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SummitTIMES

Vol 06 | Issue 51 | Gangtok | Tuesday 23 February 2021

ON TOP OF THE NEWS

RNI No. SIKENG/2016/69420

Pages 8 | ₹ 5

MD rubbishes 'SBS under RBI purview' reports

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 22 FEB:**

Following a news report in a national daily that the State Bank of Sikkim has been brought under the purview of the Reserve Bank of India, SBS today issued a press release stating that the report "has no basis at all".

Business Standard published a news report on 21 Feb datelined New Delhi and titled "State

Bank of Sikkim under RBI's purview" wherein it said that the bank had been brought under the RBI's regulatory purview and that the bank's ownership structure would not change but would be regulated at par with other banks.

The news report also quoted Sachin Chaturvedi, a member of the RBI's board of governors and on the eastern local board of RBI, as saying

that it would expand the role of State Bank of Sikkim.

The report further said that SBS could be modelled on the pattern of J&K Bank.

On the other hand, SBS Managing Director, P Wangdi, has said in the press release that the Government of Sikkim and SBS have received no such communication from the RBI or from any other source.

"News item seems to be the handy work of some rumour monger whose only intention could be to discredit the Government of Sikkim and the State Bank of Sikkim," the release states.

SBS is preparing to file an FIR against the newspaper and its reporter, it further mentions.

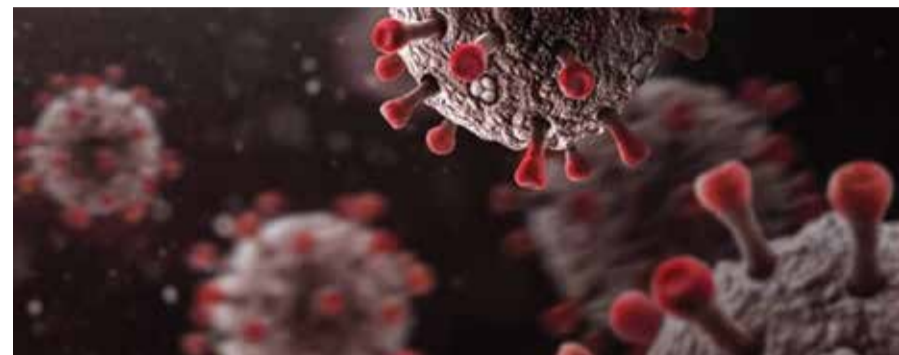
The bank was established under the SBS

Proclamation of 1968 which is an old law of Sikkim protected under Article 371F of the Constitution.

"The Government of Sikkim and the State Bank of Sikkim fully understands the sanctity of the Article 371F of the Constitution of India and old laws of Sikkim and is fully committed to keep the same protected by all means," the release further states.

No new cases and new record number of vaccinations in Sikkim

ACTIVE COVID CASES DROP UNDER 50



**SAGAR CHHETRI
GANGTOK, 22 FEB:**

A total of 1,594 healthcare and frontline workers were vaccinated for COVID-19 in Sikkim on Monday even as the Sunday pause allowed the State a breather and no new cases were reported.

In his daily health bulletin this evening, Health Department State IEC Officer, Sonam Gyaltzen Bhutia, informed that 153 healthcare workers and 1,441 frontline workers were vaccinated at different locations across the State on Monday.

He added that of the

153 healthcare workers, 78 were receiving their first dose of the vaccine, while 75 their second dose of the two-shot Co-viShield regime.

The vaccination drive against Covid-19 had begun in Sikkim on 16 Jan and today's was a new record on the number of shots administered in a single-day. The previous record was held by 19 Feb, last Friday, when 1,537 Co-viShield shots were administered.

In the meanwhile, the State's tally of confirmed Covid cases held at 6,132 with no new cases of novel coronavirus being

reported in the last 24 hours.

Mr Bhutia informed that 19 samples tested by TrueNat and 28 through rapid antigen testing on Sunday, all returned negative for COVID-19 and no RT-PCR tests were conducted since the VRD lab at STNM Hospital is closed on Sundays.

On the other hand, three more Covid patients recovered and were discharged from isolation on Sunday to bring down the number of active cases to 49. With this, the total figure of recovered cases in the State has improved to 5,851.

Aapdara villagers urge Govt for relocation

**WANGCHUK BHUTIA
MANGAN, 22 FEB:**

Residents of Aapdara Village in East Sikkim which is located right above the dam of 510 MW Teesta Stage V HE Project want to be relocated to a safer place as the houses have developed several cracks and the area is sinking posing a threat to their lives.

"We can feel the tremors all the time. Doors and windows start shaking due to the vibration caused by the de-silting chamber under our village," says one of the local residents, Saroj Rai.

The people here have been trying to get their houses acquired by NHPC so that they can shift to a safer location without much success.

Five families have already vacated their houses and are living with relatives.

The villagers say that only surveys and joint inspections are conducted by authorities time and again but their situation remains the same. It has been three years since the people of this village have requested authorities to resolve their problem.

This village is a cluster of 27 houses, of which only 16 have been accepted by NHPC as having been damaged beyond saving but even these are yet to receive compensation.

The villagers here have no option left but to knock on the Chief Minister's office and they are planning to meet the CM soon.

"We never thought that this situation would arise as we have given our land for the development of the nation," said one of the affected villagers.

The village has become even more unstable after the recent landslide at the dam site where an entire stretch started sinking again.

GANGTOK HOSTS SIKKIM-WEST BENGAL BUDDHIST CONCLAVE

Monks integral part of Sikkimese society: CM



**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 22 FEB:**

Chief Minister, PS Tamang attended the National Conference on 'Sikkim-West Bengal Buddhist Conclave' held at Manan Kendra, Gangtok, today. The conference was organised by the Indian Himalayan Council of Nalanda Buddhist Tradition (IHCNBT) in collaboration with the International Buddhist Council (IBC), Ministry of Culture, Government of India.

The conference was also attended by Ecclesiastical Affairs Minister, Sonam Lama, Director of International Buddhist Confederation, Shakti Sinha, Rinpoches and

Khempos, Tulkus, dignitaries from West Bengal and Delhi, Buddhist scholars, researchers, lamas from different monasteries, students from Sikkim Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies, Pangthang, Students of Denzong Pema Choling and officers and staff of Ecclesiastical Affairs Department, Government of Sikkim.

In a Facebook post the CM wrote, "In my address, I stated the importance of preserving and conserving our culture to prevent it from depleting. As individuals, it is our responsibility to maintain and preserve our heritage and pass it on to the next generation. I added that our Govern-

ment is concerned about the welfare of the Lamas and have equally considered them in all the schemes and programs. They have been an integral part of our society and have contributed to the well-being of Sikkim in various ways."

The CM stressed on documenting the oral history of Sikkimese culture and traditions in order to preserve it for future generations.

"Cultural and religious harmony has been the hallmark of the Sikkimese society, setting the precedence for peaceful co-existence. We should always strive to uphold this virtue," the CM said.

Head of Tibetan Govt in exile calls on CM

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 22 FEB:**

The Sikyong [President] of the Central Tibet Administration, Dharamsala, Dr Lopsang Sangay called on Chief Minister, PS Tamang at his official residence at Mintokgang today, a press release from the Chief Minister's Office informs.

In the course of the meeting, they discussed the need to preserve and conserve traditional practices, knowledge and history.

The Chief Minister recalled his visit to Dharamsala where he had mentioned the initiative to send the cultural team to learn Tibetan performing arts and cul-



ture. He also emphasized the importance of documenting oral history for its preservation and also to educate the younger generation.

Dr Lopsang Sangay informed the Chief Minister about the proposed Nalanda University at Bodhi Gaya, Bihar. He added that the Government of Bihar has donated 60-acre land for the same purpose and

will be based on the ancient University.

The Chief Minister thanked him for his visit and applauded the work done during his tenure which concludes in May 2021 and wished him success in his future endeavours. Likewise, Dr Lopsang also expressed his gratitude for the hospitality accorded to him and his entourage.

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STATE BANK OF SIKKIM

(A Government of Sikkim Undertaking)

INFORMATION IN PUBLIC INTEREST

A news item titled "State Bank of Sikkim under Reserve Bank of India's regulatory purview" is doing round in the electronic and social media. News item, which appears to have originated from a national daily has no basis at all. Government of Sikkim and the State Bank of Sikkim has received no such communication from the Reserve Bank of India or any other authorities in their website or elsewhere. News item seems to be the handiwork of some rumour monger whose only intention could be to discredit the Government of Sikkim and the State Bank of Sikkim. Bank is preparing to file an FIR against the daily and its reporter.

The State Bank of Sikkim is established under the SBS Proclamation of 1968 which is an old law of Sikkim protected by the Article 371F of the Constitution of India. The Government of Sikkim and the State Bank of Sikkim fully understand the sanctity of the Article 371F of the Constitution of India and old laws of Sikkim and are fully committed to keep the same protected by all means. The State Bank of Sikkim is on strong footing now and there is no threat of any kind to any of its customers.

sd/-

(P. Wangdi Bhutia)
Managing Director
State Bank of Sikkim
February 22, 2021

Regd Office & HO: National Highway 10, Gangtok - 737101 (Sikkim)
website: www.statebankofsikkim.com Mail-id: info@statebankofsikkim.com

SDF West president joins SKM, more to follow suit



SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 22 FEB:

Sikkim Democratic Front district president [West], Buddha Hang Subba has resigned from the party to join Sikkim Krantikari Morcha party. He is also the sitting Zilla Panchayat from Yuksom-Tingling and former Zilla Upadhyaksha for West District. He will be officially joining SKM

during the state-level joining programme to be held at Sreebadam in West District on Tuesday. SKM senior vice-president, G Lachungpa, who is also the Chairman of Teesta Urja, general secretary [HQ], Pawan Gurung and East District sports' wing convener, Pema Dorjee Lepcha welcomed Buddha Hang Subba in the party by

offering khadas here on Monday.

Addressing a press conference, Buddha Hang Subba said, "I worked for SDF party since its inception and gave my most productive years, almost 28 years, to the party. However, the party never recognized the contribution and sacrifice of the youth." He added that there was no hope and

future for youth in SDF.

"We have been impressed by the farsighted vision and thought of the SKM president and CM, PS Tamang to keep Sikkim always in safe hands," he said.

Mr Subba congratulated the founding members, workers and supporters of SKM for working hard to bring the party of youth in

government. He assured to work continuously to contribute towards the state building process.

As the district president of SDF is joining SKM, other workers and supporters of SDF from West District are also welcome in the party, said SKM general secretary, Mr Gurung. He mentioned that a huge number of SDF leaders and supporters from different constituencies of the State would be joining SKM in tomorrow's state level joining programme.

Likewise, SKM senior vice-president, Mr Lachungpa mentioned that it is high time for workers and supporters of SDF to understand the present situation of their party where their leader left them immediately after losing the election. Instead of saving his drowning ship, the captain was the first to run away, he added.

SGSS presents Samaj Calendar to Area MLA



SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 22 FEB:

Eleven members of Shantinagar Gaon Sudhar Samiti led by president, Krishna Chettri met Health Minister and Area MLA, Dr. MK Sharma, at his res-

idence in Gangtok today. He was presented with the SGSS calendar of 2021, a press release informs.

Previously senior members and the youth had interacted with the Area MLA, so this time

the women's wing of the Samiti presented the calendar to the Minister, the release mentions.

The Minister has assured help and support for the upliftment of the Samiti, the release adds.

STA holds elections for vacant posts

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 22 FEB:

A meeting of the central executive committee and district executive committee of Sikkim Teachers Association was held here on Sunday. The main objective of the meeting was to fill the vacant post of president and general secretary of the central committee and to discuss pending works of the association, informs an STA press release.

The release mentions that with the resignation of former president CK Rai and general secretary MK Pradhan, the meeting has unanimously decided to reshuffle the ad-hoc executive committee of STA. During the meeting, KB Bhan-



dari was elected as president, Da Tshering Lepcha as vice-president, Ashish Thapa as general secretary, Kunzang Sherpa as joint secretary, Bhim Khanal as publicity secretary and Gyaltsen Dadul Bhutia as treasurer and KP Kaushik and BK Basnett as advisors.

The ad-hoc committee has been assigned with the responsibility to conduct fresh elections to elect a new executive committee of

the association, the release mentions.

The meeting was also attended by ASGEA general secretary [Group C & D], Tsewang Norbu Bhutia, who highlighted on concern issues related to teachers as anomalies in pay and promotion and others which needs to be brought to the competent authority and the government in the earliest. The meeting ended with the delivery of vote of thanks by SCA publicity secretary, Bhim Khanal.

When crowds gather, governments get changed: Rakesh Tikait

SONIPAT, 22 FEB [PTI]: Farmer leader Rakesh Tikait took a dig at Union Minister Narendra Singh Tomar's remark that a mere gathering of crowd does not lead to revocation of laws, saying when people gather governments get changed.

The Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader, who has held a series of "kisan mahapanchayats" in Haryana this month, also warned that the government could find it difficult to stay in power if the new agri-marketing laws are not repealed.

The farmers' protest against the laws will continue till the time the Centre accepts their demands of repealing the legislations, Mr Tikait said while addressing a "mahapanchayat" at Kharkhoda in Harayana's Sonipat district.

On Sunday, Union agriculture minister Tomar in Gwalior said the Centre was ready to talk to the farmers protesting against the new laws, and that mere gathering of crowd does not lead to revocation of legislations.

He had urged the agitating farm unions to tell the government which provisions in these new laws they find anti-farmer.

Hitting back at Mr Tomar for his remark, Mr Tikait said: "The minister says that mere gathering of crowd does not lead to revocation of legislations. They have lost their mind. When crowds gather governments get changed."

Farmers, mostly from Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, have been protesting at Delhi's borders since November 28 last year demanding rollback of the laws.

"They (the government) should know if farmers can destroy their own produce, then you are nothing before them," Mr Tikait said.

"There are many questions, it is not only the farm laws, but the electricity (amendment) bill, the seed bill... what kind of laws do they want to bring?" he asked and

slammed the government for rise in prices of diesel and petrol.

Mr Tikait said that this agitation is not just of farmers, but also of the poor, daily wagers and other sections. "These laws will destroy the poor. This is not just one law, many more laws like these will come," he said.

Referring to the farmer leaders spearheading the agitation, the BKU leader also reiterated that the government will have to talk to the same committee of 40 members.

The government has held 11 rounds of negotiation with protesting unions and these have remained inconclusive with regard to rollback of the laws.

The agitation against the laws at Delhi's borders with Haryana and Uttar Pradesh is being led by the Sanyukt Kisan Morcha, which is an umbrella body of 40 farmer unions.

Mr Tikait said this stir will go on and farmers will work in their fields simultaneously.

Demanding a law on minimum support price (MSP) for farmers, he said, "When a law on MSP will be framed, farmers will be protected. This stir is about that, this is about rights of farmers."

Mr Tikait had recently said farmers will not return home till the farm laws are repealed and had added that farmers should be ready to sacrifice their standing crop for it.

The unions are protesting against the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020, the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020 and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020.

The three farm laws, enacted in September last year, have been projected by the government as major reforms in the agriculture sector that will remove middlemen and allow farmers to sell anywhere in the country.

SKM's Jan Samvaad Yatra reaches Rhenock



SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 22 FEB:

On the 10th day of the ongoing state-wide Jan Samvaad Yatra of Sikkim Krantikari Morcha, a team led by SKM senior vice-president, TN Dhakal, who is also the Political Advisor to the CM, and general secretary [press & media HQ], Boom Tshering Yonzon toured Rhenock constituency in East District on Monday. The main objective of the tour is to take stock of grievances of the public of different constituencies and to analyze and discuss various issues to strengthen the party, informs a press release.

The programme was participated by Chairman to Sikkim Consumers & Cooperative Society Ltd and SKM president [Zone-II, East], Santosh Kumar Pradhan, State Nari Vice Convener, Prabha Pradhan, Nari

Vice Convener [Zone-II, East], Radha Regmi, senior party worker, ML Sharma, CLC president, DB Chettri, CLC coordinator, Mahendra Subba, CLC Nari Convenor, Sushila Thapa and other party workers.

The team first visited the Block Level Party office located at Rhenock and interacted with party workers, which was followed by an interaction programme with the public at Rhenock GPU and Tarpin-Salghari GPU.

During the course of interaction with the public at Rhenock and Tarpin-Salghari, the local public placed several grievances, issues and demands, informs the press release. In his address, the senior vice-president assured to take all issues of the people to the government and concerned departments.

He stated that the CM has taken historic steps

to listen to the problems and grievances of the people in rural corners of the state which, he said, was never done by previous Chief Ministers.

"We do not always engage in politics out of revenge, but we want to make Sikkim capable, efficient, developed and prosperous by changing the mindset of the people and the society by showing the right path to every member of the society," Mr Dhakal said.

He talked about the resolution passed in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly for inclusion of 12 left out communities as Scheduled Tribes.

"This one is a very long pending demand of 12 left out communities and the previous SDF government failed to fulfill this demand but the SKM government always stood in favor of 12 left out communities, he expressed.

Rahul Gandhi takes dig at Modi for ridiculing MGNREGA

WAYANAD, 22 FEB [PTI]: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Monday said Narendra Modi, who "ridiculed" MGNREGA when he took over as Prime Minister in 2014, was "forced to accept" the fact that the ambitious rural job scheme brought in by the previous UPA government played the role of "saviour" of people of the country during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Inaugurating a Kudumbasree Sangamam at Poothadi Grama Panchayat in his constituency here, the Congress leader said the Congress works for the empowerment of the

poor and alleged that the idea of the ruling BJP was to empower the most powerful.

"When Modi became Prime Minister, in the Parliament House, in front of all of us, he ridiculed MGNREGA. He said MGNREGA was an insult to the Indian people," Mr Gandhi alleged, as he began his two-day visit to his constituency in poll-bound Kerala.

He said the Prime Minister was forced to increase the work and money of the scheme during the spread of coronavirus in the country.

"And he was forced to accept during COVID-19 that only MGNREGA played the role of saviour of our people," Mr Gandhi said.

He noted that the demand for MGNREGA, which provides social protection for the most vulnerable people living in rural India by guaranteeing wage employment opportunities, "skyrocketed" during COVID.

The Wayanad MP said both SHGs and the MGNREGA were brought in by the UPA government not as a "gift" but as "tools for empowerment for making our people stronger."

COVID-19: National positivity rate at 5.20 per cent

NEW DELHI, FEB 22 (PTI): India has registered a record in the number of COVID-19 cumulative tests, with over 21.15 crore samples tested, the Union Health Ministry said on Monday.

The country's national positivity rate is pegged at 5.20 per cent.

Progressive countrywide expansion in testing infrastructure has played a crucial role in the steep rise of testing numbers, the ministry underlined.

With 2393 testing labs in the country including 1,220 government laboratories and 1,173 private laboratories, the daily testing capacity has got a substantial boost.

"India's cumulative national positivity rate is presently pegged at 5.20 per cent," the ministry said.

A total of 6,20,216 tests were conducted in a span of 24 hours.

"The number of beneficiaries being tested per million every day has shown a consistent and progressive increase. India's tests per million stand at 1,53,298.4 as on date," the ministry highlighted.

Till February 22, the COVID-19 vaccination coverage was 1,11,16,854 through 2,32,317 sessions, as per the provisional report. These include 63,97,849 health care workers (HCWs 1st dose), 9,67,852 HCWs (2nd dose) and 37,51,153 frontline workers (FLW 1st dose).

The 2nd dose of COVID-19 vaccination started on February 13 for those

beneficiaries who have completed 28 days after receipt of the 1st dose. Vaccination of the FLWs started on February 2. As on day-37 of the vaccination drive (21st February), 31,681 vaccine doses were given. Out of which, 24,471 beneficiaries were vaccinated across 1,429 sessions for 1st dose (HCWs and FLWs) and 7,210 HCWs received 2nd dose of vaccine.

Out of total 1,11,16,854 vaccine doses, 1,01,49,002 (HCWs and FLWs) received 1st dose of vaccine and total 9,67,852 HCWs received 2nd dose of vaccine, the ministry said.

It said 60.17 per cent of the total vaccine doses are concentrated in seven states. Karnataka alone accounts for 11.8 per cent (1,14,043 doses).

India's cumulative recoveries surged to 1.06 crore (1,06,99,410) and exceed the active cases by 1,05,49,355 (71.3 times), the ministry underscored.

A total of 9,695 patients have recovered and got discharged in a span of 24 hours. The ministry said 80.86 per cent of the new recovered cases are observed to be concentrated in five states.

Kerala has reported the maximum number of single day recoveries with 4,345 newly recovered cases. A total of 2,417 people recovered in Maharashtra in a span of 24 hours followed by 460 in Tamil Nadu.

The country's total active cases is 1,50,055 as on date which consists of 1.36 per cent of India's total infections.

KUTSE SHEGU



The 49th days Kutse Shegu (Anthyesti Kriya) of our beloved father Lt Lerap Shandarpa (Sokay Kaila) of Rabongla Yangyang Road who left for his heavenly abode on 04 Jan, 2021 falls at our residence, Rabongla Yangyang Road near Foodgodown South Sikkim on 21 Feb, 2021. We would like to request all relatives, friends and well-wishers to present their prayers and offering to the departed soul.

Family members-
Dechen Doma Bhutia (Eldest daughter)
Karma Tseten Bhutia (Eldest son)
Laki Doma Bhutia (Daughter)
Ugen Bhutia (Son)
Sedenla Bhutia (Daughter)
Contact No: 74329001908, 9775476720.

Mangan hosts block-level Interschool Junior Olympics



**WANGCHUK BHUTIA
MANGAN, 22 FEB:**

Three-day Block Level 1st Inter School Junior Olympic games under "Sports for peace and development" 2020-2021 under-14 and under-17 boys and girls which had started on 18 Feb concluded today at Naga playground under

Lachen-Mangan constituency, North Sikkim.

The event was organized by the Department of Sports & Youth Affairs Government of Sikkim, Mangan BAC in collaboration with Department of Sports & Youth Affairs, Mangan, North Sikkim and was funded by Ministry of Youth Affairs &

Sports, Govt. of India.

The event saw participation from more than 15 schools from six Gram Panchayat Units under Mangan Block which includes Namok-Swayem, Mangshila-Tibuk, Thingchim-Chandey, Singhik-Sentam, Ringhim-Nampatam and Toong-Naga.

The valedictory function

today was attended by Chairman Social Welfare Board, Nim Tshering Lepcha, as chief guest in the presence of ADC Dev Mangan, RB Bhandari, BDO Mangan, DS Subba, Deputy Director HRDD North, Sajam B. Sebastain, Sonam Wangchuk Bhutia, OS BAC Mangan, panchayat members from different

GPUs, representatives and head of the different schools and officials.

The competition was organized in different disciplines like athletics, archery, boxing, badminton, football, karate, taekwondo, table tennis, etc.

In under-14 boys football tournament, Thingchim SS defeated Mangan SSS by 3-0 goals. Likewise, in under-17 boys Mangan SSS defeated Eklavya Model School Swayem in penalty shoot-out.

The team championship of the tournament was awarded to Mangshila-Tibuk GPU.

In his address, the chief guest said that students should try to strike a balance between sports and academics. He stated that Naga ground will be developed into one of the most beautiful stadiums in North Sikkim.

SAATHI outreach program at Palitan Namthang



**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 22 FEB:**

SAATHI organized a community outreach program at Palitan Namthang today. The program was supported by Titam Company Ltd. and was attended by 25 persons, a press release informs.

The program had an interactive session between local residents and Sudeep Sharma, Teacher Coordinator of Namthang Sr Sec School. Various issues related to substance abuse were discussed and explained to the participants.

He mentioned that stigma related to substance abuse has to be removed which is possible only with support from the community. He also said that substance abuse can be prevented with the right knowledge and care.

IIT-Kharagpur researchers turn Odisha steel plant dumpsites into greenbelt

KOLKATA, 22 FEB [PTI]: Researchers at Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kharagpur have transformed Odisha's steel plants' dumpsites into greenbelts using traditional Indian organic components and Japanese afforestation techniques. According to the team, a drive through the Dhenkanal region of Odisha will give one the chance to witness the vast stretches of green canopy and vegetation developed by them on what was once industrial dumpsites.

The transformation to a greenbelt is not a natural reclamation but the "Midas touch" of the Post Mining Mine Site Restoration group of the Department of Mining Engineering of IIT Kharagpur through a project supported by Tata Steel BSL, according to the team that worked on the project.

The researchers afforested over 32,000 square feet in the region following a rapid forest regeneration technique by using a unique mix of the traditional resource of Panchagavya with the Miyawaki plantation technique of ecologist Akira Miyawaki from Japan. The dumping of blast furnace slag by steel plants has been a perennial challenge in India and even in some of the developed countries in the world, said IIT Kharagpur professor Khanindra Pathak.

"These steel slag dumps contribute to the generation of airborne particles causing air pollution and also to groundwater and surface-water contamination through different pathways. The slag-covered land is unsuitable for vegetation growth and associated problems lead to the ruination of vegetation and health hazards for both humans and animals," he said.

tries in the world, said IIT Kharagpur professor Khanindra Pathak.

"These steel slag dumps contribute to the generation of airborne particles causing air pollution and also to groundwater and surface-water contamination through different pathways. The slag-covered land is unsuitable for vegetation growth and associated problems lead to the ruination of vegetation and health hazards for both humans and animals," he said.

"Researchers at IIT Kharagpur have devised a bioremediation method to reduce the concentration of these polluting slags to an innocuous state. They have turned this slag suitable for plant growth by mixing it with topsoil, cow dung and other organic enhancers. Plants carefully chosen for the Miyawaki technique and 22 native species were grown on the mix with a 30-cm layer of topsoil over it after administering them with Panchagavya," he added. According to the team, periodic administration of Panchagavya checked the problem of nutrient scarcity while mulching helped retention of water and nutrients. "In a span of one year, we witnessed the growth of a self-sustaining mini-forest, dominated by plants belonging to the Fabaceae and Sesbania grandiflora family.

The plants with long root systems could utilize the steel slag with their roots penetrating up to a depth of 2 m from the ground surface, thus reducing the effects of groundwater contamination and surface runoff of water in the monsoons," said Pathak. The process turned an unsupportive steel slag dump to a self-sustaining primary succession over it. "Vetiver grass was used as a boundary for the plantation to check migration of nutrients. This grass, if grown over the slopes of the slag dumps, will further check the fugitive emissions and thereby reducing air pollution and erosion of slag onto adjacent habitations," he added. Pathak said that the process can be replicated for municipality waste dumps as well.

"Development of a vetiver grass field could be beneficial for urban wastewater management as well as municipality solid waste dump sites. We had also demonstrated hydroponic vetiver for the containment of oil in refinery wastewater through an IIT Kharagpur and IOCL collaborative project at the Bongaigaon refinery," the professor said.



Amar Subba completes Dharan 10K Run

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 22 FEB:**

Marathon Man, Amar Subba received a certificate of appreciation from the organizers of Dharan 10K Run 2021. He finished the 10 KM

run held at Dharan, Nepal, on 20 Feb in 43 minutes. Mr Subba expressed his happiness on getting the honour from the organizers and further congratulated them for organizing the run successfully.

AICF appoints SCA president to promote chess in NE region

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 22 FEB:**

Sikkim Chess Association [SCA] president, Leela Prasad Acharya has been entrusted with the responsibility to promote the game of chess in North-Eastern region and Andaman & Nicobar. He has been nominated as a member in the committee formed by the newly formed body of All India Chess Federation [AICF] for promotion of chess in North-Eastern region and Andaman & Nicobar.

SCA general secretary, Mahendra Dhakal, who was recently elected as the joint secretary of AICF, stated that Leela Prasad Acharya is the first from Sikkim to be given such an important



responsibility.

He stated that AICF is serious about promoting chess in all corners of the State and the formation of this committee is an initiative towards its commitment to promote and develop the game of

chess in the country.

SCA executive members and the entire chess fraternity of Sikkim have congratulated Leela Prasad Acharya on getting such an important responsibility for the promotion of chess.

Maharashtra's COVID-19 tally below 6,000 after 3 days

MUMBAI, 22 FEB [PTI]: Maharashtra reported 5,210 fresh COVID-19 infections on Monday, after logging over 6,000 cases for three days in a row, even as the Mumbai region, which has seen a bulk of states fatalities, did not report even a single death during the day, the health department said.

The state -- which has witnessed an upsurge in COVID-19 cases since February 10 -- reported 6,112 infections last Friday (February 19). It reported 6,281 and 6,971 new cases on Saturday (Feb 20) and Sunday (Feb 21), respectively.

According to an official statement, with 5,210 fresh infections, Maharashtra's COVID-19 tally rose to 21,06,094.

The Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) reported 1,364 cases, while the Akola circle in the Vidarbha region, which has witnessed an upsurge in cases of late, recorded 1,154 new infections on Monday.

With 18 new deaths reported on Monday, the state's fatality count rose to 51,806, the government said.

The department said of the 18 deaths, 6 were reported during the past 48 hours, while 9 were from the last week. The remaining three deaths were from the period before the last week.

Though the statement said no new death was reported from the MMR during the day, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) data showed four more patients died in Mumbai due to COVID-19.

On the other hand, 5,035 patients recovered on Monday, taking the

number of persons discharged from hospitals till now to 19,99,982.

Mumbai city continued to report the highest single-day cases in the state with a spike of 761 on Monday. Nagpur and Amravati cities in Vidarbha saw a jump of 643 and 555 cases, respectively, on Monday.

Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad cities in Western Maharashtra reported a rise of 336 and 207 cases, respectively.

Aurangabad city in the Marathwada region reported 194 new cases, while in the jurisdiction of Akola Municipal Corporation, 167 fresh infections were recorded. Amravati city saw death of seven persons due to the disease during the day.

In Nashik city and Latur district (barring Latur city), two persons lost lives to COVID-19. Out of the total 5,210 new cases, the MMR accounted for 1,364.

With this, the number of cases reported in the MMR -- which includes Mumbai city and its satellite towns -- till now increased to 7,15,049.

The sprawling region has reported 19,757 deaths till now. The country's financial capital alone has witnessed 3,19,889 cases and 11,446 deaths till now. The Akola circle -- which covers Amravati, Yavatmal, Buldhana and Washim districts, besides Akola -- reported a rise of 1,154 cases on Monday.

In the Nagpur circle, a total of 946 fresh cases were reported. The states recovery rate is 94.96 per cent, while the fatality rate is 2.46 per cent, the health department said.

Unbeaten Real Kashmir face high-flying Aizawl FC

KOLKATA, FEB 22 (PTI): Unbeaten Real Kashmir FC will face a litmus test in high-flying Aizawl FC when they lock horns in an I-League match here on Tuesday. Both sides will look to consolidate their position in the top four. Real Kashmir saved their unbeaten run from ending after Dipanda Dicka cancelled out Punjab FC's lead in what was a top-of-the-table clash, eventually playing out a 1-1 draw.

The draw, however, pushed the Snow Leopards down into third place with 14 points from eight games. Head coach David Robertson now will be hoping for three points against Aizawl, which could take them further



up in the table.

Speaking at the virtual pre-match press conference, Robertson said, "We came from a goal down against Punjab. This showed a lot of character as we

did against NEROCA. Spirits are high within the team.

"Aizawl are a very good team, we saw them against Mohammedan. They are quick, enthusiastic, and difficult to play

against. We got to be at our absolute best to beat them," the Scottish manager spoke about his opponents.

When quizzed about the life in bio-bubble and the mood among the team members, RKFC forward Danish Farooq, said, "Obviously, it is hard to be in the bio-bubble. The only places we go to are training and matches.

"Regardless, we are trying our best to stay positive, and after the run of results we have had, the atmosphere in the team is very good."

Meanwhile, Aizawl produced a dominant attacking display and returned to winning ways against Mohammedan SC.

RUCHI DIAGNOSTIC CLINIC

Behind telephone Exchange Near Old STNM Hospital. Gangtok

PH: 03592-203333, 204876, 8509373970

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- Arihant Medical, Opp. CRH gate, 5th Mile.

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ENT O P D Monday to Friday 10.00 am to 2.30 pm

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3. MICROSCOPIC PROCEDURES
4. MINOR OT PROCEDURES
5. VERTIGO MANAGEMENT
6. AUDIOMETRY, TYMPANOMETRY AND HEARING AIDS.

CONSULTANT ENT SURGEON DR. ONGDEN GYATSO, MS (AIIMS)

GASTRO CLINIC & O P D

8.00 am to 9.00 am

MEDICAL CLINIC & O P D

9.30 am

ORTHO AND GYNEA

CLINICS & O P D

3.00 pm

PAEDIATRIC CLINIC & O P D

8.00 am And 6.00 pm

VACCINATION CLINIC

Find Time to Rethink Waste

Awareness and engagement on garbage management

Gangtok has for long been a tourist town unique for its general cleanliness. Being the capital of a State to which modern waste management is a recent experience and garbage a recent (a decade and a half old) problem, this is an impressive achievement. Admittedly, its still relatively small size helps keep things in better nick, but Gangtok has also been witnessing a sustained population boom and the capital is now a contiguous stretch of buildings from Tashi View Point to Ranipool. Urban planning rambles along lost between being woefully inadequate to blissfully absent, and the one eyesore where this is most noticeable is in the civic sense of the residents. The waste management system of the town is still not crumbling, but that is no thanks to people's engagement but is driven primarily by the GMC-UD&HD combine and its interventions. Many years ago, it was again an outside agency's top-down initiative that introduced garbage management in Gangtok through an AusAud programme. When they left, so did the resuscitated civic organisations. Now, the municipal corporation is trying to help Gangtokians dispose and segregate their waste more responsibly. What is missing, however, is spontaneity among the stakeholders. There is no surprise there because people even had problems when asked to drop off their garbage to the collection trucks. To have expected them to take with any real interest to segregating waste was always a tall ask.

One had hoped that the municipalisation of Gangtok and some other towns in the State would have facilitated such engagements and awareness and hope flickers occasionally when municipal councilors make the occasional public appearance in cleanliness drives and overseeing jhora-cleaning operations in their respective jurisdictions. What remains unfortunately missing, at least in the public initiatives and statements coming out of the GMC, is a reassuring signal that it understands the garbage management problems confounding Gangtok in particular and Sikkim in general. The priorities appear to be mixed up, with supporting initiatives gaining primacy over policy and planning measures. When councillors arrive at cleanliness drives, they contribute not with their sweeping skills but by underlining, with their presence, the need for public participation for such initiatives. For instance, CCTV cameras at jhoras might work as strong deterrents against irresponsible dumping, but deterrence has a limited shelf-life and for responsible disposal, waste management needs to become a habit at every home. The existing models for awareness drives are not delivering the required results and maybe it is time to devise something more earnest and genuine – like involving the children instead.

Meanwhile, it is also important that the safai karamcharis are better looked after. It is not enough to remember them once a year with felicitations and gifts. They serve Sikkim despite everything, so the least that can be offered them is a safer work environment. The rubber gloves and masks issued to garbage handlers and sweepers wear out within a week and it is disturbing to see them handle all the filth with the flimsiest of protections. They should ideally also receive a special medical package for their hazardous working conditions and then some more extra emoluments over and above their salaries for the hours they spend keeping Sikkim clean.

The logistics and humanity of garbage management apart, one expects the urban body representatives to also deliver the State a coherent and sustainable garbage management policy. They should not just inherit and continue with the system passed on to it by the UD&HD. Because they are more accountable to the people, one hopes they will tweak this system, scratch that, replace it with something which is more in sync with the image that Sikkim aspires to project. At present, waste management continues to be managed with disposal seen as the only option. The speed with which the dump at 32 Mile has been over-run, and the one at Marchak before that, should convince all that waste needs to be examined as part of a cycle of production-consumption-recovery, with the last aspect of "recovery/ recycling" being the one which will ensure overall sustainability.

Without it, new garbage dumping grounds will need to be found every few years. And no, one recycling plant at Lall Bazaar will not suffice. Why, even the 32 Mile land-fill did flirt with composting for a short while, but the machinery and the prospects were lost to departmental disinterest. Waste can actually become wealth and has tremendous potential not only for generating livelihoods for the urban poor but can also enrich the earth through composting and recycling rather than spreading pollution as has been the case. Compost is only one part of recycling. The tons of plastic and other non-biodegradable waste can also be recycled profitably into ply-boards and other products which can become a niche and wellpatronised industry. These are only stray ideas; fact remains that garbage management needs a rethink of a policy-shift scale and not just token displays and gimmickry.

Doc on WHO's COVID-19 Mission to China on What They Found About Origins of the Coronavirus

DOMINIC DWYER
theconversation.com

As I write, I am in hotel quarantine in Sydney, after returning from Wuhan, China. There, I was the Australian representative on the international World Health Organization's (WHO) investigation into the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Much has been said of the politics surrounding the mission to investigate the viral origins of COVID-19. So it's easy to forget that behind these investigations are real people.

As part of the mission, we met the man who, on December 8, 2019, was the first confirmed COVID-19 case; he's since recovered. We met the husband of a doctor who died of COVID-19 and left behind a young child. We met the doctors who worked in the Wuhan hospitals treating those early COVID-19 cases, and learned what happened to them and their colleagues. We witnessed the impact of COVID-19 on many individuals and communities, affected so early in the pandemic, when we didn't know much about the virus, how it spreads, how to treat COVID-19, or its impacts.

We talked to our Chinese counterparts — scientists, epidemiologists, doctors — over the four weeks the WHO mission was in China. We were in meetings with them for up to 15 hours a day, so we became colleagues, even friends. This allowed us to build respect and trust in a way you couldn't necessarily do via Zoom or email.

This is what we learned about the origins of SARS-CoV-2.

ANIMAL ORIGINS, BUT NOT NECESSARILY AT THE WUHAN MARKETS

It was in Wuhan, in central China, that the virus, now called SARS-CoV-2, emerged in December 2019, unleashing the greatest infectious disease outbreak since the 1918-19 influenza pandemic.

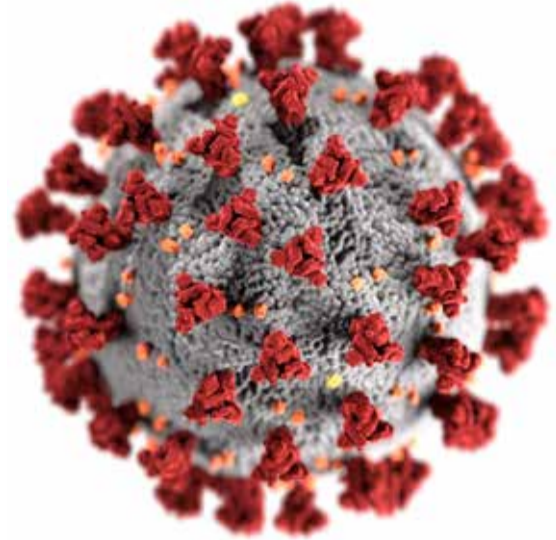
Our investigations concluded the virus was most likely of animal origin. It probably crossed over to humans from bats, via an as-yet-unknown intermediary animal, at an unknown location. Such "zoonotic" diseases have triggered pandemics before. But we are still working to confirm the exact chain of events that led to the current pandemic. Sampling of bats in Hubei province and wildlife across China has revealed no SARS-CoV-2 to date.

We visited the now-closed Wuhan wet market which, in the early days of the pandemic, was blamed as the source of the virus. Some stalls at the market sold "domesticated" wildlife products. These are animals raised for food, such as bamboo rats, civets and ferret badgers. There is also evidence some domesticated wildlife may be susceptible to SARS-CoV-2. However, none of the animal products sampled after the market's closure tested positive for SARS-CoV-2.

We also know not all of those first 174 early COVID-19 cases visited the market, including the man who was diagnosed in December 2019 with the earliest onset date.

However, when we visited the closed market, it's easy to see how an infection might have spread there. When it was open, there would have been around 10,000 people visiting a day, in close proximity, with poor ventilation and drainage.

There's also genetic evidence generated during the mission for a transmission cluster there. Viral sequences from several of the market cases were identical, suggesting a transmission cluster. However, there was some diversity in other viral sequences, implying other unknown or unsampled



chains of transmission.

A summary of modelling studies of the time to the most recent common ancestor of SARS-CoV-2 sequences estimated the start of the pandemic between mid-November and early December. There are also publications suggesting SARS-CoV-2 circulation in various countries earlier than the first case in Wuhan, although these require confirmation.

The market in Wuhan, in the end, was more of an amplifying event rather than necessarily a true ground zero. So we need to look elsewhere for the viral origins.

FROZEN OR REFRIGERATED FOOD NOT RULED OUT IN THE SPREAD

Then there was the "cold chain" hypothesis. This is the idea the virus might have originated from elsewhere via the farming, catching, processing, transporting, refrigeration or freezing of food. Was that food ice cream, fish, wildlife meat? We don't know. It's unproven that this triggered the origin of the virus itself. But to what extent did it contribute to its spread? Again, we don't know.

Several "cold chain" products present in the Wuhan market were not tested for the virus. Environmental sampling in the market showed viral surface contamination. This may indicate the introduction of SARS-CoV-2 through infected people, or contaminated animal products and "cold chain" products. Investigation of "cold chain" products and virus survival at low tem-

peratures is still underway.

EXTREMELY UNLIKELY THE VIRUS ESCAPED FROM A LAB

The most politically sensitive option we looked at was the virus escaping from a laboratory. We concluded this was extremely unlikely.

We visited the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which is an impressive research facility, and looks to be run well, with due regard to staff health.

We spoke to the scientists there. We heard that scientists' blood samples, which are routinely taken and stored, were tested for signs they had been infected. No evidence of antibodies to the coronavirus was found. We looked at their biosecurity audits. No evidence.

We looked at the closest virus to SARS-CoV-2 they were working on — the virus RaTG13 — which had been detected in caves in southern China where some miners had died seven years previously.

But all the scientists had was a genetic sequence for this virus. They hadn't managed to grow it in culture. While viruses certainly do escape from laboratories, this is rare. So, we concluded it was extremely unlikely this had happened in Wuhan.

A TEAM OF INVESTIGATORS

When I say "we", the mission was a joint exercise between the WHO and the Chinese health commission. In all, there were 17 Chinese and ten international experts, plus seven other experts and support staff from various agencies. We looked at the clinical epidemiology (how COVID-19 spread among people), the molecular epidemiology (the genetic makeup of the virus and its spread), and the role of animals and the environment.

The clinical epidemiology group alone looked at China's records of 76,000 episodes from more than 200 institutions of anything that could have resembled COVID-19 — such as influenza-like illnesses, pneumonia and other respiratory illnesses. They found no clear evidence of substantial circulation of COVID-19 in Wuhan during the latter part of 2019 before the first case.

WHERE TO NOW?

Our mission to China was only phase one. We are due to publish our official report in the coming weeks. Investigators will also look further afield for data, to investigate evidence the virus was circulating in Europe, for instance, earlier in 2019. Investigators will continue to test wildlife and other animals in the region for signs of the virus. And we'll continue to learn from our experiences to improve how we investigate the next pandemic.

Irrespective of the origins of the virus, individual people with the disease are at the beginning of the epidemiology data points, sequences and numbers. The long-term physical and psychological effects — the tragedy and anxiety — will be felt in Wuhan, and elsewhere, for decades to come.

[the writer is Director of Public Health Pathology, NSW Health Pathology, Westmead Hospital and University of Sydney, University of Sydney]

Why We Did It: the Kenyan women and girls who joined Al-Shabaab

FATHIMA AZMIYA BADURDEEN
theconversation.com

The direct involvement of women and girls in terrorism has attracted increased interest as the nature of recruitment tactics has evolved. In Kenya, their involvement in terrorist networks, such as the Al-Shabaab, is an emerging trend. The recruitment of female members is most evident in Kenya's coastal and North Eastern counties but has also been reported in many other counties.

Women and girls have been identified as recruiters for the terrorist group, logistics planners, financial conduits, spies for terrorist activities and in some cases, masterminds behind terrorist attacks or conveners of terror cells.

The Al-Shabaab, or "the youth", emerged in the mid-2000s as an offshoot of a Jihadist movement that peaked during Somalia's civil war in the 1990s. Driven out of Mogadishu in 2006, it continues to pursue its main aim of establishing an Islamic state in Somalia through violent means. It has carried out repeated deadly attacks in Somalia but also in Kenya and Uganda. Both contribute troops to the African Union force in Somalia.

In one of my previous studies, I found that women may participate willingly because the extremist ideology resonates with their religiously inclined cultural values. They may also join due to the financial benefits that come with belonging to or associating with the group. Also, women may be forced or coerced to join through deception or intimidation.

In my most recent study I looked at different ways in which recruitment occurs to analyse the diverse motivations of women and girls to join Al-Shabaab in the coastal region of Kenya. In particular, I sought to establish the "voluntariness" of their decisions – in other words, did they

sign up on their own volition?

I interviewed 36 women or girls who had returned home from terrorist camps or defected from the network. I generated 16 case accounts of women and girls who explained 'voluntariness' in Al-Shabaab recruitment.

The study revealed that the gender-dynamics of submission and subordination within families and the community contributes to Al-Shabaab recruitment. However, there were political and ideological motivations too.

BUT WHAT DO WE MEAN BY VOLUNTARY?

Recruitment was deemed to be voluntary if a woman or girl – without duress – elected to join the Al-Shabaab network. Recruitment was viewed as involuntary if it occurred through deceptive or coercive means. However, I must caution that voluntary and involuntary are not always mutually exclusive. I found that depending on allegiances, social interactions, ideological resonance, and changing circumstances within and beyond the Al-Shabaab network, recruits may reverse their original views.

Furthermore, there is need to examine different aspects of autonomous decision-making. Some women who join terrorist networks do so to assert themselves within systems of oppression and patriarchy, and to embrace the lure of emancipation within the utopian caliphate.

In my study four main circumstances emerged as the reasons behind decisions to join Al-Shabaab.

DEFENDING THE FAITH

Al-Shabaab thrives on the narrative of Kenya as a Christian state oppressing Muslims in Somalia and Kenya. This resonates with the global marginalisation of Muslims. Political and religious motivations came up during our interviews, as well as the expressed desire to support or de-

fend fellow Muslims.

Two women explained their motivations to be wives of martyrs and to play their role to support the Muslim Ummah, or community. Nine interviewees explained how ideology influenced their decisions to support the Al-Shabaab cause. These decisions belie Kenyan media accounts of naive girls manipulated through romantic notions of Jihadi brides or wives.

Aisha, 25 at the time, an Al-Shabaab returnee who defected after two years said: "I read a lot of materials. I was sad at how Muslims were treated as a second class group. I didn't want my people to suffer, I needed to do something. I wanted to assist them in Somalia."

REACTING TO A PERSONAL CRISIS

Al-Shabaab recruitment thrives on revenge among individuals who see the state as the perpetrator of the injustices suffered in their lives. A crisis event in the life of women and girls – such as the police killing a loved one – was found to be an important tipping point. Some women join extremist networks to avenge the death of a husband, fiancé, or son at the hands of government security actors.

There's also evidence of recruiters penetrating existing networks of aggrieved women, including relatives of fallen Al-Shabaab members. Peer influence is used to influence or coerce women to follow the relative's cause.

CLOSE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

Daily interactions with family, friends and peers also shaped the decision to join the network in 9 out of the 16 case studies. A woman's autonomy in marital relationships may be constrained in ways that push her to follow her husband or other influential male relatives' lead.

The decision to join is autonomous if it is her choice. Nevertheless, her choice may be coerced within marital and family relationships. This

occurs when a woman exhibits excessive deference to the wishes of her family members.

IDEOLOGY RUBBING OFF IN CAMPS

Some women may have been recruited involuntarily. However, after a prolonged period of time in the terrorist camp or association with terrorist fighters, three of the 16 identified for this study accepted the ideology and subsequently volunteered to join Al-Shabaab.

Mary, a Muslim convert, was recruited by a friend in the guise of a job in Somalia. She was 18 years old when she was recruited in 2015. In camp she was subjected to work and religious indoctrination.

"After a few days, I was worn out. I was also learning the religion...I kind of started to accept it. I felt it was right to fight for our [Muslim] freedom. It was like a moral obligation. I wanted to be a part of the Al-Shabaab network."

CONCLUSION

An examination of the political and ideological motivations behind women joining the Al-Shabaab shows that in some cases, they do make autonomous decisions based on their response to the grievances of the Muslim community.

But other structural and cultural factors were at play such as the patriarchal set-up in families and their communities. Some women's decision making conformed to subservient attitudes and roles. These women, mainly from the coastal Muslim communities, revealed that they were subject to traditional gender roles, suggesting deference to social norms.

But not all women joining the Al-Shabaab lived lives of subjugation prior joining. Some returnees had good family lives or were happily settled.

[the writer is Lecturer, Department of Social Sciences, Technical University of Mombasa]

Oli faction cripples provincial assemblies to save two chief ministers

BINOD GHIMIRE

KATHMANDU, 22 FEB [KATHMANDUPOST]:

On January 20, the winter sessions of Province 1 and Bagmati Province commenced. The meetings of the provincial assemblies were called because the constitutional provisions made them mandatory. As per the Constitution of Nepal, there cannot be a gap of more than six months between the two sessions of the assemblies.

However, both the assemblies have failed to hold a single full-fledged meeting. The reason: The Nepal Communist Party faction led by Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli does not want it.

Ever since Oli dissolved the House of Representatives on December 20, the Nepal Communist Party has split. One faction is led by Oli and the other by Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal.

The Oli faction is making every attempt to postpone the assembly meetings—and is even resorting to obstructions to avoid discussions and voting on no-confidence motions registered against the chief ministers in both provinces—Dormani Poudel and Sherdhan Rai—are close to Oli.

The Dahal-Nepal faction filed no-confidence motions against Poudel and Rai on December 25 and December 27, respectively. Commencement of the assembly meetings would

mean discussions and voting on the no-confidence motions, which could bring down both the governments.

After a month of deferral, despite reservations from the Oli faction, the Province 1 Assembly met on Sunday.

However, it was adjourned immediately till March 4 after the no-trust motion was tabled in the assembly. There was no discussion and voting after the Oli faction boycotted the meeting. As many as 37 provincial assembly members led by Indra Bahadur Aangbo registered the no trust-motion and proposed Bhim Acharya as the chief ministerial candidate instead. Five members of the assembly withdrew their proposal a month later.

Political and constitutional experts say what has been going on in the provinces is a rare incident, quite unbecoming of a democratic country, as the ruling party is obstructing an assembly meeting.

In principle, it is the responsibility of the ruling party to ensure the assembly or House meetings are held, according to them.

"It is the responsibility of the ruling party to provide business to the assembly and ensure that the assemblies function smoothly," Krishna Pokharel, a professor of political science at Tribhuvan University, told the Post. "In a functioning democracy, we don't imagine a situation where the ruling party obstructs the assemblies from performing their duties."

After the 2017 elections, the Nepal Communist Party formed governments in six out of seven provinces—except in Province 2.

But after the split in the Nepal Communist Party, a power game has started, with Oli trying to exert influence.

On Sunday, Rai, the chief minister of Province 1, wanted deferral of the provincial assembly. However, Pradeep Kumar Bhandari, the provincial Speaker, refused and called the meeting. The meeting of the assembly called on January 20 was deferred until February 8, which was again postponed till Sunday.

Similar is the scenario in Bagmati Province where the provincial assembly meeting was adjourned twice on February 1 and February 17 as the Oli faction didn't want the meeting.

Provincial assembly members close to Dahal and Nepal are raising questions over the impartiality of Sanu Kumar Shrestha, the Speaker of Bagmati Province.

"The Speaker is postponing the assembly meetings at the behest of the Oli faction," Ratna Dhakal, a Bagmati provincial assembly member from the Dahal-Nepal faction, told the Post. "Let's see how long he postpones the meeting."

Experts say Oli dissolved the House on December 20 fearing that a no-confidence motion could be moved against him and now leaders loyal to him are trying

to defer provincial assembly meetings.

"As the dissolution of the provincial assembly isn't easy, the Oli faction is trying its best to ensure that assembly meetings are not held," said Pokharel. "It is out and out undemocratic to stop the people's representatives from functioning."

Oli recommended the dissolution of the lower house after realising that a no-confidence motion was being registered against him.

The Nepal Communist Party had 174 seats in the 275-strong House of Representatives. But the Dahal-Nepal faction held a majority.

Experts say the Oli faction might be waiting for the Supreme Court's decision before taking any further decision.

The five-member Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court has completed hearing on the 13 writ petitions filed against Oli's House dissolution move.

The bench led by Chief Justice Chandra Shumsher Rana has directed the plaintiffs, defendants and amicus curiae to present their briefs by Monday.

Officials at the Supreme Court say a verdict is likely this week.

On the last day of the hearing on Friday, Rana had said it can take a couple of days after the lawyer's briefs are submitted for the final verdict.

"The moves of dissolving the House and making provincial assemblies defunct show Oli and his people are bent on

breaching the constitution to the extent that benefits them," Mohan Lal Acharya, an advocate who served as a constitutional expert to the Constituent Assembly, told the Post. "Several moves by the Oli faction are setting negative precedents, which are good neither for democracy nor for the implementation of the constitution."

According to Acharya, the Oli government had the responsibility and opportunity to implement the constitution and ensure its wider acceptability. However, within five years of its promulgation, Oli's moves have put the constitution in a coma, he said.

Experts say Oli on different occasions has spoken and taken steps against the spirit of federalism.

In May 2019, he said that provincial and local governments were not independent entities, but administrative units under the federal government. Similarly, the provincial assemblies were given no authority to decide on the names and headquarters on their own—the party took a decision instead to that effect.

"Oli has no respect for a democratically elected institution as he believes in centralising power," Chandra Dev Bhatta, a political commentator for the Post's sister paper Kantipur, told the Post. "Disruption of provincial assembly meetings is yet another example that Oli and his faction have no respect for the constitution and federalism."

No COVID-19 case reported in Arunachal for 3 days

ITANAGAR, FEB 22 (PTI): Arunachal Pradesh did not report any fresh COVID-19 case in the past three days, a senior health official said on Monday.

The total caseload in the northeastern state remained at 16,836, State Surveillance Officer Lobsang Jampa said.

Arunachal Pradesh now has five active cases, while 16,775 people have recovered from the disease. A total of 56 patients have succumbed

to the virus. Altogether, 4,03,485 samples have been tested for COVID-19, including 196 on Sunday, Jampa said.

Meanwhile, State Immunisation Officer (SIO) Dimong Padung said 18,697 health and frontline workers have received vaccine shots so far.

The health department has been carrying out the inoculation drive four days a week -- Monday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Modi 'migratory bird': Grand Alliance in Assam



GUWAHATI, FEB 22

(PTI): The Congress-led Grand Alliance in Assam on Monday called Prime Minister Narendra Modi a "migratory bird" who visits the state often but does not solve any problem.

The comment was made after Modi paid his third visit in a month to the poll-bound state and dedicated to the nation a number of projects in different parts of the state.

The Congress, which had posed six questions to the prime minister before his arrival, placed them again at a joint press conference with five alliance partners after he left.

The questions asked were related to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, generation of employment in the state, granting of ST status to six communities, rise in the prices of essential commodities, minimum wage to tea garden workers and the exorbitant rise in fuel price. The Congress, which was in power for 15 years in the state since 2001, has formed the 'Grand Alliance' with Badruddin Ajmal's AIUDE, CPI, CPI(M), CPI(ML) and Anchalik Gana Morcha (AGM), which was launched by a section of intellectuals, to fight the coming Assembly election against BJP.

Assam Pradesh Congress Committee president Ripun Bora said "We asked six questions to Modi and hoped that

he will answer at least one of them. Unfortunately he did not do that.

He is just a migratory bird and nothing else. Let him come, visit and then go back".

Continuing his attack, Bora, also Rajya Sabha MP, said "Modi said he will continue to come to Assam till the model code of conduct for the Assembly election is enforced. Why did he not come when the state was suffering from flood? Why did he not come when five youths were gunned down by police during the anti-CAA movement (in December 2019)?"

He also questioned Modi's silence over kidnapping of two oil sector employees by ULFA(I) militants and sought to know what action the government is taking for their safe release.

All India United Democratic Front(AIDUF) organisational general secretary Aminul Islam said the frequent visits by Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP national president J P Nadda post the formation of the 'Grand Alliance' prove that the BJP is afraid of losing the polls.

"The BJP-led NDA is frustrated, scared and trying to save its government. They have lied in every front -- NRC, Assam Accord, CAA, investments and border sealing. The people now know that it is bluffing,"

he added.

CPI(M) Assam Committee Secretary Deben Bhattacharyya said the BJP government gave jobs to only 80,000 youths in the state against its promise of 25 lakh employment in the last five years.

AGM working president Manjit Mahanta wondered why Modi and other "big" national leaders are visiting the state repeatedly if BJP is not scared of the 'Grand Alliance'.

Modi had since January 23 addressed three public rallies at Sivasagar, Dhekiajuli and Silapathar as part of official functions to roll out various schemes and projects.

The press conference of the opposition alliance was also addressed by CPI state secretary Munin Mahanta and CPI(ML) central committee member Bibek Das.

The election to the 126-member Assam Assembly is likely in March-April. The 2016 election had given a fractured mandate and no party got an absolute majority in the current assembly.

BJP is currently the single largest party with 60 MLAs, while its allies Asom Gana Parishad and Bodoland People's Front now have 13 and 11 lawmakers respectively. The ruling coalition also has the support of an independent MLA.

The opposition Congress has 19 MLAs at present, while AIUDF has 14 members in the House in Assam.

No new COVID-19 case in Nagaland

KOHEMA, FEB 22 (PTI):

Nagaland did not report any fresh COVID-19 case on Monday, Health Minister S Pangnyu Phom said.

The coronavirus tally in the state remained at 12,192.

One more person was cured of the disease, taking the total number of COVID-19 recoveries in the state to 11,937.

"No +ve case of #COVID-19 reported today. One +ve patient have recovered in Kohima," the minister said in a tweet. Nagaland cur-

rently has 12 active coronavirus cases of which 10 patients are in Kohima and two in Dimapur, Director of Health and Family Welfare, Dr Denis Hangsing said.

The COVID-19 recovery rate in the state is 97.90 per cent, Dr Hangsing said in the daily COVID-19 bulletin. So far 91 persons have succumbed to the infection, while 152 patients have migrated to other states.

Nagaland has so far tested a total of 1,29,228 suspected COVID-19

samples, including 74,613 on RT-PCR, 37,310 on TrueNat and 17,305 on Rapid Antigen Test, Dr Hangsing said.

Meanwhile, State Immunisation Officer Dr Ritu Thurr said as of Saturday 21,481 people including 12,777 frontline workers and 8,704 healthcare professionals have been administered the COVID-19 vaccine.

Among the healthcare professionals, 3,909 have received the second shot of the vaccine, said Dr Thurr.

SDRF installs QDA at artificial lake

DEHRADUN, FEB 22

(PTI): The SDRF has installed a Quick Deployable Antenna system at the artificial lake formed above Rishiganga after the recent avalanche.

The QDA system based on satellite communication will help in constant monitoring of the lake located in a no-signal zone at a height of nearly 14,000 feet by transferring data related to it to the control rooms,

SDRF DIG Ridhim Aggarwal said.

It will help in issuing an alert immediately in case of detection of an unusual activity in the lake, she said.

Formation of the artificial lake above Rishiganga had caused concern among scientists.

Several teams of scientists have conducted aerial recce of the lake and a combined team of Geological Survey of

India and Uttarakhand Space Application Centre scientists have visited it on foot to assess how big a threat it poses to areas downstream.

Though most of the scientists who returned from a visit of the lake have so far maintained that as water is being discharged by the lake in a natural way there is no immediate threat from it, the need for its constant monitoring was felt by all.

Mizoram Assembly budget session from Tuesday

AIZAWL, FEB 22 (PTI): The Budget session of the Mizoram Assembly will begin on Tuesday, an official said. The first day of the budget session will start with the customary address by Governor P S Sreedharan Pillai, the official said on Monday.

Chief Minister Zoramthanga, who also holds the Finance portfolio, will present the annual budget for fiscal 2021-2022 on March 1, he said.

The budget session will continue till March 17, the official said. Three government bills, including "The Mizoram Licensing and Regulation of Private Veterinary Hospitals and Clinics Bill, 2012" will be laid during the session, he said.

Game over for BJP govt: Akhilesh on UP budget



LUCKNOW, FEB 22 (PTI): Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav panned the budget presented by the Uttar Pradesh government on Monday, saying expectations of the poor and the farmers' were not met. The Adityanath government presented a Rs 5.5 lakh crore budget for 2021-22 in the Assembly with a target of making Uttar Pradesh self-reliant. With the Assembly election a year away, the budget includes new schemes of Rs 27,598 crore.

"Khel khatam, paisa hajam" (game over, money usurped)," Yadav said when asked about the budget. This was fifth and last budget of the government led by Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and his game is over now, the SP leader said.

"Poor and farmers were expecting big relief, but their expectations were not met. Now, the government has no time left and people of the state have seen what they did in the past four years," Yadav added.

SP spokesperson Rajendra Choudhary claimed that the budget would turn the tide in favour of "AY from YA" (Akhilesh Yadav from Yogi Adityanath) in the 2022 Assembly election.

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Thing about being a Test batsman is that you handle all conditions: Stokes on pitches

AHMEDABAD, FEB 22 (PTI): Brushing aside the incessant talk around spin-friendly pitches in India, big-hitting England all-rounder Ben Stokes has said that Test players should be proficient in handling all kinds of conditions.

Ahead of the day/night Test here starting Wednesday, Stokes wondered how the newly-refurbished Motera strip would behave but at the same time, stressed that top-flight cricketers should be able to deal with whatever they are faced with.

"The thing about being a Test batsman is that you need to be able to handle all types of conditions. India is one of the places where it is a lot tougher for overseas batsmen to come and be successful, but then so too is England," he wrote in a column for the 'Daily Mirror'.

"And that is part of the game, the challenges and why we love it," he said.

The turning tracks in India became a talking point during the ongoing series when some former England players such as Michael Vaughan asked whether such strips were ideal for Test cricket.

The series is tied at 1-1 after India's brilliant 317-run triumph in the second Test in Chennai. Stokes' bowling quota of just two overs in that game raised a few eyebrows but he said it was about

"Don't read too much into the fact that I didn't bowl a huge amount in the second game, I'm sure if it was a green seamer I would have bowled a lot more overs.

"I think there may be more reason for me to bowl under lights in the next game if it will help the team."

A lot is at stake for both India and England in the four-match series as the World Test Championships final spot is still up for grabs. While India need to win one and draw another to make it, England will have to triumph in both the remaining games.

Stokes said nobody has the slightest clue how the track would behave.

"Generally around the world whenever these pink ball games are played there is always a period when the ball starts doing a bit under lights and it brings the seamers right into the game," Stokes wrote.

"For us out here that will be massive. And at a brand new ground that looks pretty impressive no-one will know just how it will react.

"We've got a good spin department, but hopefully with conditions that suit, we've certainly got a seam department to back them up strongly."

Stokes said the Test triumph of the English team that toured in 2012 has been an inspiration for the current side. "There aren't too many teams who come away from India with a series win.

Analysis: Djokovic right to focus on Federer, Nadal, Slams

MELBOURNE, FEB 22 (AP): It didn't take long for Novak Djokovic to make his intentions clear: All that matters to him from here on out is catching Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal in the Grand Slam standings.

Forget about winning other, run-of-the-mill tournaments or playing enough to retain the No. 1 ranking.

There is one, primary goal for the 33-year-old from Serbia. He wants to keep adding to his 18 major championships he reached that number with No. 9 at the Australian Open on Sunday until he no longer trails Federer and Nadal, who share the men's record of 20.

"They've made history already. They made a tremendous mark in our sport, Djokovic said.

"Whether I think about winning more Slams and breaking records? Of course, I do. And most of my attention and my energy from this day forward, until I retire from tennis, is going to be directed (at) majors, trying to win more major trophies."

Which is perfectly fine. There is no need for pretense.

And there is absolutely no requirement that he show up to compete more often than he really wants or in places other than where he really wants.

If all that matters to Djokovic from a tennis standpoint is accumulating Slams, and playing less frequently will also protect his body he had surgery on his right elbow three years ago; his 2021 Australian Open



nearly was derailed by what he said was a torn abdominal muscle that is his prerogative.

It isn't much different from what Federer himself or 23-time major champion Serena Williams, for that matter, have done for years.

"I think 99.9% of players kids that get a racket in their hands start dreaming about what they want to achieve. It's a Grand Slam, winning a major," Djokovic explained after his commanding performance in a 7-5, 6-2, 6-2 victory over Daniil Medvedev in the final at Melbourne Park. "I

mean, I don't feel like I'm old or tired or anything like that, he said. But I know that biologically and realistically, things are different than they were 10 years ago for me."

Connected to that: His latest triumph at the Australian Open came with the additional bonus of assuring a stay atop the ATP rankings until at least March 8.

That is when he will reach 311 weeks at No. 1 for his career, one more than Federer's total, another aim Djokovic made clear mattered to him. "When you are going for No. 1

rankings, you kind of have to be playing the entire season, and you have to be playing well; you have to play all the tournaments. My goals will adapt and will shift a little bit, which means that I will have to adjust, also, my calendar," Djokovic said.

"Not have to, but I will have an opportunity to do that, which, as a father and a husband, I'm really looking forward to."

One part of the calculus is that no one knows, of course, whether Federer, who hasn't played in more than a year after two knee operations and

turns 40 in August, or Nadal, 34, will win more majors or how many more.

It bears repeating that until Federer, Nadal and Djokovic came along, no man had won more than Pete Sampras' 14 Grand Slam titles. Here we are, less than 20 years after Sampras retired, and he's been surpassed by a trio of men, and by a lot of majors.

"We are talking about some Cyborgs of tennis, in a good way," Medvedev said, referring to the longevity and unprecedented success of the guys known as the Big Three. "They're just unbelievable."

Djokovic's coach, 2001 Wimbledon champion Goran Ivanisevic, predicted Nadal will claim "one more, maybe two championships at the French Open, where he collected a 13th last October.

That is the only instance of a man owning more singles titles from one major than Djokovic's haul in Australia. Federer's high is eight at Wimbledon.

All have career Grand Slams. "Roger and Rafa inspire me. That's something that I've said before. I'll say it again. I mean, I think as long as they go, I'll go," Djokovic said. "In a way, it's like a race (of) who plays tennis more, I guess, and who wins more. It's a competition between us in all areas. But I think that's the very reason why we are who we are, because we do drive each other, we motivate each other, we push each other to the limit.

Anand takes up extensive role in 'Global Chess League'

CHENNAI, FEB 22 (PTI): Tech Mahindra on Monday roped in former world champion Viswanathan Anand in an extensive role for a first-of-its-kind "Global Chess League". The League aims to engage players from all levels - professional or otherwise -- and will be played in a franchise format, the IT company announced on Monday.

The league will have eight franchise owned teams from across the world. The teams will comprise a mix of titled women and men players along with juniors and wildcard entrants playing each other in a round robin format with the final League structure and team details to be announced in due course.

"A moment of personal pride. Proud to announce a truly Glob-

al event with an Indian connect," Grandmaster Anand tweeted. It was also announced that Anand, five-time World champion and Indian Chess Grandmaster will "mentor, partner, advise and help shape the league".

Anand Mahindra, Chairman, Mahindra Group, said, "Chess still has an incipient and largely untapped potential across the globe. Recently, there has been a surge of interest post the online Chess Olympiad and the enormous popularity of a TV series based on the game.

"We hope that the creation of a league will harness this resurgence of interest and bring about a renaissance in the world of chess." Anand on his part said, "chess is a game that is played by millions around the

world. At this time, a unique opportunity exists to popularize it further and dramatically enhance its visibility through a global league powered by technology."

He said he was personally happy to partner with a technology provider like Tech Mahindra, whose endorsement and promotion will certainly elevate the sport to a higher level. "There is a renewed interest in the game of chess and through this unique global league format, we will be able to keep the spirit of chess intact and ensure the right platform is provided to upcoming talent," Anand added.

The Indian team last year won the Online Olympiad jointly with Russia for its first ever gold at the global event.

Last laugh for Lukaku as Inter beats Ibrahimovic's Milan 3-0



MILAN, FEB 22 (AP): Romelu Lukaku had the last laugh and goal as his Inter Milan side beat Zlatan Ibrahimovic's AC Milan 3-0 on Sunday in their biggest derby match in a decade.

The game took place almost a month after a heated spat between the two star players.

Lukaku set up Lautaro Mart nez for an early opener and sealed the result in the 66th minute with Inter's third. Mart nez had doubled his tally early in the second half, during Milan's best spell of the match.

"Lukaku works a lot and always makes himself available for the team," Mart nez said.

"He is a great player and a great player, we are happy to have him with us. I am convinced that he can still improve a lot."

Inter remained top but extended its advantage to four points over second-place Milan.

"It's been a difficult week but we'll get back on track," Milan coach Stefano Pioli said.

"If you told us a year ago, or even just three months ago, that at this point of the season we would be second, we would have leapt in the air with joy.

"That shouldn't make us satisfied now. We have had three matches in which we haven't managed to show our true qualities ... we need to get our level back up, we have the quality to continue to do well right until the end."

The stakes in the Milan derby were higher than they have been in the last 10 years. The last time Inter and Milan went into the Derby della Madonnina occupying the top two spots in the table was in 2011, when Milan was above Inter.

The Rossoneri won that match and went on to win the league title the last team other than Juventus to do so.

There were no supporters in the stadium because of coronavirus restrictions, but thousands of fans from both sides gathered outside to welcome the teams.

"We want to dedicate this win to our fans. The welcome they gave us at the stadium gave us goosebumps," Inter coach Antonio Conte said.

"Credit goes to the lads, they put in an extraordinary performance."

"We prepared really well for the game and they carried out to perfection what we'd been practicing beforehand. There is great satisfaction in seeing this team's growth and I am pleased because the lads deserve to see the fruits of their labour."

The match was even more highly charged because the last time the two sides met, on Jan. 26 in the Italian Cup quarterfinals, Lukaku and Ibrahimovic were involved in a heated confrontation that is currently under investigation by the Italian soccer

federation. It was Lukaku who helped Inter get off to the perfect start, with less than five minutes on the clock. His first cross was charged down by a great block from Milan defender Simon Kj r but the ball came back out to Lukaku, who floated another cross in for Mart nez to easily head into the top right corner.

Inter dominated for long stretches of the first half but Milan appeared a side transformed after the break. Inter goalkeeper Samir Handanovic had to make three outstanding saves in quick succession in the opening couple of minutes to deny Ibrahimovic twice and then Sandro Tonali.

But Milan's good work was undone in the 57th when, following a rapid counterattack, Peric rolled the ball across for Mart nez to tap into the bottom left corner.

And Lukaku all but secured the win when he raced from near the halfway line before firing into the bottom left corner.

RACE FOR TOP FOUR
Roma remained third after drawing 0-0 at 10-man Benevento.

The capital side is nine points below Inter and one point above Atalanta, which beat Napoli 4-2 to move into fourth.

Napoli slipped to seventh. At the other end of the table, Udinese fought back from two goals down to draw 2-2 at 19th-place Parma.

PSG slips to 3rd after losing to Monaco; Lille stays top

PARIS, FEB 22 (AP): Days after routing Barcelona in the champions League, Paris Saint-Germain lost 2-0 at home to Monaco to fall back down to earth and into third place in the French league.

Fourth-place Monaco was hardly troubled on Sunday as it won for the ninth time in the last 10 games to move just two points behind defending champion PSG, which now trails Lyon by one point and league leader Lille by four. There are 12 games left.

Monaco did the "double" on PSG following its 3-2 league win at home in late November.

Earlier Sunday, Lille routed Lorient 4-1 to put the pressure firmly on PSG at Parc des Princes, where coach Mauricio Pochettino surprisingly left key midfielder Marco Verratti on the bench.

Verratti was outstanding in Tuesday night's 4-1 win at Barcelona, but PSG was already 2-0 down when he came on after 55 minutes. Monaco coach Niko Kovac expertly exploited gaps in midfield and defense without Verratti patching things up. Monaco's goals were scored early in each

half as poor defending led to PSG's sixth defeat of the campaign compared to three for Lyon and just two for Lille. PSG would be further behind if Lille and Lyon hadn't both drawn seven games each so far.

Midfielder Sofiane Diop was totally unmarked to head home from close range in the fifth minute.

Five minutes after the break, defender Guillermo Maripan slotted the ball into the bottom right corner after Ander Herrera clumsily lost possession trying to pass from inside the penalty area.

Kylian Mbappe, who scored a superb hat trick against Barcelona, was ineffective and among four PSG players shown a yellow card.

Verratti did not seek any excuses for a performance which has dented PSG's title campaign.

"You have to congratulate Monaco, but we have to look at ourselves, he said. "We conceded a goal after five minutes and again five minutes into the second half. These are things that shouldn't happen."

He even challenged his teammates to show

a better attitude. "It's not just the Champions League where you have to give everything, you have to do it here as well," he told broadcaster Canal Plus.

"There are very good teams in France ... It's up to us to rise to the challenge." Lille still has to play away at Lyon, PSG and Monaco but is looking strong. Coach Christophe Galtier's side took the lead in the 20th minute when Lorient defender Andreaw Gravillon deflected a shot into his own net, but the home side equalized two minutes later thanks to Jerome Hergault's excellent curling strike after cutting in from the left flank.

Captain Jose Fonte scored a fine goal to put Lille back in front in the 37th, sweeping the ball in from the edge of the penalty area, and forward Jonathan Ikone made it 3-1 in the 58th when he deftly curled home a free kick. Substitute Domagoj Bradaric thumped in the fourth very near the end.

"It's our most complete match of the season. We didn't concede many chances," Galtier said. "Winning here isn't easy. Lorient had not lost for five league games,

(including) against PSG and Monaco."

MAVIDIDI'S MOMENT

English striker Steph Mavididi scored twice as Montpellier beat Rennes 2-1.

Mavididi connected well with midfielder Teji Savanier's pass to volley Montpellier ahead in the 16th minute, with a video review ruling out offside. He showed great awareness to fake a shot and dink the ball past two defenders, before rifling the ball home again in the 26th.

After Savanier missed a penalty early in the second half, and then went off injured, striker Serhou Guirassy pulled one back in the 77th for Rennes. The 22-year-old Mavididi has six goals this season.

He came through the youth ranks at Premier League team Arsenal, but did not play for the club, and made one league appearance for Italian champion Juventus two seasons ago.

He loaned him to French club Dijon last season. He netted eight goals there before joining Montpellier last summer for 6.3 million euros (7.6 million). Rennes dropped to seventh spot while Montpellier is in ninth.

Gun provocation reveals tensions in Michigan tourist haven

TRAVERSE CITY (US), FEB 22 (AP): Some 90 minutes into a routine meeting of the Grand Traverse County board, its agenda packed with mundane topics such as roads and libraries, came a surprising seven seconds that drew the kind of national attention no local government wants.

The January 20 proceedings were livestreamed, with members joining from home because of the pandemic.

As usual, citizens phoned in to sound off. Among them was Keli MacIntosh, who complained about remarks to the board last spring by members of the Proud Boys on designating the county four hours northwest of Detroit as a Second Amendment sanctuary.

As MacIntosh urged the chairman to disavow the far-right group that was a leading agitator during the January 6 riot at the US Capitol, commissioner Ron Clous seated in a room with deer heads mounted on a wall briefly disappeared from view and returned holding a rifle.

He brandished it for the webcam, then set it aside.

The chairman, Rob Hentschel, laughed on-screen. But many in this Lake Michigan bay-side community, which prizes tourism and a friendly image, were not amused. To them, the provocative gesture that made national headlines was another sign of a deeper problem in this woodsy, idyllic region that couldn't be brushed aside.

Michigan's northwestern Lower Peninsula is more than a resort community with sandy beaches, cherry orchards and arts festivals where



vacationers come to play. Beneath the cheery exterior lurk racial and cultural divides eerily similar to those that have ignited protests and violence elsewhere.

In this age, no place is an island, said Warren Call, president of a business organization in Traverse City, the county seat. The incident goes against everything we stand for.

This postcard-pretty patchwork of small towns, forests and fields is far removed from the tough streets of urban America and the South's racial tinderboxes. But as northern Michigan becomes more popular and accessible, long-simmering conflicts boil over.

Income inequality is stark in the area, notorious for skimpy wages. Producers of the fruit for which Traverse City bills itself cherry capital of the world are struggling to survive.

Meanwhile, pricey condominium developments spring up to accommodate an influx of wealthy retirees and summer residents whose yachts pack lakefront marinas, while 20-some-things who serve their

meals in upscale restaurants scramble for affordable housing.

Some elderly newcomers from big cities and younger ones who can work remotely via wireless internet bring progressive ideas that clash with Northern Michigan's entrenched conservatism.

The area remains solidly Republican, although Democrats have captured two county commission seats representing Traverse City, which has a gay mayor.

Leelanau County, adjacent to Grand Traverse and dotted with wineries and a national lakeshore, was embarrassed last August when road commissioner Tom Eckerle used the n-word during a meeting while blaming Blacks in Detroit for spreading the coronavirus. The 75-year-old farmer resigned under pressure.

I got calls about that from the East Coast to the West Coast, Chet Janik, the county administrator, said in an interview. We had minority people asking if it was safe for them to come up here.

Janik, 63, who immigrated to the area from

Poland as a child and endured taunts about his heritage, said Eckerle's racial slurs don't represent his rural county. But he acknowledged the rapid pace of change had unsettled some.

It's just that they want things to be the way they used to, he said.

But local residents of colour say discrimination often subtle, sometimes blatant is commonplace in the region, which is well over 90 per cent white.

Members of Northern Michigan E3, an anti-racism group, described uncomfortable encounters with law enforcement, bullying in schools, suspicious gazes in stores.

A Native American pupil recently was the target of racist language and violent videos, said Holly T. Bird, an activist and attorney. A doctor of Iranian descent wrote in a local newspaper that a sheriff's deputy had knocked on his door after someone apparently saw him in his yard and reported a suspicious person.

We agree this is a wonderful place filled with wonderful people but it has a racism prob-

lem," said Bird, who is Native American. Tyasha Harrison, a Black woman who moved to nearby Benzie County eight years ago, said such experiences had made family and friends from elsewhere reluctant to visit.

Some Black people that know what's going on in Michigan don't feel welcome, and for some reason we keep making national news for doing some crazy, off-the-wall, racist stuff, she said in an interview.

Her organisation formed after a Black Lives Matter rally along the Traverse City waterfront last summer. A handful of armed counter-demonstrators in camouflage garb showed up, but kept their distance.

Their presence came during a year of resurgent paramilitary activity in the state, with protesters angry over Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's pandemic policies carrying firearms into the Capitol in Lansing. Last fall, six men were charged in an alleged plot to kidnap the Democratic governor. Eight others were accused of planning terrorist acts, including storming the statehouse.

In Israel and beyond, virus vaccines bring political power

JERUSALEM, FEB 22 (AP): Forget about oil and arms. Coronavirus vaccines are emerging as the newest currency of choice in the Middle East.

Israel's reopening of its economy, combined with a murky prisoner swap with Syria and the arrival of a batch of vaccines in the Gaza Strip, have all underscored how those with access to the vaccines have political power in the turbulent region.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been at the forefront of this trend, pinning his re-election hopes on the success of his campaign to vaccinate Israel's adult population. At the same time, he has offered rewards to those who vaccinate and punishments to those who don't.

Israel has jumped out to the world's fastest vaccination campaign, administering at least one dose to more than half its 9.3 million people and the required two doses to about a third in less than two months.

In contrast to the long waits seen in Europe and the US, vaccines are plentiful and available almost on demand to anyone who wants one. Clinics have even offered free food and cappuccinos to help lure reluctant holdouts to come in and get the jab.

Netanyahu's efforts finally seem to be bearing fruit, and the number of new coronavirus infections and serious cases is dropping. That enabled the government on Sunday to lift a number of restrictions, reopening stores, shopping malls, and many schools after a two-month lockdown. In the coming weeks, all schools and restaurants are expected to reopen, just in time for the March 23 election.

The timing is good for him, said Gideon Rahat, a political scientist at Israel's Hebrew University. Whether it is enough to divert attention from an ongoing corruption trial and the broader economic damage caused by the pandemic is another issue.

Much will depend on Netanyahu's agenda setting, Rahat said.

He will talk about the vaccines all the time, he said, while others will focus on his missteps over the past year.

Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their jobs and businesses during a series of lockdowns, and there is widespread public anger over the flouting of lockdown restrictions by the ultra-Orthodox religious community, one of Netanyahu's key political allies. Many say Netanyahu waited too long to close the country's main airport, allowing fast-spreading variants of the virus to infect the unvaccinated.

Sticking to his script, Netanyahu on Saturday unveiled his green pass" program, which will allow the fully vaccinated to attend cultural events, fly abroad and patronize restaurants and health clubs. These services and amenities will remain off limits for those who do not get immunized.

I ask everyone who has not been vaccinated go be vaccinated. You will have the Green Pass and you will also be able to benefit from it, Netanyahu said during a photo op at a Tel Aviv-area

gym. Israel has faced international criticism for largely excluding Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip from the vaccination campaign.

Yet Netanyahu reportedly showed little hesitation in agreeing to pay Russia some USD 1.2 million to buy coronavirus vaccines for archenemy Syria as part of a deal last week to release an Israeli woman held captive in Damascus.

Netanyahu boasted last week that his warm ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin helped clinch the deal. His office made no mention of any vaccines and reportedly pushed the country's military censor to block the vaccine purchases.

Asked about the reported deal, Netanyahu was evasive. He said not one Israeli vaccine was delivered to Syria -- a country that harbors hostile Iranian forces. But he would not say whether Israel had paid Russia for the vaccines.

It is legitimate for the Israeli government to decide to deviate from past norms and to pay with another form of currency, Yoav Limor, an Israeli military affairs correspondent, wrote in Israel Hayom. "However, the decision to hide that is baffling and worrisome. Obviously, someone was very uncomfortable with having that matter come to light.

Yet Netanyahu does not appear to be deterred. An Israeli official said Sunday that Israel is considering sharing surplus vaccines with friendly nations. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was discussing internal government deliberations.

The disparities between Israel's successful vaccination push with its own population and the Palestinians have drawn criticism from UN officials and rights groups and have shined a light on the inequities between rich and poor countries getting access to vaccines.

These groups contend that Israel is responsible for vaccinating the Palestinians, while Israel has argued that under interim peace agreements it is not responsible for vaccinating them. Israel's vaccination campaign has included its own Arab population.

Ahmad Tibi, a prominent Arab lawmaker in the Israeli parliament, wrote on Twitter: Must we wait for a Jewish person to cross the border with Gaza for them to deserve vaccines? Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has struggled to secure vaccines for his people. So far, he has received 2,000 doses from Israel to treat medical workers in the West Bank, and 10,000 doses from Russia.

One of Abbas' main rivals on Sunday orchestrated the delivery of 20,000 doses of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine from the United Arab Emirates. The move by Mohammed Dahlan, a former Abbas aide forced into exile after a falling out with the Palestinian leader, appeared to be aimed in part at making Abbas appear weak ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled in May.

Dahlan, who is backing a list of supporters in the election, boosted his position and political presence with the delivery, said Mustafa Ibrahim, a Gaza-based writer.

New Zealand remembers 185 who died in quake 10 years ago

WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND (AP): New Zealand lowered its flags on Monday and made special note of those who couldn't travel as it marked the 10th anniversary of the Christchurch earthquake that killed 185 people.

Hundreds of people attended an outdoor service in Christchurch, which continues to rebuild from the magnitude 6.3 quake that destroyed much of its downtown. A separate service was also held in the northern Japanese city of Toyama, home to 12 students who died in the quake.

Speaking at the Christchurch ceremony, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said it was important to remember that 87 of the victims were foreigners and many of their families couldn't be there because of coronavirus travel restrictions.

"Our flags fly at half-mast for them today too," she said.

Christchurch Mayor Lianne Dalziel talked about the 28 Japanese citizens who died, the largest number of victims from any country outside of New Zealand.

"I especially wanted to mention all the Japanese family members who I last year met in Japan and who so wanted to be here," she said. "We are forever connected by this tragedy and we do not forget you even when we are apart. You are with us in spirit."

Another person who spoke at the Christchurch service was Maan Alkaisi, a university professor who has spent years trying to get authorities to press criminal charges against those who designed the CTV building which collapsed during the quake, killing 115 people including his wife, Maysoon Abbas.

A review after the quake found the building's design was flawed and it should never have been approved.

"Today commemorates 10 years of injustice and mistreatment," Alkaisi said. "Today reminds us of our responsibility to make sure we learn from this tragic experience and honor those lovely people we lost by ensuring their dreams are kept alive, by ensuring this will not happen again."

The memorial service was held on the



banks of the Avon River, and people observed a moment's silence at 12:51 p.m., the moment the quake struck in 2011. Emergency service workers and others took turns reading out the names of each of the victims.

In a touching moment, Dalziel read out a message from Bob Parker, who was the mayor at the time of the quake and became an internationally known face of the trag-

edy. Parker recently suffered a stroke and attended the service in a wheelchair.

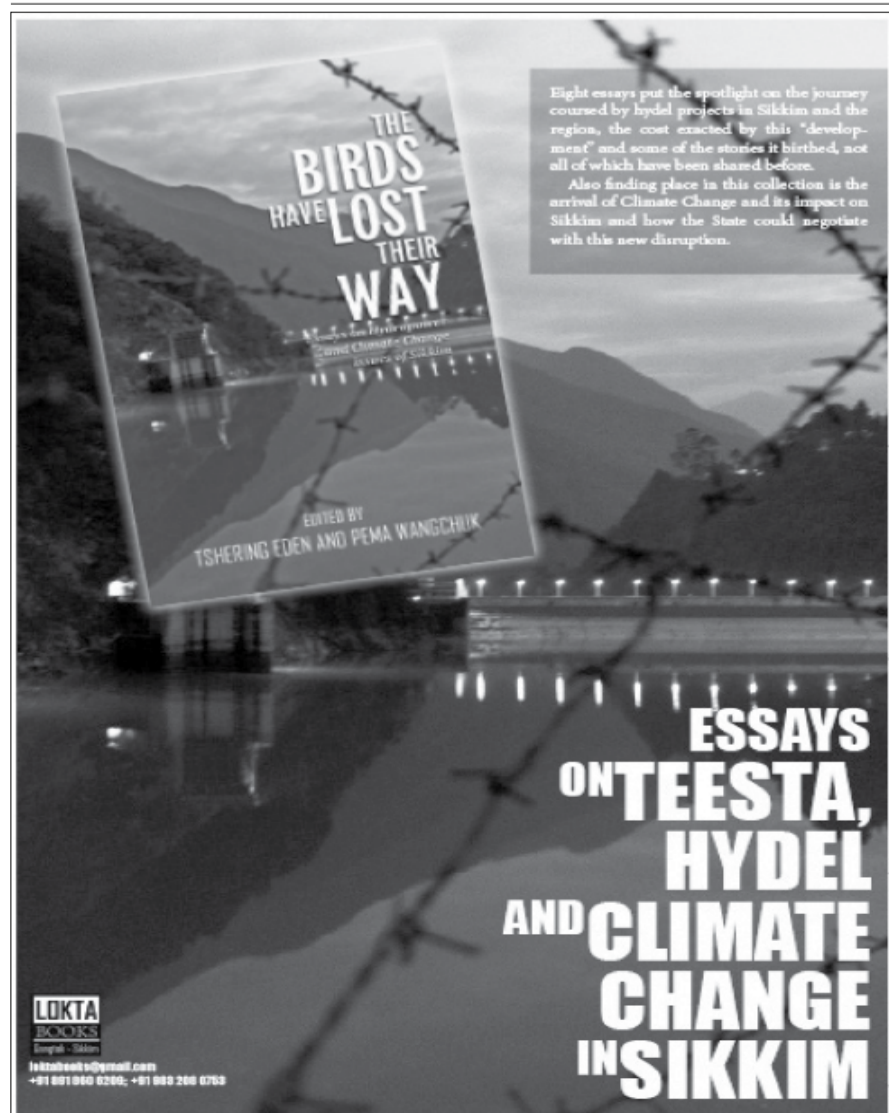
Ardern said the quake had affected people in many ways, and daily reminders including aftershocks and the fractured landscape had made the recovery harder.

"Ten years on there will be people still living their daily lives with the long shadow of that day," she said.

"But as we look ahead to the coming decade, I see hope and energy and optimism,"

she said. "And I see Christchurch taking its rightful place amongst New Zealand's best and brightest cities."

In Toyama, more than 100 family members, friends and school officials observed a moment of silence for the student victims and offered flowers during a ceremony at the Toyama College of Foreign Languages. Most of them joined online due to coronavirus measures.



Deal reached in **suit alleging JAMES FRANCO** sexual misconduct

LOS ANGELES (AP): A tentative settlement has been reached in a lawsuit that alleged James Franco intimidated students at an acting and film school he founded into gratuitous and exploitative sexual situations, attorneys for the plaintiffs said Saturday.

The two sides filed a joint status report in Los Angeles Superior Court telling a judge a settlement had been reached in the class-action lawsuit brought by former students at the now-defunct school, Studio 4, though elements of the lawsuit may live on.

The document was filed on Feb. 11, but the settlement has not previously been reported.

Actresses and ex-students Sarah Tither-Kaplan and Toni Gaal, who first filed the lawsuit in 2019, have agreed to drop their individual claims under the agreement, according to the court filing. Their lawsuit said Franco pushed his students into performing in increasingly explicit sex scenes on camera in an "orgy type setting" that went far beyond those acceptable on Hollywood film sets.

It alleged that Franco "sought to create a pipeline of young women who were subjected to his personal and professional sexual exploitation in the name of education," and that students were led to believe roles in Franco's films would be available to those who went along.

The lawsuit said the incidents occurred in a master class on sex scenes that Franco taught at Studio 4, which opened in 2014 and closed in 2017.

The two sides had been in discussions on a settlement for several months, and the lawsuit's progress had been paused while they talked.

Plaintiffs' attorneys from the firm of Valli Kane & Vagnini, LLP, confirmed the

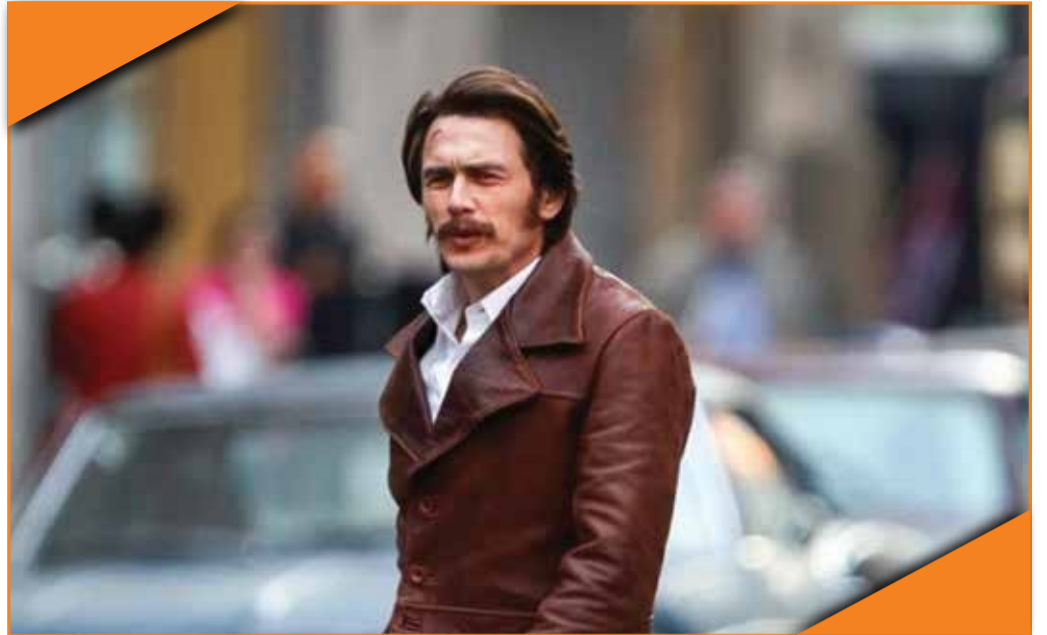
agreement in a statement to The Associated Press on Saturday night, adding that it will be "further memorialized in a Joint Stipulation of Settlement to be filed with the Court at a later date," but giving no further comment or details.

After-hours emails seeking comment from attorneys for the defendants

report said.

Fraud allegations brought by those plaintiffs will be "subjected to limited release," the document says, without further details or explanation.

The document does not reveal how much money may be involved in the deal.



were not immediately returned.

In a previous court filing, Franco's attorneys, while praising the #MeToo movement that helped inspire the lawsuit, called its claims "false and inflammatory, legally baseless and brought as a class action with the obvious goal of grabbing as much publicity as possible for attention-hungry Plaintiffs." They pointed out that Tither-Kaplan had previously expressed gratitude for the opportunity to work with Franco.

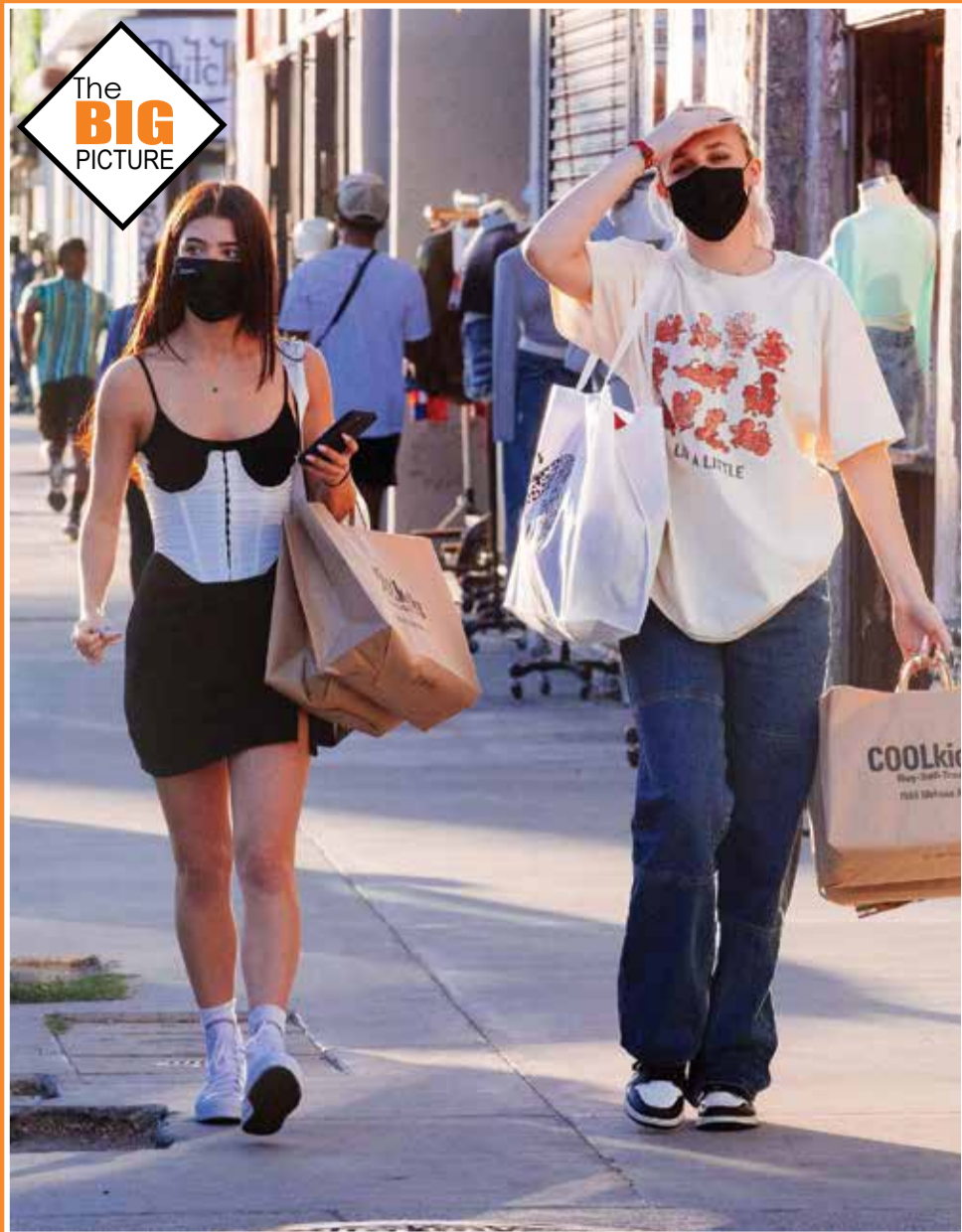
The lawsuit also names Franco's production company Rabbit Bandini and his partners including Vince Jolivette and Jay Davis as defendants.

The sexual exploitation allegations of other plaintiffs in the class action will be dismissed without prejudice, meaning they may be re-filed, the joint status

Before filing the lawsuit, Tither-Kaplan aired her allegations of sexual misconduct against Franco along with other women in the Los Angeles Times after Franco won a Golden Globe Award for "The Disaster Artist" in early 2018, when the wave of the #MeToo movement was sweeping across Hollywood.

In a subsequent interview on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," Franco called the sexual misconduct stories about him inaccurate, but said, "If I've done something wrong, I will fix it. I have to."

Franco, 42, best known for starring in comedies with Seth Rogen, has generally kept a low-profile since the allegations arose in what had been a highly productive period that culminated in the acclaimed "Disaster Artist."



RETAIL THERAPY! TikTok stars Charli D'Amelio and Madi Monroe did some shopping on LA's Melrose Avenue.

Khloe Kardashian Shares New Diamond Ring Photo and Sparks Fresh Engagement Speculation

Khloe Kardashian posted a new pic of herself with a massive diamond ring, renewing speculation of a possible engagement with longtime boyfriend Tristan Thompson. Listen, we know there's currently a lot of stuff going on in the Kardashian world, but the other shoe, or rather, ring, just dropped.

On Sunday, Feb. 21, Khloe Kardashian posted on her Instagram page a professionally shot, promotional photo of herself kneeling on a patio near a yard while wearing a black bikini top and bottoms by SKIMS and high-heeled khaki booties from her Good American brand's new shoe collection. Oh, and she is also sporting a giant diamond ring on her ring finger, which sparked fresh rumors of being engaged to longtime boyfriend Tristan Thompson. And people certainly noticed the bling right away, with many commenting on it.

Khloe included a teasing caption with the promotional post, writing, "New @goodamerican shoes are dropping 2.25." Correspondent Morgan Stewart asked, "ARE THEY?" to which Khloe replied, "yep! They are!" Khloe later commented, after fans speculated about an engagement, "My reply was to the question 'are they?' My reply is 'Yep they are'... Meaning yes the shoes are dropping on 2.25." Tristan, 29, with whom she shares 2-year-old daughter True Thompson, commented, "WOW!!!!!! That grass is cut to perfection."

Engagement speculation continued re-

gardless. "Ok bling bling we see you," commented Selling Sunset star Christine Quinn, along with emojis of a diamond, a winking face and hands clapping.

Khloe's ring features a massive pear-



shared diamond centered in between two smaller pavé diamonds. Shannon Delany-Ron, Director of Communications at JamesAllen.com, told source. News she estimates that the sparkler contains nine to 10 carats and costs between \$500,000 and 750,000.

The reality star had showed off a similar ring, also worn on her ring finger, in Instagram photos taken at her 36th birthday party last June. However, she made no comment in response to the engagement speculation that ensued back then.

Rubina Dilaik wins 'Bigg Boss 14'

MUMBAI, FEB 21 (PTI): TV actor Rubina Dilaik on Sunday beat nemesis and singer Rahul Vaidya to emerge as the winner of reality show "Bigg Boss" season 14. Dilaik is known for featuring on shows like "Chotti Bahu" and "Shakti - Astitva Ke Ehsaas Ki".

Superstar Salman Khan, who is the host of the reality show, announced the winner from the show's set put up in suburban Mumbai's Filmcity. Dilaik, 33, entered the house with her actor-husband Abhinav Shukla and remained an audience favourite right from the show's debut in October.

From revelations about her rocky marriage, rivalry with Vaidya to her aggressive attitude, Dilaik was one of the most popular contestants on the show. Besides Dilaik and Vaidya, the other three finalists of the show were actors Nikki Tamboli, Aly Goni and Rakhi Sawant.

Tamboli, who re-entered the show after being evicted, was the second runner-up, followed by Goni who stood fourth.

Taapsee Pannu starts filming for Anurag Kashyap's 'Dobaaraa'



Mumbai, Feb 22 (PTI): Actor Taapsee Pannu has begun shooting for director Anurag Kashyap's upcoming thriller "Dobaaraa". The project marks the filmmaker-actor duo's third collaboration after 2018 hit "Manmarziyaan" and biographical drama "Saand Ki Aankh", which had Kashyap on board as producer.

Pannu took to Instagram and posted a picture with the 48-year-old director, similar to the one they clicked on the sets of "Manmarziyaan", three years ago.

"Because some collaborations deserve to be repeated. Ready to create more memories because we were running out of manmarziyaan stories to tell.

Anurag Kashyap, let's do this #Dobaaraa," the 33-year-old actor wrote. "Dobaaraa" is backed by Ekta Kapoor's Cult Movies, a new division under her Balaji Telefilms banner. The film is penned by Nihit Bhawe, who previously wrote Kashyap's 2020 Netflix movie "Choked".

Sunir Khetarpal's ATHENA and Gaurav Bose's The Vermillion World Production are also producing.

Apart from "Dobaaraa", Pannu has thriller "Haseen Dillruba", sports-drama "Rashmi Rocket" and "Loop Lapeta", Hindi adaptation of the critically-acclaimed German thriller "Run Lola Run", in the works.

Aries:

Pay attention to what makes you unique. Pay attention to what makes you "you". This is a time of fully realising the gifts that were granted to you at birth. Know that offering them to the world is a part of your sacred contract. A mission that you voluntarily commit to before your journey to the earthly realm. Yes, you will be faced with roadblocks. No, it won't always be easy for you to trust yourself. Challenge yourself to keep moving forward nonetheless, knowing that the mysterious forces are working with you. Tip: It's time to fully realise the gifts that were granted to you at birth.

Taurus:

This is a beautiful time in the Taurus HQ. You are moving closer and closer to fruition season. You're watching your labour of love come to life. So take a moment to gaze lovingly at the harvest. Take a moment to offer a prayer of gratitude to the mysterious forces. Remember, the secret to living a fulfilling life is finding a balance between doing and being, which is something your life experiences seem to be teaching you quite well.

Tip: Take a moment to lovingly gaze at your creations.

Gemini:

Who are you giving your time and energy to? We repeat: Who are you giving your time and energy to, Gemini? Chances are, you're losing a sense of purpose here.

You're losing yourself in a haze of other people's expectations. Expectations that may or may not be helping you further your cause. Word for the wise: it's time to reaffirm your boundaries. Remembering that 'no' is a complete sentence will help you get through it all. Tip: Your time and energy are sacred.

Cancer:

You can have all the moolah in the world, but it won't fulfill that void in your being, Cancer. The cards are encouraging you to look beyond your material reality and explore your inner landscape. Oh, the jewels you will find within once you commit to meeting your true and most authentic self! What are the practices that make you feel grounded? It's a good idea to prioritise meditation and mindfulness. If you've been thinking about getting back to your yoga practice, consider this as a sign. Tip: It's time to explore the inner landscape.

Leo:

There's a brand new work opportunity on the cards, Leo, one that could help you up your money game. Word for the wise: stay vigilant. When the time comes, make the right pitch. If this requires you to toot your horn tastefully, so be it. There could also be news for lions who have been wanting to start their own business or expand an existing one. The support (and investment) you need at this point is likely to come through unexpectedly.

Tip: A new work opportunity could be on the cards.

Virgo:

It's 3am in the morning, you're passing the tequila (or tea) around, and sharing the stories that evoke joy and laughter. You're surrounded by the people you love and you're feeling so, so alive, Virgo. It's been a rocky road till here—there's no doubt about that. However, as long as you and your soul crew are together, you will find a way to get through the turbulent times.

Tip: Let's raise a toast to the soul connections that make you feel oh-so-alive!

Libra:

Author Mary Shelley once said, "Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos." Read that again, Libra, as you offer a prayer of gratitude for everything that's falling apart. What the cards want you to remember is that the worst thing that's happening to you could be the best thing that's happening for you. So, look beyond the illusion created by your three dimensional reality and find the underlying order. A new you is about to be born from the ashes.

Tip: Look beyond the illusion of chaos and find underlying order.

Scorpio:

There are things we do for money and then there are

things we do for love. Finding a balance between the two is what keeps us from losing our mind, beloved. Today, you're being asked to pay attention to which one of the two extremes you are swinging towards, and readjust in a manner that you feel called to. If you've been focusing solely on your material pursuits, it's a good idea to revisit the projects that awaken a sense of joy within.

Tip: Find a balance between the things you do for love and the things you do for money.

Sagittarius:

Your time and energy are sacred, Sagittarius. We repeat: Your time and energy are sacred. So, be mindful of who you are choosing to share your space with and what imprint this interaction is leaving on your life. Spending time in solitude may or may not be such a bad idea at this point. If you've been slacking off on your yoga or meditation practice, realign. Prioritise activities that activate the flow of your prana and make you feel good about yourself.

Tip: Spend some time in solitude.

Capricorn:

Health and wellness in a big theme in the Capricorn HQ. It's not about working towards those enviable abs anymore. It's about understanding the mind, body, and soul connection, and nurturing yourself inside out. So, stretch those muscles and get your daily endorphin rush.

Supplement the physical activity with foods that work as medicine and nurse you back to good health. Working with a healer or an alchemist could help you understand your sacred vessel on a deeper level.

Tip: It's time to nurse your body back to good health.

Aquarius:

Albert Einstein once said, "It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge." Your thoughts exactly, Aquarius. This is a time of stepping into your power as a leader and sharing the knowledge you have gathered over the years—with your own unique spin. What you need to remember, though, is that what works for you may not necessarily work for your students. It's best to hold space for them to find their own way to the truth.

Tip: It's time to step into the role of a mentor.

Pisces:

You've always been a misfit at heart. You've always possessed the ability to commune with the mysterious realms and feel a sense of oneness with all of Mother Gaia's creations. Today, you're tapping into your natural healing abilities and honouring the gifts that were given to you at birth. You are a medium of light, Pisces. A messenger of the devas and the deities. It's time to offer your unique offerings to the world.

Tip: You are a medium of light.