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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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*1,786 more
receive Covid
vaccine shots
across Sikkim*

SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 27 MAR:

In continuation with the state government's push to cover more and more people in the COVID-19 vaccination drive, 1,786 more people received the COVID vaccine shots across the State on Friday.

Out of these 1,786 people, 1675 were provided the first shot of the vaccine and 111 completed their vaccination schedule with the second dose.

While providing details of district-wise vaccination carried out on Friday, Health Department State IEC Officer, Sonam Gyaltsen Bhutia, informed that 1,040 persons [955 first dose & 85 second dose] in East District, 599 [587 first dose & 12 second dose] in West District, 88 [76 first dose & 12 second dose] in North District and 59 persons [57 first dose & 02 second dose] in South District received vaccination against COVID-19.

In the category-wise vaccination, he informed that 115 healthcare workers [103 first dose & 12 second dose], 162 frontline workers [63 first dose & 99 second dose], 450 persons in age group of 45 to 59 years with co-morbidities and 1,059 persons in age-group of 60 years & above were vaccinated for COVID-19.

*"Your visa should
be cancelled":
Mamata*

*Banerjee on PM's
Bangladesh trip*

KOLKATA, 27 MAR [NDTV]: West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Saturday hit out at Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his visit to Bangladesh, accusing him of trying to influence voters in West Bengal where polling began for the eight-phase assembly election in the morning.

"Elections are underway here and he (PM) goes to Bangladesh and lectures on Bengal. It is a total violation of code of conduct of the election," Ms Banerjee said at a campaign event in Kharagpur according to news agency ANI.

"In 2019 Lok Sabha polls, when a Bangladeshi actor attended our rally, BJP spoke to Bangladesh government and cancelled his visa. When polls are underway here, you (PM) go to Bangladesh to seek votes from one section of people. Why shouldn't your visa be cancelled? We will complain to the Election Commission," she said.

Mamata Banerjee was
turn to pg02

Following flu-like outbreak in livestock, Agri Minister tours West Sikkim farms, directs officials to get more proactive

PRITAM LAMA GYALSHING, 27 MAR:

Agriculture Minister Loknath Sharma toured various villages in West Sikkim following the flu-like outbreak in the livestock in the district.

The Minister made it a point to visit farmers engaged in piggy and dairy who have been severely affected by this outbreak.

On Saturday, Minister Lok Nath Sharma along with officials from the Veterinary Services Department and veterinarians visited every households at Berthang and Bermiok villages under Gyalshing-Bermiok constituency in west Sikkim to take stock of problems faced by them. The Minister also represents Gyalshing-Bermiok in the Legislative Assembly.

While interacting with the farmers, the Minister informed them about the various welfare schemes available for them and the incentives the State Government has put in place for piggy, dairy and poultry farmers.

The Minister appealed to the



farmers to opt for insurance facilities available for livestock from the Department.

He also directed department officials and employees to render services proactively and without compromises.

Veterinary Departmental em-

ployees must be serious in carrying out their duties and accountable or be prepared to face the consequences, the Minister warned.

"Our farmers must not suffer in receiving medical assistance for their Livestock from the Department. Farm-

ers must not be discouraged and the Department should be at their service 24x7," the Minister stressed.

The State Government is focused on developing Agriculture and allied sectors in the state to generate revenue for the grassroots and the

Department is improving its services for the upliftment of farmers, he added.

He also empathised with the farmers for the loss suffered by them due to the outbreak in the livestock assured all possible support from the State Government to help them tide over the crisis.

"Our Veterinarians are doing their best to restore health among the livestock," the Minister reassured.

The Minister also directed the Department officials to start vaccination, extend medical assistance and other measures to bring the flu-like outbreak under control in the livestock.

Animal Husbandry & Veterinary services Department Additional Director Narad Cintury, in turn informed that samples have already been sent to the laboratory for further tests to ascertain the cause of livestock deaths.

He added that the Department was also starting a vaccination drive against Swine Flu in the area.

Knight Karnage belt their way to Red Fest-V victory



SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 27 MAR:

Knight Karnage emerged champions of Red Fest V in the grand finale held here at Manan Kendra on Saturday.

Likewise, Freedom came in the first runners-up and Resurrected Souls on the third position in this battle of the bands competition.

The winning band took away the cash prize of Rs 70,000, while cash prizes of Rs 50,000 and Rs 30,000 were presented to the first and second runners-up respectively.

The Multi Media Campaign [MMC] 2020-21, Red Fest V, was organized by Sikkim State AIDS Control Society in association with Recovering Users Network [RUN].

A total of ten bands from different parts of the State had participated in the audition round held on 10 March with the top-five proceeding to the grand finale today.

The other two bands in top-five who performed at the grand finale are Burning Fire and Dremonite.

The grand finale had Chairperson, Khadi & Village Industries Board, Chung Chung Bhutia, as the chief guest accom-

panied by Advisor to Information Technology Department, Tenzing Lamtha, and Additional Political Secretary to the CM, Tshering Wangchuk Lepcha, as guests of honour.

The event was judged by a panel of four judges comprising of Neha Pradhan, Diwsh Rai, Naeky Rai and Sachin Gurung.

The bands performed three songs each of which two were covers and one original.

The grand finale also featured a performance of Sikkim Gurls and Bipolar Shadows, the winners of MMC 2019 and a special performance by the judges.

Motivational speaker Premium Bhutia also addressed the event.

Earlier, SSACS Project Director, Dr DS Kerongi, asserted that everyone needs to work together in the fight against HIV/AIDS in the State to build a healthy society. He said that SSACS has been working continuously along with different organizations and sections of the society to create mass awareness on this issue to bring positive change in society.

The programme was conducted by KC Nima from RUN.

11 more cases raise Sikkim's active Covid cases to 50

SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 27 MAR:

The number of active cases of novel coronavirus in Sikkim increased to 50 today with the detection of 11 new cases in the last 24 hours. This is the first time in over a month that the number of daily cases has gone above ten. Sikkim's tally of the confirmed cases of COVID-19 has now reached 6226.

Of the eleven cases, nine were reported from East District and one each from West and South Sikkim.

In his daily health bulletin on Saturday, Health Department State IEC Officer, Sonam Gyaltsen Bhutia, informed that the screening of 125 samples on Friday returned 11 positive cases.

He added that while eight of the cases were found in RT-PCR testing of 97 samples, one case was picked up in TrueNat testing and two more in rapid antigen testing.

Among the new cases from in and

around Gangtok, there is one person from Libing, two from Tadong, one from PNG School Road and one from Indira Bye-Pass Road.

Elsewhere in the district, one person from Rhenock and one from Aho-Yangtam, Ranipool, in East District were also found positive for COVID-19.

Mr Bhutia mentioned that a 36-year-old female from government quarters in Shyari who has tested positive for COVID-19 cannot be reached over the phone number provided by her and has urged her to immediately contact the concerned authorities.

Elsewhere, one person from Ghurpisey, Namchi in South District and another also Namchi were found positive for COVID-19.

Mr Bhutia added that a tourist has also tested positive in rapid antigen
turn to pg02

Holy Cross family puts together grand farewell for 'Yangchung Miss'



SAGAR CHETTRI GANGTOK, 27 MAR:

Tsering Yangchung, a senior teacher at Holy Cross School, Tadong, received an emotional farewell from her colleagues and students at a special function held here at the school auditorium on Saturday.

Ex-students from different batches of Holy Cross School also participated in this grand farewell programme.

On the occasion, the

school and the batch of 1996 also felicitated Ms Yangchung for her service.

Ms Yangchung has taught Science & Mathematics at Holy Cross School for the past 34 years, a service also feted with a national award on Teacher's Day in 2017. She has also been felicitated numerous times by the school for her contributions to the field of education.

While sharing her
turn to pg02

With 9 candidates in the fray, Burtuk sees campaigning intensify

TENZING YANGZOM GANGTOK, 26 MAR:

Campaigning for the municipal election has grown stronger as the day of voting approaches.

All nine candidates of Burtuk [ward no. 2] have plans to bring about change in terms of resolving major problems like water shortage, garbage system, street lights, and health facilities.

While some candidates say that they will resolve water shortage by making more scientific use of springs in the area, others assure that garbage system, streetlights, and health services will be taken up on priority for improvement if they are elected.

Sunita Chettri, Suk Bahadur Gurung, and Saroj Gurung spoke to SummitTimes about footpath construction in the area.

They expressed that they would appeal to the Government to provide a footpath till Bojoghari for the safety of pedestrians in the area. At the moment the footpath ends at Vajra.



Suk Bahadur Gurung said that he believes, public service is holy and akin to going on a pilgrimage which is why he is the fray.

Durga Chettri and Kishore Tamang, two other candidates, focused on the need for playground and community hall in their area where people could gather not just in celebration but also to discuss their com-

mon problems and find solutions by consensus.

Chandra Bahadur Gurung, Ram Giri, Palmu Sherpa, and Nell Bahadur Chettri's focus is on car parking problems, unemployment, and health services, especially for the elderly.

Nell Bdr. Chettri said that a multi-storeyed car park could solve the parking problem.

Palmu Sherpa, meanwhile,

said that she wants to provide skill development training that would help unemployed youth and school dropouts to become self-reliant.

Also, while speaking to SummitTimes, Mr Nell Bahadur Chettri alleged that his opponents have been trying to malign his image and advised them to focus on issues and not his image.

Trinamool asks election body to appoint only locals as poll booth agents

KOLKATA, 27 MAR [PTI]:

A Trinamool Congress delegation, led by MP Sudip Bandyopadhyay, has urged the Election Commission to bring back the rule which enjoined upon political parties to appoint only people, registered as voters in an assembly segment where an election booth was located, as polling agents for that booth.

The rule had been relaxed last week to allow agents to be appointed from any part of an assembly constituency.

Mr Bandyopadhyay, after meeting Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Aariz Aftab, said that only locals, living in the assembly segment where the booth was located should be appointed as polling agents by parties "as was the practice earlier."

"After representations by BJP, the Election Commission has changed the long established tradition of asking parties to have polling agents from the same locality and this has caused a lot of problems in the booths in the first phase as many of the agents don't even know each other," he said.

The TMC has urged the CEO to revert to the earlier practice of having polling agents of the same locality which will also minimise the chance of discrepancies and ensure fair polling in the remaining seven phases, he added.

Mr Bandyopadhyay said "the CEO listened to our points. But did not say much."

Asked if he expected a favourable response from EC, he said "our job is to point out issues to them. We believe in democratic traditions."

Reacting to claims by BJP that TMC is scared of the outcome as it is fast losing support, Mr Bandyopadhyay said "after May 2 it will be amply clear who the populace prefers."

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Rajya Sabha MP adopts Rongong-Tumlong GPU under Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana

MANGAN, 26 MAR [IPR]: As a part of Sansaad Adarsh Gram Yojana (SAGY) the entry point visit of Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), Hishey Lachungpa was held at Phodong Senior Secondary School for Rongong Tumlong GPU today.

The guest of honour for the event was Minister for Forest & Wildlife Management-cum- area MLA, Karma Loday Bhutia. Also present at the gathering were Zilla Adhyaksha, Namday Lepcha, District Collector (North), Tenzing T Kaleon, ADC (Dev Mangan) RB Bhandari, HoDs of various departments of North District, Panchayat, public and the students of Phodong Senior Secondary School.

Addressing the gathering, the MP expressed his pleasure and gratitude, both on Rongong Tumlong being adopted under SAGY.

He stated that 'development' is an ongoing procedure, which means growth and expansion will continue to



take place in the years to come for the GPU. He said that unity among the people of the village is of utmost importance and should be the driving force for the people to achieve common goals for the community.

He also encouraged people to participate and increase activities that will propel economic development through agriculture, tourism and the history and heritage of the place. He also suggested adding 'traditional entertainment' like theatre that can recreate historical tales that could pass on as a visual tradition for generations to come.

erations to come.

Addressing the students, he advised them to challenge themselves and to try and face obstacles in life so that eventually they can emerge victorious.

Minister Karma Loday Bhutia spoke on the roles and responsibilities of the Panchayats and the seriousness with which they need to cater to the needs of the people of the GPU. He stated that the objective of SAGY was to bring about developmental activities in a system and manner that is beneficial as well as rewarding for all. He stressed on

social duties of individuals and the officers and to appealed to everyone to give special attention to the needy and the less privileged.

He advised the students to lead a disciplined life and to become model citizens. He urged the gathering to try and maintain an eco-friendly lifestyle and be conscious regarding the environment.

Deputy Secretary (RMDD) provided details on the origin, vision, and guidelines of SAGY while the Village Profile Presentation was provided by Panchayat Dev. Assis-

tant, who presented the exact number of wards, households, population, education and banking institutions and all details of Rongong Tumlong GPU.

Zilla Panchayat Member appealed for the public's participation as well as suggestions for the development of the GPU.

An interactive session took place where the public placed their grievances, suggestions, and feedback. The MP (Rajya Sabha) assured that all their grievances would be dealt with and thanked them for their suggestions.

At high-level meet, Centre reveals 5-step plan to tackle Covid spike

NEW DELHI, 27 MAR [NDTV]:

The Union Health Secretary on Saturday chaired a high-level meeting with 12 states and union territories - including Maharashtra, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, Bengal, Karnataka, Punjab and Delhi - to discuss the alarming spike in Covid cases across the country.

At the meeting a five-step strategy - "exponential increase in testing, effective isolation and contact tracing, re-institution of healthcare workers (to counter fatigue after spending the past year fighting the virus and treating patients) ensuring the public follows Covid protocols, and targeted approach to vaccination" - was introduced to help deal with the increase in cases.

Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan told states and UTs present that 46 "high-burden districts" had been identified and advised them to focus on "stringent containment and public health measures".

States and UTs were told these 46 districts had contributed 71 per cent of all new Covid cases (and 69 per cent of all deaths) this month. Mr Bhushan also said that of the 36 districts in Maharashtra - the worst-affected state - 25 accounted for 59.8 per cent of all new cases in the past week. As part of renewed efforts to contain the virus, states and UTs were told to increase testing but increase the share of the more reliable RT-PCR kits to 70 per cent of all tests.

They were also asked to ensure effective isolation of positive cases and prompt tracing of contacts - "...an average of 30 close contacts are traced, tested and isolated in the first 72 hours."

Efforts to counter fatigue among frontline and healthcare workers - who have been battling the pandemic for over a year now - were also

discussed. The results of a study on public compliance to Covid protocols was tabled; the study revealed that only 44 per cent of the people wear face masks when in public. In line with this fact, states and UTs were urged to ensure people followed all Covid-appropriate behaviour, particularly in public.

This morning over 62,000 new coronavirus cases were reported across the country in the preceding 24 hours - a 5.3 per cent increase from Friday and the biggest single-day spike in five months.

Maharashtra accounted for over half of these - nearly 37,000 cases. Other states to report high daily figures were Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Chhattisgarh. Delhi logged over 1,500 cases for a second straight day. Gujarat and Haryana both saw over 2,000 cases and Punjab over 3,000.

On Friday the Health Ministry rushed teams of medical experts to Chandigarh and Chhattisgarh to deal with increasing cases. A few days earlier teams were sent to Maharashtra and Punjab.

Concern over the surge in cases also comes as several states - particularly those seeing a spike now - are prepping for Assembly elections over the next few weeks. Bengal and Assam held the first phase of polls today, with Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry all set to vote on April 6.

Several major cities and states - Mumbai, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh among them - have also banned celebration of Holi and other forthcoming festivals in public spaces. Delhi and Mumbai have also announced random Covid testing of people in public areas.

A home-grown dating app for LGBTQ+ community

NEW DELHI, MAR 27 (PTI):

A home-grown app designed explicitly for the Indian LGBTQ+ community aims to bridge that gap when it comes to dating and connecting with others who have, over the years, become comfortable with and vocal about their identities.

'As You Are' or AYA, the dating and social networking platform, is the brainchild of Chandigarh-based entrepreneur Sunali Aggarwal and understands that many within the community have not identified themselves publicly for various reasons.

The app's key features are customised keeping in mind the suitability and sensitivity of the users: accessibility and anonymity, easy-to-

use and jargon-free sign-up, three levels of verification and blanket security, and complete user control, says Aggarwal, who co-founded Mobikwik.com in 2009.

Reflecting on the journey and AYA's future, she says for many from the LGBTQ+ community, the physical world may not be the most conducive space to find a partner.

"Therefore, the community often turns to the digital world to seek guidance and support. Owing to this, AYA aims to create a safe space to counter the challenges of queer dating," she says.

"In the future, we also aim to bring services designed especially for the community and if possible, by the community," she adds.

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Holy Cross family...

34-year-long journey at Holy Cross School, Ms Yangchung shared that continuous support and love from colleagues and students kept teaching a joy for her and provided constant inspiration to work harder.

While calling the farewell a memorable one, she thanked colleagues and students for coming together with such a warm gesture even during the current time of a COVID pandemic.

"I had always wanted to become a teacher... and never had second thoughts about the profession and I can now proudly say that I am a born teacher," she said.

Ms Yangchung also thanked all her ex-students for their presence and felicitation on her last day at the school.

She expressed happiness on seeing her students doing exceptionally well in society and their respective lives.

Principal, Sister Sherin Jose, expressed her gratitude towards Ms Yangchung for her committed service to the Holy Cross family and added that she was a teacher par excellence who dedicated her life nurturing the lives of her students.

Likewise, another senior teacher, Neema Dolma Lama, spoke about the contributions made by Ms Yangchung towards the school and students.

11 more cases...

testing and has been referred to Siliguri. He added that the hotel the tourist stayed in has been contained and his primary contacts identified for testing.

In the meantime, two more persons were discharged from isolation facilities after completing their home quarantine to further improve the number of recovered cases of COVID-19 in Sikkim to 5,944.

"Your visa should ...

referring to the PM offering prayers at a temple in Bangladesh's Orakandi, the birthplace of Hindu mystic figure and Matua community's spiritual guru Harichand Thakur, earlier in the day.

Orakandi is the abode of hundreds from the Hindu Matua community, a large number of whom are now residents of West Bengal and an important factor in elections.

PM Modi, whose visit during the temple was seen by many as a political message, also addressed members of the Matua community, saying, "I was speaking to some people here. They were saying who could have thought that India's Prime Minister would visit Orakandi."

He also promised to make it easier for people from India to Orakandi and announced that his government will upgrade a girls' school and set up a primary school in the area. A day earlier, PM Modi had said he had gone to jail while protesting for Bangladesh's freedom.

Not taking too kindly to the canvassing across the border, Mamata Banerjee said, "Sometimes they say Mamata has brought people from Bangladesh and did infiltration. But he (PM) himself goes to Bangladesh for vote marketing."

West Bengal is holding elections in a record eight phases starting Saturday in a contest that has seen the BJP pull out all stops, including poaching a large number of Trinamool leaders, to unseat the two-time Chief Minister. Votes will be counted on May 2.

NHPC Director visits Teesta-V Power Station



SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 27 MAR:

Director (Projects), Biswajit Basu, NHPC, made his maiden visit, since assuming charge, to Teesta-V Power Station here on 26 and 27 March, an official press release informs.

Upon his arrival on 26 March, he was received by Head of the Power Station, Sanjay Darbari, along with senior officers

of the Power Station.

During his visit, Mr Basu inspected the various components of the Power House at Balur where the Head appraised him about the various activities undertaken by Power Station.

The Director's visit coincided with the day on which Teesta-V power station achieved its annual generation target of 2810 MU under excellent category.

In his address, the Director congratulated the HOP for the achievement and exhorted all officers to work with continued zeal and dedication and maintain the high standards set by the Power Station, the release adds.

Director (Projects) also interacted with Operational Shift Engineers and staff later on his late-night inspection of the Power House.

Assam Election 2021: Masks, Gloves, Sanitisers for voters at Assam polling booth amid Covid

LAHOWAL, 27 MAR: As polling is underway in Assam for the first phase of assembly elections, voters at the polling centre in Mankata area of the Lahowal constituency are being provided masks, gloves and hand sanitisers amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The temperature of voters is also being checked at a primary school—designated as a polling booth.

People were also seen maintaining social distancing at the polling centre.

Binod Hazarika of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Manoj Dhanowar of Congress and Likhan Baruah of Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) are in the fray from Lahowal constituency.

Polling for the first phase of the elections be-

gan today at 7 am for 47 constituencies across 12 districts of the state.

Over 81.09 lakh voters, including 40,77,210 males and 40,32,481 females, are eligible to cast their votes at 1,1537 polling stations in this phase. The polling will continue till 6 pm.

A total of 264 candidates are in the fray for 47 seats—42 seats from 11 districts of Upper Assam and northern Assam region and five seats from central Assam's Nagaon district.

Out of these, 37 sitting MLAs are re-contesting including 24 from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), six each from Congress and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), and one from the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF).

A total of 375 com-

panies of security personnel including both central and state armed police forces like the Central Armed Police Force (CRPF) and State Armed Police (SAP) of other states have been deployed for the polls. 300 units will be active during the first phase.

Key candidates for this phase of polling include incumbent Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal in Majuli. Mr. Sonowal had wrested the seat from Congress' Rajib Lochan Pegu in the 2016 assembly elections. Mr. Pegu, who had won the seat for three straight terms since 2001, has again been fielded by Congress.

Assembly Speaker Hitendra Nath Goswami is in the poll battle from Jorhat, ministers Ranjit

Dutta from Behali, Naba Kumar Doley from Jonai and Sanjoy Kishan from Tinsukia.

The fate of ministers from NDA ally AGP—Atul Bora from Bokakhat and Keshab Mahanta from Kaliabor—will also be sealed.

Congress' Ripun Bora is contesting from the Gohpur seat, where his wife Monika Bora lost in the 2016 polls. The 60-year-old leader will face sitting BJP MLA Utpal Bora.

For the three-phase assembly elections, there are 126 constituencies across 33,530 polling stations covering more than 2.33 crore electors in the state.

Polling for the next two phases will be held on April 1 and April 6. The counting of votes will take place on May 2.

Four days residential training on value-addition of Horti and Agri crops

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 27 MAR:**

Agriculture Technology Management Agency (ATMA), East, conducted a four-day Residential Training Program on Processing and Value Addition of Horticulture and Agriculture crops in collaboration with College of Agricultural Engineering and Post-Harvest Technology (CAEPHT) at Farmers Produce Processing Cum Skill Development Centre - CAEPHT Ranipool under Martam Block for the Women SHGs from Regou and Martam Block from 23-26 Mar, 2021.

The inaugural and Valedictory Function was chaired by the Dean CAEPHT, Prof Parmendra P Dabral and Joint Director cum Deputy Project Director, ATMA East, Agriculture, Rachna Gurung, Project Coordinator, Dr Sujata jeena and Dr Prashant P Siad. Trainees representing the program was trained by resource persons from CAEPHT. Chwaba singh, Sanjay Upadhyay, Purnima, Kabita Chettri, Tirthakala Gurung, Arun Chettri and Block Technology Manager, Martam Block, Chanda Poudyal,



ATM Tenzing W Bhutia, ATM Regu Block Saiman manger.

The overall program was co-ordinated by Block Technology Manager, Martam Block, Chanda Paudyal.

The Chief Guest during the Program acknowledged the activities of ATMA and congratulated the team and congratulated the trainees for successful completion of four days residential program to women members, making them self-reliant and building their capacity on various enterprises. Dean CAEPHT also promised to work in collaboration with ATMA to provide

full support to farmers and guide them with technical know-how and institutional facilities in the coming futures.

Joint Director cum Deputy Project Director, Rachna Gurung addressed the trainees on taking full benefit of training and coming up as exemplary farmers with huge production on verge of becoming self-reliant. she also highlighted on ATMA scheme and other ongoing Agricultural schemes and motivated farmers on doubling their income by adopting various schemes from the ATMA cafeteria and Agriculture schemes. She also promised

full support from the Department.

Project Coordinator, CAEPHT Sujata Jeena congratulated the participants and encouraged the trainees for local production and assured technical support in future if required by farmers.

With these, the Chief Guest along with officials distributed certificates to all the participants, post-harvest and value-added products made by trainees. The incentive of Rs.10,000/- as Seed Money under ATMA was provided to Makhamali SHG Martam Block by Joint Director cum Dy Project Director

to motivate SHG work and progress on their enterprise.

The program was concluded with the vote of thanks by Miss Chanda Poudyal thanking Dean CAEPHT for providing all the technical and institutional support to conduct the program successfully; Dr Sujata Jena, Dr Prasant Said and Dr GT Patle for providing the training modules and collaborating with ATMA to conduct the residential training program to empower women SHGs.

The overall program was organized by ATMA East Agriculture Department and reported by BTM Martam.

"Big Lie": Kanhaiya Kumar on PM Modi's "I Did Satyagraha" remark in Bangladesh

MORIGAON, 27 MAR [PTI]: Communist Party of India leader Kanhaiya Kumar hit out at the BJP, calling Prime Minister Narendra Modi "the biggest liar" and comparing the top Assam leader Himanta Biswa Sarma with King Kansa, the tyrant ruler of Mathura in the Mahabharata.

The former JNU students union president termed PM Modi's statement in Bangladesh, where he is on a visit, about going to jail for that country's freedom as a "big lie".

He urged the people of Assam, where the three-phase poll for the state assembly began on Saturday, not to support those who are selling the resources of the country in the name of nationalism. The Left youth leader questioned whether annually two crore jobs have been created or black money has returned to the country as was promised by him in 2014.

"What has happened in five years? How are the same people seeking votes again? When I came here someone said that I can be a challenge to Modi. I said that to challenge PM Modi one has to be the biggest liar of the world".

"Have you heard what has he said in Bangladesh? He said he had also contributed in Bangladesh's freedom struggle, that he had participated in satyagraha and went to jail... Only BJP leaders can create such level of lies," Mr Kumar said.

In the Bangladesh war, India supported the freedom movement in that country and Pakistan opposed it. "So a question arises that where was Modi on his satyagraha? Was he put behind the bars by the Pakistan government or

the Indian government? It is nothing but a big lie," Mr Kumar said while campaigning for CPI candidate Munin Mahanta.

PM Modi had said in Dhaka that he was part of a satyagraha held to back the liberation of Bangladesh. He was speaking at the national parade square in the Bangladesh capital to mark the celebrations of the golden jubilee of its Independence and the birth centenary of the father of the nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Training his guns at Himanta Sarma, he said: "There is one leader who calls himself Mama (maternal uncle). Kansa was also a mama (of Lord Krishna). You can see the political truth. I just want to know how many promises which were made five years ago have been fulfilled (in the state)".

Mr Sarma, who is also the Assam health minister, is fondly called "Mama" mostly by the youth for his handling of the COVID-19 situation in the state in 2020.

"The man who could not be Mama of Congress party, how can he be a Mama of Assam? There is not a bigger traitor than the one who cheats people for his own interests," Mr Kumar said.

Mr Sarma was a minister in the Congress government of Tarun Gogoi in the state till he quit the party and joined BJP.

Criticising BJP, the CPI leader said: "Traitors have occupied Delhi. We have to defeat them and make our farmers who are protesting on the borders of Delhi (against farm laws) for months victorious."

The ongoing state election is not being held to chose any leader but the government which will work for the people, he said.

Science Fair at Kumari Pema Tseduen Govt Secondary School



SUMMIT REPORT

RANGPO, 27 MAR:

Kumari Pema Tseduen Govt Secondary School, Rongli, East Sikkim, in collaboration with Agasthya International Foundation, organised a Science Fair at its school compound today.

Area in-charge, Damber Kr Pradhan graced the occasion as Chief Guest along with Deputy Director Rongli Sub-Division, Kumar Pradhan, Assistant Director, Narad Chettri, SMC President, BS Gurung, and Golden Cross Site-Head, Arun

Chettri as Special Guests.

Teachers, students from schools and officials from Agasthya Foundation were also present in the program. Chief Guest Damber Kumar Pradhan and other delegates appreciated the concept of the School and its students.

SAC for agri and allied sector planning for South Sikkim meets



SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 27 MAR:

The Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) for South Sikkim, a committee tasked with agriculture and allied sector planning for KVK through its members comprising of scientists and officials from the line departments met today.

The meeting was chaired by Senior Scientist (Horticulture) ICAR-NOFRI, Dr Sudip Kumar Dutta.

The committee is tasked with planning and preparing development action plans in agricul-

ture, horticulture, fisheries, animal husbandry and other green sectors with focus on need-based research, demonstrations, extension, training and capacity building activities to be implemented by Krishi Vigyan Kendra.

Other dignitaries present for the meeting were In-charge KVK East Sikkim, Dr Janak Kumar, Subject Matter Specialist (Agronomy), Dr Manoj Kumar, AGM NABARD, Rupen Lamichaney, Joint Director Agriculture, Pratap Subba, ADO/Dy PD ATMA,

Dr Nation Chamling, VO Dr Deepshika Pradhan HDO Saroja Tamang and progressive farmers associated with KVK South Sikkim.

The Senior Scientist and Head IP Shivakoti welcomed the guests and presented the annual report 2020-21 of KVK South Sikkim followed by individual progress report and action plan by the Subject Matter Specialist of various disciplines viz. Horticulture, Soil Science, Agricultural Extension, Agronomy, Plant Protection and Animal Science.

India sends 2,00,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses as gift for UN Peacekeepers

United Nations, 27 Mar [PTI]: Top United Nations officials, including the UN peacekeeping chief, have expressed gratitude to India for its gift of 2,00,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses for peacekeepers, saying the donation will enable the Blue Helmets to continue their life-saving work in a safe manner.

The 200,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines, announced as a gift by India for UN peacekeepers, left Mumbai in the early hours of Saturday and will arrive at Copenhagen, Denmark. They will then be distributed to all UN peacekeeping missions.

Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix and Under-Secretary-General for Operational Support Atul Khare on Friday hailed India's contribution of the vaccine doses for the UN peacekeepers.

An effective roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccine to all peacekeepers is a key priority for the United Nations in order to protect our personnel and their capacity to continue their crucial work, help protect vulnerable communities and deliver on their mandates, Mr Lacroix said.

India is a longstanding and steadfast supporter of Peacekeeping and I want to thank the Government and people of India, who have generously donated COVID-19 vaccines to benefit our peacekeeping personnel and enable them to continue their life-saving work in a safe manner.

Mr Khare thanked India for donating the 2,00,000 vaccines to UN peacekeeping missions.

"This important donation will allow us to ensure that UN peacekeepers are able to remain healthy and deliver in some of the most difficult environments in the world without relying on already stretched national health systems or ongoing COVAX efforts."

He added that we also remain engaged with our troop and police-contributing countries to ensure that wherever possible, uniformed personnel are vaccinated through their national systems prior to deployment. At the same time, my Department is leading UN system-wide arrangements to support national efforts in vaccinating UN civilian personnel and family members.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar had announced in February that India will gift 2,00,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses for UN peacekeepers.

Keeping in mind the UN Peacekeepers who operate in such difficult circumstances, we would like to announce today a gift of 200,000 doses for them, Mr Jaishankar had said while addressing the UN Security Council open debate on the implementation of resolution 2532 (2020) on the cessation of hostilities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Quoting the Bhagavad Gita, Mr Jaish-

ankar had said Do your work with the welfare of others always in mind.

The 2,00,000 doses essentially mean that it will be possible to administer the required double doses of COVID vaccines to all UN peacekeepers across missions.

According to UN Peacekeeping, as of January 31, 2021 a total of 85,782 personnel are serving in 12 peacekeeping operations across the world led by the Department of Peace Operations.

A total of 121 nations are contributing uniformed personnel to the UN peacekeeping missions.

India is one of the largest contributors of troops and police to UN peacekeeping missions, with more than 5,000 men and women deployed in nine missions, including in The Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and Lebanon.

The 200,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine left Mumbai via Qatar Airways on March 27 at 04:10 am.

The shipment will go to Copenhagen, where it will be safely stored in a facility, re-packaged and quickly distributed to peacekeeping missions for the peacekeepers.

The vaccine Covishield is the version of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine produced by the Serum Institute of India. Covaxin is the indigenously developed vaccine by pharma company Bharat Biotech.

The Department of Peace Operations said that over the past year, UN peacekeepers around the world have undertaken remarkable efforts as they adjusted and responded to the unprecedented global health crisis.

Nearly 100,000 peacekeepers, already operating within complex and challenging environments, managed to keep themselves and others safe while supporting national and local authorities in their response to the pandemic.

It added that despite the unexpected challenges posed by COVID-19, peacekeepers demonstrated adaptability and flexibility to continue implementing their core mandates, which is to protect people and build sustainable peace.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had said that he is extremely grateful for the gift of 200,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses for UN peacekeepers announced by India.

Under India's Vaccine Maitri' initiative, which translates into Vaccine Friendship, the country has been providing vaccines to nations across the world - from India's immediate neighbours to countries in Latin America and Africa - and is a significant source of supply to the COVAX facility.

More than 58 million Made in India coronavirus vaccine doses have reached about 70 countries in recent weeks.

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For Labour

Because not enough is being said on their behalf

We see them around often, but don't always notice them. They labour on tasks which are necessary, but would not have the necessary workforce had it not been for their privations which draw them away from home at worksites across the country. They power development with their sweat, plod away, are often humiliated and yet they persevere. Had it not been for them, the planners who chart development for the country would have seen their projections stuck to the drawing board and never on ground. Take a look around, the sewage line does not get laid only because there is a budget for it, but because there are stomachs desperate enough to work through cold, wet nights to lay them. Cardamom is not a cash crop because Sikkim has progressive farmers, but because there are backs willing to take the load by the maund after they have harvested a crop which, let's accept it, few here have any actual understanding of. Gangtok's highways would not be neatly parted of their overnight sludge, had an entire army of labourers not been at hand to begin clearing the debris at the break of dawn. Trekking is possible not only because Sikkim is pretty, but because realities are quite ugly for some making them carry loads wearing slippers and plastic shoes up trails where even the tougher trekkers slip despite their better shod feet.

And still, they do not figure anywhere in the pecking order and in most cases, don't even get to enjoy the infrastructure they build. Unfortunately, they also make easy targets, often denied even of their due remunerations. We read reports of Indian stuck in the Middle East, not paid their dues and unable even to afford an air ticket home, and we offer them the wrong response – clucking our tongues in sympathy when we should have been raging against the systems which allow such denials. Sikkim got a taste of such inhumanity in the wake of the 18 Sept earthquake when choppers evacuated the management and officers, but labourers at hydel and other construction sites had to foot it across dangerous terrain. Many of them complained of not having received their dues and only few of them had any plans of returning. They fled with their lives, leaving behind their earnings. It is unlikely that anyone even attempted to trace them down and clear their dues. They are probably being exploited somewhere else now.

The anonymity in which the labour force works and fades away is still an unfortunate reality, and one that needs to be addressed. Not just because they deserve better, but also because we need to be better. The maltreatment is not just a governmental failing, but more a societal shortcoming. It is because we, as consumers, do not pay enough heed to basic human rights that the labour, as a class, gets denied. The West now has the luxury to pay attention to such issues which the developing world still looks at as distractions. When we celebrate laws banning bonded labour and child labour in India, we should perhaps thank buyers in the West who put pressure on manufacturers to become more humane. The pressure for better protections and more genuine safeguards have to come from the lay people, who themselves have to deliver better as well. The government fixes the minimum wage, but apart from government employ, how many other workplaces offer them? How many domestic servants, even discounting meals, are volunteered such remuneration? And yet there are people willing to work for less, willing to look the other way despite a law [of minimum wage] being broken. The labour force does not require a more compassionate government, it requires fellow citizens who notice them, listen to them, respect them and when the situation demands, speaks for them.

WRITE US:

Readers are invited to comment on, criticise, run down, even appreciate if they like something in this paper. Letters carrying abusive/ indecorous language and personal attacks, except when against people responsible in this newspaper (who are fair game), will have to be ignored. Letters which carry forward a conversation or initiate a dialogue will command immediate attention and receive prominence. Mail us at: news@summittimes.com

Why Misogyny Needs to be Tackled in Education From primary School

LOUISE MULLANY & LORETTA TRICKETT
theconversation.com

The issue of violence by men against women in UK society has once again taken centre stage. Public figures are beginning to talk about the more active role that men need to play in tackling this issue. In response to recent protests around women's safety, policing minister Kit Malthouse has called for boys to be given compulsory school lessons on respect for women and girls.

We've been arguing since 2018 that education is key to addressing the issue of male violence against women, based on our study of the impact of Nottinghamshire Police becoming the first force in the country to record misogyny hate crime. This is a policy that the government now plans to implement nationwide. People of all genders who we interviewed told us that education and the role of men were both key, and the younger education begins the better.

Global research on primary schools has shown that boys learn to behave in gendered ways that are reinforced by the adults around them. Teachers are a key part of this socialisation process. To change behaviour, we need to start with school.

Education needs to address a series of essential socio-cultural issues around gender, from power relationships and inappropriate language to touching and violence. The UK government, however, has been criticised for not having any clear strategy in place to do just that, which is why Malthouse's statement is welcome.

In her book, *Why Women Are Blamed for Everything*, forensic psychologist and feminist author Jessica Taylor lays out some startling evidence presented to the UK Parliament's Women and Equalities Select Committee. In secondary schools, only 3% of teachers felt confident to teach sex and relationships education.

A total of 40% of schools were found to have inadequate teaching provision in this area; 50% of children said they would not tell teachers if they were being harassed or sexually assaulted because they believed they would not be taken seriously.

Early primary school is the time where boys begin to distance themselves from girls and from behaviours stereotypically perceived as "feminine", through put-downs and bullying. Current teaching guidelines, however, do not involve engaging younger children to think about their gender identities in any depth. They also do not facilitate detailed discussion among children on why they or their peers may engage in gender-based behaviours that are damaging to others.

Boys in the UK build their sense of masculinity in direct relation to the dominant "macho" heterosexual ideal of what it means to be man. As sociology researcher R W Connell establishes in her book *Masculinities*, this dominant form is imbued with the most power in society, and often translates into, among other things, language which demeans girls and their abilities, as well as violence and bullying. At school, this can mean boys controlling sports and playground areas, for example.

Later on in primary school, boys often define and display being a "real boy" through public projections of (hetero)sexual fantasies, and imagined (hetero)sexual futures as adults. This includes misogynistic objectification and sexualised forms of harassment towards girls and women. This can be a well-established part of their identities by ages 10-11, which then influences their behaviour as they move through adolescence into adulthood.

This age brings additional challenges, including increased peer pressure within a context of sexual development. The increased availability of pornography via the internet is particularly troubling, as research has shown greater porn use is associated with more sexist attitudes, behaviour and sexual violence.

WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO

Throughout primary and secondary school, teaching children about respecting girls and women, and about the different forms misogyny can take should be compulsory. Currently, it is not.

Teachers need to be given the space in the PSHE curriculum, and the budgetary means, to put to use the growing number of educational strategies available. The creative industries offer resources

to help with that kind of conversation. Our own graphic comic, *Changing Minds*, is a prime example for secondary schools and universities. It brings to life everyday stories of street harassment, told to us by women in our research interviews.

Boys also need male role models. In primary schools, where there is a lack of men, male teachers have a critical role to play in calling out sexist behaviours, however subtle they may appear. They also need to draw attention to issues of gender equality with everyone they work with, so that boys can observe this in action.

The men in our research consistently reported they were either unaware that harassment was endemic, or that it had such an impact on the daily lives and freedoms of women and girls. If boys are enabled to recognise how damaging and pervasive gender stereotypes are to everyone in society, they can become allies, and call out similar behaviour among other boys – if they are backed up by adults.

Schools can also work directly with external groups, including charities run by men, whose overall purpose is to eradicate violence against women and girls. The organisation Beyond Equality provides a compelling example of hundreds of men] currently working as volunteers in UK schools to educate boys. Through honest and open discussion, boys are taught to recognise how their behaviour towards women and girls might be detrimental, the long-term damage it can cause and, crucially, how to resist it.

For behaviour to change, both education and men have essential roles to play. Our schools and teachers, as well as parents, youth groups, sports organisations, colleges and universities, need to be equipped with the tools and training needed to drive home the message that abuse of women and girls – under any guise – is completely unacceptable.

[Louise Mullany is Professor in Sociolinguistics, University of Nottingham; Loretta Trickett is Senior lecturer, College of Business Law and Social Sciences, Nottingham Law School, Nottingham Trent University]



Suez Canal blockage: what it takes to unwedge a megaship

STEPHEN TURNOCK
theconversation.com

One of the world's largest container ships, named Ever Given, has been wedged across the Suez Canal since it was blown off course by high winds in the early hours of March 23, blocking one of the busiest maritime trade corridors in the world.

The incident has created a logjam of hundreds of tankers, the operators of which are now weighing up whether to wait for the stranded container ship to be cleared, or whether rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope, at the southernmost point of Africa, will hasten their arrival at port.

That decision hinges upon how long it'll take to refloat the Ever Given, tugging it away from the banks of the canal and back into operation. Several maritime salvage firms, with experience rescuing stricken vessels, are already in attendance at the scene – but it's unclear how much time they'll need to dislodge the ship.

The methods they'll use to do so, however, will be the roughly the same as past examples. A grounded ship of any size requires additional buoyancy to help salvage crews ease it from where it's stuck. And, in the case of the Ever Given, horizontal force – applied by tug boats – will be required to heave the ship from both banks of the Suez Canal.

HOW IT HAPPENED

The Ever Given is 400 metres in length and has the capacity to carry over 20,000 20-foot containers. It

was these containers, stacked high on the deck, that are suspected to have caught the gust of wind, like a sailboat's sail, that ultimately blew the ship off course.

It appears that the Ever Given lost control while heading northbound along the Suez Canal, diverting its course in such a way that one end struck one of the canal's banks. The momentum of the massive vessel will then have pulled it round until the other end struck the other bank – slowly, perhaps, but with a huge amount of force.

The precise way in which the Ever Given struck ground will be important for salvage teams to understand because, when refloating a grounded ship, it's usually easiest to extract it the way it went in – as with a splinter.

SALVAGING SHIPS

Salvaging has always been an important part of maritime operations, with specialist companies called in when large container ships or tankers run aground. The process of freeing grounded vessels is often referred to as refloating.

In 2016, a ship of similar size to the Ever Given, called the CSCL Indian Ocean, took six days to refloat after grounding on the bank of the Elbe River in Germany. The same salvage techniques used then will be used this time around – albeit in the more restrictive environment of a narrow canal.

There are two basic approaches to extracting a grounded ship. First, salvage crews will work to increase

the vessel's vertical buoyancy force, which means the whole boat floats higher in the water.

Second, tug boats will apply sufficient horizontal force to overcome the static friction generated by whatever material the boat is resting upon. The larger and heavier the vessel, the more force required by the tug boats to refloat the ship.

FLEETS OF TUGS

Swiftest to mobilise are a fleet of tugs, eight of which are already in position at the site of the stranded ship. But reports from the scene suggest that tugs have already attempted an unsuccessful operation to unwedge the ship.

That means the first priority of salvage teams will instead be to make the Ever Given float higher in the water – by dredging near the sections of the bank upon which the ship is stranded, and by increasing the ship's buoyancy.

In previous salvage operations, buoyancy air bags have been attached to the underwater section of the hull to encourage it to float. But in the case of the Ever Given, this will need to happen alongside the unloading of the ship's cargo, the removing of all on-board ballast water, and the draining of the ship's fuel, all in an effort to make the vessel lighter and more buoyant before the tugs attempt another horizontal pull.

The removal of cargo will be particularly challenging in this case. Seeing as land access will be difficult due to the Suez Canal's sandy surrounds, a floating crane may be required, which will take time to transport to

the ship and which will only be able to remove one container at a time.

It might prove quicker to pump the fuel off the vessel instead of removing containers, which would require a small refuelling vessel to pull alongside to take on the fuel. Those overseeing the salvage will have access to computer models of the vessel to tell exactly which load-lightening strategy will be most effective.

HIGH TIDE

Despite all these measures, increasing buoyancy during salvage usually relies on a rising tide, which provides an extra boost in sea level for the ship to potentially refloat upon. Unfortunately, the tidal range within the Suez Canal is limited compared to coastal waters, which will hamper refloating attempts – though a promising "spring tide", which is higher than the usual high tide, is due over the weekend.

It's difficult to predict the rapidity with which the various components of the salvage puzzle can be brought to bear in the Suez Canal. This is not a standard salvage operation: the time pressure, with ships queuing at either end of the strait, will be weighing on everyone's minds.

But with expert salvage crews now on hand, and tried-and-tested refloating methods being put in place around the Ever Given, it's likely to be only a matter of days – rather than weeks – before the ship is unwedged from the Suez Canal.

[the writer is Professor of Maritime Fluid Dynamics, University of Southampton]

Bengal's Daughter will defeat Bengal's Traitor: Trinamool jibe at Suvendu Adhikari

KOLKATA, 27 MAR: Trinamool Congress (TMC) leader Derek O'Brien today, in a veiled attack at BJP candidate from Bengal's Nandigram Suvendu Adhikari, said "Bengal's daughter (Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee) will defeat Bengal's traitor from the Assembly seat. "TMC will win Bengal. Bengal's daughter will defeat Bengal's traitor at his own backyard in Nandigram. Members of tourist gang will continue to do what they do best - try and destroy every institution in India," Mr O'Brien told news agency ANI.

Suvendu Adhikari, a former TMC leader, joined the BJP ahead of Assembly polls. Mr Adhikari is a sitting MLA from Nandigram, from where Mamata Banerjee has decided to contest this time instead of from Bhawanipur.

Polling in Nandigram constituency will be held in the second phase of the assembly election on



April 1.

He also lambasted West Bengal BJP chief Dilip Ghosh on his remark that Ms Banerjee should wear bermuda shorts if she wants to show her plastered leg.

"Women in Bengal will continue to wear saarees any way they want," Mr O'Brien said.

Addressing a rally in

Bengal's Purulia on Tuesday, Dilip Ghosh had said: "She (Mamata) wants to show her plastered leg to everyone. Why doesn't she just wear a pair of bermudas?"

The state is witnessing a triangular contest this time with Trinamool Congress, Congress-Left alliance and the BJP in the fray.

Meanwhile, the polling for the first of the eight-phase assembly polls in West Bengal began at 7 am on Saturday with voters deciding the fate of 191 candidates in 30 constituencies.

All constituencies in Purulia, Jhargram and segments of Bankura, Purba Medinipur and Paschim Medinipur are

voting to decide electoral fate of 191 candidates, including 21 women. The polling will end at 6.30 pm.

As many as 730 coys of central forces, including 92 for Bankura, 169 for Purba Medinipur, 139 for Paschim Medinipur, 186 for Purulia and 144 for Jhargram have been deployed for this phase.

Haze and smoke turn Kathmandu most polluted, low visibility affects flights

CHANDAN KUMAR MANDAL KATHMANDU, 27 MAR [KATHMANDUPOST]: Smoke and haze covered Kathmandu and some other hilly areas for most of Friday, with the weather condition becoming more severe in the afternoon.

As the air quality deteriorated, Kathmandu became the most polluted city in the world in the afternoon.

With visibility at just 1,000 metres, Tribhuvan International Airport was closed from 2:10pm.

"The atmospheric condition has been hazy. There is haze, with a mixture of smoke in the atmosphere," said Raju Pradhanang, a senior meteorologist at the Meteorological Forecasting Division under the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology. "Raging wildfires could also be one of the factors. We have not confirmed that though."

Nepal witnessed a relatively hot and dry winter as the country received only 25 percent of normal rainfall in the season. With scant rainfall in three winter months (December-February), the country experienced a severe drought-like situation, which is a recipe for wildfire.

The dry condition has ushered in one of the deadliest forest fires the country has seen of late. Forests are burning across the country.

The Infrared satellite images from NASA's FIRMS (Fire Information for Resource Management System) showed numerous fires from east to west.

According to Sundar Prasad Sharma, an under-secretary at the Department of Forest and Soil Conservation, the country is witnessing one of the worst forest fire seasons, evidently that a record 479 wildfire incidents were reported on Thursday.

Sharma, who is also the forest fire focal person at the department, said: "It is not limited to one or two districts or a particular region. Forests are burning across the country."

According to Sharma, forest fires had broken out at 437 places in 54 districts all over the country on Friday afternoon. Most of the fires were recorded in the western districts of Kanchanpur, Banke, Bardiya and Kailali, among others whereas central hill districts and Tarai districts across the country also have fires spreading massively.

As per the data on forest fires accumulated by the Nepal Forest Fire Management Chapter, 524 fires were detected in Nepal in the 24 hours of March 25. On Thursday, an elderly man was killed in a

wildfire in Gorkha. Since the 2015-16 dry season, this is the first time forest fires have been recorded in 73 districts. The record for wildfires during this period was 63 districts in the 2018-19 forest fire season.

Sharma's data shows there have been 2,087 forest fires in 73 districts between November 15, 2020 and March 25, 2021.

"The number of wildfire incidents has been unprecedented and we are worried about the situation," said Anil Pokhrel, chief executive officer of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority.

The wildfire season in Nepal begins sometime between November and December and continues until the onset of the monsoon. Around 80 percent of wildfire incidents occur between March and April with the last week of April as the peak.

"We are yet to see the worst of wildfires," said Sharma. "If the weather doesn't support us, then the country will suffer a massive loss of forests, lives and the property."

Forest fire incidents were relatively smaller last year when the country was fighting the pandemic. Reports also showed that forest fires had reduced amidst the pandemic. This could lead to more forest fires this year, according to Sharma. "The forest fire fuels are dry and have accumulated this year, which can result in more fire incidents in the coming weeks," said Sharma.

Winter fire begins from mid-November, mostly in the mountain region whereas summer fires begin in March till mid-May and occur in Tarai districts and the mid-hills.

"This year, however, winter fires started earlier. There were wildfire incidents in Manang and Mustang and other districts," said Sharma. "Besides, fires have been more intense and are more frequent."

Nepal, which boasts an improved green cover, loses a significant area of forests to wildfire incidents every year. The annual wildfire is considered the leading threat to sustaining the country's forests area and the biodiversity that it preserves. Unofficial estimates, according to Sharma, who voluntarily compiles data on forest fires from across the country, show that the country has been losing some 200,000 hectares of forest area annually since 2005.

Besides, at least 106 deaths are reported to have been caused by wildfires since 2005, accord-

ing to the data he maintains. The worst forest fire season, in terms of lives lost, in recent years was in 2009 when 49 people, including 13 Nepal Army personnel, died in Ramechhap district while fighting a wildfire. Meanwhile, some 268,618 hectares of forest cover across the country were lost to fires during the months of January-May in 2016.

In 2016, Nepal lost nearly 1.3 million hectares of forest and 15 people were reported dead in forest blazes, according to Sharma. While 2017 was a Zero Forest Fire Casualty Year, the threats of wildfire and the destruction they wreak remain.

Besides burning valuable natural resources like forest, land and wildlife, forest fires also contribute significantly to air pollution by generating haze and smog, which have a direct effect on human health.

The poor air quality in Kathmandu, for which fossil fuels are mostly responsible, was further exacerbated by the burning forests in nearby districts, topography and wind direction.

"Westerly wind that is blowing from west to east has brought more smoke from western districts, where wildfires are raging," said Pradhanang, the senior meteorologist. "As the atmosphere is stable, pollutants and smoke have remained trapped inside the Valley."

With forests burning across the country, the atmosphere in hill areas, including Kathmandu, has become hazy, worsening the air quality in Kathmandu.

IQ Air, a Swiss air quality technology company that provides real-time worldwide air quality data, showed that Kathmandu became the most polluted city in the world on Friday afternoon. The capital city kept on shuffling between the top three positions competing with Beijing and Mumbai.

With the Air Quality Index (AQI) level reaching 198 by 3:45 pm, the air quality level was 'unhealthy' for the residents. At 5:45 pm, it further worsened reaching 340, which is considered 'hazardous' level.

The PM2.5, the most dangerous pollutant, was recorded highest at 171 micrograms per cubic meter (µg/m3) by 9:45 am, showed the IQ Air data. The highest AQI measurement was also recorded at 9:45 am with a reading of 221.

Such a level of pollution means the air quality of Kathmandu was several times higher than the acceptable limit, according to the WHO Air Quality Guideline (10µg/m3).

Tricky situation awaits Nepal for Bangladesh fixture

KATHMANDU, 27 MAR [KATHMANDUPOST]: Hosts Nepal face a tricky situation when they lock horns against the South Asian rivals Bangladesh in the last group stage match of the Three Nations Cup football tournament at the Dasharath Stadium on Saturday which will decide the second finalist side.

While Bangladesh have already made it to the final after 1-0 victory over Kyrgyzstan U-23 in the first match played on Tuesday, Nepal or the central Asian country will book place for the title decider depending on the outcome of the Nepal-Bangladesh encounter. Both Nepal and Kyrgyzstan have one point each after playing 0-0 draw on Thursday.

Nepal could progress to the final if they beat or play a draw against the South Asian team. They could also progress to the next round even if they lose by a single goal margin. In such a situation both Nepal and Kyrgyz youth team will have equal one point each in the standings and also minus one goal each. And Nepal could progress on the basis of negative cards conceded by Kyrgyzstan as they were shown three yellows against the hosts including two to their captain Tashiev Kamolidin. Unlike them, Nepal did not see a single yellow.

Despite having a slight advantage over the central Asian opponent,

team Nepal is adamant to earn points against the well known foes. "We are not thinking about defeat at this point and we will play at least to secure a point [draw] or win," said Maharjan who saw his side squander more than a dozen scoring opportunities against the youth team.

Maharjan said his side lacked the cutting edge in the attacking zone against Kyrgyzstan and they would try to improve on the aspect while playing Bangladesh. "We have been unable to deliver at the finishing line for a long time and we must improve on it. But improvement is not possible overnight. I have pointed out the weaknesses during our team meeting," said Maharjan.

"I can only decide on the match day if there will be changes in the striking line-up or not," added Maharjan, who had paired Anjan Bista with Avishek Rijal in the attacking department. He started with Tridev Gurung and Sanjog Rai in midfield along with Rabi Paswan and Tej Tamang.

Star player Rohit Chand will spearhead the defence line-up along with Ananta Tamang, Dinesh Rajbanshi and Ranjeet Dhimal. Captain Kiran Limbu will take charge of the post.

Regarding Bangladesh, Maharjan said: "They are a strong side with well balanced players in defence, midfield and attacking line-ups. I

expect the match to be an evenly contested affair. We will play total football against them."

Unlike Nepal, Bangladesh are expected to come pressure-free into the game, as they have already made it to the final. Bangladesh's British coach James Day, who fielded three new players against the Kyrgyz team, is likely to try more rookie players. "We are taking the tournament as preparation for the World Cup qualifier matches in June," the Briton said at a pre-event conference.

"If we are assured of a final before Nepal-Bangladesh fixture, I will definitely go for new players to see if they are good enough for Qualifiers," Day said.

However, the match will have an impact on FIFA rankings. While Nepal currently are 171st in FIFA rankings, Bangladesh are 186th.

Looking at past records, the two sides have played 21 matches. While Bangladesh have won 13 matches, Nepal have won six and two matches have finished in draws. In the last five encounters, Nepal and Bangladesh have won two each and the fifth match had ended in a draw.

Apart from Nepal and Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan are also concerned about the outcome. "I hope the last game between Nepal and Bangladesh will be competitive and fair," Kyrgyz coach Zholdoshev Nurbek had said after the draw against Nepal.

Odisha reports 210 new COVID-19 cases, 1 fresh fatality

BHUBANESWAR, MAR 27 (PTI): Odisha's COVID-19 tally mounted to 3,39,904 on Saturday as 210 more people tested positive for the infection, while one fresh fatality pushed the state's coronavirus death toll to 1,920, a health official said.

After the Odisha government termed the prevailing situation as "critical" following the detection of a new coronavirus strain, the state reported over 200 fresh cases for the third consecutive day. It had reported 234 new cases on Friday and 214 on Thursday.

Of the 210 new cases registered in 21 of the 30 districts of the state, 124 were reported in quarantine centres, while 86 were detected during



contact tracing. Khurda district, under which Bhubaneswar falls, reported the highest number of new cases at 51, followed by Nuapada (23) and Cuttack (19).

The Health Department said that one patient succumbed to the infection in Sundergarh, taking the district's coronavirus death toll to 174. Also, 53

coronavirus patients have died due to comorbidities so far. The state now has 1,449 active cases, while 3,36,482 people have recovered from the disease.

Only Malkangiri district does not presently have any active case. The state has thus far tested over 89.49 lakh samples for COVID-19, including 28,828 on Friday.

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Hit more boundaries and win game is trend in white ball cricket: Bairstow

PUNE, MAR 27 (PTI): The reigning world champions would continue to stick to their aggressive and fearless brand of cricket, opening batsman Jonny Bairstow said after the tourists chased down 337 in just 43.3 overs to set up a series decider here on Sunday. The opening batsman followed up 94 from 66 balls in the first match with 124 from 112 as England plundered 20 sixes to make the stiff chase a complete mismatch.

"To be honest, I think it's just happening that way. There hasn't been a conversation saying we must hit more sixes," Bairstow said after Friday's series-levelling second ODI. Bairstow smashed seven sixes, while No 3 Ben Stokes hit cleared the ropes 10 times before falling for 99. Opener Jason Roy (55) and debutant Liam Livingstone (27 not out) also added to India's misery as they conceded 20 sixes in total -- the joint most by them in an ODI. They had conceded a similar 20 sixes against South Africa in 2015. "If you look at where the game is going around the world, whether that be in T20, or 50-over cricket the team that hits the most boundaries generally wins the game.

"And if you're hitting boundaries that are going for six rather than four, then the numbers are going to stack up slightly more. "There's 20 today -- now, that's an extraordinary number in one game... If we can keep hitting boundaries, keep putting bowlers under pressure, they know if they miss their lengths, then that potentially could go for six." The reigning world champions are however aware of their high-risk approach, having lost the series-opener by 66 runs despite Bairstow and Roy getting the team off to a similarly spectacular start.

"Look, the execution won't happen every single time and people will get out doing it. But everybody in the dressing room is backing that person out in the middle. If they want to hit the ball for six they believe in everyone's ability. That's a good place to be in." Reflecting upon their loss in the first ODI and said: "If you actually break the game down only from a couple of days ago, we were way ahead of the game," he said.

"A couple of bits happened and a couple of wickets fell but we were way ahead of that game and that was something that we went away and spoke about and identified. "To win that, chase down 337 with six-seven overs left and six wickets in the shed is something that we were really pleased with," he said. On personal front, Bairstow, who hit his 11th ODI century, has set his sights on sooring the most number of hundreds for his country in the fifty-over format.

All his ODI centuries have come after he was promoted to open in 2017 as he has only Joe Root (16), skipper Eoin Morgan (13) and Marcus Trescothick (12) ahead of him in the list.

"Well, naturally you'd like to have the most ODI hundreds for England. I'm happy, that's the biggest thing and certainly in batting." "I've got 11, and I think I have opened only 56-57 times so yeah I'm happy with those figures, but they mean nothing if you don't keep converting them in the future. "So, look, I'm happy with how I'm playing cricket at the moment and I'm really enjoying it," he said.

Gavaskar welcome to give me a ring and talk about my Test cricket: Bairstow

PUNE, MAR 27 (PTI): England opener Jonny Bairstow has hit back at Sunil Gavaskar for questioning his intent in the Test series defeat, saying the Indian legend is more than welcome to call or message him and discuss about his 'will' to play the longest format. Bairstow had scores of 0, 0, 0 and 28 in the four innings that he played in England's 1-3 Test series defeat against India, prompting Gavaskar to comment that he looked "uninterested".

"Yeah, he's more than welcome to give me a ring and ask me about my will to do well in Test cricket and my enjoyment in Test cricket," Bairstow said in response to Gavaskar's comments.

The 31-year-old smashed 112-ball 124 as England made a mockery of India's 337-run target to canter home with 39 balls to spare.

Following Bairstow's dismissal off Ravichandran Ashwin in the second innings of the final Test in Ahmedabad, Gavaskar had commented that the batsman looked "uninterested" during his stay at the crease. "You have not scored a run, and just come in and pushed at it, as if there was no fielder at backward short leg. It looked to me as if it was the shot of a person uninterested,"

"What's he trying to do? First ball, he should be looking to play a soft defensive shot. There is a fielder there at backward short leg. Uninterested," Gavaskar had said during his TV commentary. Bairstow, however, said he has not heard what the Indian legend had remarked.

"First of all, I hadn't heard what he said. Secondly, I'm interested in knowing how an opinion can be made especially when there has been no correspondence or communication between him (Gavaskar) and me... "As I said, my phone is on and if he just wants to give me a call or a message, he can feel free to do so," he said.

Bairstow has scored 4197 runs at an average of 34.12 in 74 Tests, while amassing 3425 runs, including 11 centuries, at 48.92 in 85 ODIs for England. India and England will clash for the title in the third ODI on Sunday.

Garcia comes up aces on a frenetic Friday at Match Play

AUSTIN, TEXAS (AP): Needing to win the final hole to advance, Bob MacIntyre drilled a driver to 3 feet of the cup on he 371-yard 18th hole. Moments later, Sergio Garcia ended one of the record eight sudden-death playoffs with a hole-in-one.

Already the most fickle event in golf, the Dell Technologies Match Play on Friday was an endless frenzy.

Kevin Na lectured Dustin Johnson about not waiting for a putt to be conceded — 6 inches — and then birdied the last two holes to oust the No. 1 player in the world. Patrick Cantlay, practically flawless with 14 birdies and an eagle over two days, managed only two birdies and lost a playoff with a three-putt.

When it finally ended, Jon Rahm at No. 3 was the only player from the top 20 seeds who made it to the knockout stage of the weekend at Austin Country Club.

"You just never know what can happen out there," Billy Horschel said after beating Max Homa on the third play-off hole. Just about everything did.

Garcia beat Lee Westwood in the longest of the eight playoffs with a 9-iron from 161 yards to a front pin on the par-3 fourth hole that landed just beyond the pin



and trickled back into the cup. "Well, 28 years on tour and I thought I had seen everything. I hadn't!" Westwood posted on Twitter.

Equally stunning was the drive of MacIntyre, the 24-year-old from Scotland with plenty of spunk and loads of fight. He was 1 down against Adam Long, who was poised to advance with Johnson in the group ahead about to lose to Na.

Johnson backed away from his 6-foot par putt — Na only had 4 feet for birdie — and his caddie, brother Austin, stepped in a few feet from the cup to help read the putt. Out of nowhere, a ball shot up the left side of the bank around the green and rolled in front of the caddie's feet. Dustin had

to mark MacIntyre's ball so he could putt. MacIntyre was oblivious to what happened except he knew he hit the shot of his life.

"Probably one of the best and one of the luckiest golf shots I've hit in my life," MacIntyre said. "You've just got to keep fighting until the end, and it just shows anything can happen in this game."

His only chance was a low bullet, and it caught the downward slope for extra run toward the left side of the green, which MacIntyre couldn't see. He heard it was on the green.

"I didn't have a clue how close," MacIntyre said. I'm thinking it's going to be just on the green below the slope. Going to

have hopefully two putts maybe to win the hole. But when I seen where they put the ball back down I was like, 'No way!'

"And that's what you play the game for, these moments."

Given how three days of group play has gone, no telling what to expect on the win-or-go-home weekend. It will include a trio of Texas Longhorns, including Jordan Spieth for the first time since 2016. He won three straight holes around the turn and, unlike Thursday when he let Matthew Wolff off the hook, Spieth managed to close out Corey Connors.

Scottie Scheffler halved his match when Xander Schauffele made an 8-foot birdie putt on the last hole, and then

Scheffler returned the favor with a 12-foot birdie on the second extra hole. The other Longhorn is Dylan Frittelli of South Africa, who became the first No. 64 seed in Match Play history to make it to the weekend.

Frittelli had company. Two other players seeded at No. 60 or lower made it to the knockout stage. Ian Poulter won his third straight match as the No. 60 seed, while Erik van Rooyen (62) advanced by beating Daniel Berger with a par on the second playoff hole.

Poulter and Matt Kuchar are the only players to have won all three matches. Kuchar knocked out defending champion Kevin Kisner with a 20-foot birdie putt on the 17th hole.

Shaka Smart leaves Texas to take over Marquette's program

MILWAUKEE (AP): After a frustrating six-year stint at Texas in which he never quite lived up to lofty expectations, Shaka Smart is returning to his home state and starting over at Marquette.

Marquette officially announced Friday that it had hired Smart to replace Steve Wojciechowski, who was fired a week ago. The move came six days after Smart's Texas team was upset 53-52 by Abilene Christian in the first round of the NCAA Tournament.

"Throughout the search, one individual continued to rise to the top, and that was Shaka," Marquette athletic director Bill Scholl said in a statement. "I am beyond excited for our current and future student-athletes who will have the great fortune of being mentored by Shaka. He is a great teacher of the game, while also being a great molder of young men." Smart, who turns 44 on April 8, will be formally introduced at a Monday news conference.

Smart went 109-86 with no NCAA Tournament victories at Texas after a remarkably successful six-year run at VCU, where he went 163-56 and led the Rams to a Final Four appearance in 2011. Texas went 19-8 this season and won the Big 12 Tournament before its early NCAA exit. "I am extremely excited to get to Milwaukee to begin building relationships and getting to work on the court!" Smart said in a statement.

This marks a bit of a homecoming for Smart, who went to high school at Oregon, Wisconsin, just outside Madison. His arrival should provide a burst of energy for a Marquette program that went 128-95 overall and 59-68 in Big East competition during Wojciechowski's seven seasons.

Marquette went 13-14 this season for its first losing season since Wojciechowski's debut year of 2014-15. "Shaka will be the first person of color to lead our program, and is a true role model for our student-athletes," Marquette President Michael R. Lovell said in a statement.

Smart had two seasons left on a Texas contract paying him more than \$3 million per year. Texas hired him to replace Rick Barnes, who was fired after making the NCAA Tournament 16 times in 17 seasons. Smart faced the immediate expectation he'd not just match that sort of consistency, but ignite the program with the sort of success he'd had in leading VCU to the Final Four.

The Longhorns haven't been to the Final Four since 2003 and haven't made it out of the second round of the tournament since 2008.

Instead, Smart's years in the Big 12 proved to be a struggle despite recruiting some elite talent to campus. He finished below .500 in the Big 12 three times and had just three NCAA Tournament appearances. Texas also likely would have earned an NCAA bid in 2020 if the pandemic hadn't shut down the season.

Harden, Griffin help Nets hold off Pistons 113-111

DETROIT (AP): Blake Griffin seemed to be in the middle of everything in his return to Detroit.

Griffin scored 17 points and was part of a first-half dustup that resulted in Isaiah Stewart's ejection, and the Brooklyn Nets outlasted the Pistons 113-111 on Friday night. James Harden had 44 points, 14 rebounds and eight assists in a disjointed game that was full of free throws, technical fouls and other contentiousness.

"They're a hard-playing team," Griffin said. "I don't know if you expect to get elbowed, but I knew it was going to be chippy. They're going to play hard."

Griffin spent three-plus years with the Pistons, but he reached a buyout agreement with Detroit earlier this month and went to the contending Nets. The Pistons played a tribute video for him during a first-half timeout, and he stood to acknowledge the small number of fans in attendance.

By the end of the game, however, Detroit coach Dwane Casey didn't want to talk about Griffin at all.

"To talk about somebody else's players, I'm not going to do that," he said.

Make no mistake: Griffin was an opponent. In the second quarter, Stewart appeared to give Griffin a shot to the head with his arm. After a lengthy review, Griffin received a technical foul — and Stewart was called for a flagrant foul and ejected.



"You can't be baited into a situation like that," Casey said.

Harden was back after missing his team's previous game because of neck soreness. Brooklyn was still without Kevin Durant (left hamstring strain) and Kyrie Irving (personal reasons), but the Nets had enough to hold off the last-place Pistons.

Jerami Grant scored 19 points for Detroit.

The game was tied at 82 in the fourth when Griffin made a 3-pointer that started a 10-0 run for the Nets. An alley-oop dunk by Griffin made it 100-90.

The Pistons fought back to tie it at 106 before Harden's three-point play put Brooklyn back ahead. A 3-pointer by Jeff

Green made it 112-107.

The Nets had the ball up by two with 4.5 seconds left, but Detroit's Saddiq Bey intercepted Green's inbound pass, and the Pistons called a timeout with 3.3 seconds to play.

Cory Joseph's driving attempt missed, and it may not have beaten the buzzer anyway. So the Nets escaped.

"We got the win, but we don't feel great about it," Brooklyn coach Steve Nash said.

In addition to the incident between Stewart and Griffin, five other players were called for technical fouls: Wayne Ellington and Hamidou Diallo for Detroit, and DeAndre Jordan, Green and Harden for Brooklyn. Green's was for defensive three seconds.

NEWCOMERS

Joseph and Diallo, both of whom were ac-

quired by the Pistons in recent trades, made their debuts for Detroit. Joseph had nine points and Diallo six.

TIP-INS

Nets: Jordan had 10 points and nine rebounds. ... Harden's 44 points were the most by a Brooklyn player this season.

Pistons: G Rodney McGruder started for just the second time this season after Detroit traded Delon Wright in the deal for Joseph. ... The Pistons went 34 for 47 on free throws.

UP NEXT

Nets: Host Minnesota on Monday night. The Timberwolves beat Brooklyn twice last season, both times in overtime.

Pistons: Visit Washington on Saturday night. The Wizards went 3-1 against Detroit last season.

North Korea snaps back at Biden over criticism of launches

SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA

(AP): North Korea on Saturday snapped back at President Joe Biden's criticism of its ballistic missile tests, calling his comments a provocation and encroachment on the North's right to self-defense and vowing to continuously expand its "most thoroughgoing and overwhelming military power."

The statement issued by senior official Ri Pyong Chol came after the North on Thursday tested-fired two short-range missiles off its eastern coast in the first ballistic launches since Biden took office.

Experts say the flight data released by South Korea's military and North Korea's own description of the tests indicted that the North tested a new solid-fuel weapon that is designed to evade missile defense systems and is potentially nuclear capable.

The launches showed how the North continues to expand its military capabilities while nuclear negotiations with the United States remain stalled. They also underscored the growing threat such short-range weapons pose to U.S. allies South Korea and Japan, which host a combined 80,000 U.S. troops as the core of America's military presence in the region.

Biden was restrained as he admonished North Korea for the launches, which were a violation of U.N. sanctions against the North.

"We're consulting



with our allies and partners," Biden said at the first news conference of his presidency on Thursday. "And there will be responses if they choose to escalate. We will respond accordingly. But I'm also prepared for some form of diplomacy, but it has to be conditioned upon the end result of denuclearization."

In comments carried by Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency, Ri said the North expresses "deep apprehension" over Biden's remarks that were "openly revealing his deep-seated hostility toward the DPRK." DPRK refers to North Korea's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Ri said it was "gangster-like logic" for the United States to criticize the North's tactical weapons tests when the Americans are freely testing intercontinental ballistic missiles and could send their strategic military assets to the region

surrounding the Korean Peninsula at any time. He said the North doesn't have options other than building "invincible physical power" to defend itself because the United States and South Korea "constantly pose military threats" and continue with their combined military exercises, which the North claims are an invasion rehearsal.

"I think that the new U.S. administration obviously took its first step wrong," Ri said.

"If the U.S. continues with its thoughtless remarks without thinking of the consequences, it may be faced with something that is not good."

Ri, secretary of the ruling Workers' Party's Central Committee and vice chairman of the party's Central Military Commission, is a former air force commander who has been seen as a key figure in the development of the North's missile program.

Thursday's launches followed a statement

by North Korean leader Kim's powerful sister last week, who berated the latest U.S.-South Korean military exercises that ended earlier this month and warned Washington to "refrain from causing a stink" if it wants to "sleep in peace" for the next four years.

The North has so far ignored the Biden administration's efforts to reach out, saying it won't engage in meaningful talks while Washington persists with "hostile" policies.

While Pyongyang has a history of testing new U.S. administrations with weapons demonstrations aimed at forcing Washington back to negotiations, Ri said that the North Koreans are "by no means developing weapons to draw someone's attention or influence his policy."

It's unclear how the Biden administration will respond before it completes its policy review on North Korea in coming weeks.

"For Kim Jong Un's

missiles man, Ri Pyong Chol, to label Biden's press conference a provocation is essentially a threat that North Korea will respond to the U.S. policy review with more tests," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor of international studies at Seoul's Ewha Womans University.

"Pyongyang is implementing a premeditated strategy of advancing military capabilities and raising tensions. Ri Pyong Chol has larger tests in the works and is trying to maximize political bang for his missile development buck."

The United States has downsized its drills with South Korea and stopped sending nuclear-capable bombers and aircraft carriers since President Donald Trump's first summit with Kim in 2018, where they issued vague statements on a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula without describing when and how it would occur.

But the talks stalled after the second Kim-Trump meeting in February 2019 collapsed over disagreements in exchanging the relief of crippling U.S. sanctions for the North's disarmament steps.

Some experts say the allies should restore the normal scale and scope of their exercises to develop a response to the growing threat of North Korea's short-range weapons, which it continued to test even as it suspended nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests.

UN commission urges equality for women in decision-making

UNITED NATIONS, MAR 27

(AP): The UN's premiere global body fighting for gender equality called for a sharp increase of women in global decision-making in a hotly debated final document adopted Friday night that saw continuing pushback against women's rights and a refusal to address issues of gender identity.

The Commission on the Status of Women reaffirmed the blueprint to achieve gender equality adopted 25 years ago at the Beijing women's conference and shone a spotlight on several major issues today, including the imbalance of power between men and women in public life and the growing impact of violence against women and girls in the digital world.

Diplomats were negotiating until almost the last minute over language on women human rights defenders, gender-based violence, and earlier on reproductive and sexual health and rights. Some Western nations sought unsuccessfully to get the commission to recognise gender non-conforming and transgender women.

The closest they got was a reference to women and girls who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination" and face diverse situations and conditions."

The European Union said it would have liked to see more ambitious language in the 23-page document, stressing that the systematic attempts by some delegations to derail the process and question international commitments and obligations on gender equality show that the pushback against women's rights continue.

Shannon Kowalski, director of advocacy and policy for The International Women's Health Coalition, said at a briefing earlier Friday that this year Russia has been very vocal and on the front lines in pushing for language that is often regressing and that seeks to deny

women and girls ... their rights.

The Holy See often joined their positions, and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Cuba were also vocal opponents on many issues, she said, while China opposed any reference to women human rights defenders.

Russia played an exceptionally disruptive role in the negotiations, an EU diplomat said.

Today's low common denominator result demonstrates that a pushback against women's rights continues at the U.N., and that Russia is doing all it can to undermine progress on the issue.

The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of private discussions.

The Agreed Conclusions were negotiated by the 193 U.N. member nations and adopted by consensus by the commission's 45 members at the end of a two-week meeting.

The U.N. women's agency said more than 25,000 members of civil society registered to participate in the partly in-person but mainly virtual meeting that saw 200 side events led by member states and more than 700 events by civil society representatives.

After Ambassador Mher Margaryan, the commission chair, banged the gavel signifying consensus, about two dozen countries spoke.

Saudi Arabia stressed that any reference to gender means women and men and to marriage as between women and men. China said it would not join consensus on the role of women human rights defenders.

In the document, the commission supports the important role of civil society in promoting and protecting the human rights and freedoms of all women, including women human rights de-

fenders.

U.N. Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka said areas in the outcome document do not please everybody, and the conclusions could have been more ambitious and the recommendations even bolder and decisive.

She urged member states to use the recommendations as a building block and to outperform what is contained in these Agreed Conclusions.

She said next week's mainly virtual Gender Equality Forum in Mexico City, another follow-up to the 1995 Beijing conference, will take forward what we have learned from the discussions of this commission and look at how we take concrete actions.

Mlambo-Ngcuka said the conclusions contribute to important advances on women's participation in public life, the main focus of the meeting along with tackling violence against women which increased during last year's COVID-19 pandemic.

The commission recognized that despite some progress women have a long road to reach equality with men in elections or appointments to decision-making bodies and administrative posts, she said.

And it recognised that temporary special measures, including quotas, substantially contribute to increasing women's representation in national and local legislatures, and called on all governments to set specific targets and timelines to achieve the goal of 50/50 gender balance in elected positions.

On violence against women in the digital world, Mlambo-Ngcuka said the commission noted the lack of preventive measures and remedies. She said member states should take action to encourage women's digital participation and protect them, including from cyberstalking and cyberbullying.

Sri Lanka releases all 54 Indian fishermen arrested this week



COLOMBO, MAR 27 (PTI):

Sri Lanka has released all 54 Indian fishermen arrested this week for allegedly poaching in the country's territorial waters, Indian officials confirmed on Saturday.

The Indian official sources here said that 40 of them were released on Friday and the remaining 14 have been released this morning.

The 54 Indian fishermen were arrested by the Sri Lankan Navy on March 24 at two different locations in the north and northeastern seas.

The Navy also seized their five trawlers.

Upon their arrest, the Indian High Commission here said that they were providing consular assistance to the arrested fishermen.

It said the fishermen's issue needed to be treated in a humanitarian manner. The Indian High Commission in a statement said the bilateral mechanisms were being utilised to see an

expeditious settlement of the issue.

Fishermen from both countries are arrested frequently for inadvertently trespassing into each other's waters. The fishermen issue has become a major irritant in bilateral ties.

In January, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar visited Sri Lanka, he met with Fisheries Minister Douglas Devananda and raised the fishermen issue and reviewed bilateral cooperation in fisheries.

"We look forward to the early return of our fishermen from Sri Lanka," Jaishankar had said.

Later, a three-member committee was appointed by the Sri Lankan government which will make recommendations on measures to stop poaching by Indian fishermen inside the country's waters after four people were killed when an Indian trawler capsized after colliding with a Sri Lankan Navy vessel.

Protests in Myanmar as junta chief marks Armed Forces Day

Yangon (Myanmar), Mar 27 (AP): The head of Myanmar's junta on Saturday used the occasion of the country's Armed Forces Day to try to justify the overthrow of the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, as protesters marked the holiday by calling for even bigger demonstrations.

Senior Gen Min Aung Hlaing did not directly refer to the nationwide protests that show no signs of stopping. In a nationally televised speech before thousands of soldiers at a massive parade ground at the capital Naypyitaw, he referred only to terrorism which can be harmful to state tranquility and social security, and called it unacceptable.

People in cities and towns around Myanmar marked the public holiday by again demonstrating against the Feb. 1 coup. In several locations, security forces sought to disperse them forcefully, as has become standard practice, Reports on social media, not immediately verified, said several demonstrators were shot dead Saturday morning.

The toll of protesters confirmed killed in Myanmar since last month's takeover has reached 328, said the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a group that documents deaths and arrests. It has cautioned that

its tally includes only verified cases, with the actual number of casualties likely much higher. It said eight people were killed Friday.

The protesters refer to the holiday by its original name, Resistance Day, which marks the beginning of a revolt against Japanese occupation in World War 2. This year's event was seen as a flashpoint, with protesters threatening to double down on their public opposition to the coup with more and bigger demonstrations.

State television MRTV on Friday night showed an announcement urging young people who have been at the forefront of the protests and prominent among the casualties to learn a lesson from those killed already about the danger of being shot in the head or back.

The warning was taken as an explicit threat because a great number of the fatalities among the protesters have come from being shot in the head, suggesting they have been targeted for death. The announcement suggested that some young people were taking part in protesting as if it was a game, and urged their parents and friends to talk them out of participating.

In recent days the junta has portrayed the demonstrators as the ones perpetrating vio-

lence for their sporadic use of petrol bombs. In contrast, security forces have used live ammunition daily for weeks against overwhelmingly unarmed and peaceful crowds.

In his lengthy speech, Min Aung Hlaing accused Suu Kyi's elected government of failing to investigate irregularities in the last polls, and repeated that his government would hold a free and fair election" and hand over power afterward. He gave no details.

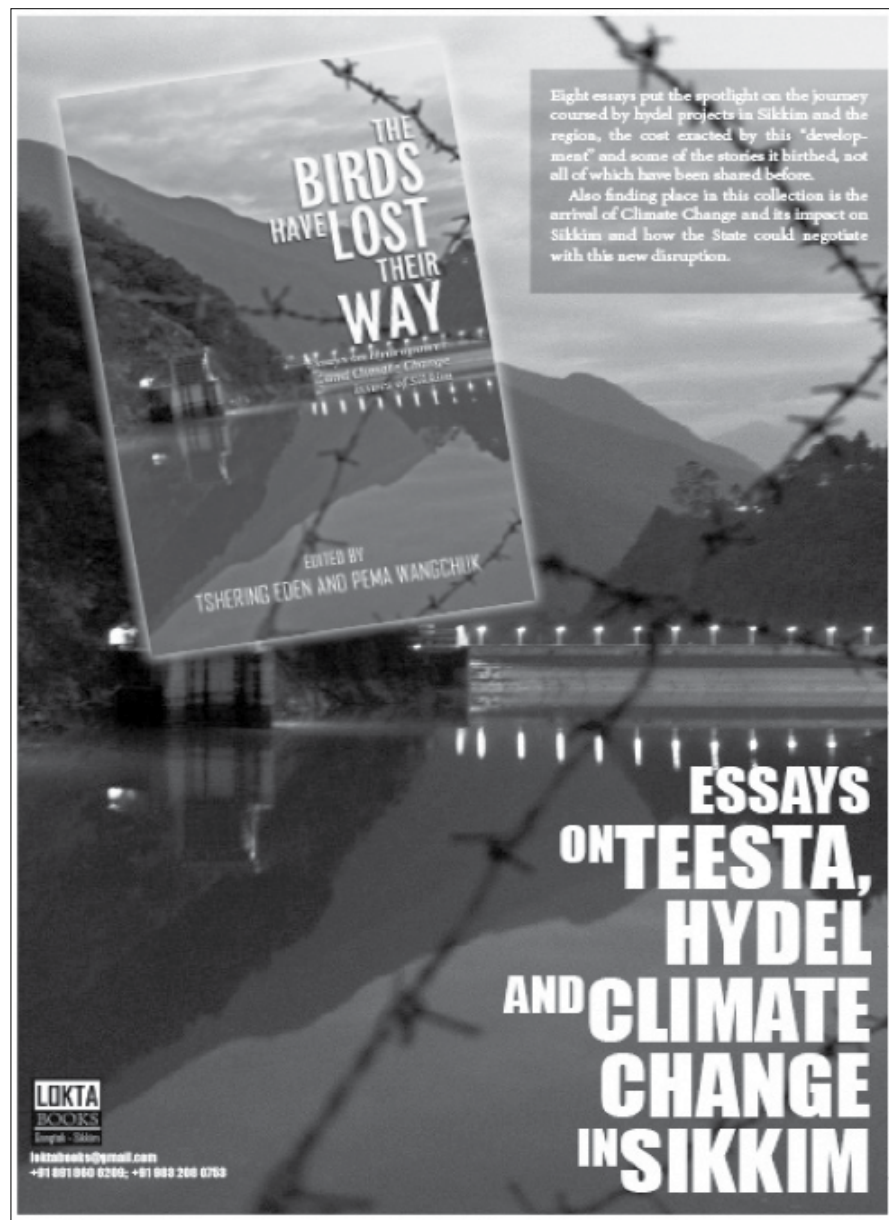
The military has claimed there were irregularities in the voting rolls for last November's election, which Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party won in a landslide.

The junta detained Suu Kyi on the day it took power, and continues to hold her on minor criminal charges while investigating allegations of corruption against her that her supporters dismiss as politically motivated.

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Carrie Underwood's faith shines through on church hymns

NASHVILLE, TENN. (AP): Don't get her wrong, Carrie Underwood loves to sing about getting revenge on the cheating ex and belting out ballads on award show stages in dazzling gowns. But Underwood's spirituality has always been at her musical core.

The seven-time Grammy winner has always made hits that speak directly to her faith, from "Jesus Take the Wheel" to "Something in the Water." Now she's releasing her first album of gospel music called "My Savior" on Friday, just in time for Easter.

"I'm lucky enough that I feel like I've been making spiritual music along the way in my career," said the three-time Academy of Country Music entertainer of the year. "I love the sassy stuff and I love to get an attitude and get dressed up and do all that stuff. But it's so nice to be able to sing songs like this."

Recording the songs that she sang in church growing up in Oklahoma was always on the list of albums she wanted to make. After years of touring in between releasing platinum-selling studio albums, the

global pandemic finally gave her the opportunity. She didn't squander the time at home and put out two albums in six months, with "My Sav-

ior" following up on her Christmas album "My Gift."



ior" following up on her Christmas album "My Gift."

"It's such a great time to just really slow down and be super intentional about what I'm doing," Underwood

said. "It's not about the bigger, better thing. It's about the smaller thing, the thing that's inside of me."

Among classic hymns like "How

Great Thou Art" and "Amazing Grace,"

Underwood also sought to bring a fresh sound, such as the acoustic rock-inspired "Nothing But the

Blood of Jesus" that features a duet

from Bear Rinehart from NEEDTO-

BREATHE. Gospel icon CeCe Winans

joins Underwood on "Great Is Thy

Faithfulness" with vocal runs that

soar to the heavens.

Underwood also wanted to record

"Softly and Tenderly," a hymn that

brought her and the crowd to tears

when she sang it at the Country Music

Association Awards show in 2017

during the in memoriam segment

that also honored victims of the mass

shooting at the Route 91 Harvest festival.

The performance was so emotional

that even Underwood struggled to finish singing.

"In that moment that I sang that

song, I feel like it provided such a

peace in the room and it allowed everybody

to be emotional and to be stirred inside themselves," Under-

wood said.

Underwood will perform the

new album during a livestream

event from the Ryman Auditorium

in Nashville, Tennessee, on Easter

Sunday via her Facebook page. Don-

ations raised during the event will

benefit Save the Children.

Osbourne off 'The Talk' after inquiry into racism discussion



LOS ANGELES (AP): CBS says Sharon Osbourne will no longer appear on its daytime show "The Talk" after a heated on-air discussion about racism earlier this month.

The network said Friday Osbourne had decided to leave the show after a review that found in part that "Sharon's behavior toward her co-hosts during the March 10 episode did not align with our values for a respectful workplace." The network said its internal inquiry said the show's co-hosts, including Osbourne and Sheryl Underwood, were not properly prepared by the show's team for a discussion on race. But it said there was no evidence found to support Osbourne's claim CBS ordered she be confronted about her support of British TV personality Piers Morgan.

Morgan, who is a friend of Osbourne's, left "Good Morning Britain" after saying he didn't believe Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, when she said in an interview that she had considered suicide when unhappy with her life in Britain's royal family.

"The Talk" has been on hiatus while the March 10 discussion was investigated. CBS said it had conducted workshops and training this week "about equity, inclusion and cultural awareness for the hosts, producers and crew."

There was no immediate comment from Osbourne's publicist. No replacement has been announced. CBS said the show will not return until April 12.

During the discussion of Morgan, Underwood asked Osbourne, "what would you say to people who may feel that, while you're standing by your friend, it appears that you gave validation or safe haven to something that he has uttered that is racist, even if you don't agree?"

Osbourne replied angrily, using words that were bleeped out, and said she felt like she was being placed on "the electric chair" for having a friend that some people think is racist.

After a commercial break, the discussion continued with Osbourne telling Underwood at one point: "Don't try to cry. If anyone should be crying, it should be me."

Osbourne gained TV fame with the 2002-2005 reality show "The Osbournes," which she produced and starred in alongside her heavy-metal rock star husband, Ozzy Osbourne, and two of their three children.

Sharon Osbourne, a manager for her husband and other musicians, was a judge on the British talent show "The X Factor" and on "America's Got Talent."

Don Cheadle to narrate 'Wonder Years' for ABC

LOS ANGELES, MAR 27 (PTI): Actor Don Cheadle will serve as a narrator on ABC's upcoming reboot of "Wonder Years".

According to The Hollywood Reporter, the "Avengers: Endgame" star will portray the adult version of the show's lead character, Dean, to be played by Elisha "EJ" Williams.

The rebooted series is about a Black family in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1968.

It follows 12-year-old Dean, an inquisitive and hopeful kid coming of age in a turbulent time and trying to figure out his place both within his family and in the larger world. Cheadle's adult

version of Dean is a new grandfather looking back on his childhood.

"Wonder Years" will also feature Dule Hill and Saycon Sengbloh as Dean's parents and Laura Kariuki as his older sister.

The original drama series ran on ABC from 1988 to 1993 in which Daniel Stern had served as the narrator.

Fred Savage, who played the lead role in the show, is directing the reboot with the pilot episode being penned by Saladin K. Patterson.

Savage and Patterson are also executive producing the series alongside Lee Daniels and Marc Velez of Lee Daniels Entertainment.



A REASON TO CELEBRATE! Model Kendall Jenner stepped out for Justin Bieber's album release party in LA.

Emma Stone has given birth' to first child with husband Dave McCary



LOS ANGELES, MAR 27 (PTI): Oscar winner Emma Stone has welcomed her first child with husband Dave McCary.

The actor reportedly gave birth to the baby on Saturday 13 March in Los Angeles, according to TMZ, but it's not yet known whether she had a boy or a girl.

In February, Stone was spotted cradling her baby bump in a black top on a Los

Angeles walk with a friend.

Stone and the 35-year-old writer tied the knot last year, People magazine confirmed in September 2020.

The couple became engaged in December 2019 after dating for two years. They met when Stone hosted the NBC variety sketch series "Saturday Night Live!" near

the end of 2016.

Popular Pakistani rock band Strings part ways after 33 years

ISLAMABAD, MAR 27 (PTI): Pakistani rock band Strings, known for belting out hits songs like "Dhaani" and "Duur", have announced that they are ending their 33-year-long musical partnership. The group took to social media on Thursday evening to announce their decision to disband, saying that the members will share an "inseparable bond".

"Hey guys. This post is a bit different from the usual. We have decided that today, 25/03/2021, is the day we gracefully get to conclude Strings. The past 33 years have been incredible for both of us," it read. The band thanked fans for showering love on them over the years.

"It's so rare to have the chance to be able to do things like this and we are infinitely grateful to all of our fans for

making it possible. We hope you found it worthwhile as well. "While the band technically may not be together anymore, both of us share an inseparable bond that will connect us no matter where life takes us. Thank you so much for everything," the farewell note read.

Strings was formed as a college band by four students Bilal Maqsood, Faisal Kapadia, Rafiq Wazir and Kareem Bashir Bhoj in 1989.

Despite two successful albums 'Strings I' (1990) and 'Strings II' (1992), the band took a break for eight years.

Maqsood and Kapadia then revived the band in 2000 and released their third album "Duur", which was a huge hit. Strings went on to compose "Hai Koi Hum Jaisa", Pakistan's official cricket World Cup song in 2003, before releasing their fourth album 'Dhaani' the same year.

Aries:
The trouble is, we believe we have to do everything on our own. That we're solely responsible for making things happen in our reality. What we forget is that we are a part of a divine matrix, and that we are supported in more ways than we can fathom. So, perfect the art of co-creation, Aries. Allow that which is meant to be yours to flow into your existence. Finding that balance between doing and non-doing will help you evolve to the next level.

Tip: Find a balance between doing and non-doing.
Taurus:
Things are looking rather topsy-turvy on the personal front. You gave your all to make this relationship work, but there is something that seems amiss here. Word for the wise: take your rose-tinted glasses off, Taurus. Recognise this connection for what it is. If you need time to process what you have been shown, take a step back. Remember, coming face-to-face with the truth is seldom easy, but it will liberate you in more ways that you can imagine.

Tip: Take the rose-tinted glasses off.
Gemini:
Here's the thing, Gemini: the idea you're sitting on is a million dollar one. So, what's keeping you from putting things into action? Are your inner demons secretly standing in the way of your success? What the cards want you

to remember: nobody is going to believe in you unless you believe in yourself. So, move past the self-doubt. Walk the inhibitions to the exit door. The time to take that final step has come, and that time is now!

Tip: You know what you have to do!
Cancer:
It's easier to externalise the problem. To make somebody else responsible for the suffering you are experiencing. But, deep down, you know that you are responsible for your own reality—that both the good and the bad are a result of your doings. So, let go of the blame game, Cancer. Take charge of where you are today. Trust that will create a magnitude shift both within and without.

Tip: Take charge of your reality.
Leo:
It's easier to externalise the problem. To make somebody else responsible for the suffering you are experiencing. But, deep down, you know that you are responsible for your own reality—that both the good and the bad are a result of your doings. So, let go of the blame game, Cancer. Take charge of where you are today. Trust that will create a magnitude shift both within and without.

Tip: Take charge of your reality.
Virgo:
When we suppress anger, sadness or any kind of

negative emotions, we end up storing them in our cellular memory, which in turn becomes venomous for our own being. Today, you're being asked to pay attention to the old wounds that are resurfacing at the moment. The upcoming full moon will provide you with the opportunity to cleanse and purge these heavy emotions. Word for the wise: prepare yourself to release that which no longer serves your highest good. PS: Meditating with crystals such as citrine and carnelian will assist you in the releasing process.

Tip: Cleanse and purge. Recognise that which has served its purpose in your existence.
Libra:
It's time to nurture your body inside out. It's time to activate the circulation of good chi through movement meditation and dance. So, turn the volume up, Libra. Hold space for your body to sway to its own rhythm. In doing so, you will be able to transmute the heavy emotions that are weighing you down at this moment. Need the support of the collective to get grooving? Consider organising a small gathering in your living room or terrace.

Tip: When in doubt, dance.
Scorpio:
As things get turbulent around you, you may find yourself playing the role of jester (which is new for you!). Keep

things light-hearted around here. Choose to see the humour in each and every situation. Making limoncello out of life's metaphorical lemons is probably the most spiritual thing you can do at this moment. Remember, you're not in this alone. Your fellow warriors are experiencing the ups and downs in their own manner too. Consider holding space for a sharing circle so you can work through the difficult emotions together.

Tip: Channel your inner jester.
Sagittarius:
We tend to glorify the good in our existence—the moments that awaken joy and happiness. What we tend to forget is that duality is the way of life in the earthly realm. In other words, the light will be followed by darkness and the darkness will be followed by light. So, honour both sides of the coin with equal aplomb. Remembering that the challenges are helping you level up is a good way to make peace with where you are.

Tip: Challenges have a special place and purpose in our life, Sagittarius.
Capricorn:
As you transform, your relationships transform too, Capricorn, and that is the truth of life in the earthly realm. But, what happens when you're both experiencing changes at the same time? Could your equation be affected as a result of this shift? Active listening will help you under-

stand the other side of the story and restore the balance that has gone awry. Remember to leave the judgements at the door as you do. Only love and compassion will help you build the bridges that you're being called to.

Tip: Active listening is the need of the hour.
Aquarius:
When we come from a space of judgements, we tend to look at the other as a separate entity. When we come from a space of compassion, however, the separation makes way for oneness. It all comes down to where we choose to vibrate. Remember, each and every individual comes to this planet to live out their karma—karma which we will know nothing about given our limited vision. Keep this in mind as you ask yourself the most significant question: "What would love do in this moment?"

Tip: When we come from a space of compassion, separation makes way for oneness.

Pisces:
All the world's a play, Pisces. All the world's merely a play. So have fun with what you're creating without getting attached to a specific outcome. If things don't work out as planned, trust that that's part of the plan too—the part that's teaching you to take failure in your stride and learn from your past mistakes.

Tip: Have fun with what you are creating without getting attached to a specific outcome.