



**MICHAEL JACKSON'S  
NEVERLAND RANCH  
SOLD TO BILLIONAIRE**  
*pg 08*

**COPS SHOULD NOT BE THE ONLY ONES  
BOTHERED BY SUBSTANCES ABUSE**

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**LESLIE WEST, GUITARIST  
OF ROCK BAND MOUNTAIN,  
HAS DIED AT 75**

*pg 08*



# SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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## CM inaugurates Sikkim Entrepreneurship & Economic Development Cell

**SUMMIT REPORT  
GANGTOK, 26 DEC:**

Chief Minister PS Tamang inaugurated Sikkim Entrepreneurship & Economic Development Cell (SEED) at Samman Bhawan today. In a Facebook post, the CM said that he urged SEED to be the flag bearer and an inspiration for aspiring entrepreneurs and be a bridge between the Government and the people.

"Staying true to their acronym, they should sow the seeds for upcoming entrepreneurs and move towards being 'Atmanirbhar'. Our Government has plans and programs to promote and support our local entrepreneurs. I also appealed to them to create awareness among the youths regarding the current programs directed at promoting entrepreneurial ventures and businesses in the State," he said.

He spoke about the Skilled Youth Startup Scheme and Sikkim Film Policy which is the first of its kind in the State. Such programs provide



a platform for entrepreneurial ventures by offering subsidies to ease the financial burden for beginners and others, said the CM.

"Our Government will have provisions that will give more preference to the local people, adding that we are open to

suggestions to improve the ease of doing business in the State without compromising the rules," the CM stated.

The CM, who is the chief patron of SEED, also launched the SEED magazine and App. He also distributed certificates to the office bearers of SEED.

During the function, 35 entrepreneurs of the State were felicitated by SEED.

The Chief Minister handed over souvenirs to entrepreneurs Rinzing Choden Bhutia, Allen Targain, Swarnim Lama, Yougan Tamang, Gyurmila Bhutia, Tenzing

Bhutia, Shova Rai, Raj Tamang, Rewaj Chettri, Remanti Rai, Yankesh Panth, Bishal Rai, Vishal Pradhan, Sagar Parajuli, Nima Lama, Bikash Basnett, Bhupendra Gurung, Peden Ongmu Bhutia, Kushan Zulca, Sishir Kharka, Dipen Subba, Rajiv Mishra, Bishal Chettri, Kaushal Lamichaney, Smita Rai, Karma Choden Bhutia, Barsha Shrestha, Chetan Raj Pradhan, Ram Giri, Abhimanyu and Abhinandan Dhakal, Binay Chettri, Prabin Agrawal, Parayan Dikshit, Sonam Dorjee Bhutia and Gunsmriti Shakya.

The programme was also attended by Minister for Commerce and Industries Department, BS Panth, Minister for Rural Development Department, Sonam Lama, Minister for Urban Development Department, Arun Upreti, Minister for Forest Department, Karma Loday Bhutia, Advisors, Chairmen and Heads of the concerned departments, HoDs, officials and entrepreneurs from Sikkim.

## CM attends virtual release of PM Kisan Samman Nidhi 6,192 SIKKIM FARMERS TO BENEFIT FROM SCHEME

**SUMMIT REPORT  
GANGTOK, 26 DEC:**

Chief Minister, PS Tamang virtually witnessed the Prime Minister release more than Rs 18,000 crore as the next instalment under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme to over 9 crore farmers of the country on 25 Dec.

In a Facebook post, the CM wrote, "6,192 farmers and growers from Sikkim will benefit under this scheme of Central Government."

25 Dec is observed every year as "Good Governance Day" to mark the birth anniversary of former Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The CM joined Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and Union Minister of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Narendra Singh Tomar virtually in the program.

Under the scheme, farmers falling into a scale fixed by the government are transferred an amount of Rs 6,000 every year. The money is deposited in three installments, of Rs 2,000 each.

Pradhan Mantri Kisan Sammann Nidhi is an initiative by the government of India in which all farmers will get up to ₹6,000 per year as minimum income support.



## CM felicitates 32 SDRF Homeguards



**SUMMIT REPORT  
GANGTOK, 26 DEC:**

Chief Minister, PS Tamang felicitated a team of 32 Homeguards of State Disaster Response Force under Homeguards and Civil Defence in a brief function held at Samman Bhawan on 25 Dec, 2020.

As per a press release,

the team was felicitated in recognition of the commendable service and dedication they have provided as COVID warriors.

The team had conducted disinfection drives in the initial stage of pandemic at the Checkposts and Screening Centres at

Rangpo and Melli, along with Rongli, Rhenock, other bazaar areas and public places to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The Chief Minister in his brief address also lauded the efforts of the team for their selfless efforts and carrying out the sanitization task with sincerity and dedication.

## 2020 was of struggle, innovation for teachers

**GUNJAN SHARMA**

**NEW DELHI, DEC 26 (PTI):** From turning walls of mud houses into blackboards to taking classes through loudspeakers on moving carts, from 'mohalla' classes to using public announcement system of panchayat bhawans, 2020 was full of struggle and innovation for teachers to ensure learning was not disrupted as schools remained closed due to COVID-19.

The over 10-month-long shutdown inspired creative ways to teach thousands of students who could not log on to online classes because they did not have access to smartphones and computers in several villages across the country.

Government school teachers in Dumka's Dumarthar village in Jharkhand found a new way to impart education to students who do not have access to smartphones.

They created blackboards on the walls of students' houses to teach them while maintaining social distancing.

"We started with an initiative called 'shiksha aapke dwaar' (education at your doorstep) to provide education to children who did not have access to

smartphones and internet. More than 100 blackboards have been created on walls to teach students at their houses," said Tapan Kumar, a teacher in Dumarthar.

Every day, Indra Mukhi Chhetri, a maths and science teacher in Sikkim's Ravangala, visited homes of several students she identified and reached out to around 40 students in a week from class 1 to 5.

"Even if I take online classes, these students either do not have devices or Internet connectivity. Some of them may have access but then how do I maintain equality, others might feel left out. So I used to spend about 20 minutes with each student in a week.

"I collected their notebooks and write lessons for them, which they have to finish over the course of the week. I also brief the parents on what needs to be done," she said.

Ghanshyambhai, a teacher in Gujarat's Janan village, used the public announcement system of the village panchayat to share stories, songs, guidelines for parents on how to deal with children during the lockdown period, importance of exercising and much more.

"I also announced when I will be at Panchayat Bhawan so students or parents who want to clear any doubts or to interact can see me there, while maintaining social distancing," he added.

Teachers in Chhattisgarh conducted Mohalla (neighbourhood) classes in areas with low infection rates.

"We set up mini classrooms, with small groups of students, in community spaces. The teachers spent a couple of hours in each room, engaging with all students at least twice a week," one of the teachers said.

Another teacher in Chhattisgarh, Rudra Rana, used his motorcycle to conduct classes.

"The children were not able to go to study as schools were closed. So I thought why not bring the school to them. Even though schools continue to be shut, online classes are not viable for most rural students. I used a portable umbrella and a chalk board to take classes when I went to the village," he said.

In Haryana's Kanwarsika village, the morning bell announcing the start of a teaching session used to ring, not in the local school, but from a van equipped with a

loudspeaker.

"Students settled down inside homes and in courtyards facing the street. First they recited a prayer following the teacher on loudspeaker and then they attended lessons of one subject each day," Noor Bano, a teacher with the government school in Nuh district, said.

In a newly-acquired daily practice, students in Haryana's Jhamri village opened their textbooks at the sight of the cart that arrived near their homes, filling the vacuum left by closure of schools due to the lockdown and lack of digital infrastructure such as feeble internet connectivity.

"I arranged for a loudspeaker system on a cart. The teachers were asked to turn-wise go with the cart and park it at a feasible location and impart lessons from there. It doesn't match up to the classroom learning levels but will at least ensure that students' don't drop out," said Satyanarayan Sharma, who runs a school in the village in Jhajjar district.

The lockdown induced by COVID-19 in March prompted schools and colleges to move to the virtual world for teaching and learning activities and exposed the existing digital divide in the country.

## 100 more test positive at Rongneck Jail, Sikkim's Covid count reaches 5,799

**SUMMIT REPORT**

**GANGTOK, 26 DEC:**

The number of active COVID-19 cases in Sikkim has climbed to 517 with 115 fresh cases detected in the last 24 hours on Saturday. The State had 417 active cases on Friday.

Among these 115 new cases are 100 inmates currently lodged in the Central Jail, Rongneck in East District.

Sikkim's tally of confirmed cases of COVID-19 has also now climbed to 5,799, of whom 5,063 have already been discharged from the home and facility isolation. There are currently four patients admitted in the ICU facility of the COVID-dedicated STNM Hospital.

In his daily health bulletin on Saturday, Health Department State IEC Officer, Sonam Gyaltzen Bhutia, informed that the 115 cases were picked up from 270 samples tested on Friday - 113 in RT-PCR testing of 240 samples and two through rapid antigen testing of 20 samples. Only one of the cases came from West District and three from South District.

While providing details of the new cases, Mr Bhutia informed that the 100 more who tested positive at Rongneck Jail have been kept in isolation. It may be recalled that 81 inmates have already tested positive at the Central Jail, following which it was declared a Covid Care Centre and doctors and support health staff deputed there.

Among the new cases reported from in and around the capital are one person from Lower Shyari, one from Yatri Niwas, one from Gangtok, one from Daragaon-Tadong and one from Joredhara-Tadong.

Two persons from Ranipool, one from 8th Mile-Marchak, one from Biring-Zarong, one from Lower Tarku and one from Mamring have also been found positive for COVID-19.

Mr Bhutia informed that samples of three persons from Namchi in South District and one person from "Upper Lunjizl" in West District were also tested COVID-19 positive.

Sikkim reported 20 fresh positive cases on Friday taking the COVID-19 caseload in the state to 5684, an official said.

The state IEC member Sonam Bhutia said that East Sikkim registered 17 positive cases, while South Sikkim and West Sikkim recorded two and one cases respectively.

Sikkim has 417 active cases, while 94 others have migrated out and 5048 patients have recovered from the disease, he said.

The toll due to the pandemic stands at 125 in the state, he added.

Sikkim has tested 199 samples in the past 24 hours taking the tally of tests to 67,774 so far, Bhutia said.



# 1st Khanchenzonga Adventure Meet



**SUMMIT REPORT**  
**GANGTOK, 26 DEC:** Deputy Speaker, Sikkim Legislative

Assembly, Sangay Lepcha attended the sixth day of the 1st Khanchenzonga Adventure Meet

organised by Pelling Tourism Development Association on 25 Dec, 2020.

## Live telecast of PM held in North



**SUMMIT REPORT**  
**GANGTOK, 26 DEC:** Krishi Vigyan Kendra, North Sikkim in collaboration with Horticulture and Agriculture

Department, North Sikkim organised a live telecast program at KVK hall on 25 Dec, 2020, a press release informs. During the live telecast, Prime

Minister, Narendra Modi released the installment of PM Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojna for the period December, 2020 to March 2021 online.

## PM releases farmer support online in West



**SUMMIT REPORT**  
**GANGTOK, 26 DEC:** The live telecast program on the virtual release of the second installment of PM-KISAN Samman

Nidhi Yojana by Prime Minister, Narendra Modi was organised by Agriculture and Horticulture Department, West

District at the training hall of Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) Gyaba for the Gyalshing Block, on 25 Dec, a press release informs.

## Oxford vaccine likely to be first to get approval in India, say officials

**NEW DELHI, 26 DEC [PTI]:** With preparations underway for a possible vaccine-rollout by January, the Indian drug regulator is looking at the UK, which sources believe may give its nod to the Oxford COVID-19 vaccine next week, before deciding on giving emergency use authorisation to the Serum Institute that is manufacturing the shots. Once the UK drug regulator gives its approval to the Oxford vaccine, the expert committee on COVID-19 at the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) will hold its meeting and thoroughly review the safety and immunogenicity data from the clinical evaluations conducted abroad and in India before granting any emergency authorisation for the vaccine here, official sources said.

The process of granting emergency use approval for Bharat Biotech's COVID-19 vaccine 'Covaxin' may take time as its phase 3 trials are still underway, while Pfizer is yet to

make a presentation. "Going by this, Oxford vaccine 'Covishield' is likely to be the first to be rolled out in India," a source said. Serum Institute of India (SII) last week also had submitted some additional data required by the Drug Controller General of India (DCGI), the sources said. Amid fears about the mutated variant of SARS-CoV-2 detected in the UK, government officials recently said that it will have no impact on the potential of emerging vaccines that are being developed in India and other countries. Bharat Biotech, Serum Institute of India (SII) and Pfizer had applied to the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) seeking emergency use authorisation for their COVID-19 vaccines early this month.

The subject expert committee (SEC) on COVID-19 of the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) on December 9 had sought additional safety and efficacy data for COVID-19 vaccines of SII

and Bharat Biotech after deliberating upon their applications.

The application by the Indian arm of US pharmaceutical firm Pfizer was not taken up for deliberation as the company had sought more time for making a presentation before the committee.

The Pfizer vaccine has already been approved by several countries including the UK, the US, and Bahrain.

While considering SII's application, the SEC had recommended that the firm should submit an updated safety data of phase 2 and 3 clinical trials in the country, immunogenicity data from the clinical trial in the UK and India, along with the outcome of the assessment of the UK Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) for grant of EUA.

As for Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech, "after detailed deliberation, the committee recommended that the firm should present the safety and efficacy data from the ongoing phase 3 clinical trial in the country for further consideration", the SEC had said.

The highlight of the programme was the finals of veteran's football tournament played between Contractor Association and SSB Gyalshing in which Contractor Association lifted the trophy with a score line of 3-0.

Addressing the gathering, the chief guest expressed his gratitude towards the committee for organising a national level event in West District. He emphasised on enhancing tourism in Pelling and encouraged them to host more such

events in coming days. He also assured to provide maximum support from the government's side to boost local entrepreneurship and tourism in the District.

The program also had the presence of Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha), Indra Hang Subba as the guest of honor accompanied by Minister for PHE & Water Security, Bhim Hang Subba, Hari Narayan Subedi (Chairman, PHE), Narayan Khatiwada (President, PTDA) and other dignitaries.

## CM meets Railway project reps



**GANGTOK, 26 DEC:** Chief Minister PS Tamang today met officers from Indian Railway led by General Manger Sunil Sharma and had a detailed discussed

about the progress of the Railway to Sikkim project and was informed about clearance of pending issues concerning the same, he shares in a Facebook post.

## GJM Binoy faction organizes Padh Yatra in Darj



**SUMMIT REPORT**  
**GANGTOK, 26 DEC:** Padh Yatra (March for change) was organised today by Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (Binoy Faction) starting from Sonada and ending at Darjeeling Motor Stand. Thousands of supporters along with the leaders were present in the Padh Yatra.

Chairman of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration, Anit Thapa addressed the public at the Motor stand. "Today's Padh Yatra was organised for a change in the mind-set of the people of the Hills and I am not here to blame or scold anyone. I don't want to waste my energy in negative things rather I will invest my energy to work for my public of the Hills," he said.

Mr Thapa said that he believes in constructive politics and not in destructive politics. He announced that he will be staying in Darjeeling from today onwards.

"I want to ask Mr Bimal Gurung, what have you done till now? We have made university and hospital for our public, what have you done?" said Mr

Thapa.

At the same time, he said that the Binoy Tamang faction is always open to working with those who have been with Bimal Gurung as they have sacrificed a lot for Gorkhaland.

"Our door is always open for you all for a new beginning," said Mr Thapa.

Spokesperson of Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (Binoy Faction), Keshav Raj Pokhrail said, "I want to apologize to the public of the Hills for the past 12 years. I feel guilty for serving leaders who only think about themselves."

He said he will support Bimal Gurung if the latter can name the 16 seats that he plans to win.

Talking about Kanchenjunga Public School, Mr Pokhrail said that the school did provide free education for students but the money invested in that school was sponsored by GTA contractors not only by Mr Gurung.

Mr Gurung is blaming everyone for the destruction of the school but everyone knows who destroyed the school, he added.

## Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana in South



**SUMMIT REPORT**

**GANGTOK, 26 DEC:**

Prime Minister, Narendra Modi released an installment of Prime Minister Kisan Samman

Nidhi Yojana in South Sikkim

through a live telecast program on

25 Dec, a press release informs.

The live telecast was screened at DAC, Conference Hall.

## Lingi Payong School completes second floor slab casting



**SUMMIT REPORT**

**GANGTOK, 26 DEC:**

The second floor slab casting of 8-roomed school building of Lingi Payong Secondary School was completed on 25 Dec, a press release informs.

The slab casting was done under the supervision of Suraj Rai (AE) and Anup Chhetri (JE) from Engineering Cell,

Department, Namchi and also had presence of headmaster of school, Suraj Kumar Sharma and supervisor, NK Khatiwara.

Despite several hindrances caused due to lockdown restrictions and obstruction at Rangla khola for smooth flow of larger vehicle, the contractors Manorath Gautam and Raj Kumar

Gautam has been able to complete the second slab casting in stipulated time. With this, one more slab of 2 rooms is left along with other civil works.

The school building has been sanctioned by Samagra Shiksha Education Department, Government of Sikkim upon upgradation of the school into secondary school in 2016.

## Around 150 Army personnel test positive for COVID-19

**NEW DELHI, DEC 26 (PTI):** Around 150 Army personnel who arrived in the national capital from various locations in the last few weeks to participate in the Republic Day and Army Day parades have tested positive for COVID-19, official sources said. The infection was detected during a mandatory testing for COVID-19 under a strict protocol formulated to insulate all the personnel taking part in the two parades from the COVID-19 infection, they said. Over 2,000 Army personnel have arrived in Delhi since late November for the Republic Day and Army Day parades using various modes of transport and all of them had to undergo the COVID-19 test before they were put into a "safe bubble", the sources said. Those who have tested negative are being put into the "safe bubble" that has been created to accommodate all the personnel who will be part of the marching contingents, they said.

The "safe bubble", created in the Cantonment area, comprises a large number of camps and those selected to stay in them will have almost "zero connectivity" from the outside world till the Republic Day celebrations on January 26, the sources said. The Army Day is celebrated on January 15. The sources said the 150 personnel who have tested positive for COVID-19 are "asymptomatic" and may be able to go to the "safe bubble" once they recover from the infection.

"We are following a very strict COVID-19 protocol for the participants of the Republic Day and Army Day parades. The safe

bubbles were established as part of a larger strategy of force preservation in view of the pandemic," said an official on the condition of anonymity.

## ~ SummitTIMES ~ CLASSIFIEDS

### LAND FOR SALE

Two plots available - 30X40 sq ft and 50X30 sq ft  
Junkeri Dara, Samlik Marchak

Price negotiable  
Contact : 6296366498,  
9641878315, 9593262407

### LAND FOR SALE

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

### LAND FOR SALE

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

### FOR RENT

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

### GENERAL LAND FOR SALE

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

### BUILDING FOR SALE

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

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## 1st National Paragliding Accuracy Olympic trial C'ship

**SUMMIT REPORT**  
**GANGTOK, 26 DEC:**

The 1st National Paragliding Accuracy Olympic trial championship began at Upper Pelling, West Sikkim on 25 Dec. The championship organised by Pelling Tourism Development Association (PTDA) will conclude on 29 Dec, a press release informs.

Deputy Speaker, Sikkim Legislative Assembly, Sangay Lepcha attended the event as the chief guest and Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha), Indra Hang Subba was the guest of honor.

This is the first



ever paragliding championship organised in India in which 60 paragliding pilots from 12 teams viz. Air force team, Indian Army Team, Kalimpong West Bengal,

ALU, NE Flyers, Black Hawk, Assam, Guwahati Worrier, Sikkim A, Sikkim B, Arunachal and Adventure zone from various states are participating.

During the inaugural

program, four paragliding pilots and achievers were felicitated.

Those who were felicitated were Sonam Bhutia (First initiated paragliding in

Pelling), Prashant Rana (President of Paragliding Association of Kalimpong), Arjun Kr Rai (First trial paragliding pilot from Pelling) and Rinzing Doma Bhutia (The first Woman paragliding pilot of Sikkim and first woman Tandem paraglider of India).

Also present were Minister for PHE and Water Security, Bhim Hang Subba, JB Subba (Chairman, SAABCO), Chairman, SIDICO, Janak Gurung, Hari Narayan Subedi (Chairman, PHE), TT Bhutia, SDM/Gyz, NK Karki, SDM/Dentam and Narayan Khatiwada, President (PTDA).

## Burtuk Law College to mark 40 years with year-long celebration



**SHRAVAN CHETTRI**  
**GANGTOK, 26 DEC:**

Sikkim Government Law College, Burtuk is all set to mark the completion of 40 years of the College with various events in 2021.

The celebration was to begin last year but due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other issues, the celebration had to be postponed, informed Principal Law College, Tshewang Dorjee Lama who is also advisor to

the recently formed Sikkim Government Law College Alumni Association [SGLCAA] which was registered on 20 February 2020.

The plan was to begin celebrations from September 2019 till September 2020 but due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other issues the same could not be organized.

The celebrations will begin in January 2021 with the publication of a newsletter which will

carry the experiences shared by the alumni of the college.

Mr Lama further said that Post-Graduation courses along with various other degree and diploma courses will also be initiated in the coming year for the benefit of the students around the state.

Student Mukul Rani Parajuli talked about the current condition of the infrastructure and the issues related to availability of girls hostel.

## Sarita Pradhan becomes 1st runner-up at Face of Zylish 2020



**SUMMIT REPORT**

**SINGTAM, 26 DEC:**

Sarita Pradhan of Burung, Singtam, was crowned the 1st Runner Up at the Face of Zylish 2020 at the pageant finale organised by Zylish Academy at Malbazaar, West Bengal on 23 Dec, a press release informs.

Sukla Roy from Bagdogra won the Face of Zylish title while Anisha Sewa from Jaigoan was adjudged the second runner-up.

This was the second season on the pageant and had attracted 927 participants from 11 states while participants from Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Singapore, UK, Maldives and Kuwait joined the online hunt.

Abhijit Chettri groomed the finalists and was also a judge for the contest.

Sarita was a wild card entry and feels blessed for having won a title.

## COVID-19: Daily deaths below 300 after over 6 months, 22,273 new cases reported

**NEW DELHI, DEC 26 (PTI):** India's daily new COVID-19 fatality count was reported below 300 after over six months, taking the death toll to 1,47,343, while the infection tally rose to 1,01,69,118, according to data updated by the Union Health Ministry on Saturday

A total of 251 more deaths and 22,273 new infections were reported in a 24-hour period, the data updated at 8 am showed

The number of people who have recuperated from the disease surged to 97,40,108, pushing the national recovery rate to 95.78 per cent, while the COVID-19 case fatality rate stands at 1.45 per cent

The active caseload remained below three lakh for the fifth consecutive day. There are 2,81,667 active coronavirus infections in the country, constituting 2.77 per cent of the total caseload, the data stated

India's COVID-19



infection tally had crossed the 20-lakh mark on August 7, 30 lakh on August 23, 40 lakh on September 5 and 50 lakh on September 16.

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

According to the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), 16,71,59,289 samples have been tested up to December 25, including 8,53,527 on Friday

The 251 new fatalities include 71 from Maharashtra, 31 from West Bengal and 30 from Delhi

The total 1,47,343

deaths reported so far in the country include 49,129 from Maharashtra, followed by 12,048 from Tamil Nadu, 12,044 from Karnataka, 10,414 from Delhi, 9,536 from West Bengal, 8,279 from Uttar Pradesh, 7,091 from Andhra Pradesh and 5,269 from Punjab

The health ministry stressed that more than 70 per cent of the deaths occurred due to comorbidities

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

## FUNERAL NOTICE



With heavy hearts we would like to inform that Shri D.K Gajmer, IAS, former Secretary and Chief Information Commissioner left for his heavenly abode on 25th December.

The funeral procession shall start at 9.30 am from his residence, Development Area, Gangtok on 27th Dec 2020.

## Farmer leaders ready to resume talks with Govt on Dec 29

**NEW DELHI, DEC 26 (PTI):** The protesting farmer unions on Saturday decided to resume their dialogue with the government and have proposed December 29 as the date for the next round of talks to resolve the deadlock over the Centre's three farm laws.

The decision was taken at a meeting of Sanyukt Kisan Morcha, an umbrella body of 40 farmer unions protesting at various Delhi border points against the new agriculture laws.

Addressing a press conference, farmer leaders made it clear that the modalities for the repeal of three farm laws and guarantee for MSP -- minimum support price at which the government procures crops from farmers -- should be

part of the agenda for resuming talks with the government.

At the press conference, farmer leader Darshan Pal said that it was also decided that farmers will hold tractor march on the Kundli-Manesar-Palwal (KMP) highway on December 30 in protest against the Centre's agri laws.

"We request people from Delhi and other parts of country to come and celebrate New Year with protesting farmers," Pal said.

Another farmer leader, Rajinder Singh, said, "We will march from Singhu to Tikri to KMP. We ask farmers from surrounding states to come in huge numbers in their trolleys and tractors. If the govt

doesn't want us to block the KMP highway, then they better announce the repeal of the three farm laws."

In a letter to Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare Vivek Aggarwal, the Morcha said, "We propose that the next meeting between the farmers' representatives and the Government of India be held on December 29 2020 at 11 am."

"As the government is willing to hold talks with us and asking us for date and our issues, we have proposed to hold dialogue on December 29. Now, the ball is in the court of government when it calls us for talks," Bhartiya Kisan Union leader Rakesh Tikait told PTI.

According to the letter,

the agenda proposed by the protesting unions includes amendments to be made and notified in the Commission for the Air Quality Management in National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas Ordinance, 2020 to exclude farmers from its penal provisions.

The farmer unions also demanded that changes in the draft Electricity Amendment Bill 2020 to protect the interests of farmers should also be part of the agenda for the next round of dialogue.

Earlier this week, Aggarwal had written to the 40 protesting unions and invited them for fresh talks, but made it clear that it would not be "logical" to include in the agenda any new demand related to the MSP, which is out of the purview of the three new farm laws.

"Unfortunately, your (Aggarwal's) letter continues the government's attempt to mislead the public by suppressing true facts about the deliberations in the previous meetings. We have consistently demanded the repeal of the three Central Farm Acts, whereas the government has distorted our position as if we were asking for amendments to these Acts.

"If you are sincere about respectfully listening to the farmers, as you say in your letter, the government must not indulge in misinformation about the previous meetings.

The campaign launched by the entire state machinery to defame and malign the farmers' movement must stop forthwith," the Sanyukta Kisan Morcha said in its letter.

Thousands of farmers have been camping at three Delhi border points -- Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur -- for nearly a month, demanding repeal of three agri laws enacted in September and a legal guarantee on minimum support price.

While the government has presented these laws as major reforms aimed at helping farmers, protesting unions have maintained these acts will leave them at the mercy of big corporates by weakening the mandi and MSP systems.

On Wednesday, the Sanyukt Kisan Morcha, had asked the government to not repeat the proposal of "meaningless" amendments that they have already rejected but to come up with a "concrete offer" in writing for the resumption of talks.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi Friday squarely blamed those with a political agenda for the deadlock in the Centre's talks with the protesting farmers and asserted that his government was willing to hold dialogues with all, including those staunchly opposed to it, as long as talks are based on farm issues, facts and logic.

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**What is Novel Coronavirus - nCoV?**

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

**Symptoms of nCoV**

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

**Precautions to Prevent nCoV**

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

**Treatment**

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

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



## Addiction Remains Because We Won't Engage

*Cops should not be the only ones bothered by substances abuse*

This section has often railed against the police, policing and the force's clearly askew priorities. And yet, they also remain the only defence that Sikkim has cobbled together to address the problems of substance abuse. Sikkim Police appears to be the only agency consistently bothered by the proliferation of substances of abuse in the State and the increasing number of youth who appear to be developing the habit. It thus keeps busy; making arrests and conducting drug busts in its bid to keep the streets free of easy accessibility to substances of abuse. At least someone is doing their bit about the disturbing prevalence of substance abuse in the State, because the society sure is not doing much. And even the policing now appears to be focused primarily at the interstate check-posts and traditional "hot-spots". There is, after all, only so much that solitary agency can do to address what is essentially a societal challenge.

The State Government did its part by giving Sikkim's youth the Sikkim Anti-Drugs Act which penalizes the peddling of prescription drugs of abuse, sourcing, hoarding and peddling of which used to earlier not even earn a proper rap on the knuckles. Sikkim Police has patrolled the streets to confiscate as much of this contraband as appears possible, and the process has now become so frequent and routine that even addicts are being picked up on "source" information and are being processed as dealers. A clutch, a very small clutch, of organisations also remain steadfast in their commitment to work among addicts and those wishing to kick the habit. What is also worrying is that the more serious narcotics are also finding their way to those who have already made it past the gateway drugs, and the volume of recent seizures suggest that this market is no longer limited to those with bigger purses.

And where is the society at large in this entire challenge? Substance abuse is a social challenge, a societal failing and policing and enabling laws can only assist a society on a mission to keep the young safe and cannot and should not be the only protection against addiction. Societal engagement is not expected in the form of street processions or community policing and should instead manifest as parent-groups, youth organizations and social associations and NGOs across all platforms recognizing that chemical dependence is ruining an entire generation and then collaborating to first figure out what makes addiction such an easy recourse for the youth and then addressing that problem. These social groups should engage the youth more actively and even invite them to decision-making positions and shoulder them more responsibility. Doing so would communicate respect and that would win over their trust, then efforts can begin to work with the youth to take on the challenge that their age faces in Sikkim. This is an important first step to take because we appear to have lost the trust of the young with our constant failures in looking out for them.

Make no mistake, substance abuse demands mission-level engagement of everyone in Sikkim because too many lives are being wasted in their prime here. No state-initiated or sponsored intervention to address the situation will be enough unless the society at large steps up and gets involved.

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# Would You Eat Indoors At a Restaurant? We Asked Five Health Experts

## THECONVERSATION.COM

Earlier this fall, many of the nation's restaurants opened their doors to patrons to eat inside, especially as the weather turned cold in places. Now, as COVID-19 cases surge across the country, some cities and towns have banned indoor dining while others have permitted it with restrictions. Still other geographies have no bans at all.

The restaurant and hospitality industry has reacted strongly, filing lawsuits challenging indoor dining bans and, in New York state, pointing to data that showed restaurants and bars accounted for only 1.4% of cases there – far lower compared with private gatherings.

We asked five health professionals if they would dine indoors at a restaurant. Four said no – and one had a surprising answer. NOT AN OPTION

Dr. LAURIE ARCHBALD-PANNONE, Associate Professor of Medicine, University of Virginia

No. March 12, 2020 was the last day I ate indoors at a restaurant. At the time, there was mild apprehension – but much changed that week. The COVID-19 pandemic altered many aspects of "normalcy," and for me eating inside at a restaurant is one of those activities. I loved eating out and typically would eat out three times a week (sometimes more!). But understanding how the COVID-19 infection is transmitted, I feel that being inside without a mask on – even just to eat – is not an option for me. I strongly believe that we need to support our community through these challenging times, so we still get curbside pickup or delivery from our favorite local restaurants at least three times a week – sometimes more! – but it will be a while before I'm back inside. When I do return I'm definitely getting dessert.

## GREAT RISK

Dr. THOMAS A. RUSSO, Chief of Infectious Disease Division, Jacobs

School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, University at Buffalo

No. And it's been "no" right from the beginning.

We have a little more information now, but what I said in the spring hasn't really changed. The greatest risk of getting infected with SARS-CoV-2 is being indoors with people who aren't using masks at all times. The concern isn't just big respiratory droplets when close to someone talking; it's also the tiny aerosols that linger in the air.

Making it even riskier is the generally poor ventilation in many restaurants. The key differences between indoor dining and shopping in a big box store or grocery store are: 1) big stores have more ventilation and greater air space; 2) everyone can wear a mask at all times; 3) you're not fixed in space, so if you see someone who just has a bandanna or their mask drops down below their nose, you can steer clear of them; and 4) it should take less time than dinner out. At a restaurant, you're stuck at that table. If a party near you is having an animated conversation, they could be generating a lot of respiratory secretions.

Some interesting studies have looked at the airflow and air currents in restaurants in relation to where people became infected. In one, a person was 20 feet away from the source for only about 5 minutes, but the person was directly in the airflow and became infected. It's a reminder of what we've been saying – there's nothing magical about 6 feet. The high degree of community disease in the U.S. right now increases the likelihood that another diner in the restaurant is infected. If you are tired of cooking and need a break, takeout is the way to go.

## CAREFUL MIXED WITH TRUST

SUE MATTISON, Provost and Professor in the College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, Drake University

Yes. As an epidemiologist, my

response may seem surprising or hypocritical: I do eat at local restaurants, but only because in April, like more than 17 million Americans since that time, I tested positive for COVID-19 and recovered. According to the latest evidence, I believe I have immunity for now, and perhaps longer. But I am not pushing my luck.

I have my own list of four restaurants where I eat. I trust these restaurants because each has drastically reduced their number of tables and spaced them at least 6 feet apart, and everyone inside is diligent about wearing a mask. My husband and I also order takeout a lot. It is important to reiterate, however, that evidence shows restaurants are a significant source of infection, and those who have not recovered from COVID-19 should refrain from eating at restaurants until the community gets a better handle on the spread of infection.

## SHORT-TERM SACRIFICES

Dr. RYAN HUERTO, Family Medicine Physician, Health Services Researcher and Clinical Lecturer, University of Michigan

No. While I understand many factors contribute to indoor dining, such as the mental health toll of social isolation, the opportunity to support small businesses and cold weather, I strongly recommend against indoor dining.

The risk of contracting COVID-19 from indoor activities is far greater than from physically distanced outdoor activities. The recent spike in COVID-19 infections, deaths and ICU bed shortages is likely linked to indoor gatherings during Thanksgiving.

On Dec. 22, 201,674 infections and 3,239 deaths due to COVID-19 were reported. This death toll is equivalent to approximately 20 Boeing 737 aircrafts crashing in a single day.

Even with a COVID-19 vaccine

approved, staying home, physically distancing, wearing a mask and good hand hygiene are as important as ever. Think of these as short-term sacrifices to help protect your friends, family, neighbors and essential workers.

Instead of dining in, please consider exponentially safer alternatives such as ordering delivery or curbside pickup.

## RESTAURANTS POSE BIG RISK

KATHLEEN C. BROWN, Associate Professor of Practice and MPH Program Director, College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences, University of Tennessee

No. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that patients testing positive were twice as likely to have eaten in a restaurant than those testing negative in the 14 days preceding their test. I regularly get takeout but do not eat in restaurants.

What I cannot control poses a risk. I have very open and honest conversations with family and friends about where we have been and who we have been with. From there, our risk is pretty clear but still not at zero. The more people I come into contact with, the greater the risk.

In a restaurant, I am not able to assess the risk posed by other patrons or the staff. Each person in that restaurant has a network of others that, taken together, increases my risk of contracting COVID-19. Currently, Tennessee, where I live, is the second-leading state for cases per 100,000, which means community spread is high.

In plain language, that means there is an increased likelihood that I may come into contact with someone who is infectious – symptomatic or not – if I eat inside a restaurant. I will continue to pick up my takeout for now.

[the writer is Associate Professor Medicine, Geriatrics, University of Virginia]

# A Brief History of Christmas Pudding – and Why it Can Actually be Quite Good For You

## HAZEL FLIGHT

## THECONVERSATION.COM

Even in these hard and strange times, Christmas will be celebrated and traditions upheld. And for many British households, Christmas dinner would not be complete without a Christmas pudding – traditionally served with brandy sauce, brandy butter or custard.

The Christmas pudding originated in the 14th-century as a sort of porridge, originally known as "frumenty", which bears little resemblance to the dessert we know today.

It was originally made with hulled wheat, boiled in milk, seasoned with cinnamon and coloured with saffron. It was associated with meatless days, lent and advent and was often served as a plain dish. But there are a variety of recipes which included additions such as beef, mutton, raisins, currants, prunes, wines and spices.

In some instances, this was the staple food for Christmas eve, although in Yorkshire it was eaten first thing on Christmas morning. In the 17th-century changes to the recipe were made. It was thickened with eggs, breadcrumbs, dried fruit and beer or spirits were added – and came to resemble something a bit more like a sweet pudding. However, it was the Victorians who fine tuned the recipe into the Christmas pudding many of us enjoy today.

A Christmas pudding should have 13 ingredients – that represent Jesus and the 12 disciples. Traditionally, these ingredients include: raisins, currants, suet, brown sugar, breadcrumbs, citron, lemon peel, orange peel, flour, mixed spices, eggs, milk and brandy. Brandy is also traditionally poured over the pudding and set alight. The flaming brandy is said to represent the passion of Christ.

Christmas puddings were traditionally boiled in a "pudding cloth", although today are usually steamed in a bowl. Presented on the table with a sprig of holly, they are then doused in brandy and set alight.

The last Sunday before Advent became known as "stir up Sunday". This was when the ingredients of the pudding would be assembled and stirred up in a bowl with a wooden spoon (representing the manger) from east to west – symbolising the journey taken by the three wise men. Traditionally, every family member stirs the pudding three times and makes a secret wish.

Trinkets were always included in the



traditional pudding. As a child I still remember the excitement of waiting to see who was going to find the sixpence. Whoever found the coin was believed to have good fortune over the coming year.

## A HEALTHY PUD?

Although the Christmas holidays can sometimes feel a little unhealthy – with a lot of sitting around and excessive food consumption – the ingredients that makeup a Christmas pudding are actually pretty nutritious.

Traditional Christmas puddings consists of fibre rich ingredients, such as fruits, nuts and currants. Dried fruits are rich in fibre, enzymes, polyphenols (substances with a high antioxidant activity), vitamins and minerals. Sultanas, currants, apricots and pears are highly nutritious and packed with essential potassium and iron. And although dried fruits can contain a lot of sugar, they have a lower glycemic index value so don't impact your blood sugar in the same way as other sweet treats.

Raisins are also rich in antimicrobial compounds, fibre and iron. These compounds lower the risk of heart disease and can relieve constipation. Prunes too can also aid with digestion, relieve constipation, reduce inflammation and protect cells from free radical damage.

Walnuts, hazelnuts, pecans and almonds can also be added into the mix and these all come with a range of health benefits – from lowering cholesterol levels and reducing heart disease risk to delivering high levels of vitamin E, polyphenols and melatonin.

The mixed spices, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, pimentos (or all spice) in a Christmas pudding are also an incredible source of aromatic antioxidants. Spices aid digestion and have anti-inflammatory and anti-bacterial properties. They can supposedly

even help to reduce bloating, cramps and nausea – key if you've been overdoing it a bit.

There is one secret ingredient often overlooked but included in many recipes – the carrot. Rich in beta-carotene, which the body utilises to produce Vitamin A, carrots are good for lowering cholesterol levels and, yes, for the health of your eyes.

## A GLOBAL TRADITION

Although a British tradition, the Christmas pudding is eaten in various countries including Australia and South Africa. The Canadians also have a version which includes potatoes alongside the carrots.

The Christmas pudding even makes its way into literature, with Charles Dickens' Christmas Carol making reference to it. Then there is the case for Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot to solve in which he is advised to avoid the plum pudding – another name for the Christmas pud.

One well known fact about the Christmas pudding is that there always seems to be some left over after Christmas day. In fact Christmas puddings of the past could last up to a year, so it was often shared out. Indeed, in 1885 a British newspaper reported the joyful consumption of a plum pudding – sent overland via special envoy from Tehran — to a group of British soldiers stationed in northwestern Afghanistan.

If you don't fancy posting a pudding there are a number of ways you can share and use the leftovers – with a whole host of recipes from Christmas strudel to a black pudding breakfast replacement. Another firm favourite is Christmas pudding ice-cream - simply mix pudding with vanilla ice cream and enjoy!

[the writer is Programme Lead Nutrition and Health, Edge Hill University]



## BJD will make women reservation a major national issue: Naveen Patnaik

Bhubaneswar, 26 Dec [PTI]: Taking a swipe at the national parties for talking about women empowerment only during polls and conveniently forgetting afterward, Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik Saturday said BJD will make women reservation issue a national movement by raising it in every session of Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha and the Legislative Assembly. Speaking on the occasion of 24th foundation day of Biju Janata Dal, Mr Patnaik said BJD will continue to demand 33 per cent reservation for women in assemblies and Parliament.

The BJD president said the regional party named after his father Biju Patnaik has all along been fighting for the rights of women.

Mr Patnaik said his father was the first chief minister in the country who in 1992 reserved 33 per cent of seats for women in the panchayats and urban polls in Odisha.

"Basing on Biju Patnaik's ideology, our BJD government has raised the reservation ratio for women in panchayats and urban bodies to 50 per cent," the chief minister said.

"The national parties remember women empowerment during elections and commit in their manifestoes only to conveniently forget after winning polls," Mr Patnaik said without taking names of any party.

He said BJD will remind the national parties about their forgotten promises on 33 per cent reservation for women in Assembly and Parliament elections.

The BJD supremo said they would ensure that each woman in India is made aware about her rights.

"The BJD though a regional party, will take the message to every doorstep, every village and make the women reservation issue a national movement", Mr Patnaik added.

The BJD supremo said, "From now on in every session of Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha and legislative assembly, BJD will raise the women reservation issue and remind the national parties about their forgotten promises".

"We cannot deprive half of our population of their rights. They must have their rightful place in the political space of our country.

"Though BJD is a regional party, we will continue to demand 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in assemblies and Parliament," Mr Patnaik said.

Noting that empowerment of women is the empowerment of the nation, Mr Patnaik said that no country or a state could progress without strengthening women.

"If we Indians want to compete with the developed countries, we must first give rights to our women," he said.

## I-T dept detects black income of Rs 100 crore after raids on contractors in Assam

**NEW DELHI, DEC 26 (PTI):** Unaccounted income of Rs 100 crore has been detected after the income tax department raided three "leading" contractors of Northeast India based in Assam early this week, the CBDT said on Saturday. The search and survey action was initiated on December 22 at fourteen locations in Guwahati, Silapathar and Pathsala in Assam and in Delhi.

"Cash of Rs 2.95 crore has been seized. Overall, undisclosed income to the tune of approximately Rs 100 crore has been unearthed so far during the search and survey operation," the Board said in a statement without sharing the identities of those raided.

It added that "jewellery of Rs 9.79 lakh has been seized and the sources of acquisition of some other jewellery worth Rs 2 crore is under



verification."

The Central Board of Direct Taxes frames policy for the I-T department.

The entities covered are "leading contractors of Northeast and one group is also involved in the hospitality business," it said.

"The main allegation against the three groups is that they have taken accommodation (dubious) entries in the form of non-genuine unsecured loans and also securities premium

from dubious Kolkata-based shell (dummy) companies."

"The three groups have suppressed their net profits across the years and routed back into business the unaccounted income through entry operators based out of Guwahati and Kolkata," the CBDT said.

It has been established, the statement said, that the shell companies from which loans/premium had been taken exist

"only on paper" and have no real business and creditworthiness.

"The entry operators, on being questioned, have admitted that the unsecured loans/share premium from the shell companies to the groups are non-genuine and bogus."

"Evidences of the cash trail of routing of funds through securities premium was unearthed during search. It has been established that

amounts to the tune of about Rs 65 crore were routed back into regular books involving shell companies which actually represent unaccounted income of the group," it said.

The Board said a number of suspect cash transactions have been detected.

"It has been gathered during the search action that one of the groups engages in huge cash transactions in hospitality business of proportions as high as 50 per cent, which is under examination."

"Some of the entities of the groups engage in purchases of jewellery in cash. The source of the cash purchases are under examination," it said.

Further investigation is on to detect the actual quantum involved in tax evasion even as a locker found during the raids is yet to be "operated", it said.

## Adhikari, turncoat MP face protests in Kolkata

**KOLKATA, DEC 26 (PTI):** Former West Bengal minister Suvendu Adhikari and MP Sunil Mondal, both of whom recently joined the BJP from the TMC, faced protests allegedly by members of the ruling party in the state near the saffron party's office here on Saturday.

The TMC said the "spontaneous protests" reflected "people's anger against the turncoats".

The back-to-back incidents took place when the two BJP leaders were inside their cars in Hastings area of Kolkata, police said.

The BJP claimed that the protesters banged on Mondal's car and pelted it with stones while he was on his way to the party office.

"Some TMC activists, who were participating in a programme, blocked his (Mondal's) car. They sat on the road to



prevent him from going to our office. They also banged on the window panes and pelted his vehicle with stones," BJP's Barrackpore MP Arjun Singh said.

This led to a scuffle between BJP activists and TMC workers, he said.

Police reached the spot and ensured the safe passage of Mondal's car, a senior officer said.

"This shows the true colours of the TMC. They don't believe in any democratic norm. Is this a way to treat a people's representative?" Mondal said.

Adhikari, who during the BJP programme said he was ashamed to have been part of "tyrant" TMC for 21 years, was also subjected to sloganeering by the alleged TMC members

while he was leaving the venue.

His car with security cover left the spot as policemen put up barriers separating the road in front of the BJP office from the small dais erected nearby for organising the TMC meeting.

Adhikari was not available for comments.

Along with Adhikari and five TMC MLAs,

Mondal, Barddhaman Purba MP, had joined the BJP during Union Home Minister Amit Shah's rally at Midnapore on December 19.

The TMC said the incident was a reflection of people's anger against the turncoats.

"The spontaneous protest was people's anger against the turncoats," TMC MP Saugata Roy said.

BJP sources said party national general secretary Kailash Vijayvargiya informed Shah about the "attack" on Mondal's vehicle.

"The earlier attack on BJP chief JP Nadda's convoy and today's stone-pelting on Mondal's car shows that law and order has collapsed in West Bengal. The TMC is not allowing democratic activities of its political opponents," party state chief Dilip Ghosh said.

## After virus, spirit of Christmas reigns supreme in Meghalaya

**SHILLONG, DEC 24 [SHILLONGTIMES]:** Hymns and songs reverberated through the churches in the city on Friday night as Christians offered prayers, eagerly waiting for the clock to strike 12 am to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. The COVID-19 pandemic did not dampen the spirit of Christmas in the state, although low-key this year.

People offered prayers

in the churches and greeted each other after the midnight mass while following the standard operating procedures as laid down by the state government.

"We are following the protocols strictly and our volunteers are ensuring social distancing is followed while seated during the service or entering and leaving the church," said the Parish Priest of Mary Help of Christians,

Pascal Lyngdoh.

Lyngdoh further said, "The coming of Jesus Christ is a new hope and we should not lose hope in spite of the difficulties we are faced with."

Earlier, the streets of Khyndailad, the city's commercial hub came alive as last-minute shoppers rushed towards the bakeries and other retail stores.

"I have come to pick up the cake I had ordered.

Merry Christmas!" said Christopher Khongwir, walking away hurriedly with a smile.

The scene was unlike any Khyndailad, with the decorated old Assembly building as backdrop, had witnessed for most part of the year. "I am happy that things have improved and we are getting to celebrate Christmas," said Shem Marsharing, advising against complacency.

Lewduh, the largest traditional market of the state, witnessed a heavy footfall.

Many legislators and ministers besides police personnel and members of NGOs distributed materials to relieve the spirit of giving.

## Assam's new Bhakti Movement will stamp out armed movements, says Amit Shah

**GUWAHATI, 26 DEC [NDTV]:** Union Home Minister Amit Shah today promised a social transformation in Assam's villages by reviving a Bhakti movement there so that young people do not take up arms. Towards this, he said, the government was extending a financial assistance of Rs2.5 lakh each to 8,000 "Namghars", the state's traditional Vaishnavite monasteries, that are over 50 years old.

"There was a time when separatists ruled the roost. The youth were given arms. Now all the groups have joined the mainstream and Assam has become part of the growth engine. The biggest success was the Bodoland accords. I am proud that in the recent Bodoland election, 80 per cent polling took place without a single case of bloodshed," Mr Shah said today at a public rally in Amingaon, Kamrup district.

"The Bodoland election...was only a semi-final. Now the final is ahead. In the Assam polls, we will have full majority. The Sonowal-Himanta combination has worked wonders for Assam," he said referring to the state legislative polls scheduled for April 2021.

He sought to evoke 16th-century Assamese cultural icon Srimanta Sankaradeva to recall the richness of the state's culture and history, which, he said, will give it a new beginning. He excoriated previous governments and leaders, including former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, for not working on the state's development.

"Manmohan Singh was MP from Assam for 18 years, but could not solve the problem of eight thousand rupees oil royalty that Assam was supposed to get...we solved it," he said.

Mr Shah is in Assam today as part of his two-day northeast visit.

He landed around mid-night (December 25-26) at the Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport in Guwahati, outside which scores of folk artistes and hundreds of supporters had created a festival-like atmosphere on his account.

He was received at the airport by Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal.

The financial grants to Namghars which he announced in Kamrup are part of his schedule in Assam which includes laying the foundation stones for the development of "Batadrava Than" as a cultural and tourist destination, a new medical college in the state capital, and nine law colleges to be established across Assam, according to ANI.

This is besides the preparatory meetings with party colleagues and workers to flag off the BJP's election campaign for the 2021 state assembly polls. Sources informed NDTV that at least two state Congress leaders are expected to join his party in his presence today - a minor repeat of what took place during Mr Shah's West Bengal visit on December 19-20.

In the second leg of his northeast visit, on December 27, the Union Home Minister will lay the foundation stones of the Churachandpur Medical College in Imphal, according to ANI. This is besides flagging off projects to build the state government guest house and the police headquarters at Imphal, the Manipur Bhawan in New Delhi, the Indian Institute of Technology at Muongkhong, and the Integrated Command and Control Centre City in Imphal, the agency reported.

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## Ban on High-Speed Mobile Internet extended in J&K till Jan 08

**SRINAGAR, 26 DEC:** The ban on 4G internet in Jammu and Kashmir has been extended till January 8, said an order issued by the Union Territory's administration on Friday.

"The internet speed shall be continued to be restricted to 2G, except the districts of Ganderbal and Udhampur, where mobile internet connectivity shall be continued to be made available without any speed-related restrictions," said a statement issued by the Government of Jammu and Kashmir.

"The aforesaid



directions shall be effective December 26, 2020, and remain in force till January 8, 2021, unless modified earlier," it further said.

There were credible inputs that a large number of terrorists were trying to infiltrate from across the border, the order said while adding that curbs on high-speed internet had obstructed the attempts.

The administration cited the recently held

Panchayat elections that saw participation by political parties, and said that it had gone down well with the "elements inimical to public peace and tranquility".

"The successful conduct of the recently concluded election, which witnessed participation of political parties across the spectrum and large scale voter turnout, has not gone down well with the elements inimical to public peace and tranquillity, as apparent from the multiple incidents of hurling of grenades by terrorists since the conclusion of

the election process, targeting civilians/police personnel/security forces and the encounter with security forces," the order stated.

Mobile internet services were suspended in Jammu and Kashmir on August 5 last year, in view of security concerns in the region after Article 370 was abrogated by the Central government.

The Central government also bifurcated the former State into Union Territories (UTs) of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. The new UTs came into being on October 31.

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## Drumchapel United: helping Glasgow children cope with Covid life

**EWAN MURRAY**  
**LONDON, 26 DEC [THE GUARDIAN]:** Drumchapel United did not need a pandemic to accentuate their commitment to a greater good. Slowly but surely this club in one of Glasgow's most deprived areas had been emphasising that the idea of football being intrinsic to a community need not be antiquated.

Drumchapel has needed a positive reference point. Deprivation and life expectancy rates are among the worst in Scotland. The situation looks even more acute when compared with nearby Bearsden and Milngavie, both highly affluent areas.

"It is a place that will always have a stigma," admits Scott Bland, Drumchapel United's secretary. "I'm supposed to live five or six years less than people who are just round the corner from me. We live with these things. For the club, it is about putting down a marker where people throughout Scotland know Drumchapel as a really good club. We might have these poverty stats but it's not about that, it's about people. We are trying to promote our people."

Before Covid struck, Drumchapel had been given a Queen's award in recognition of voluntary work. However, a visit to Holyrood Palace and a civic reception in Glasgow city chambers have had to wait. Bland rather swats off such occasions; nice to attend, but not really the point.

Under the club's operation sit 31 teams – male and female, from under-nines to over-35s – and 136 volunteer coaches. "I think the community is really excited about what the club is doing," adds Bland. "There's a real bond and desire to put across a positive message for Drumchapel."

"There are 9,000-10,000 people in Drumchapel. We have 600-plus players and 136

volunteer coaches. So a strong percentage of the population are involved, playing, coaching, coming to support the teams or being involved in fundraising nights. Everybody in the community knows our club and we are probably the biggest volunteer organisation in Glasgow when you consider those coaching numbers and an executive board of 13 people."

This, however, has been a year like no other. Bland and his committee members soon realised that essential services they provide had to be tailored as youngsters, many of them vulnerable in different ways, were banned for months on end from playing football.

"The initial challenge came in how quickly it all happened," says Bland. "I remember taking training on a Monday night and by the Tuesday everything had to stop. We have so many teams, so many coaches and people relying on our role in the community. It might be all some kids have during the week so we suddenly had to think about how we supported them."

"Initially it was very difficult because we hadn't been through this challenge before and had no idea what it looked like. We had umpteen meetings inside the first two weeks to look at how we dealt with things, but really we thought at that stage it would just be a couple of months and we would be back to normal. We had a plan, which really was all about continuing to support the young people and the community despite the situation we were in."

"The coaches had calls set up once a week for all the teams, even if that just meant some fun challenges; find your favourite player, come back next week and tell us who and why, that is sort of thing. We just tried to keep them engaged on focused on something."

Exercise programmes were provided to young players. So, too,



wellbeing packs and packed lunches as many would rely on even in normal times. Mental health and wellbeing schemes were delivered, as was shopping trips for those in Drumchapel as were forced to shield and could not buy for themselves.

"That's what the club is about, it isn't about that big green pitch all the time," says Bland. "It is hard work but a lot of people relied on that. Our volunteers are from the community so they know what it all means; the don't mind that extra hour to knock on somebody's door or put a hygiene pack together. We don't get round everybody but we try help as many as you can."

There has also been time to draw breath. The community asset transfer of the Donald Dewar Centre, where teams play, to the club was allowed to continue in the background. Drumchapel have plans for their West of Scotland men's team to progress through Scottish football's pyramid; packed footpaths alongside the pitches as friendly games restarted bely any notion this operation isn't big enough to play in the professional leagues.

The club's academy teams are now full with parents apparently even more keen than normal to see their children enjoy exercise. More than £3,000 has been needed to fund Covid signage and paperwork but, more pertinently, coaches have needed to be aware of wider fears.

"We saw a lot of girls [more than 100 play at the club] especially when they came back to training who were anxious, they wanted to talk about coronavirus and everything the virus affects, especially with the schools going back," explains Bland. "I'm going into high school, there's going to be 1,000 people there, how am I going to cope with that?" The coaches had to be very good at talking through all those issues. We have kids with mental health issues – anxiety, depression – so we had to be there for them."

Wider appreciation has arrived about the club's outstanding contribution. "I know I'm not the only person who gets annoyed when Drumchapel is mentioned and the term 'socially deprived' has to be attached," says Bill Kidd, the local member of the Scottish Parliament. "It's certainly a fact that 'the Drum' has genuine issues of poverty still to be overcome and that has to be a priority. At the same time, organisations like Drumchapel United have shown that a place for sport for all age groups is important during these difficult times."

Soon, Drumchapel United will return to what had become standard elements of their year. Christmas toy drops, community clean-ups and care facility visits by teams were routine long before coronavirus was part of our narrative. As soon as it was, the club stepped forward.

## MCG may witness spectator surge if 3rd Test is shifted from Sydney

Melbourne, Dec 26 (PTI): If the third Test between India and Australia shifts to Melbourne because of stringent COVID-19 restrictions in Sydney, the MCG will consider allowing more than the currently permitted 30,000 spectators here, the ground's president Stuart Fox said on Saturday.

Uncertainty looms over the New Year's Test being held at the SCG from January 7 because of stricter quarantine rules set by Queensland, the host of the fourth Test, for people arriving from Sydney due to the surge in COVID-19 cases there. MCG is hosting the second Test right now and has capped the spectator count at 30,000.

India are set to play their fourth and final Test in Brisbane from January 15 and current health protocols would require the touring side to undergo quarantine if they play the third Test at the SCG.

"I would love it but we have to go to what's right for the community. If it's confirmed the MCG is hosting it, we go back to the government and re-submit another plan and they will have a look at it," Fox was quoted as saying by the 'Sydney Morning Herald' when asked if the permissible crowd numbers could



surge if the match is held in Melbourne.

"It's more important we get this one away safely and then we will reassess after that," Fox said.

While Fox said that the MCG will be ready if required, he would ideally like SCG to host the Test match.

"Yes we can, we are ready to go but, I have said all along, we really do hope it can stay in Sydney. It's a really, really special Test," he said.

"...I really do hope it gets away in Sydney but we are on standby, we are ready to go. There are a few challenges with that but, if we are needed, we are ready."

Victorian sports minister Martin Pakula said that his government and health officials took a cautious approach in terms of capacity for the

Boxing Day Test after having agreed to allow an extra 5000 into the stadium.

"This was always going to be the event where we were more on the conservative side in terms of numbers. We want to test the processes," Pakula told the paper.

He felt that MCG's capacity can allow a larger crowd which Cricket Australia won't mind.

"I am sure Cricket Australia would like to see a slightly bigger crowd if they could get it. I think our position on that is, let's wait and see for a decision on where the Test is," he said.

"If the Test is going to be at the MCG, then Cricket Australia would submit a plan. If it's for a slightly higher number,

then that would be a matter for the CHO (chief health officer) to assess," he added.

The SCG Test, over the years, has also been a charity event for the Jane McGrath Foundation.

"The Sydney Test is a very important game. It's the Jane McGrath Foundation fund-raising Test, the pink Test ... I really hope NSW get to a position where it can put that Test on."

"But as Stuart said, if we are needed, we are ready to go and, if we are needed, we will look and see what crowd numbers are once CA makes that call."

MCG curator Matt Page has intimated to authorities that he would require 10 days' notice to ensure that a second pitch was up to Test-match standard.

## Murray accepts Delray Beach Open wildcard to begin 2021 season

**LONDON, 26 DEC (REUTERS):** Andy Murray will begin his 2021 season at the Delray Beach Open next month after accepting a wildcard for the ATP 250 tournament, the men's tour said on Saturday.

The former world number one, whose has slipped to 122nd in the rankings, will join

defending champion Reilly Opelka, top-ranked American John Isner and Canada's Milos Raonic in the Florida field.

The tournament takes place from Jan. 7-13, after being moved from its traditional February slot, and will serve as part of the preparations for the Australian Open Grand

Slam, which will begin three weeks later than scheduled on Feb. 8 due to COVID-19 health and safety measures.

Murray, a three-times Grand Slam champion, underwent hip resurfacing surgery in January last year but returned to win the Antwerp title seven months later -- his first

since 2017.

The 33-year-old Briton missed most of the 2020 season due to complications with his hip and struggled for form on his return after the COVID-19 hiatus, suffering a second-round defeat in the U.S. Open before falling in the opening round at Roland Garros.

## Liverpool won't force Salah to stay, says Klopp

**LIVERPOOL, 26 DEC (REUTERS):** Liverpool manager Juergen Klopp sees no reason why Mohamed Salah would want to leave the Premier League champions but says he would not keep the Egyptian forward at the club against his will.

Salah told Spanish newspaper AS in an interview this month that he admired Real Madrid and Barcelona, fuelling talk in the British media that he was looking to move on.

"I think the only reason to leave Liverpool

at the moment is the weather. What other reason could be there?"

Klopp said at a news conference.

"This is one of the biggest clubs in the world, we pay good money ... we have a sensational stadium with outstanding supporters."

"You cannot force people to stay but that is it ... We make changes and bring players in and if a player wants to go then we cannot, probably not hold him back; it's just that I would not understand

why somebody would want to go."

Salah was left on the bench for last weekend's 7-0 thrashing of Crystal Palace, but still scored two goals when he came on to help the leaders maintain their fine form.

He became Liverpool's all-time top scorer in the Champions League earlier this month in a 1-1 draw at Denmark's Midtjylland.

Klopp said Salah's comments about the Spanish sides were not an indication of his desire to leave Liverpool.

"If you ask any player in the world who is not playing for Barcelona or Madrid if he can imagine playing there one day and he said: 'No, Spanish football is not for me,' why would he say that?"

"Mo is a very important player for me obviously but this story around is not."

Liverpool are top of the table with 31 points from 14 games, four clear of second-placed Leicester City. They face West Bromwich Albion, who are second from bottom, on Sunday.

## Mikel Arteta says relegation fight looms if Arsenal fail in next three matches

**DAVID HYTNER**  
**LONDON, 26 DEC [THE GUARDIAN]:** Mikel Arteta has admitted to feeling the psychological strain of Arsenal's dire predicament and accepts the next three matches will determine whether the club are dragged into a relegation battle.

Arsenal are 15th in the Premier League, after taking five points from their past 10 games and, following the Boxing Day visit of Chelsea, they go to Brighton on Tuesday and West Brom next Saturday – teams currently two and seven points below them.

"The next seven to eight days are going to be crucial to see where we're going to be heading to in the Premier League," Arteta said, when asked directly about relegation.

The manager and his players appear trapped in a bubble of bad results and ever-decreasing confidence,

with no way of breaking out to boost morale with a team-bonding session, for example, because of coronavirus restrictions. The latest setback came on Tuesday when Arsenal lost 4-1 at home to Manchester City in the quarter-finals of the Carabao Cup.

"At the moment, to keep the team together and alive, to be a team rather than a group of players, takes a lot of energy," Arteta said. "You have to get them to be positive to each other, to not start blaming any external factors or any individuals when things are not going well. The best thing to do when you are like that is to have the possibility to do things outside our site. Get them together, change the environment, but at the moment we can't do that."

"The players are really putting in a lot of



energy and enthusiasm not to lose what we are building. But it takes a lot of energy because when you are losing games, every game is a lot of weight on your shoulders.

"People are suffering, we are hurting and you have to get back, be the leader again and try to push the players. The players respond and are excited again for the game. That's happening

but the best medicine is to win against Chelsea."

Arteta then delivered his latest rallying cry, although it has long since passed the point where it is actions on the pitch that matter. "We have to stand up and we have to pick up the points," he said. "Let's draw a line and move forward. Whether it's bad luck or these things that are affecting our results, they have to change dramatically."

## Russia's Shirokov sentenced to community service after assault on referee

**MOSCOW, 26 DEC (REUTERS):** A Moscow court on Friday sentenced Roman Shirokov, the former captain of the Russian men's national soccer team, to 100 hours of community service over an assault on a referee, the Interfax news agency reported.

The 39-year-old, who was taking part in an amateur tournament in August, was angry when referee Nikita Danchenko refused to award him a penalty



after he was challenged in the area, footage from the incident showed.

Danchenko sent Shirokov off, prompting the midfielder to punch and kick the official.

Shirokov, who played most of his career at

Zenit St Petersburg and earned 57 caps for the national team, apologised to Danchenko after the incident.

"I am well aware that not being assigned a penalty kick and then being shown a red card

cannot be a reason to raise my fists," Shirokov, who retired in 2016, wrote on Instagram.

Shirokov is not the only Russian professional soccer player to have had run-ins with the law in recent years.

Alexander Kokorin and Pavel Mamayev were jailed last year for their involvement in an assault on two civil servants, including a trade ministry official, and an altercation with the driver of a television presenter.



# After early success, South Korea sleepwalks into virus crisis

**SEOUL, DEC 26 (AP):** South Korea had seemed to be winning the fight against the coronavirus: Quickly ramping up its testing, contact-tracing and quarantine efforts paid off when it weathered an early outbreak without the economic pain of a lockdown. But a deadly resurgence has reached new heights during Christmas week, prompting soul-searching on how the nation sleepwalked into a crisis.

The 1,241 infections on Christmas Day were the largest daily increase. Another 1,132 cases were reported Saturday, bringing South Korea's caseload to 55,902.

Over 15,000 were added in the last 15 days alone. An additional 221 fatalities over the same period, the deadliest stretch, took the death toll to 793.

As the numbers keep rising, the shock to people's livelihoods is deepening and public confidence in the government eroding. Officials could decide to increase social distancing measures to maximum levels on Sunday, after resisting for weeks.

Tighter restrictions could be inevitable because transmissions have been outpacing efforts to expand hospital capacities.

In the greater Seoul area, more facilities have been designated for COVID-19 treatment and dozens of general hospitals have been ordered to allocate more ICUs for virus patients. Hundreds of troops have been deployed to help with contract tracing.

At least four patients have died at their homes or long-term care facilities while waiting for admission this month, said Kwak Jin, an official at the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency. The agency said 299 among 16,577 active patients were in serious or critical condition.

Our hospital system isn't going to collapse, but the crush in COVID-19 patients has significantly hampered our response, said Choi Won Suk, an infectious disease professor at the Korea University Ansan Hospital, west of Seoul.

Choi said the government should have done more to prepare hospitals for a winter surge.

We have patients with all kinds of serious illnesses at our ICUs and they can't share any space with COVID-19 patients, so it's hard, Choi said. It's the same medical staff that has been fighting the virus for all these months. There's an accumulation of fatigue. Critics say the government of President Moon Jae-in became complacent after swiftly containing the outbreak this spring that was centered in the southeastern city of Daegu.

The past weeks have underscored risks of putting economic concerns before public health when vaccines are at least months away. Officials had eased social distancing rules to their lowest in October, allowing high-risk venues like clubs and karaoke rooms to reopen, although experts were warning of a viral surge during winter when people spend longer hours indoors.

Jaehun Jung, a professor of preventive medicine at the Gachon University College of Medicine in Incheon, said he anticipates infections to gradually slow over

the next two weeks.

The quiet streets and long lines snaking around testing stations in Seoul, which are temporarily providing free tests to anyone regardless of whether they have symptoms or clear reasons to suspect infections, demonstrate a return of public alertness following months of pandemic fatigue.

Officials are also clamping down on private social gatherings through Jan. 3, shutting down ski resorts, prohibiting hotels from selling more than half of their rooms and setting fines for restaurants if they accept groups of five or more people.

Still, lowering transmissions to the levels seen in early November 100 to 200 a day would be unrealistic, Jung said, anticipating the daily figure to settle around 300 to 500 cases.

The higher baseline might necessitate tightened social distancing until vaccines roll out a dreadful outlook for low-income workers and the self-employed who drive the country's service sector, the part of the economy the virus has damaged

the most.

The government should do whatever to secure enough supplies and move up the administration of vaccines to the earliest possible point, Jung said.

South Korea plans to secure around 86 million doses of vaccines next year, which would be enough to cover 46 million people in a population of 51 million. The first supplies, which will be AstraZeneca vaccines produced by a local manufacturing partner, are expected to be delivered in February and March. Officials plan to complete vaccinating 60% to 70% of the population by around November.

There's disappointment the shots aren't coming sooner, though officials have insisted South Korea could afford a wait-and-see approach as its outbreak isn't as dire as in America or Europe.

South Korea's earlier success could be attributed to its experience in fighting a 2015 outbreak of MERS, the Middle East respiratory syndrome, caused by a different coronavirus.

## Black doctor dies of COVID after racist treatment complaints

**INDIANAPOLIS (AP):** A Black doctor who died battling COVID-19 complained of racist medical care in widely shared social media posts days before her death, prompting an Indiana hospital system to promise a "full external review" into her treatment.

Dr. Susan Moore, 52, tested positive for COVID-19 late last month and was admitted to IU Health North Hospital in Carmel, Indiana, according to a Facebook post. Acutely aware of her condition and medical procedures, the physician said had to repeatedly ask for medication, scans and routine checks while admitted at a hospital in Carmel, Indiana. She noted a white doctor in particular who seemingly dismissed her pain and said she didn't trust the hospital.

"I put forth and maintain, if I was white, I wouldn't have to go through that," she says in a Dec. 4 video, her voice often cracking. "This is how Black people get killed, when you send them home, and they don't know how to fight for themselves."

She was released from the hospital run by Indiana University Health System on Dec. 7, but was again hospitalized 12 hours later when her temperature spiked and her blood pressure dropped, according to her post. She was taken to a different hospital, Ascension St. Vincent in Carmel, and said she was experiencing better care.

Still, her condition worsened and she was put on a ventilator. She died Dec. 20, her 19-year-old son Henry Muhammad told news outlets. A listed number for Muhammad could not be located Friday. Messages left by The Associated Press for two family spokespeople weren't immediately returned Friday.

The coronavirus has disproportionately affected Black people, who suffer from higher rates of obesity, diabetes and asthma, making them more susceptible to the virus. Black Americans are also more vulnerable because of systemic racism, inequity in health care access and economic opportunity.

Many Black Americans also report that medical professionals take their ailments less seriously when they seek treatment.

Moore grew up in Michigan, where she earned a medical degree at the University of Michigan in 2002. She had an active medical license in Indiana at the time of her death, according to MLive.com.

Muhammad told The New York Times that his mother had often frequently experienced inferior medical care. She had an inflammatory disease called sarcoidosis that attacks the lungs and was often treated for her condition.

"Nearly every time she went to the hospital she had to advocate for herself, fight for something in some way,

shape or form, just to get baseline, proper care," he told the newspaper.

Dennis Murphy, the president and CEO of Indiana University Health, said Thursday he was saddened by Moore's death. He said he did not believe the medical team "failed the technical aspects" of Moore's care after a preliminary medical quality review but "may not have shown the level of compassion and respect we strive for in understanding what matters most to patients."

"I am asking for an external review of this case. We will have a diverse panel of healthcare and diversity experts conduct a thorough medical review of Dr. Moore's concerns to address any potential treatment bias," he said in a statement.

In the past year, public health experts nationwide have acknowledged the role racism plays in health care with dozens of cities, counties and states declaring racism a public health threat. While public health experts have called it a first step, many are skeptical.

Muhammad, who said his mother was his best friend and a very caring person, didn't get the chance to say goodbye before she died.

"I am outraged beyond words ... because if what my mom thinks was true and that it was racism, and they neglected her because of that, nobody should go through that," he told ABC News.

# Armenia's prime minister offers to discuss early election

**YEREVAN (ARMENIA), DEC 26 (AP):** Armenia's prime minister said he was ready to discuss the possibility of holding an early parliamentary election, but rejected opposition demands to step down over his handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan.

Opposition supporters have rallied for weeks, urging Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to step down over the November 10 peace deal that saw Azerbaijan reclaim control over large parts of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas. The Russia-brokered agreement ended 44 days of fierce fighting in which the Azerbaijani army routed Armenian forces.

Pashinyan has defended the peace deal as a painful but

necessary move to prevent Azerbaijan from overrunning the entire Nagorno-Karabakh region.

He argued Friday that his critics lack broad public support for their demand.

I'm not clinging to the prime minister's seat, but I can't carelessly treat the post given to me by the people, he said on Facebook.

Pashinyan added that he was ready to hold consultations with the nation's political parties to discuss calling an early parliamentary election next year.

Opposition supporters on Friday continued blocking streets in the Armenian capital and engaged in occasional scuffles with police.

Nagorno-Karabakh lies within Azerbaijan but was under the control of



ethnic Armenian forces backed by Armenia since a separatist war there ended in 1994. That war left Nagorno-Karabakh itself and substantial surrounding territory in Armenian hands.

Heavy fighting that erupted in late September marked the biggest escalation of

the decades-old conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, killing more than 5,600 people on both sides.

The Russia-brokered peace agreement stipulated that Armenia hand over control of some areas it holds outside Nagorno-Karabakh's borders.

Azerbaijan also retained control over areas of Nagorno-Karabakh it had taken during the conflict.

The peace deal was celebrated in Azerbaijan as a major triumph, and triggered outrage and mass protests in Armenia.

## Downtown Nashville explosion knocks communications offline

**NASHVILLE, TENN. (AP):** A recreational vehicle parked in the deserted streets of downtown Nashville exploded early Christmas morning, causing widespread communications outages that took down police emergency systems and grounded holiday travel at the city's airport.

Police were responding to a report of shots fired Friday when they encountered the RV blaring a recorded warning that a bomb would detonate in 15 minutes, Metro Nashville Police Chief John Drake said. Police evacuated nearby buildings and called in the bomb squad. The RV exploded shortly afterward, Drake said.

"This morning's attack

on our community was intended to create chaos and fear in this season of peace and hope. But Nashvillians have proven time and time again that the spirit of our city cannot be broken," Mayor John Cooper said at a news conference after issuing a curfew for the area.

Police believe the blast was intentional but don't yet know a motive or target, and Drake noted that officials had not received any threats before the explosion.

The chief said investigators at the scene "have found tissue that we believe could be remains, but we'll have that examined and let you know at that time." Police could not say whether it potentially came from

someone inside the RV.

Three people taken to area hospitals for treatment were in stable condition Friday evening, Cooper said.

Surveillance video published on a Twitter account Friday that appeared to be across the street from the blast captured the warning issuing from the RV, "... if you can hear this message, evacuate now," seconds before the explosion.

The blast sent black smoke and flames billowing from the heart of downtown Nashville's tourist scene, an area packed with honky-tonks, restaurants and shops. Buildings shook and windows shattered streets away from the explosion near a building

owned by AT&T that lies one block from the company's office tower, a landmark in downtown.

"We do not know if that was a coincidence, or if that was the intention," police spokesman Don Aaron said. He said earlier that some people were taken to the department's central precinct for questioning but declined to give details.

AT&T said the affected building is the central office of a telephone exchange, with network equipment in it. The blast interrupted service, but the company declined to say how widespread outages were.

The AT&T outages site showed service issues in middle Tennessee

and Kentucky. Several police agencies reported that their 911 systems were down because of the outage, including Knox County, home to Knoxville about 180 miles (290 kilometers) east of Nashville.

AT&T said that it was bringing in portable cell sites and was working with law enforcement to get access to make repairs to its equipment. The company noted that "power is essential to restoring" service.

The Federal Aviation Administration temporarily halted flights out of Nashville International Airport because of telecommunications issues associated with the explosion

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Eight essays put the spotlight on the journey coursed by hydel projects in Sikkim and the region, the cost exacted by this "development" and some of the stories it birthed, not all of which have been shared before. Also finding place in this collection is the arrival of Climate Change and its impact on Sikkim and how the State could negotiate with this new disruption.

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## Arshad Warsi says he finds the delay in 'Munna Bhai 3' weird

**MUMBAI, DEC 26 (PTI):** Actor Arshad Warsi has revealed that three scripts are ready for the third installment in the "Munna Bhai" franchise, but he is doubtful if the film will be made in the near future.

The franchise, helmed by filmmaker Rajkumar Hirani and produced by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, chronicles the story of an affable goon, Munna bhai (Sanjay Dutt), and his sidekick Circuit (Warsi).

The first film Munna Bhai MBBS released in 2003 and was followed by a 2006 sequel Lage Raho Munna Bhai.

The much-anticipated third film has been in the making for sometime, but the 52-year-old actor said he is clueless about the reasons for the delay in the movie.

"It is the weirdest thing ever because three scripts are almost ready, we have a producer who would love to make it.

"A director and actors, who are ready and audience who wants to see it but still there is no film," Warsi told PTI.

Chopra had revealed in February that the team had zeroed in on an idea for the third "Munna Bhai" movie

and were developing it further.

Warsi also shared that he was going to collaborate with Dutt on another project, but the film was put on hold due to the latter's health issues.

"Once, he is all healthy and fine, we will discuss and start the film," he added.

Dutt had announced in August that he would be taking a break from his professional commitments to focus on overcoming his battle with cancer.

In October, the actor had shared that he has been "victorious" in his fight against the disease.

## Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch sold to billionaire

**LOS ANGELES (AP):** Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch in California has found a new owner in billionaire businessman Ron Burkle.

Burkle views the 2,700-acre property in Los Olivos, near Santa Barbara, as a land banking opportunity, his spokesman said Thursday in an email.

The Wall Street Journal reports the property was sold for \$22 million to Burkle, an associate of the late pop star and co-founder of the investment firm Yucaipa Companies.

The asking price of the property was \$100 million in 2016 then dropped to \$67 million a year later.

In addition to a 12,500 square-foot main residence and a 3,700 square-foot pool house, the property boasts a separate building with a 50-seat movie theater and a dance studio.

Other features on the ranch are a



"Disney-style" train station, a fire house and barn.

Burkle's spokesman said the billionaire had been eyeing Zaca Lake — which adjoins the property — for a new Soho House, a members-only club with locations in Los Angeles, Miami, New

York and Toronto. Burkle ultimately decided the location was too remote and expensive for a club.

Burkle is the controlling shareholder of Soho House.

After Burkle saw the property from the air, he put in an offer to purchase.

## Leslie West, guitarist of rock band Mountain, has died at 75

**LOS ANGELES (AP):** Leslie West, an iconic guitarist-vocalist who was behind several '70s rock anthems including "Mississippi Queen" with the popular band Mountain, has died. He was 75.

His spokesman Steve Karas said West died Wednesday in Palm Coast, Florida. Karas said West died from cardiac arrest after being rushed to the hospital.

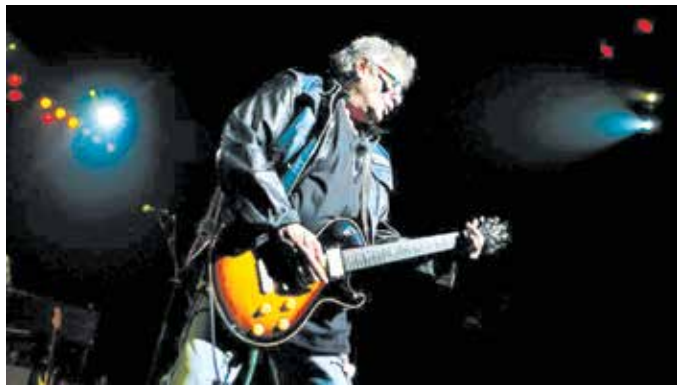
West battled with health issues in the past few years. In 2011, his lower right leg was amputated in a life-saving operation related to his diabetes.

Rockers like Gene Simmons and Slash showed support for West on social media a day before his death when it was clear he was in dire condition. Paul Stanley called West a "gentle man and guitar hero" on Twitter.

West began his music career in the mid-60s with The Vagrants with his brother Larry West Weinstein, who played bass. The band known as a blue-eyed soul group had a minor hit with "I Can't Make a Friend" and covered Otis Redding's "Respect" in 1967.

West stepped out on his own with a solo career, releasing the 1969 album "Mountain," which was produced by Felix Pappalardi. West and Pappalardi ended up starting the hard rock band Mountain, which was named after West's debut solo album.

In 1969, Mountain performed an 11-song set at Woodstock before the Grateful Dead. A year later, the band released their biggest hit "Mississippi Queen," which appeared on numerous movie and TV soundtracks along with video games including Guitar Hero. The song was covered by several artists such as



Ozzy Osbourne, W.A.S.P. and Bachman-Turner Overdrive.

Mountain's song "Long Red" became popular among multiple hip-hop artists including Jay-Z, Kanye West and Nas, who sampled the single. "Theme From An Imaginary Western" was another of the band's notable songs.

During a Mountain hiatus, West formed the group West, Bruce and Laing along with Cream bassist Jack Bruce and Mountain drummer Corky Laing.

West appeared in films such as "Family Honor" and "Money Pit." He was a regular guest on the Howard Stern Show. The musician was inducted into the Long Island Music Hall of Fame in 2006.

West is survived by his wife, Jenni, whom he married on stage after Mountain's performance at the Woodstock 40th anniversary concert in Bethel, New York in 2009.

## Jisshu Sengupta to star in film 'Baba, Baby O'

**MUMBAI, DEC 26 (PTI):** Actor Jisshu Sengupta will next essay the role of a single father in his upcoming Bengali film "Baba, Baby O", the makers have announced.

The news was shared by noted Bengali film producers Nandita Roy and Shiboprosad Mukherjee's Windows Productions on Friday.

Roy said the film is based on a novel concept and she is hopeful that it will capture the hearts of the audience.

Aritra Mukherjee will direct the movie from a screenplay by Zinia Sen and dialogues by Samragnee

Bandyopadhyay.

The filmmaker said the film is an intense love story, filled with humour.

"During the lockdown, when Zinia came up with this story, it made our entire team smile from ear to ear. Samragnee immediately started work on the dialogues and we were all set to embark on a new journey," she added.

Sengupta most recently featured in a string of Hindi films such as "Shakuntala Devi", "Sadak 2" and "Durgamati".

## Phoebe Waller-Bridge is surprise celebrity guest in Harry Styles' new music video

**LONDON, DEC 26 (PTI):** British singer Harry Styles has roped in "Fleabag" star Phoebe Waller-Bridge as a special guest for his upcoming music video.

The teaser for the song "Treat People With Kindness", from Styles' Watermelon Sugar album, was leaked on Vevo's Twitter account on Thursday, leaving the fans of the pop star and Emmy-winning actor-writer craving for the full video.

The 24-second-long black-and-white clip features Styles, wearing a rhinestone-covered tuxedo, as he serenades Waller-Bridge, dressed in a white suit, sitting at the table in a nightclub.



There is no news on when the official teaser or the full-length video of the song will come out, but admirers of both the artistes took to social media to express their excitement on the collaboration.

"So you're telling me Harry Styles is realising Treat People With Kindness music video starring him and Phoebe Waller-Bridge! I'll take it. What a wonderful Christmas gift," a Twitter user wrote.

"Phoebe waller bridge is in harry styles's treat people with kindness music video. somebody has to be kidding me, cuz if there's someone I love as much as I love harry it's her. this is the best Christmas present I could have asked for," another user wrote on the micro-blogging site.

"What! A TPWK mv with Phoebe Waller Bridge! Is this a dream?" a tweet read.



**LAST MINUTE SHOPPING! Actress Jessica Alba was spotted in an all-brown look outside of Nordstrom in Century City, California.**

### ARIES:

Medium Darryl Anka reveals, "Everything is energy and that's all there is to it. Match the frequency of the reality you want, and you cannot help but get that reality." You're resonating with his words one hundred per cent because this is where you are in your experience, Aries. The law of attraction is no secret to you. But it wasn't up until now that you realised your own role as a master manifestor. So, continue to dedicate yourself to the inner work, and to bring about a shift in your own vibrations. Before you know it, your physical reality will have transformed with you.

### TAURUS:

Self-help author Stephen Richards writes, "No matter how small you start, always dream big." Just the words of wisdom you need to get up and show up, Taurus. Each day is a new day, and you are more aware of this today than you have ever been. You know that your failures don't define you. Your dreams do. So, continue to move forward and onwards knowing that you have the power to manifest your dreams in your physical reality.

### GEMINI:

This is a strange and beautiful time in the Gemini HQ. You are not where you envisioned you

would be, but you know you are on your way there. The destination requires a few sacrifices from you, and that's okay. You're putting your big expenses on hold at the moment and focusing on saving those coins. There's a big dream that will require financial investment on your part. It's better to start working towards it sooner than later.

### CANCER:

There's fantastic news for Cancerians who are a part of the literary world. A brand new beginning is indicated for you, one that will take your career to the next level. The key: working hard and dedicating your energy to the realisation of this goal. So, keep the distractions to a minimum and find a way to remain creatively charged. Getting out of your head and into your body is a good way to reconnect with that stream of creative consciousness.

### LEO:

It's a 'work hard and play harder' kind of day in the Leo HQ. You're more focused on your goals than you've ever been, and you know you have the potential to make it big despite your history. You're on the right track. Keep moving forward and onwards without an ounce of doubt in your mind. Remember, what makes you different is what makes you, you. So, take

a great risk knowing that the pay off will be more magnificent than you can even imagine.

### VIRGO:

Less-than-perfect has never been your style—not with your presentations, not with your sartorial choices, and certainly not with your relationships. The weekend finds you re-examining your choices and looking at them through the lens of wisdom. You understand that you attracted certain experiences in your life so you could grow on a soul level and blossom into the person you are today. So, let go of the old and let go with love. You are now moving into a space where your authenticity will help you attract a relationship that is in alignment with who you are.

### LIBRA:

Chaos and conflict could be a constant in your world, Libra, and your inner peacemaker will not be able to understand why those around you cannot find a way to get along. Resist the urge to get caught up in the drama. Be the Venusian that you are and act from a space of diplomacy. Yes, that means refusing to take sides. Sooner or later, this storm will pass. Remembering that all the world is but a stage will help you make it to the other side with your sanity intact.

### SCORPIO:

It's easy to blame the world and its aunt for where you are and what's going wrong. You know what requires courage? Taking charge of your life, reclaiming the reins, and steering your chariot in a direction that feels right to you. You are understanding the power of free will more than ever before, and your role as the co-creator of your Destiny. Remember, the forces are with you and they're holding space for you to take a leap of faith in the right direction.

### SAGITTARIUS:

You've been here before, Sagittarius, with people who only half-loved you and chose to exit at the first sign of distress. Do you really want to repeat the old pattern, or hold onto what is no longer in alignment knowing fully well that things won't work out? Today, without bringing guilt or shame into the equation, take a stance for yourself. If this requires you to cut a certain cord, so be it.

### CAPRICORN:

The dispute won't settle overnight. It will require patience and dedication on your part. It will require you to hold space for an open and honest conversation, where both parties feel seen and heard. So, move beyond the ego space. Remember the higher reason behind

why you are here. There is a way to bring peace and harmony into the equation. Trust this and keep moving forward.

### AQUARIUS:

There are times in our lives when everything looks good on paper, yet the nagging feeling in our head prevents us from moving forward. Maybe you are not operating from a space of paranoia. Maybe you are being guided by something higher than yourself. Just for today, let go of the self-doubt \*and\* the burden of other people's expectations as you pay attention to what your inner voice is telling you. Remembering the cliché 'all that glitters is not gold' will help you make the right decision.

### PISCES:

There was a time when you acted from a space of anxiety. There was a time that you worried yourself sick about the outcome of things. But you are experiencing a huge shift in your consciousness, one that is helping you lay your trust in the mysterious forces. You understand that everything works in accordance with the law of divine timing, and that the rewards of this endeavour will be granted to you when the stars align. In the meantime, you're going to continue to put in your best, and pour your love into these creations.