The victim (wife of complainant) is admittedly an adult who understands her well being. She as well as the petitioner have a fundamental right to privacy and being grown up adults who are aware of the consequences of their alleged relationship," it added.

Odisha reports 356 COVID-19 cases, 3 more deaths



BHUBANESWAR, DEC 19 (PTI): Odisha's COVID-19 caseload on Saturday surged to 3,25,861 after 356 more people tested positive for the infection, while three fresh fatalities pushed the state's coronavirus death toll to 1,832, a health department official said.

The new cases were detected in 26 of the 30 districts of Odisha, with 199 reported from different quarantine centres and 157 local contact cases.

Khurda district of which the state capital Bhubaneswar is a part, reported the highest 41 new positive cases followed by Sundargarh (35) and Angul and Mayurbhanj (29 cases each).

Taking to twitter, the health and family welfare department said: "Regret to inform the demise of three numbers of Covid positive patients while under treatment in

hospital."

The three fresh fatalities were reported from Jagatsinghpur, Puri and Nuapada.

Apart from 1,832 coronavirus fatalities reported in Odisha so far, 53 other COVID-19 positive patients have also died of comorbidities, he said.

Of the 1,832 fatalities, Khurda district alone accounted for 312 deaths followed by Ganjam (246), Sundergarh (158), Cuttack (138) and Puri (113).

The state currently has 3,029 active COVID-19 cases, while as many as 3,20,947 patients have recovered from the infection.

The state has so far conducted over 65.69 lakh sample tests for COVID-19 including 33,067 on Friday. Odisha's positivity rate stands at 4.96 per cent, the data released by the health and family welfare department said.

Mizoram reports 16 new COVID-19 cases

AIZAWL, DEC 19 (PTI): Mizoram on Saturday reported 16 new COVID-19 cases, taking the state's tally to 4,110, an official statement said.

Ten of the new cases were reported from the Aizawl district, two each from Lunglei and Champhai districts, and one case each was

reported from Hnahthial and Lawngtlai districts, as per the statement.

Among the newly-infected people is a personnel of the Assam Rifles.

Six of the new patients have recent travel histories.

Two of the patients have developed some

symptoms, while the rest are asymptomatic.

There are 160 active cases in the state at present and 3,943 people have recovered.

Mizoram has also reported seven COVID-19 fatalities in all.

The state has so far tested 1,70,231 samples for COVID-19.

Jharkhand reports 274 new COVID-19 cases, one more death



Ranchi, Dec 19 (PTI): Jharkhand's COVID-19 tally rose to 1,12,606 as 274 more people tested positive for the infection, a health department official said on Saturday.

The death toll increased to 1,008 as one more person succumbed

to the infection in the last 24 hours, he said.

Ranchi district registered the maximum number of new cases at 98, followed by East Singhbhum (36), Ramgarh (31) and Dhanbad (25).

Jharkhand now has

1,707 active coronavirus cases, while 1,09,891 people have been cured of the disease so far, the official said.

The state tested 17,347 samples for COVID-19 in the last 24 hours, he added.

taking the number of recovered patients to 8,654, which is 94 per cent of the total cases in the Union Territory, while the active number of cases dropped to 474 -- 381 in Leh and 93 in Kargil.

Ladakh records one more COVID-19 death, nine new cases

LEH, DEC 19 (PTI): Ladakh has recorded one more coronavirus-related death and nine fresh cases, taking the infection tally to 9,252 and death toll to 124, officials said on Saturday.

With this death, the fatality figure in Leh

district reached 81, while rest of the 43 COVID-related deaths had taken place in Kargil district since the outbreak of the disease in March.

The officials said 32 COVID patients were discharged after successful treatment,

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Tinfoil Gloves: Why Has MMA Become a Breeding Ground for QAnon?

KARIM ZIDAN LONDON, 19 DEC [THEGUARDIAN]: There was anger on the streets of Huntington Beach.

At the intersection of Main Street and Pacific Coast Highway near the picturesque pier, hundreds gathered on 30 November in defiance of California's coronavirus curfew, which prohibits all "non-essential work, movement and gatherings" between 10pm and 5am until 21 December across most of the state. The so-called "curfew breakers" protest brought together a collection of coronavirus truthers, anti-maskers, and those who remain convinced that Donald Trump won the 2020 presidential election.

Among those gathered at the rally were former UFC champion Tito Ortiz, who was recently elected to Huntington Beach city council, despite a lack of any political or legislative experience. The fighter carried an American flag over his shoulder and stood among the raucous group, which bore signs such as "COVID is a SCAM," and "Disobey the lockdown."

"The public spoke and now it's time for the people to take over before we lose our constitutional rights," Ortiz said during an interview at the rally. "I know the ins and outs of what's going on before the rest of people with their 9-to-5 jobs. At the end of the day, electoral votes – it's a fraud."

When asked about The Great Reset, a term coined by the World Economic Forum to describe the rebuilding of economic sustainably following the Covid-19

pandemic and which has since become a cornerstone of anti-lockdown sentiment, Ortiz said he believes the plan is part of a 'globalist' conspiracy to diminish American freedoms. Ortiz said the plan would have already have taken hold had it not been for one man.

"Donald Trump is that person," he said.

Ortiz's interview was littered with references to the between 10pm and 5am until 21 December across most of the state. The so-called "curfew breakers" protest brought together a collection of coronavirus truthers, anti-maskers, and those who remain convinced that Donald Trump won the 2020 presidential election.

In the past, Ortiz used his platform to sell apparel marked with QAnon slogans such as WWG1WGA (Where we go one we go all). More recently, he started an account on Parler, the social media network tailored to the far-right, in order to propagate QAnon-linked conspiracy theories among his significant fanbase.

Ortiz is part of a trend of current and former MMA fighters who subscribe to QAnon and adjacent conspiracy theories. It is a trend that includes fighters and coaches from major MMA promotions such as the UFC and Bellator.

In June 2020, the UFC found itself involved in a



QAnon scandal when cutman Don House was spotted on an ESPN broadcast wearing the conspiracy's markings. House had a Q symbol on his chest and the WWG1WGA slogan on the left arm of his shirt. The UFC launched an investigation into House's actions, deeming it a "violation" of its outfitting policy. And while House said he regretted wearing the slogans during the broadcast, he defended QAnon's supposed aim to "expose" child sex-trafficking.

There are also several prominent UFC fighters who have either used QAnon-related hashtags or propagated its principles. They include Jorge Masvidal, who used a QAnon hashtag when he posted a false quote by Kurt Cobain in reference to Donald Trump, and bantamweight Anthony Birchak, who tweeted about QAnon until his wife insisted he stop. As for Bellator, middleweight Andrew Kapel outed himself as a QAnon

adherent in an Instagram post in which he signed off with several QAnon hashtags.

Arguably one of the most well-known MMA figures to promote QAnon is Gina Carano, the retired fighter turned actor currently starring in Disney's The Mandalorian. Once considered a MMA darling, Carano has spent the last few months peddling conspiracy theories on social media, including posts about QAnon and child trafficking. Most recently, the hashtag #FireGinaCarano was trending on social media after Carano posted a series of anti-mask memes and retweeted posts denying the outcome of the presidential election.

But why does QAnon thrive in MMA while remaining on the periphery in other sports? "There has always been a strain of outsider, iconoclasm inside MMA," said Luke Thomas, a veteran MMA journalist and combat sports analyst for CBS Sports and Showtime.

"It was the sport of outsiders who either rejected or were rejected by more mainstream interests and activities. Conspiracy theory or thinking that was conspiracy-adjacent has always been a part of the community. It has hit overdrive with QAnon, but the groundwork in terms of a populace ready to believe these sorts of things has always been there."

Thomas added that "there were no mainstream media organs covering MMA for much of its early rise. The only places to either get info or connect with like-minded [people] was online in message boards or small websites." This trend has continued despite the sport's growth, leaving a portion of the MMA landscape operating on platforms known for peddling conspiracies.

For example, one popular QAnon channel on Telegram with more than 7,000 subscribers is operated by an admin who claims to be an MMA fighter with ties to several notable gyms and fighters. In one of the admin's posts, they claim that "the only athletes speaking the truth seem to be literally us pro MMA fighters." Several other channels operated by QAnon adherents have also shown support for MMA, and especially fighters who support Trump and reject mainstream reporting.

"QAnon followers believe that high profile adherents give their movement legitimacy," said Travis View, co-host of the QAnonAnonymous podcast, "which is why they were eager to support QAnon boosters

like Roseanne Barr, James Woods, and former Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling. Despite the rapid growth and even congressional representation of QAnon, it remains a fringe movement. When QAnon is embraced by public figures like professional athletes, they see that as another step towards mainstream acceptance.

Meanwhile, the sport's leading organization, the UFC, has also shown clear favouritism for Trump. UFC president Dana White, has campaigned for Trump – and QAnon is, as View notes, "foremost a pro-Trump movement."

There is also a case to be made that the lack of regulation of MMA fighters' social media accounts in comparison to mainstream team sports such as basketball and football has played a key role in the proliferation of conspiracy theories. The consequences for fighters promoting unfounded conspiracy theories are non-existent, as neither the UFC nor Bellator have taken any steps to limit their fighters from promoting QAnon. This laissez-faire approach to regulation has helped make MMA a safe space for QAnon followers.

"There is very little institutional pressure to get fighters to not espouse totally crazy beliefs," Thomas explained. "There aren't many sponsors in the sport and the ones that are there also face no consequences for a fighter promoting QAnon with the audience who watches MMA."

"So, where's the cost in terms of social forces? It doesn't really exist."

Callum Smith prepares for fight of his life against Saul 'Canelo' Álvarez

KEVIN MITCHELL LONDON, 19 DEC [THEGUARDIAN]: Saul "Canelo" Álvarez is more than a fighter, he's an industry. And, for all the restrictions of the pandemic and boxing politics, business is still good – as Callum Smith has recently discovered.

Late on Saturday in San Antonio, Texas (early Sunday morning GMT), they will argue over the unbeaten Liverpudlian's WBA "super" super-middleweight title as the incomparable Mexican reaches for a world championship to go with his several belts at light-middle, middleweight and light-heavyweight gathered over nearly a decade in a 56-fight career that began as a teenager 15 years ago.

For all the credentials of other excellent contemporaries such as Terence Crawford, Nayoya Inoue, Errol Spence Jr and Oleksandr Usyk, the red-headed 30-year-old phenomenon from Guadalajara bears favourable comparison with Julio César Chávez, who terrorised the best in his business over three weights in the last two decades of the 20th century.

Smith, also 30, brings his own spotless CV to Texas at short notice, and, although he is acknowledged as pre-eminent at 12 stone, he is talking like a fighter privileged to be sharing a little piece of hell with



a boxing nightmare. Neither has fought for over a year; they are about to make up for lost time and revenue.

In this millennium, only Floyd Mayweather Jr (to whom he lost in 2013) has had greater commercial clout than Álvarez, who chose Smith – not the other way around – giving the champion a mere month to prepare and travel to his turf. A purse of \$40m when the fight was first mooted before lockdowns gripped the world has probably shrunk to a quarter of that, with Álvarez likely to pocket the bigger slice.

In the Alamodome, a stadium just over a mile from the battle where Davy Crockett simultaneously perished at the hands of Mexico's General Santa Anna and was confirmed as an American wild west hero, Smith knows he is in for the fight of his life. He has to put aside the brief preparation he has been allowed, and said: "There's plenty of different ways to get in shape. It hasn't been

ideal, but you make do with what you've got, and I'm in very good shape."

There won't be more than a scattering of citizens inside a biosecure stadium that holds up to 64,000 fans, but the tension and sense of occasion will be considerable, nonetheless.

In normal circumstances, Smith would be preparing for Christmas back in Liverpool inside an altogether more welcoming bubble of his three boxing brothers and their close family. He might have contemplated a mid-winter round of golf at Wallasey, where he has performed enthusiastically. Álvarez is a keen golfer, too, but their skills are now trained on a more dangerous pursuit.

When they faced off for the first time at the venue this week, Smith towered over Álvarez by fully half a foot at 6ft 3in, and he invests his rangy frame with power that has proved too much for 19 of his 27 opponents, including

George Groves to secure his title two years ago.

None of his experiences will match this one, though. It was not of his making, but he is happy with that. As Álvarez said: "We chose Callum Smith because he's ranked No 1 in the 168lb division. And, in the end, that's what I want. I have a strong mindset. I know how to handle all of this." He certainly does.

In 2018, DAZN signed Álvarez to a 12-fight contract worth \$365m – nearly \$180m more than it cost to build the venue in which they are fighting. This year, though, it turned ugly. DAZN, Eddie Hearn's streaming partner, wanted their star to take a pay cut because of the coronavirus, he argued with his long-time promoters at Golden Boy and they went their separate ways. However, after some hard talking, DAZN got back in the Álvarez business, alongside Matchroom, Hearn and Smith.

As far as any respected historian can determine, Álvarez is the first boxer to fight brothers in world title fights at different weights, having cut up and stopped Callum's brother, Liam, in nine rounds at light-middle in 2016. The Mexican earlier repulsed worthy British challenges by Matthew Hatton, Ryan Rhodes and Amir Khan.

Relieved of dubious distinction, Gavaskar comforts Kohli & Co

MUMBAI, 19 DEC (REUTERS): Sunil Gavaskar knows what it feels like to be saddled with a dubious distinction and the batting great offered comforting words to India's team after they registered a record low total in the day-night test against Australia on Saturday.

Virat Kohli and his men folded for 36 in the second innings at the Adelaide Oval en route to a comprehensive eight-wicket defeat in the first match of the four-test series.

India's previous lowest innings total was 42, registered during a 1974 test match against

England at Lord's.

Gavaskar, who was part of that 1974 team, did not find any fault with Kohli and his men and simply attributed the collapse to a fiery rival attack, just like 46 years ago.

"Taking nothing away from the Australian bowling, they were absolutely superb today, there was nothing wrong with the Indian effort today," Gavaskar, the first batsman to score 10,000 runs in test cricket, told Channel 7.

"In the same way as in 1974, overcast conditions at Lord's with the ball swinging around, none of us got

out playing bad shots, we were all trapped lbw or caught behind," recalled the former opener.

"When you face bowling of that quality, with that line and length, it's very difficult to score runs and that's what happened to the Indians today."

Captained by Mike Denness, England won the 1974 test by an innings and 285 runs after Geoff Arnold and Chris Old ran through India's batting lineup sharing nine wickets between them.

"I have to say, but for that classy five I got, they would never have reached 42," Gavaskar quipped.

Qatar unveils fourth 2022 World Cup stadium

QATAR, 19 DEC (REUTERS): Qatar inaugurated the fourth of eight 2022 World Cup venues, the Al Rayyan Stadium, when the country hosted the Amir Cup final between Al-Sadd and Al-Arabi on Friday.

Al-Sadd, coached by former Barcelona and Spain midfielder Xavi Hernandez, beat Al-Arabi 2-1 to lift their 17th Amir Cup title after Algeria forward Baghdad Bounedjah scored twice.

"It is a wonderful football stadium," FIFA President Gianni Infantino said in a statement.

"The atmosphere is incredible, with the seats extremely close to the pitch... I am sure this



will be a perfect football arena in 2022 when it hosts matches during the World Cup.

"The country is very well prepared for the next FIFA World Cup and on track to host a memorable instalment of the tournament – the first in the Middle East and the Arab world."

The Amir Cup final's date coincided with Qatar National Day and the country is scheduled to host the 2022 World Cup final in exactly two

years' time.

The 40,000-capacity venue will host seven World Cup matches up to the round of 16.

After the World Cup, the precinct surrounding Al Rayyan, which includes six training pitches, will be transformed into a regional sporting hub for the local community.

Khalifa International, Al Janoub and Education City are the other three World Cup venues which have already been unveiled.

India slump to new low as Australia cruise to victory in first Test

ADELAIDE, 19 DEC [AAP]: Australia cruised to an eight-wicket win in the first Test at Adelaide Oval, where Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood produced spells for the ages to skittle a shellshocked India for their lowest Test total in history.

Tim Paine's team secured a 1-0 series lead before the dinner break on day three of the pink-ball Test, hauling in a target of 90.

The tourists were out for 36 in their second innings after Mohammed Shami retired hurt, having been struck on his exposed right arm by a brute of a ball from Cummins.

New-look opening pair Joe Burns (51 not out) and Matthew Wade (33) shared a 70-run stand as Australia needed just 21 overs to complete an incredible comeback.

Shami was rushed off for scans and the paceman's injury is among a glut of concerns for India, whose captain Virat Kohli will soon fly out for the birth of his first child.

The visitors resumed at 9-1 on Saturday, leading by 62 runs. Cummins (4-21) and Hazlewood (5-8) created unmitigated chaos in the ensuing 90 minutes, during which no batsman reached double figures.

"We arrived today and just collapsed, completely ... it's very hard to find words for how everyone is feeling," Kohli said. "Literally an hour, you put yourself in a position where it's impossible to win. It really hurts."

Nathan Lyon would be excused for having flashbacks to the unforgettable Test collapses he was part of in Cape Town (2011) and Trent Bridge (2015), where Australia were all out for 47 and 60 respectively.

The shoe was on the other foot for the offspinner in Adelaide, where he never looked like getting a single over in the second innings as Cummins and Hazlewood celebrated career-defining moments and big milestones.

"It shows the talent we've got with the ball," Paine said. "When you're as tall and quick as your boys are and they get it right like that, it can be an absolute nightmare."

Mayank Agarwal's nine and Hanuma Vihari's eight helped India surpass the 26 that New Zealand mustered in 1955, which remains the lowest score in 150 years of Test cricket. But Kohli suffered the ignominy of leading the XI that set the bar below the 42 India scored at Lord's in 1974, which had been the nation's lowest score from almost 550 Tests.

China to begin COVID-19 inoculations with front-line workers

BEIJING, DEC 19 (AP): China will soon begin coronavirus inoculations for workers in health care, transport and border control, a senior official said Saturday.

Vice Minister of the National Health Commission Zeng Yixin gave few specifics but said the government was prioritising those most at risk of catching the virus.

Workers in logistics and in markets selling fresh meat and seafood would also be placed higher on the list of those receiving vaccines, along with the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions.

China says it has largely contained the spread of the virus domestically, announcing just three new cases of local infection on Saturday, two of them in the capital Beijing and one in the northeastern province of Liaoning.

Vaccines produced by Chinese companies are pending approval in Turkey, Indonesia and Brazil, as manufacturers continue testing the vaccines in more than a dozen countries including Russia, Egypt and Mexico.. Bahrain became the second country in the world to approve a Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccine, joining the United Arab Emirates.

The UAE last week announced the vaccine was 86% effective, marking the first public release of information on the efficacy of the shot.

Chinese companies have yet to provide information about the results of their phase 3 trials. One of the top firms, Sinopharm, did not respond to multiple messages for comment on its prior efficacy announcement.

Chinese companies have previously released phase 1 and phase 2 clinical trial data for their vaccines through peer-reviewed academic journals.

Even before final market approval, more than a million people have received vaccine shots in a program critics say has not been transparent about safety, efficacy or scientific merit. China officially gave emergency use approval to Sinovac and Sinopharm's vaccine candidates in July. A third company, CanSino, had also given its vaccine to Chinese military personnel.

Those receiving the shot included front-line health care workers, border personnel but also workers at state-owned firms who needed to travel abroad.

In the past few months, local governments have also started buying vaccines for immunisations under emergency use.

Health officials previously said China will be able to manufacture 610 million doses by the end of this year and ramp up to 1 billion doses next year.

Sinopharm and Sinovac's shot relies on a tested technology, using a killed virus to deliver the vaccine, similar to how polio immunizations are made.

‘Big win for democracy’: Bosnian city of Mostar gets a vote

SARAJEVO, BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA (AP): Irma Baralija is looking forward to Sunday, when she intends to vote and hopes win her race in the first local election in 12 years held in her hometown — the southern Bosnian city of Mostar.

To make that possible, the 36-year-old Baralija had to sue her country in the European Court of Human Rights for letting a stalemate between two major nationalist political parties in Bosnia prevent her, along about 100,000 other Mostar residents, from voting or running in a municipal election for over a decade.

By winning in court in October 2019, Baralija believes she has “busted the myth (that nationalist parties) have been feeding to us, that an individual cannot move things forward, that we matter only as members of our ethnic groups.”

Parties representing only one ethnic group have dominated Bosnian politics since the end of the country's devastating 1992-95 war, which pitted its three main ethnic factions — Serbs, Croats and Muslims — against each other after the break-up of Yugoslavia.

“I hope that my example will inspire citizens of Mostar, when they vote on Sunday, to be brave, to realize that as individuals we can bring positive change,” said Baralija, who is running for a seat in the city council on the ticket of the small, multi-ethnic Our Party.

Divided between



Muslim Bosniaks and Catholic Croats, who fought fiercely for control over the city during the 1990s conflict, Mostar has not held local polls since 2008, when Bosnia's constitutional court declared its election rules to be discriminatory and ordered that they be changed.

The dominant nationalist Bosniak and Croat political parties, the SDA and the HDZ respectively, have spent over a decade failing to agree about how to do that. Meanwhile, Mostar was run by a de facto acting mayor, HDZ's Ljubo Beslic, and his office, which included the SDA's representatives, with no local council to oversee their work or the allocation of nearly 230 million euros from the city's coffers they have spent over the years.

Left without fully functioning institutions, Mostar — one of the Balkan nation's main tourist destinations — had seen its infrastructure crumble,

trash repeatedly pile up on its streets and hazardous waste and wastewater treatment sludge dumped in its only landfill, which was supposed to be for non-hazardous waste.

An agreement between the two parties, endorsed by the top European Union and the U.S. diplomats in Bosnia, was finally reached last June — eight months after the court in Strasbourg had ruled in favor of Baralija and gave Bosnia six months to amend its election laws so a vote can be held in Mostar.

Mostar is divided in half by a river. During the war, Croats moved to the western side and Muslims to the east. Since the fighting stopped, the city has had two post offices, two electricity and water suppliers, two phone networks, two public hospitals and more — one crumbling set for each ethnic group.

On Sunday, several small, multi-ethnic parties will be vying for seats in the city council

after campaigning on bread-and-butter issues. But the nationalist HDZ and SDA parties hope that, among them, they will secure a two-thirds majority in the council and keep their grip on power.

While acknowledging that the nationalists have armies of faithful voters whom they mobilize by stoking ethnic mistrust, non-nationalist election candidates in Mostar hope the past 12 years has shown that those two parties are too corrupt and incompetent.

“I think that many people finally realized that the abstract, ethnic interests are meaningless while their children are leaving (Mostar) in droves in search of decent jobs and a decent life” elsewhere in Europe, said Amna Popovac, a candidate from the multi-ethnic Platform for Progress party.

The nationalists are now promising to fix the city's many problems as if “Martians and not they were running Mostar, unchecked, for the past

12 years,” she added.

Miljan Rupar's name will also be on the ballot. The 35-year-old, who is running as a candidate from the multi-ethnic Social Democrat Party, decided to get involved in politics after realizing that over 38 friends and relatives, including his sister, had left Mostar “for good” in search of a better life abroad.

Rupar wants his city focused on the future, just like the international school where he teaches physics, the United World College branch in Mostar. The school is one of 17 around the globe and run by a movement founded in 1962 with the aim of overcoming Cold War divisions by bringing high-achieving youngsters from all over to live and learn together.

“When I walk into the classroom or attend our bi-weekly assembly and see students and teachers from all over the world, including from various parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina, who share the same values and goals, it gives me hope,” he said.

Political journalist Faruk Kajtaz, however, thinks that hope could prove to be treacherous in the divided city, despite local voters' well-justified grievances. He notes that not just Mostar but all of Bosnia has long been politically and administratively fragmented along ethnic lines.

“Maybe too much is expected from the people of Mostar,” he said. “(But) just the fact that citizens of Mostar will finally get a chance to vote for their local legislators is in itself a big win for democracy.”

Portugal's armed forces help nursing homes battle the virus

AMADORA, PORTUGAL (AP): Tears well up in Diana Correia's eyes as she recalls the October day that 24 of the 55 residents of her nursing home in Portugal tested positive for COVID-19.

The stunning discovery set off a scramble to enact the home's contingency plan and stiffen safety procedures. With some staff sent into isolation, others worked double shifts of up to 16 hours in full protective equipment, leaving them lathered in sweat and bone-weary. Some of the home's residents, suddenly confined to their rooms or their floor, were bewildered and chafed at restrictions, even trying to take the elevator and escape confinement.

“They were hard times,” Correia says, trying hard to keep her composure. “Very hard times.”

As a resurgence of the pandemic in the fall looked set to overwhelm Portuguese nursing homes like Correia's, and the country's public health service struggled to cope, the government mobilized all the resources it could. That included deploying military units.

The soldiers' mission: fan out across the country to visit hundreds of nursing homes and help shore up their defenses against the pandemic.

Long-term care facilities have proven vulnerable worldwide during the pandemic. The age of their residents, their physical closeness inside what is essentially a large house, and the residents' underlying health problems put them in peril. On top of that, nursing home staff in Portugal commonly work in several different care homes and travel between them on public transport.

Noting that international data on nursing home COVID-19 deaths is “imperfect and limited,” a study of 21

countries by the London-based International Long-term Care Policy Network, which includes scientific researchers, found in October that those homes' average share of coronavirus deaths was around 46%.

The European Centre for Disease Control, an EU agency that monitors 31 countries, said the same month that up to 66% of all fatal COVID-19 cases have been among nursing home residents.

By that measure, Portugal hasn't fared badly. Care home deaths through Dec. 14 accounted for 30% of the country's COVID-19 fatalities, the General Directorate for Health told The Associated Press.

On Friday, Portugal's total deaths reached almost 6,000.

At the end of September, fearing a calamity, the Portuguese government sent a distress call to its military. As well as helping with contact tracing, disinfecting buildings and providing beds for hundreds of virus patients at military hospitals, the armed forces were now being asked to buttress nursing home protections.

Dr. Maria Salazar, a physician and a colonel in the Portuguese Air Force, swiftly drew up a nationwide program to train care home staff at their workplace. The program also ensures the staff get the specific medical advice they need in almost daily online Q&A sessions with doctors, nurses and pharmacists.

Within a week, the program was launched, coordinated from the CECOM military operations command center near Lisbon.

About 140 teams of one to three people, taken from the Portuguese Army, Navy and Air Force, have traveled across the country since early October. They have already been to more than half of the targeted 2,770 care homes.

Hospital fire kills 8 COVID-19 patients at ICU in Turkey



ANKARA, TURKEY (AP): A fire broke out Saturday at an intensive care unit treating COVID-19 patients in southern Turkey after an oxygen cylinder exploded, killing eight people, state-run media reported.

The Anadolu news agency said the fire took place at the privately-run Sanko University Hospital unit in Gaziantep. It cited a hospital statement identifying the victims as being between 56 and

85. The fire was quickly brought under control.

The statement said 14 patients undergoing intensive care treatment were transferred to other hospitals. An investigation was underway.

The provincial governor's office later said 19 patients were in the unit when a “high pressure oxygen device” exploded at 4:45 a.m. (0145GMT). Other than the fatalities, no others were injured

in the fire, it said.

Intensive care units across Turkey currently have a 74% bed occupancy rate due to the coronavirus outbreak, according to government figures, although medical associations say the figure is higher and their hospitals are overrun with COVID-19 patients.

On Friday evening, Turkey's Health Ministry reported 26,410 new coronavirus cases, bringing the country's

total since March to 1.98 million. The figure includes asymptomatic cases, which Ankara did not report in the four months up to late November, prompting criticism that the government was trying to hide the extent of the country's outbreak.

Turkey hit a record daily high of 246 COVID-19-related deaths reported Friday for an overall reported coronavirus death toll of 17,610.

South Koreans line up for virus tests as cases surge

SEOUL, DEC 19 (AP): Long lines are snaking from coronavirus testing sites in the South Korean capital of Seoul on Saturday as the country reports 1,053 more confirmed cases, the fourth straight day over 1,000.

Thousands are taking advantage of free tests being offered temporarily in the capital area. The government



is struggling to decide whether to increase social distancing to maximum levels, which officials fear

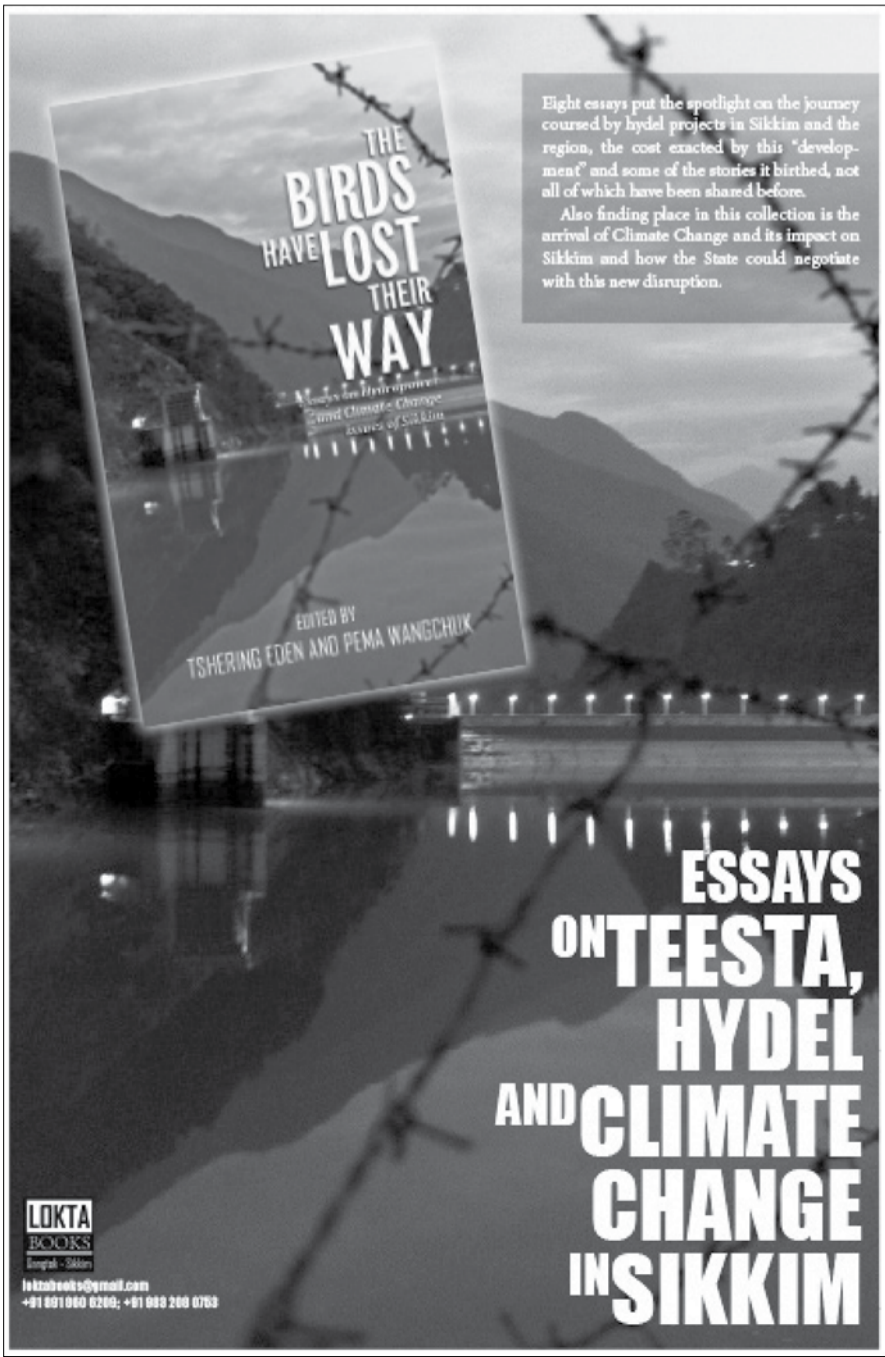
would further shock the economy.

The new cases brought the national

caseload to 48,570. Nearly 7,000 of those cases have been added over the past week.

Fourteen COVID-19 patients died in the past 24 hours to bring the death toll to 659. There are concerns fatalities will continue to rise because of a shortage of intensive care beds in the Seoul area, which is being hit hardest by the virus.

HAVE A STORY TO SHARE?
email us: news@summittimes.com





LUXE SHOPPING! The Selling Sunset star, Christine Quinn leaves the Beverly Hills Chanel store in a bright blue Sherling coat.

Frances McDormand to star in, produce 'Women Talking' adaptation

LOS ANGELES, DEC 19 (PTI): Oscar winner Frances McDormand will star in and produce the upcoming adaptation of author Miriam Toews' bestselling novel "Women Talking". The project hails from MGM's Orion Pictures and Hollywood superstar Brad Pitt's banner Plan B Entertainment. Academy Award-nominee Sarah Polley to write and direct the movie, according to Deadline.

"Women Talking", which was published in 2018, follows a group of women in an isolated Mennonite religious colony in Bolivia as they struggle to reconcile their faith with a series of sexual assaults committed by the colony's men.

The book was named in several best-of-2018 lists, including those by The New York



Times Book Review, NPR, The Washington Post and The New York Times.

McDormand, who won an Oscar for best actress for 2017's "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri", will produce the film through her banner Hear/Say Productions.

The 63-year-old actor most recently starred in filmmaker Chloe Zhao's "Nomadland", which won top honours at the Venice and Toronto film festivals.

George Clooney says watching 'Batman & Robin' physically hurts

LOS ANGELES, DEC 19 (PTI): Hollywood star George Clooney says "Batman & Robin" was so bad that watching the film still "physically hurts" him.

Clooney, who played DC superhero Batman alongside Chris O'Donnell's Robin and Arnold Schwarzenegger's antagonist Mr Freeze in the 1997 movie, opened up about his production regrets during a virtual appearance on Howard Stern's SiriusXM show this week.

"It's so bad that it hurts to watch it... physically," the actor said when asked if he ever revisits the Joel Schumacher-directed Warner Bros movie.

"I couldn't have done that one differently. It's a big machine, that thing. You have to remember at that point, I was just an actor getting an acting job. I wasn't the guy who could greenlight a movie," he added.

Clooney also revealed that he and Schwarzenegger did not shoot together for the film.

"We never even saw each other. It's a big,



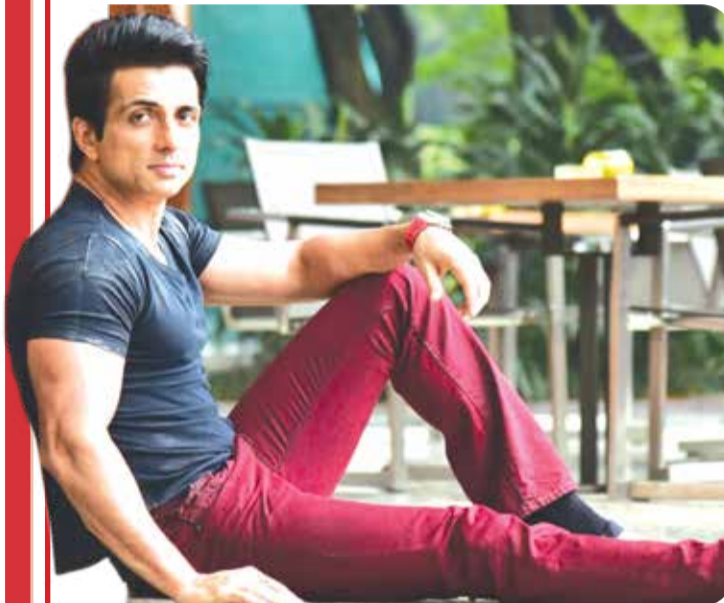
monster machine, and I just sort of jumped in and did what they said."

The actor said the film's debacle was the team's collective failure and no one person is to be blamed for it.

"The truth of the matter is, I was bad in it. Akiva Goldsman who's won the Oscar for writing since then he wrote the screenplay. And it's a terrible screenplay, he'll tell you. I'm terrible in it, I'll tell you. Joel Schumacher, who just passed away, directed it, and he'd say, 'Yeah, it didn't work.' We all whiffed on that one," he said.

Clooney took over the role of Batman following Val Kilmer's one film stint in "Batman Forever". Prior to Kilmer, Michael Keaton had a successful run as the Caped Crusader in two films directed by Tim Burton.

Getting offers for hero roles now, says Sonu Sood



MUMBAI, DEC 19 (PTI): Bollywood actor Sonu Sood has said filmmakers have started to approach him with lead roles in their films due to his philanthropic work for migrant workers during the coronavirus-induced lockdown.

Earlier this year, Sood, known for films like "Dabangg", "Jodhaa Akbar", and "Simmba", catapulted to the national spotlight for his work in helping migrants reach their homes during the lockdown.

During a virtual session of "We The Women" on Friday, Sood opened up about how 2020 has changed his personal and professional life, especially his image of an actor, who has previously played villain in films such as "Simmba", "R Rajkumar" and "Arundhati".

"I am getting all hero roles now. I have got four-five brilliant scripts. Let's hope... It's new beginnings, new innings, it is a new pitch and it will be nice fun," the actor said.

He recalled that during the shooting of his upcoming Telugu movie "Acharya", South superstar Chiranjeevi

expressed reservations about hitting him for a scene, given his new found image of a hero.

"We were doing an action sequence and Chiranjeevi sir said, You being in the film is a big problem for us because I can't hit you in the action scene'. He said if he does that people will curse him.

"There was another sequence where he was placing his feet on me but that too was reshot," Sood said.

The 47-year-old actor also revealed that the makers of another Telugu film have changed the script according to his new image, meaning that he will have to shoot his portions again.

During the lockdown, Sood had launched an initiative to help reunite migrant workers who were stranded in Mumbai with their families in distant corners of the country.

He and his team rolled out a toll-free number and a WhatsApp helpline to connect with the workers and then arrange transportation - buses, trains and even chartered flights as well as food for the stranded migrants.

Sood believes that there was some force working behind him and guiding him during the lockdown period.

"Blessings of my parents worked and I was able to connect with thousands of people. There was some kind of inner voice that made me do what I did. I didn't know how I would do it but once we started, everything just happened, he said.

Joining the actor in the session, titled "The Men We Love", was Michelin-star chef Vikas Khanna, who has also been working round-the-clock to help the needy since the pandemic hit India.

Khanna, sitting thousands of miles away in New York, launched a food distribution drive Feed India' that steadily reached millions across the country.

"Catering companies were shutting down and so were restaurants, even I was supposed to open two restaurants this year.

"It was all affecting me. I wanted to do something we started in a small way. We put everything on the backburner and focused on this," Khanna said.

No drug consumed at party: Karan Johar in reply to NCB notice

MUMBAI, DEC 19 (PTI): Bollywood filmmaker Karan Johar, in his response to the notice issued by the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), has claimed that no drug was consumed during a party at his house last year, an official said on Friday.

The anti-drugs agency had issued the notice to Johar over a viral video allegedly showing drugs being consumed at a party hosted at his residence, the official said.

"Johar was asked to give details of the party.

Accordingly, the NCB on Friday received a reply from him to the notice," he said.

"In the reply, Johar



maintained that no drug was consumed at the party," the official added.

The NCB had received a complaint regarding the video of a party, which was attended by top Bollywood

stars last year, he said.

The complaint was about movie stars apparently seen in a 'drugged' state in the video.

Shiromani Akali Dal leader Manjinder Singh Sirsa

had sent the video to the NCB and his complaint was marked to the agency's Mumbai zonal unit, he said.

Sirsa had claimed that he had registered a complaint about this video with the Mumbai police in August last year, but no probe was conducted.

After the video went viral, Johar had issued a public statement in connection with that video, saying reports of drug consumption at his party were slanderous and malicious.

The central agency has been conducting an anti-drugs probe that began in connection with the death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput in June this year.

ARIES:

There comes a point in every person's journey where they no longer resonate with the life they used to live, and feel inspired to move into an uncharted territory. You're soon going to find yourself at such a crossroads, Aries. But before you move any further, pause. Take a moment to reassess your life path. Remember that no experience is futile and no effort is wasted. So turn your knowledge into wisdom, and take the best from your past into this new phase of your life.

TAURUS:

You've always had the ability to sugarcoat, if need be. But, what's the point of keeping up with the charade? The transformation you're going through is making you question everything, including the old ways you took for granted. Today, you're in the mood to tell it like it is, especially when it comes to your loved ones. Your frankness could throw them off initially, and that's okay. Trust that they'll come around once they realise you are coming from a good place.

GEMINI:

What happens when we remain closed and view everything in our reality through the lens of scepticism? We end up creating a barrier that prevents our blessings from making their way to us. What happens when we choose love and

openness instead? We become a magnet for the good stuff by giving it the power to multiply. Today, even if it makes you feel delusional, affirm what's good in your life. Receive with gratitude and grace. Destiny is about to pull some major strings on your behalf. It is your receptivity that will allow you to witness miracles!

CANCER:

It's not you against the world, Cancer. Stop giving into the drama created by your mind. You are equally responsible for the mess you have found yourself in. So instead of playing the blame game, be gentle with yourself and others. Give them a chance to explain their side of the story as you patiently listen. Who knows? You may end up finding a solution that serves the both of you well.

LEO:

Your revelation this weekend: spending time by yourself is a deeply nourishing act. If you live in the wilderness, take a walk in nature. If you're confined to an urban jungle, find sacred space amidst the chaos where you can be yourself. The simple ritual of sipping on tulsi-lemon tea and journaling your thoughts can be deeply cathartic. On the professional/creative front, collaboration is showing up as a big theme for you. If you're feeling inspired to get into business with somebody you care deeply about, the time is now.

VIRGO:

On the cards for you this weekend: love, harmony, and togetherness. You're in the mood to spend more time with the soul family. You're in the mood to spend more time in the company of those who make you feel like 'home'. Positive changes on the home front are indicated as well. If you've been struggling to get possession of your house, things could finally come through for you. Happy where you are and can't imagine being anywhere else in the world? Consider redecorating your home in a way that makes you feel like you're waking up in paradise—every single day.

LIBRA:

You're feeling all kinds of creative, Libra, and you're in the mood to take something ordinary and add a little more music and a little more poetry to it. No wonder people flock to you for your ideas! Things on the romantic front are also getting interesting around here, mostly because you're feeling inspired to take a chance. December 2020 sees you falling for the daredevil sort—somebody who challenges you to live fully and embrace life in all of its glory. PS: Allow yourself to be surprised.

SCORPIO:

What happens to the anger and the sadness that does not get an outlet? What happens to the con-

tagious laugh that we have to silence in order to be sensitive to the feelings of other people? These emotions don't just go away, Scorpio. They make their way into the recesses of our subconscious, where they continue to poison our everyday behaviour. Today, you're being asked to address the emotions that you have suppressed, and to have that conversation that you have been avoiding. Nothing will free you like standing in your truth, Scorpio.

SAGITTARIUS:

The thing about rejection is that it leaves scars in places we didn't know existed. Unaddressed wounds from your past could resurface, but only because it's time to release them. Looking into your childhood issues could be an important theme too. Yes, the inner work is yours alone. However, you can ask somebody to hold space for you as you experience this catharsis. Turn to your best friend, Sagittarius, or a therapist who can provide you with a third-party perspective.

CAPRICORN:

This chapter of your life isn't so much about starting afresh as it is about clearing the emotional trash can and getting your priorities in order. There are some things that refuse to work out no matter how much you try, and those are the things you're being asked to let go of. Parting

with somebody (or something) you love, or giving up on a dream you've held onto for so long is seldom easy. But, you've got to do what you've got to do. Remember, healing is never a linear process. So take both, the good and the bad days in your stride, and know that Kismet has something better in store for you.

AQUARIUS:

The thing about old wounds is that they have a way of resurfacing unexpectedly. Beware of what's being mirrored back to you, Aquarius. Issues related to abandonment/rejection could be especially triggered at this moment. If you need to spend some time apart in order to focus on the inner work, so be it. Communicating from a space of openness will help the two of you come to a consensus.

PISCES:

What people say—or don't say—has little to do with you, and everything to do with them. Don't let this childish behaviour get to you, Pisces. Put your phone *and* mind on DND as you turn your attention inwards. Be mindful of what you consume in terms of news and information as well. Given that you're feeling particularly sensitive, you don't want to consume something that might trigger your anxiety. PS: Why not turn to your favourite rom-com or Christmas comedy?