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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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Aap Dara residents have had enough of Stage-V instability, want compensation and relocation



**SUMMIT REPORT
DIKCHU, 07 FEB:**

Aap Dara, the village in East district located right above the 510MW Teesta Stage-V dam, has grown even more unstable following a massive landslide on the alignment below it. Speaking to SummitTimes, the villagers pointed out to cracks and sinks which have snaked up on all the 27 houses in the village rendering them too unsafe to continue living in.

Unfortunately, since the damage taken by their homes has still not been officially attested as having been caused by the NHPC project below, they cannot even process compensation and explore the possibility of relocation.

For anyone who has followed the Stage-V project, Aap Dara's woes will not come as new news. Instability caused by the dam and the reservoir behind it has already convinced the

authorities to accept that 16 of the 27 houses are too unstable and severely damaged and supposedly identified for compensation. This, however, has not happened yet, and now the entire cluster of 27 houses is showing signs of advanced distress.

The affected families insist that all of Aap Dara has been rendered too precarious for people to continue living there.

In fact, five families have already moved out to safer places even as their damage remains unrecognized. That, however, is not a recourse available to all the affected families who stress that they can move to safer locations only after they receive adequate compensation.

"We feel tremors all the time and sometimes even our doors and windows shake because there is a de-silting chamber underground below our village," says Saroj Rai, one

of the affected villagers.

The affected people have running from pillar to post demanding that their houses be acquired by NHPC so that they can shift to safer locations.

They complain that all they have seen are piecemeal surveys and joint inspections but a permanent solution remains awaited.

With danger posed by the continuing degrading of the slope below, they are running out patience with the administration want to now approach the Chief Minister to intervene and expedite the process for them to relocate before anything untoward happens.

They have demanding relocation for three years now.

"We never thought that this situation would arise after we had given our lands for the development of the nation," remarked one of the affected villagers as a parting shot highlighting how their privations are being overlooked and ignored.

Recent natural disasters in Uttarakhand



NEW DELHI, FEB 7 (PTI): These are the major natural disasters that Uttarakhand has faced over the last three decades:

* 1991 Uttarkashi Earthquake: An earthquake of 6.8 magnitude hit the undivided state of Uttar Pradesh in October 1991 in which at least 768 people were killed and thousands of homes destroyed.

* 1998 Malpa Landslide: The small village of Malpa in Pithoragarh district was wiped in the landslide in which about 255 people, including 55 Kailash Mansarovar pilgrims, were killed. The resulting debris partially blocked the Sharda river.

* 1999 Chamoli earthquake: An earthquake of 6.8 magnitude hit Chamoli district killing over 100 people. The adjoining Rudrapur district was also heavily affected. Several ground deformations were reported as a result of the earthquake, and landslides and changes in water flow were also recorded. Cracks were observed in roads and on the ground.

* 2013 North India Floods: In June 2013, a multi-day cloudburst centered on Uttarakhand caused devastating floods and landslides. According to the state government, more than 5,700 people were presumed dead in the disaster. As bridges and roads were destroyed more than 3 lakh people were trapped in the valleys leading to the Char Dham pilgrimage sites.

Supporting farmer protest our Constitutional right: Gyalshing students out on bail counter SKM allegations



**AARON RAI
GANGTOK, 07 FEB:**

Praveen Upreti and Praveen Basnet, the two Gyalshing College students arrested by Sikkim Police on Friday night, while responding to allegations of being anti-nationals for their support and participation in the Farmer Protests at Singhu border in Delhi, today countered that their support for the farmer protest was an expression of their Constitutional right.

"It is our constitutional right to take part in any democratic movement or protest," they pointed out.

SKM, it may be recalled, had alleged that their presence among protesting farmers in Delhi was an anti-national action and had even suggested that this be investigated by central agencies.

Meanwhile, the two students, arrested on the police complaint filed by the Additional Chief Secretary, Education Department, were released on Saturday even as several other students had been detained.

The students also alleged that the arrests were made without proper justification and should be condemned by all members

of the civil society because the government was sidestepping accountability and dialogue while trying to browbeat people into submission.

The two students also clarified that they had attended the farmer protest as members of Sikkim Progressive Youth Forum and were not representing the college or the student body there. They also announced that they will continue pressing their demand for timely infrastructure development for Gyalshing College and demand better explanations from the government for the delays.

Breaking from tradition, Pope elects first woman to senior Church post

VATICAN CITY, 07 FEB [AFP]: Pope Francis has broken with Catholic tradition to appoint a woman as an undersecretary of the synod of bishops, the first to hold the post with voting rights in a body that studies major questions of doctrine.

French woman Nathalie Becquart is one of the two new undersecretaries named Saturday to the synod, where she has been a consultant since 2019.

The appointment signals the pontiff's desire "for a greater participation of women in the process of discernment and decision-making in the church", said Cardinal Mario Grech, the secretary-general of the synod.

"During the previous synods, the number of women participating as experts and listeners has increased," he said.

"With the nomination of Sister Nathalie Becquart

and her possibility of participating in voting, a door has opened."

The synod is led by bishops and cardinals who have voting rights and also comprises experts who cannot vote, with the next gathering scheduled for autumn 2022.

A special synod on the Amazon in 2019 saw 35 female "auditors" invited to the assembly, but none could vote.

The Argentinian-born pope has signalled his wish to reform the synod and have women and laypeople play a greater role in the church.

He named Spaniard Luis Marin de San Martin as the other undersecretary in the synod of bishops.

Becquart, 52, a member of the France-based Xaviere Sisters, has a master's degree in management from the prestigious HEC business school in Paris and studied in Boston before joining the order.

Sikkim's low daily count continue - only 2 cases found in 183 tests

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 07 FEB:**

Two persons were reported positive for COVID-19 in the last 24 hours in Sikkim taking the state's tally of confirmed cases to 6,110.

Samples of a person from Tadong and one from Lingtam-Bakhutar, Rongli in East District were found positive for COVID-19.

In the meanwhile, the number of recovered cases in Sikkim reached 5,810 with seven more Covid-positive patients getting discharged on Saturday.

There are currently only 70 active cases of novel coronavirus in Sikkim.

In his daily health bulletin on Sunday, Health Department State IEC Officer, Sonam Gyaltsen Bhutia informed that the two new cases were found in the testing of 183 samples on Saturday.

Both the cases were detected via RT-PCR testing of 167 samples, while all the six samples tested by TrueNat and 10 by rapid antigen testing returned negative for COVID-19.

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Massive flood as glacier breaks off at Joshimath, 150 labourers missing

DEHRADUN/NEW DELHI, FEB 7 (PTI): A glacier broke off at Joshimath in Uttarakhand's Chamoli district on Sunday, leading to a massive flood in the Dhauli Ganga river and causing large-scale devastation in the upper reaches of the ecologically fragile Himalayas. More than 150 labourers working in a power project are missing, officials said.

Homes along the way were swept away as the waters rushed down the mountainsides in a raging torrent. There were fears of damage in human settlements downstream. Many villages were evacuated and people taken to

safer areas.

I am constantly monitoring the unfortunate situation in Uttarakhand. India stands with Uttarakhand, prays for everyone's safety, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said.

Though there were few details available immediately, more than 150 labourers working at the Rishi Ganga power project may have been directly affected, said State Disaster Response Force DIG Ridhim Aggarwal.

Representatives of the power project have told me that they are not being able to contact around 150 of their workmen at the

project site," she said. The waters in the Dhauli Ganga, a tributary of the Ganga, was flowing two to three metres above normal, the official added.

Several districts, including Pauri, Tehri, Rudrapur, Haridwar and Dehradun, are likely to be affected and have been put on high alert.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah spoke to Uttarakhand Chief Minister Trivendra Singh Rawat and assured him of all possible support to deal with the situation arising in the wake of glacier burst and floods.

In a series of tweets in Hindi,



Shah also said teams of the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) have been deployed for rescue and relief operations of the affected people while additional troops of the force are being airlifted from Delhi.

"I have spoken to Chief Minister @tsrawatbjp ji, DG ITBP

and DG NDRF regarding the natural disaster in Uttarakhand. All the concerned officers are working on a war footing to secure the people. NDRF teams have left for rescue operations. Every possible help will be

provided to 'Devbhoomi,'" he said. Shah said the central government is constantly monitoring the situation in Uttarakhand.

"Some more teams of NDRF are being airlifted from Delhi and sent to Uttarakhand. We are constantly monitoring the situation there," he

said.

A home ministry spokesperson said four NDRF teams (about 200 personnel) are being airlifted to Dehradun and will head to Joshimath.

The chief minister also appealed to people to not spread rumours through old flood videos.

He said the water level in the Alaknanda, another tributary of the Ganga, is one metre above normal but the flow was reducing gradually.

He said all districts concerned have been alerted and people have been asked not to go near the Ganga.

‘Partyless’ ULBs and panchayats born from SKM’s ‘regressive’ ideology: Chamling

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 07 FEB:

Sikkim Democratic Front president, former Chief Minister Pawan Chamling, has argued that the SKM Government’s move to make elections to urban local bodies and panchayats “partyless” was born from its regressive instincts.

Responding to a query posed to him on his Facebook page, Mr Chamling writes: “This shows the regressive mentality of the SKM leadership. When the

rest of India is moving away from the old system of nonpartisan elections to party based elections, Sikkim is moving towards it.”

“Remember, party-less panchayat elections were held in the past when democracy was non-existent. People rejected that system and imposing the same system upon people shows the insensitivity of the government to people’s aspiration,” he adds.

Mr Chamling, whose SDF Government had

introduced party-based elections to urban local bodies and panchayats, believes that “ideologies, principles, programs and philosophies make the foundation for politics and a firm commitment to them strengthens democracy.”

This, he argues, is something that belonging to a political party ensures. In the absence of it, “when the ULBs and Panchayats are formed, there will be rampant bargaining as the candidates will not be bound to a party’s

high command.”

“Individuals with might or money power will easily be able to dominate the process of body formation. The age old system of socially influential individuals grabbing power at the grassroots will be institutionalised soon,” he details.

He adds that the “ill-conceived” amendments “will eventually destroy the very foundation of democratic local governance at the grassroots level.”

He goes as far as to

allege that SKM move was a “subtle attempt to prove that the ULBs and Panchayats are not constitutional bodies.”

“Can we make our assembly and parliamentary elections party-less? Think of the potential situation of a country when these elections are held like that,” he offers by way of explanation.

He also sees the move as an “eyewash” in that SKM will “still push its own candidates secretly and silence other aspirants.”

SPYF explains SKM’s outburst to party’s intolerance towards right to dissent

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 07 FEB:

Sikkim Progressive Youth Forum, in an elaborate press statement released today, has explained Sikkim Krantikari Morcha’s outburst against SPYF to the party’s apparent intolerance towards people’s right to dissent and demand accountability.

SKM spokesperson, the CM’s political advisor, Jacob Khaling, it may be recalled had yesterday lashed out strongly against SPYF while responding to the

situation created by the protest by Gyalshing College students even accusing some of them, who are also SPYF members, of being anti-nationals.

The SPYF statement explains that is the allegations had come from Mr Khaling as an individual, SPYF would have laughed it off, but since he also represents the State Government, it was felt important to respond.

The organisation has reiterated its support for the farmers protest against 3 new farm laws.

It was in connection with this sentiment that four SPYF members had travelled to the Singhu border of Delhi to register solidarity with the farmers. Two of these members are also students at Gyalshing College.

This delegation, however, returned on 20 Jan itself, the statement informs, and hence could not have been part of the violence that transpired on the 26th, which the organisation has also condemned.

About allusions that SPYF was receiving

“funding” from suspect sources, the organisation claims that it takes donations from the common people for its activities.

“We transparently show our accounts to our members publicly. Can SKM do the same to the public?” it asks.

The release contends that the State Government “has left no stone unturned to crush all dissenting voices and opposition parties in the state.”

SPYF, it accepts, “is a threat to the monopoly of the ruling Govt.”

In this regard, it goes on to enumerate the various demands it has taken to the streets with and details the response of the state machinery to its protests to claim that intolerance has been the driving principle of govt response.

The release concludes with the argument that dissent is a fundamental right of all citizens and that people can question the government and oppose it.

“These are the rights which no one cannot snatch from us,” SPYF underlines.

Minister Panth chairs ASKCBKS meeting to discuss future progs

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 07 FEB:

A meeting of the Akhil Sikkim Khas Chettri Bahun Kalyan Sangh was held here on Sunday to discuss future programmes of the organization.

The meeting was chaired by Tourism Minister, BS Panth and also attended by Health Minister, Dr MK Sharma, UDD Minister Arun Upreti, Rhenock MLA Bishnu Kumar Sharma and Namcheybong MLA Em Prasad Dulal.

A press release of the

organization informs that the meeting discussed various problems being faced by members of the Khas community and deliberated on activities and future programmes of the organization.

Minister Upreti suggested that the organization deliver on its responsibility to lead the Baisakh celebrations as a festival of Khas and the entire Nepali community.

Likewise, Minister Dr MK Sharma stated that the community can achieve a lot in the

current positive and suitable environment in the State, while MLA Em Prasad Sharma asserted that youth have a huge responsibility to preserve and conserve the culture and traditions of the Khas community.

Press Advisor to the CM, CP Sharma added that the organization should play an active role in preparing meritorious students for competitive examinations and Secretary to the CM, SD Dhakal suggested that economically deprived youth immediately make

EWS certificates.

In his presidential address, Tourism Minister BS Panth mentioned that although Sikkim was a small state, overall development was only possible with equal political and social development for every community of Sikkim.

Mr TN Dhakal, in turn, stated that the SKM government was committed to protect the interests and rights of every community in Sikkim.

Akhil Sikkim Khas

Chettri Bahun Kalyan Sangh president, Raju Basnet presented the report of the organization and detailed the activities, achievements and future programmes of the organization.

The release informs that the meeting also appointed members to its advisory committee.

The meeting which was started with a welcome address by Renuka Basnet, ended with a vote of thanks by working president Narayan Khatiwada.

Former student leader claims he was threatened for expressing solidarity with protesting Gyalshing College students



SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 07 FEB:

Former student’s representative council [SRC] president of Nar Bahadur Bhandari Degree College, Arun Limboo, today alleged that he was threatened outside Sadar Thana here after he visited the police station to extend support to protesting students from Gyalshing College.

He informs that the person who threatened him has been identified and that his identity, including a photograph,

has been provided to Sikkim Police with whom Mr Limboo has also lodged a formal complaint.

“I am not interfering in the matter of Gyalshing Degree College as I was not a student there. I was at Sadar Thana as a concerned youth,” he explained while addressing a press conference here this afternoon.

He went on to condemn the arrest of college students in uniform and the aggression with which

their protest has been cracked down upon.

“I was outside Sadar Thana out of solidarity to the students when a group of [then] unidentified persons approached me and one of them threatened me right there in front of the police station in broad daylight and even pulled down my face mask,” he claimed.

Mr Limboo informed that he will also take up the matter with the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes and the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Meeting deliberates completion of Sri Panch Kanya Devi Mandir at Upper Amba

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 07 FEB:

Rhenock Area MLA, Bishnu Kumar Khatiwada, chaired a meeting at Sri Panch Kanya Devi Mandir in Upper Amba under Rhenock constituency on Saturday. The meeting deliberated on the pending works to construct the temple in a massive and grand manner.

A press release informs that the meeting was also attended by local panchayats, ACF Forest Department, Balkrishna Dhamala, senior citizens of the area, retired teachers and local youth.

The Mandir



Management Committee president explained that the temple carries historical significance and further assured to give continuity to the pending works of the temple from tomorrow itself.

It is informed that ACF Balkrishna Dhamala handed over

a cheque of Rs 5 lakh to the management committee of the temple.

It is added that funds were also raised from the local people for the construction of the temple.

The meeting ended with a vote of thanks proposed by local panchayat Bishnu Kumari Regmi.

Productive first week of Budget session in RS

NEW DELHI, FEB 7 (PTI):

The first six sittings of Rajya Sabha during the ongoing Budget session have proved productive with the House recording productivity of 82.10 percent, a statement said.

During the sittings, the House witnessed a 15-hour debate on the Motion of Thanks on the President’s address in the upper house. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will reply to the debate after Question Hour on Monday.

The discussion on the motion has been the main business transacted by the House over three days in which 50 members from 25 parties participated, an official statement said.

Against the total scheduled sitting time of 20 hours and 34 minutes, 4 hours 14 minutes were lost on February 3, due to disruption. The members, however, sat for extra

33 minutes beyond the business hours on Friday, the statement said.

To enable extra time for discussion on the Motion of Thanks, Question Hour was dispensed with on February 3 while both the Question Hour and Zero Hour were shelved on the next two days. Private Members’ Business was not taken up on Friday.

The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation (Amendment) Bill, 2021, seeking to replace the Ordinance in this regard, was also introduced during the week.

The house also saw eight Zero Hour and seven Special Mentions made during the first week.

The House will take up the discussion on the general budget for 2021-21 during the coming week for which 10 hours have been allotted.

Centre keen to make West Bengal business hub: Modi

HALDIA, FEB 7 (PTI):

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday said the Centre is making efforts to make West Bengal a premier trading and business hub through port-led development.

Dedicating four projects, including the ambitious 348 -km Dobhi-Durgapur natural gas pipeline built by government-owned GAIL, to the nation, Modi said these will make Haldia a major centre for import and export.

“Our efforts will be directed towards making the state a premier one in trading and business activity in the country.

For this, port-led development is feasible and Haldia will play an important role in it,” he said.

“Haldia will help the East to become self-reliant in the energy sector. This will in turn help in the aim of a self-reliant India,” the prime minister said at a function to dedicate the infrastructure projects worth Rs 4,700 crore to the nation.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who was an invitee at the event, did not turn up. However, TMC MP Dibyendu Adhikari, who has been maintaining distance from the party, attended the programme.

The PM said with the inauguration of the Dhobi- Durgapur pipeline, gas connectivity in the eastern region will be strengthened.

“The four projects (belonging to GAIL, BPCL and NHAI) will help in ease of doing business and living in the east, and make Haldia a major centre for export and import,” Modi said.

The expansion of the natural gas pipeline network will also reduce the cost of natural gas, he said.

“Today, India is the largest consumer of natural gas in Asia. When we got the mandate six years ago, we drew up an agenda to develop the eastern region, which was lagging behind,” he said.

The central government, Modi said,

has made major efforts in developing rail, road, airport and port connectivity.

He said the gas pipeline will bring new enterprises and prevent closure of the old ones through the extension of the PM Urja Ganga project.

“Today, the aim is that of one-nation, one-gas grid.

This will be a big movement. In this Union Budget, we have created a mission to get hydrogen as clean fuel,” the PM said.

Modi said the Dhobi-Durgapur pipeline will benefit the north-east, while fertiliser factories at Sindri and Durgapur will be also supplied with natural gas.

“The LPG import terminal at Haldia with a capacity of one million tonne per annum by BPCL will help in increasing the gas coverage in eastern India. One crore more families will be supplied LPG under the PM Ujjwala scheme,” he said.



KOLKATA, 07 FEB

[NDTV]: Prime Minister

Narendra Modi - whose silence on the “Jai Shri Ram” slogan episode during his last visit to Bengal was questioned by the state’s ruling Trinamool Congress - made his position clear today.

“Bengal loves football. So let me speak in that language. Trinamool has made many fouls, one after the other. The foul of misgovernance, attacks on opposition leaders, theft of money... The people of Bengal are watching. Bengal will soon show Trinamool the Ram card,” the Prime Minister said at a function in Haldia, the home turf of former minister Suvendu Adhikari, who left Trinamool to join the BJP in December.

Ms Banerjee, still smarting from the

January 23 episode when “Jai Shri Ram” slogans were shouted at the programme at Victoria Memorial, sent a negative RSVP for today’s event.

What had stung her party more was the Prime Minister’s silence about the episode. “His silence condones the behaviour of the BJP supporters,” Bengal’s urban affairs minister Firhad Hakim had said.

The Chief Minister, known to get upset at “Jai Shri Ram slogans” - which have become a battle cry for the BJP in the state - had refused to continue with her speech at the event after some people from back rows shouted the slogans as she rose to speak.

“This is not a political programme. Government programmes should have some dignity. It is not fair to insult someone

you have invited,” she had said, before stepping down.

Her stance got support from traditional rivals - the Congress and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M).

“The PM has damaged his own position by allowing this. No one has the right to insult Mamata Banerjee... our chief minister... like this. It was an attack by Hindu communalists on Bengal’s culture. A communal and political assault on Bengal,” Congress’s Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury had said.

“She did the right thing by refusing to give her speech. Why couldn’t she speak? Because BJP held a party programme on government money. This is wrong. A wrong is a wrong. Bengal has been wronged,” CPI(M) leader Md Salim said.

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Multi-speciality Naruvi Hospitals inaugurated in Vellore



SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 07 FEB:

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami inaugurated Naruvi Hospitals, a multi-specialty hospital, in Vellore on Friday evening, a press release informs.

The Rs 600 crore hospital in the heart of Vellore was inaugurated through video-conferencing from the TN Secretariat in Chennai in the presence of TN Health Minister, Dr C Vijayabaskar, Commercial Taxes

Minister KC Veeramani, MGR University Chancellor and former MP, Dr AC Shanmugam, and Chairman of Naruvi Hospitals, Dr. GV Sampath.

The 500-bed hospital claims to be a first of its kind in "innovative

partnership" with technical collaboration with Henry Ford Health System, a leading healthcare provider in the U.S.

The Super-Specialties being offered at Naruvi Hospitals include a vital array of disciplines

like Cardiology, Endocrinology, Medical Gastroenterology & Liver Diseases, Neonatal Intensive Care, Nephrology, Neurology, Neurosurgery, Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery to Urology.

Ratna Laksam's latest book released



GANGTOK, 07 FEB: Upahar Rahasya Dekhin Parako, the latest literary work by Ratna Laksam

Subba, was released today at a special function here which had Forest Minister Karma

Loday Bhutia as chief guest. The book release was organized by International Nepali Sahitya Samaj.

Powerlifters selected to represent Sikkim at senior and Jr championship



SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 07 FEB:

Sikkim Powerlifting Association [SPA] has announced the State team for the upcoming Senior National Powerlifting Championship to be held from 17 to 21 February at Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu and for the Sub-Junior & Junior National [Men & Women] Powerlifting Championship to be held from 17 to 21 March at Ghazipur in Uttar Pradesh.

The team was selected from among the winners of the recently held 1st Junior & Senior [men & women] Powerlifting Championship 2021 on 30 January at Gangtok.

Announcing the names of the state team at a press conference here this afternoon, SPA treasurer Sandhya

Sundas informed that this team of three men and two women will represent Sikkim at the upcoming senior national powerlifting championship.

The team will leave for the championship on 16 February.

The senior team members are Lalit Rai, Tej Bahadur Darjee, Ranjit Sharma, Sukmit Lepcha and Seema Pradhan.

The team will be accompanied by Devendra Basnet as team coach and referee, Sandhya Sundas as team manager and Raj Kumar Subba as a team official.

The association has also listed out names of the 20-member state junior team.

SPA general secretary, Devendra Basnet informed that the state

team was preparing for the upcoming nationals at their respective gyms and coaches and the association has been providing them technical knowledge and support.

The national powerlifting championship will have three events - squat, deadlift and bench-press.

During the press conference, the association formally introduced the 1st Ironman of Sikkim, Lalit Rai, 1st Ironwoman of Sikkim, Sukmit Lepcha and Premit Lepcha who set a new record in deadlift by lifting 130 kgs in women's category.

Dr Premit Lepcha is a doctor at the Central Referral Hospital, Tadong, and a member of the Barbell Gym and hails from Namthang in South District.



CM JOINS POLICE PERSONNEL FOR LUNCH AT 3RD IRBN CAMP: Chief Minister PS Tamang joined police personnel for lunch on Sunday at the 3rd Battalion IRBN Head Quarter Manglay, South Sikkim. Several police personnel were felicitated on the occasion and the Chief Minister also extended financial assistance for the establishment of a gym at the 3rd IRBN camp. "We dedicate the day to all the women officers and personnel from the police department for their service and commitment towards the maintenance of law & order and welfare of the State," the CM posted on his Facebook page.

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Mizoram churches reopen after over 10 months

AIZAWL, FEB 7 (PTI): Churches in Mizoram reopened on Sunday after a gap of over 10 months.

The government has allowed churches to reopen with only 50 per cent seating capacity and permitted church services only

during the daytime on every Saturday and Sunday.

The decision to reopen the places of worship in the Christian-majority state was taken following a dip in COVID-19 cases.

The religious

institutions were shut since March 22 last year after the COVID-19 outbreak.

Though Seventh-Day Adventist churches were reopened on Saturday, a majority of the churches belonging to Baptist, Presbyterian and other denominations reopened

on Sunday.

Expressing happiness over the development, Lalmunsang F Tusing of the Evangelical Free Church of India (EFCI) said, "We must thank the almighty and keep praying so that the pandemic is completely

contained."

"The re-opening of the churches has brought joy to the Christians. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us how necessary it is to remain attached to the church," Lalsiamkunga, an elderly churchgoer said.

Congress workers show black flags to Nirmala Sitharaman on Mumbai visit

MUMBAI, 07 FEB (PTI): Congress workers showed black flags to Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in Mumbai on Sunday to protest against the 2021-22 Union Budget and the increasing fuel prices.

However, the police stopped the protesters from reaching near the venue of her visit here, a police official said.

As the Union minister reached Yogi Sabha Grah in the Dadar area for an interaction in the backdrop of the Union Budget presented by her last week, around 400 to 500 Congress workers started shouting slogans against her, the official said.

They also raised slogans in praise of their party leader Rahul Gandhi.

The protesters had

started assembling outside the Dadar railway station since early morning, the official said.

They shouted slogans against the Union Budget and the increasing prices of essential commodities like petrol, diesel, cooking gas cylinders as well as railway fares.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (Zone 4) Vijay Patil said, "The protest took place peacefully. No untoward incident was reported. No one has been detained and no FIR has been registered."

M u m b a i Mahila Congress general secretary (administration) Sana Qureshi claimed that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the general public and the poor people are facing job losses.

RUCHI DIAGNOSTIC CLINIC

Behind telephone Exchange Near Old STNM Hospital. Gangtok

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Back to School

Let's make this year genuinely about students, learning and schools

A year of school has been effectively offered up in the name of a national emergency caused as much by the virus as by a hollowed out, disconnected bureaucracy. On a positive note, indications are that classrooms will begin allowing students from classes VI to attend physical classes and resume the social interactions that make schools so special. Even as some schools will begin a new year in upgraded avatars, there are also some that will be reopening with people-funded new facilities and also a clutch of schools which will not reopen this year because the low enrolment numbers just don't justify their continuation and the human resource much better deployed elsewhere. The closure of anything is a difficult moment, especially when it is a place of learning and holds so many memories and significance for so many lives. But some closures are a practical necessity, and it makes sense for the Education Department to focus on those schools which still retain students and then staff them with the best of faculty and facilities released from schools operating at much lower than optimum capacity. In this regard, Sikkim's reducing fertility rate and growing awareness among the youth could prove a boon for the coming generations. If Sikkim can manage its resources well, then the young can now be lavished with infrastructure, resources and access much in excess of what their numbers require.

It is simple. A falling fertility rate means that there will be fewer children coming into schools, and maybe some more schools will shut down, but the number of books, libraries, laboratories, and most importantly, teachers, will not go down and if anything, will only increase. What this means is that if Sikkim's planners can, for once, plan, then this abundance of learning resources can be assigned in ways that every child in a government school gets focused and dedicated attention. This is an opportunity which is pregnant with immense possibilities if it is taken as an opportunity and not rued as a downturn.

Meanwhile, the rather long pandemic disruption is on its way out, and hopefully, this year, breaks from academic learning will not be as long or frequent to require wasting the new session just repairing the academic connections for students. There will eventually also be a new transfer policy in place for the teachers and the once promising EQUIP initiative will also, hopefully, get to expand its footprint. All of these make the start of a new academic year exciting and one hopes that the mood sustains and pushes learning to a higher level here.

What is still missing because of lack of clear communication to stakeholders is the excitement that used to be palpable at this time of the year in the preparatory rush at stores dealing in uniforms and books (a crowding that has thankfully not happened yet or it could have spiked Sikkim's falling number of daily cases) and in the number of laundry-fresh uniforms all over the state as students and teachers return to class.

In the coming weeks, Sikkim will also learn whether the Department responsible for education in the State has done any learning while the students were away, beyond, that is, getting into a confrontation with students they are tasked to look out for. The good news is that education has received heartening attention over the lockdown with online modes at least receiving the attention they deserve and the more inspired teachers going out of their to reach students beyond mobile network.

And what is it that schools, whether primary, secondary or senior secondary, should deliver? If nothing else, then at least a generation that is better lettered, less parochial and more inquisitive. Look at it this way, Sikkim always had among the better per capita distribution of schools and the most enviable teacher-student ratios. It also now arguably has the highest per capita density of universities and children now have more options to explore by way of higher education. Without getting into the "quality" or reliability of the institutions of higher education, imagine a scenario where the schools here fostered a real thirst for knowledge that universities could help quench and expand. For far too long, schools have been about regimented teaching, and that has clearly not worked too well. How about the State started getting more liberal with the learning process? Open more minds, and they will not only take care of themselves, but also carry the state along. Now that there are fewer students in the classrooms and more options in the staff room, wider explorations are possible if the teachers were freed from clerical chores and inspired to work more with the students. With fewer schools to look after, the finances could also be invested more keenly on improving the learning environments at schools and making classrooms more student and learning friendly. One hopes that fewer teachers are borrowed out of classrooms to stand-in for tasks they are neither trained nor appointed for.

One hopes that education-related problems will receive immediate attention and are not kept pending for later. One hopes that the process begins to make school interesting so that fewer students dropout. One hopes that there are fewer schools this year which are short-staffed and more teachers who motivate learning. Wishful thinking? We wish the same every February and still continue hoping...

In 2010, a virus similar to SARS-CoV-2 was already present in Cambodia

ALEXANDRE HASSANIN
THECONVERSATION.COM

In November and December 2010, UNESCO and Cambodian authorities invited researchers from the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris to explore several sites in northern Cambodia. The goal was to study the biodiversity of bats near the Temple of Preah Vihear, and a large number of bats species were caught during this survey, including eight types of horseshoe bat (genus *Rhinolophus*). They're of great interest for virologists, as they are the reservoir of all Sarbecoviruses, the group of coronaviruses that includes SARS-CoV and SARS-CoV-2, respectively responsible for the SARS epidemic in 2002-2004 and the current Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2020, 10 years after the expedition, the samples stored in a freezer at -80°C were taken out and tested by the Institut Pasteur of Cambodia (IPC) to look for Sarbecoviruses. A PCR test showed two positive results and a full sequencing of their genome started. Two variants of a virus close to SARS-CoV-2 were discovered in two bats of the species *Rhinolophus shameli* we captured in 2010 in a cave in the province of Steung Treng.

The results of this research are freely available on the bioRxiv website and pending peer review. (This practice is now widely used to rapidly transfer new knowledge about the Covid-19 pandemic.)

SARS-COV-2-LIKE VIRUSES ARE PRESENT IN BATS IN THE YUNNAN PROVINCE OF CHINA AND IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

The discovery is important because the virus is the first found outside China that is close to SARS-CoV-2 – of the 29,913 aligned bases in the two viruses' genomes, 93% are identical. All those previously described were detected in animals

collected in China, including two viruses found in two species of *Rhinolophus* bats in southern China, and two more divergent viruses (90% and 85%) found in pangolins seized by Chinese customs in Guangdong and Guangxi provinces.

The new virus from Cambodia was detected in a bat species endemic to Southeast Asia that does not extend beyond Yunnan, where the two previous bat SARS-CoV-2-like viruses were found.

The direct implication is that viruses similar to SARS-CoV-2 have been circulating for several decades, as revealed by molecular dating, throughout Southeast Asia and Yunnan, and that different species of bats could have exchanged these viruses in the caves they inhabit.

Chinese researchers have been searching for Sarbecoviruses throughout the country for about 15 years. They found more than 100 SARS-CoV-like viruses but only two related to SARS-CoV-2. The new data thus validates the hypothesis that SARS-CoV-2-like viruses are present mostly in Southeast Asia, while SARS-CoV-like viruses are dominant in China.

The data in the figure above indirectly support the hypothesis that the SARS-CoV-2 group actually originated in mainland Southeast Asia. Indeed, human populations in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam appear to be much less affected by the Covid-19 pandemic than other countries in the region, such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia. This suggests that the populations of these four countries may be benefiting from a level of herd immunity to Sarbecoviruses.

PANGOLINS CONTAMINATED BY BATS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Apart from bats, the Malayan pangolin (*Manis javanica*) is the only wild animal in which SARS-

CoV-2-like viruses have been found. The problem is that these discoveries were made in a rather special context, that of pangolin trafficking. Several sick animals were seized by Chinese customs in Guangxi province in 2017-2018 and in Guangdong province in 2019.

Even if the viruses sequenced in pangolins are not that close to SARS-CoV-2 (one was 85% identical and the other 90%), they indicate that at least two Sarbecoviruses could have been imported into China well before the Covid-19 epidemic. Indeed, it has been shown that pangolins from Southeast Asian countries have contaminated each other while in captivity on Chinese territory.

The question remains on how the pangolins became infected initially. Could it have been in their natural Southeast Asian environment, before being captured? The discovery of a new virus close to SARS-CoV-2 in bats in Cambodia supports this hypothesis, as *Rhinolophus* bats and pangolins can meet, at least occasionally, in caves in Southeast Asia. This strengthens the hypothesis that pangolin trafficking is responsible for multiple exports of SARS-CoV-2-like viruses to China.

THE "SNOWBALLING" EFFECT OF BREEDING SMALL CARNIVORES

In 2002-2004, several small carnivores kept in cages in Chinese markets or restaurants were found positive for SARS-CoV, such as the masked palm civet, the raccoon dog and the Chinese ferret-badger.

These small carnivores are solitary and nocturnal mammals – just like pangolins. In the wild, the occasional contamination of an individual of these species by a bat Sarbecovirus has very little chance of causing an epidemic. However, an infected individual placed in an intensive breeding facility can

lead to a rapid and uncontrollable evolution of this type of virus.

In 2020, American minks bred for their fur were contaminated with the SARS-CoV-2 virus from humans in Europe and the United States. In November 2020, millions of mink in Denmark were culled after they became infected with Covid-19 and in turn passed a mutated form back to humans.

The Covid-19 crisis taught the world that keeping immense numbers of small carnivores in captivity is a major health risk: viruses can spread and evolve rapidly in breeding facilities, potentially producing more contaminating or more dangerous variants. As pangolins and small carnivore species were frequently stored and sold together in wet markets, a "snowballing effect" due to interspecies viral transmission could be the last step in starting the human Covid-19 pandemic.

This scenario is not likely as nearly 1 million pangolins have been trafficked in the past decade and millions of small carnivores are bred in fur farms in China.

To test this hypothesis and understand why epidemics are emerging in China and not elsewhere, it would be interesting to look for possible infection by Sarbecoviruses in samples from American minks and raccoon dogs bred for their fur in China. These samples exist, they have been collected in the last two decades to study the canine distemper virus or avian flu viruses H5N1 and H9N2.

[the writer is Maître de Conférences (HDR) à Sorbonne Université, ISYEB - Institut de Systématique, Evolution, Biodiversité (CNRS, MNHN, SU, EPHE, UA), Muséum national d'histoire naturelle (MNHN)]

No Joke: Using Humor in Class is Harder When Learning is Remote



SCOTT HENDERSON
THECONVERSATION.COM

Most discussions about the drawbacks of online education focus on the negative effects it has on learning. Less obvious – but also quite important – is how remote instruction can affect the teacher's use of humor.

Scholars have formulated various explanations for why people use humor. As someone who has helped prepare and provide professional development for prospective and veteran teachers for more than 30 years, I am often asked whether humor is an effective way to teach. Decades of research has left little doubt: The answer is yes. Among other benefits, humor can create a positive learning environment, increase learning and make students more motivated to learn.

NO LAUGHING MATTER

The pandemic hasn't eliminated the benefits of humor in the classroom. Instructors, however, have told me during interviews for this article that it's more difficult to use humor when their students appear on video screens than in actual classrooms.

Annette Trierweiler, an assistant professor of environmental science, told me that she used less humor in fall of 2020 because her remote lessons were like "performing in front of a dead audience."

I have noticed the same thing in my own online courses. Comments and stories that usually make students laugh when I am in person somehow fall flat when class is online.

This challenge isn't new.

Psychology professors Frank LoSchavio and Mark Shatz in 2006 published some of the first research on using humor in online courses. Neither has changed his mind about a key distinction between face-to-face and remote instruction.

"It's generally easier to pull off humor in a traditional classroom," LoSchavio told me.

And that brings us to five reasons humor is harder to pull off when learning is remote.

1. CLUES GET MISSED

Humor is primarily social in nature. In other words, it occurs when people interact. For that reason, successful humor depends on people being able to pick up on contextual clues. This includes gestures, facial expressions and posture. It can also involve things such as the pitch, speed and rhythm of a person's voice. Remote instruction can make it harder to pick up on or make sense of these types of things.

Religion professor Stephen Hearne, who's been teaching online courses for two decades, complains that body language and other ways to telegraph humor often go unnoticed or unseen on computer screens. According to Hearne, that's one reason there's "a better chance students will get more of the humor" in traditional classrooms.

2. TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

The poor quality of audio and video connections can further distort a teacher's voice and image, as well as student responses. As Mark Shatz, the psychology professor and author of a book on secrets to writing comedy, puts it,

"the virtual platform removes or minimizes the feedback loop that guides humor selection and delivery."

To make matters worse, cellphones – with their tiny screens and speakers – are the preferred or only internet connection for some students. The problem is that words get garbled and gestures are miniaturized beyond recognition on cellular devices.

3. LAUGHTER IS LESS CONTAGIOUS

Humor is social in another respect. We often rely on the subtle and not so subtle reactions of others to confirm if something is funny. That's not possible when only a few students can or want to be seen during remote instruction. Moreover, hearing someone else laugh can trigger us to smile or laugh ourselves. Television sitcoms use laugh tracks for that very reason: They coax viewers into making desired responses.

Those types of desired responses are often lacking in remote instruction, especially if students have their cameras on mute. Andrew Barnhill, an assistant professor of public service, found that out this fall. "Students aren't able to easily feed off of each other's reactions to comments in the same way that they do in person," he told me.

On a related matter, audio delays – a near universal phenomenon in remote education – can cause the teacher and students to speak over one another in a jerky start-and-stop rhythm. "The slight delay that you get over Zoom as opposed to in-person makes a difference," Barnhill says.

[the writer is William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Education, Furman University]

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Bengal reports one fresh Covid death, lowest since April last year

KOLKATA, 07 FEB [PTI]: West Bengal on Saturday registered only one fresh COVID-19 fatality, the lowest since April last year, a health bulletin said.

The fresh fatality, reported in South 24 Parganas district, pushed the state's coronavirus death count to 10,202, it said.

The state's caseload rose to 5,71,178 as 197 more people tested positive for the infection, it said.

As many as 293 more people were cured of the disease, taking the recovery rate among the



coronavirus patients in the state to 97.36 per cent, the bulletin said.

The state now has 4,895 active cases.

North 24 Parganas reported the highest number of new cases at 55, it said.

The state has tested

over 81.28 lakh samples for COVID-19, including 24,011 in the last 24 hours, it said.

At least 9,773

frontline workers were administered the Covishield vaccine on the 17th day of the inoculation drive being conducted at 272 sites in the state, a health official said.

"Not a single AEFI case was reported during the day. A total of 3,53,876 people have been vaccinated till Saturday," he said.

The official said that Covaxin was administered to 54 people at the Kolkata Medical College and Hospital.

Bodoland People's Front invites Tejashwi Yadav as Accord Day chief guest

NEW DELHI, 07 FEB [NDTV]: The Bodoland People's Front (BPF) has invited Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief Tejashwi Yadav to be the chief guest for Bodoland Accord Day celebrations on February 10.

The BPF may have severed ties with Assam's ruling BJP after the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) election in December, but it remains an ally in the Assembly. The RJD, on the other hand, is aligned firmly against the BJP after the bitterly-contested election in Bihar in October-November last year.

The RJD, which has so far flourished under Mr Yadav's leadership - it won 75 seats in Bihar to emerge as the single-largest party - is planning to contest between 25 and 30 seats in Assam, which votes for a new Assembly in April.

"Since BTC was created on February 10, 2003, the day is celebrated every year as Bodoland Accord Day by BPF. This year also BPF is going to celebrate... at Bishmuri in Kokrajhar district,

with a gathering of lakhs. I would like to request (that) you kindly grace the programme as Chief Guest," the BPF's letter to Tejashwi Yadav, written by leader Hagrama Mohilary, said.

Mohilary was also one of the signatories of the accord.

An ex-member of the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT), Mohilary and others laid down arms in 2003 to sign the accord that created the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts.

"Since the creation of BTC, the BPF - a regional political party - ruled BTC till 2020. During this period the BPF could, in a real sense, create a peaceful atmosphere.. bring the people closer to each other and work for accelerated development," Mohilary wrote.

In January last year the centre signed another accord - with the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, another armed outfit in the region. Under this accord thousands laid down arms, and the centre agreed to

reconstruct the Council and its boundaries.

The BPF walked out of the alliance with the Congress in 2015, and formed alliance with the BJP in 2016 Assam polls; the BJP-led alliance had won. Ahead of last year's Bodoland council elections, however, the BJP decided to go solo and also not extend the alliance with the BPF; it rather chose politician Pramod Boro's UPPL as its partner for Bodoland.

"Fourth BTC general election was held on December 10, 2020. In this election the BPF won 17 of 40 seats. However, despite winning only nine seats the BJP formed the government forcefully by horse-trading...compelling UPPL (12 seats) and two others to join them (and) disrespecting the mandate of the people. The people of Bodoland stand against discriminatory, communal, and religious fundamentalist organisations like BJP," Mohilary wrote.

The BJP recently said it would contest the Assam election with the UPPL as its ally.

Trinamool's Abhishek Banerjee slams BJP's Suvendu Adhikari on home turf

KOLKATA, 07 FEB [NDTV]: Trinamool Congress MP and Mamata Banerjee's nephew Abhishek Banerjee on Saturday held a massive rally in Midnapore, just a few kilometres from the home of his former party colleague Suvendu Adhikari, where he targeted the latter for "selling Midnapore's pride" by joining the BJP.

"The people of Midnapore won't forget those who have insulted this soil. People will answer with votes. Each and every action will be answered. Traitors will be shown the door. The unfaithful will be shown the door. The person who has sold Midnapore's pride to his masters in Delhi will be shown the door. Raise your voice. Shanti Kunj (Suvendu Adhikari's residence) is just 5 km away. The house should shake when you raise your voice. We shall fight in the coming days. We will answer. The person who has played around with the trust of the people of Midnapore needs to be answered," Abhishek Banerjee said as he levelled volley of charges against Mr Adhikari.

Abhishek Banerjee told the crowd that Mr

Adhikari had plans to break the Trinamool Congress (TMC) after the elections. "Why is he envious? Because East Midnapore has 16 seats, Murshidabad has 22 seats, Malda has 12 seats and Uttar Dinajpur has 9 seats. Together it is around 50 seats. The TMC will win 35 seats in the worst-case scenario. He had plans to join the BJP with 35 MLAs and try and become Chief Minister. He has admitted that he has been in touch with Amit Shah since 2014. We knew that and that's why we didn't trust you," he said

"Don't you have any shame? You are talking about the feelings of Midnapore. The people of Midnapore have never sold their spine," Mr Banerjee said at the rally around 5 km from Mr Adhikari family residence "Shantikunj".

Mr Banerjee said that his party will win over 250 seats in the upcoming assembly elections due in April-May. "The Trinamool Congress will defeat the BJP and win over 250 seats in Bengal to make Mamata Banerjee the Chief Minister again. I would appeal to the people of Midnapore to make it 16-0. On all 16

seats make sure Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress candidates win. I am taking the responsibility. I will make them politically irrelevant in three months after the election. That's my responsibility. They will get an answer," he said.

Talking about Suvendu Adhikari's claim about not forming his own party, Abhishek Banerjee said: "They make big speeches and tall claims. He says a lot of people thought I would form a new political party. I have not done that because I am selfless. You are not selfless, you are ungrateful. Mamata Banerjee trusted you and appointed you to work for the people of Midnapore."

Abhishek Banerjee also claimed that Mr Adhikari was running away from a direct contest against Mamata Banerjee in Nandigram. "He says I will defeat her by 50,000 votes but I won't stand for election myself. Somebody will be the scapegoat. You claim to be a big leader, a people's leader. I know you have to function within a structure now, with a lot of rules. But why aren't you taking responsibility and telling

your party that I will stand against Mamata Banerjee with the BJP symbol? Have the guts to say that publicly. No matter where you stand from in Midnapore, the people will defeat you by 50,000 votes," Mr Banerjee said.

On the Prime Minister's visit to Midnapore, Mr Banerjee said, "They say Mamata Banerjee has not come to Nandigram for five years. I want to ask you - how many times has (Prime Minister) Modi visited Midnapore in the last five years? How many times has Amit Shah come? How many times has Rajnath Singh come? How many times has Piyush Goyal come? Tomorrow (PM) Modi is coming to Haldia. Why? Because the elections are here and he needs the votes. Trinamool will win Haldia with more than 50,000 votes."

Talking about the BJP's continued attack on him, Mr Banerjee said, "They only talk about Bhaipo (nephew). When they sleep they think of Bhaipo, when they wake up they think of Bhaipo. When they go for their morning walk they think of Bhaipo. When they eat they think of Bhaipo.

They are terrorized. If they speak for 15 minutes for 10 minutes they speak about Bhaipo. They are so scared that now instead of targeting me they are targeting my wife. I have declared in public that if you can provide proof of my tolabaaji (extortion) I will walk to the gallows and embrace them."

Abhishek Banerjee also read out excerpts from a letter on Saradha accused Sudipto Sen claim on Suvendu Adhikari.

"Sudipto Sen has written in the letter that 'Suvendu Adhikari took 6 crore rupees'. In the next line he writes, 'Suvendu introduced a man called Rakhal to me.' Who is this Rakhal? I will appeal to the people of this district who have lost money in the Sarada and Rose Valley scams - surround the house of this traitor. There is no point in believing in the CBI and ED. If you want your money back surround the house of these traitors so that they cannot leave the locality," he said.

Financial aid to 8 Lakh tea garden workers ahead of Assam election

GUWAHATI, 07 FEB [PTI]: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman today launched the third phase of the direct benefit transfer (DBT) of Assam government to some eight lakh bank accounts in tea gardens of the state. Each account will be credited with Rs 3,000 each; in the first two instalments Rs. 5,000 each was credited.

"Despite COVID-19 pandemic, bank officials have managed to tide over shortcomings and appointed bank mitras to take care of these accounts which were opened during demonetisation. Today, people in a tea estate of Assam will have same facility like someone in Mumbai," Ms Sitharaman said.

"It is Prime Minister Narendra Modi's dream to ensure that people get the full benefit of the scheme and that



is why he insist on use of technology to keep out middlemen. Assam government had requested Modi to make budgetary provision for welfare of children and women in tea estates and accordingly we made provision of Rs. 1,000 crore in the Union Budget this year. The Prime Minister takes care of needs of all the states. I promise that we will do everything possible for the welfare of people in tea gardens," Ms Sitharaman said in

Guwahati.

The tea tribe community of Assam makes about 35 per cent of the state's total electorate; they are the decisive factors in at least 45 out of total 126 assembly seats in Assam.

"Last year in February I visited Assam and was apprised that these accounts had some problems, especially related to identity like Aadhaar and other issues. I asked the banks to sort it out," Ms Sitharaman added. The tea tribe

community has been long asking for a daily wage of Rs. 351. Presently they are getting Rs. 167. The Assam government has come up with a new promise. "In next 10 days there will be notification which will revise the wages of tea workers," said Assam Finance Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had promised to revise the daily wages of tea workers in Assam to Rs.350 prior to 2014 Lok Sabha polls.

One new COVID-19 case in Mizoram, tally 4,382

AIZAWL, FEB 7 (PTI): Mizoram on Sunday reported just one new COVID-19 case, which took the state's tally to 4,382, an official said.

A 21-year-old woman in Aizawl tested positive for the infection, and efforts are being made to trace her contacts, the official said.

The northeastern state currently has 23 active COVID-19 cases, while 4,350 people have recovered from the disease.

Nine people have succumbed to the infection.

The recovery rate in the state stands at 99.27 per cent, the official said.

As many as 2,14,775

samples have been examined in the state, including 466 in the last 24 hours.

According to the official, 781 frontline workers have been administered the COVID-19 vaccine in the state so far, of which 226 were inoculated on Saturday.

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Leon Spinks, former world heavyweight champion who upset Ali, dies aged 67

LAS VEGAS, 07 JAN [THEGUARDIAN]: Leon Spinks, who won Olympic gold and then shocked the boxing world by beating Muhammad Ali to win the heavyweight title in only his eighth pro fight, has died. He was 67.

Spinks, who lived his later years in Las Vegas, died Friday night, according to a release from a public relations firm. He had been battling prostate and other cancers.

His wife, Brenda Glur Spinks, and a few close friends and other family members were by his side when he passed away.

A lovable heavyweight with a drinking problem, Spinks beat Ali by decision in a 15-round fight in 1978 to win the title. He was unranked at the time, and picked as an opponent because Ali was looking for an easy fight.

He got anything but that, with an unorthodox Spinks swarming over Ali throughout the fight on his way to a stunning win by split decision. The two met seven months later at the Superdome in New Orleans, with Ali taking the decision this time before a record indoor boxing crowd of 72,000 and a national television audience estimated at 90m people.

“It was one of the most unbelievable things when Ali agreed to fight him because you look at the fights he had up to then and he was not only not a top contender but shouldn’t have been a contender at all,” promoter Bob Arum said

Saturday. “He was just an opponent but somehow he found a way to win that fight.”

Spinks would lose the rematch to Ali in New Orleans and fought for the title only once after that, when he was stopped in the third round in 1981 by Larry Holmes. He continued fighting on and off into the mid-1990s, finishing with a record of 26-17-3.

Spinks, with a big grin that often showed off his missing front teeth, was popular among boxing fans for both his win over Ali and his easygoing personality. But he burned through his earnings quickly, and at one point after retiring was working as a custodian at a YMCA in Nebraska, cleaning locker rooms.

He later was part of a group of ex-fighters who had their brains studied by the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health in Las Vegas. Spinks was found to have brain damage caused by a combination of taking punches to the head and heavy drinking, though he functioned well enough to do autograph sessions and other events late in his life.

“He was a good soul,” said Gene Kilroy, who was Ali’s business manager when he fought Spinks and became friends with the fighter.

Spinks won the light heavyweight division at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, beating Sixto



Soria of Cuba in an upset to become one of five US fighters to win gold. His brother, Michael, who would later become heavyweight champion himself, won the middleweight gold, and Sugar Ray Leonard took the welterweight title.

Spinks was hardly spectacular after turning pro, winning six of his first seven fights. Just four months before he met Ali, he could manage just a draw with journeyman Scott LeDoux and he wasn’t on anyone’s radar in the heavyweight title picture.

But Ali was coming off a brutal fight with Earnie Shavers and wasn’t looking forward to what would have been a mandatory bout against Ken Norton, whom he had already fought three times and who seemed to have Ali’s number. Instead, he sought an easy mark for a fight that was to

be nationally televised on ABC, even knowing he would be stripped of one of his titles for taking another fight.

Enter Spinks, who was such a big underdog most sports books didn’t even take bets on the fight.

“In that fight everything clicked,” Arum said. “He came in with a game plan and he beat Ali. It wasn’t that Ali wasn’t at his best, but Leon shocked everybody with how good Leon was.”

Suddenly, Spinks was the heavyweight champion of the world at the age of 25.

“I’m not The Greatest,” Spinks said afterward. “Just the latest.”

Arum was in the dressing room with Ali after the fight, and said Ali directed him to sign Spinks to a quick rematch. The two fought seven months later in a prime-time fight on CBS that set television viewing records at the

time, with nearly half the country tuning in.

Ali took the rematch more seriously than he did the first fight, winning a decision though Spinks was competitive. Spinks might have been better, Arum said, but enjoyed the life of being heavyweight champion too much and partied too much of the time between fights.

“Leon posed in a bathtub with a glass of champagne smoking a cigar. He suddenly had an entourage as big as one that Ali had,” Arum said. “We were all staying at the same hotel in New Orleans for the rematch and one morning I was coming down to breakfast and Leon got in the elevator and collapsed on the floor. Obviously he had been out drinking and I said, ‘Leon, are you crazy, you’re fighting in just a few days.’ He said ‘What do you mean? I’m just coming in from roadwork.’”

Among the notable people in Spinks’ entourage was Lawrence Tureaud, who would later be known as the actor Mr T and served as bodyguard for the champion.

Spinks was born on 11 July 1953, in St Louis, raised in poverty along with his brother Michael. After discovering boxing both brothers became top amateurs, culminating in the 1976 Olympics where Leon won the light heavyweight gold and Michael won the middleweight gold.

Michael Spinks would go on to win the heavyweight title himself in 1985, defending it three times before being knocked out by Mike Tyson in 91 seconds in their 1988 fight in Atlantic City. By then, the best part of Leon’s career was over, though he would fight until losing a December 1995 fight against Fred Houpe in St Louis.

After moving to Las Vegas, Spinks was married to Brenda Glur Spinks in 2011. The two were often seen at boxing-related activities, including Spinks’ 2017 induction into the Nevada Boxing Hall of Fame.

“He was happy go lucky, the salt of the earth,” Arum said, chuckling at the memories. “Leon was nutty but you couldn’t get angry at the guy. He never meant any harm to anyone. You couldn’t help but love him even though you shook your head at how he acted.”

Australian Open arrives as Melbourne navigates bumpy road of Covid-19

JONATHAN HOWCROFT MELBOURNE, 07 FEB [THEGUARDIAN]: Apricot sunlight dances on the surface of the Yarra alongside the meandering approach to Melbourne Park. The river is an abiding companion, unspooling past Federation Square and along Birrarung Marr, away from the city skyline and towards Rod Laver Arena. This is summer in Australia on the eve of the year’s first grand slam, the event Roger Federer dubbed “the happy slam”.

But this year the pilgrimage ends abruptly at an arrestingly blue checkpoint where masks are affixed and a health declaration is scrutinised – a reminder that this is no ordinary event. Further into the precinct a labyrinth of temporary walls funnel visitors into one of three zones, a solution designed to minimise the fallout should Covid-19 creep its way onsite.

Australia has navigated two waves of significant community transmission of coronavirus with comparative success. Border closures, mask-wearing and lockdowns – if necessary at short notice and for long durations – have nipped outbreaks in the bud. Since Melbourne emerged from a three-month lockdown in October, the country has been operating on what it has called “Covid normal” policies, allowing Australians to confidently celebrate summer holidays and begin a new school year.

“It has been a very hard year for all the world in general,” Rafael Nadal said on arrival. “We are still in a very tough situation, but I think Australia is an amazing example of how to control things in the right way.”

As major sporting events have wrestled with the pandemic the central objective has been maintaining the safety of competitors and officials, to the exclusion of spectators. Here it is the players and their entourages, not the fans, that pose the greater threat to public health. Resolving this conundrum has not gone well.

First, the arrival of hundreds of players and staff on chartered flights sat uneasily with Australia’s inability to repatriate thousands of citizens stranded overseas. Then almost immediately dozens of players were forced into strict lockdown after positive tests were identified on certain flights. This damage was exacerbated by a number of players complaining about their quarantine and how it would lead to competitive disadvantage.

World No 13 Roberto Bautista Agut likened his experience in a quarantine hotel to prison “but with wifi”. Tour prefect Novak Djokovic lobbied unsuccessfully for changes. Nick Kyrgios branded him a “tool”.

“My good intentions for my fellow competitors in Melbourne have been misconstrued as being selfish, difficult and ungrateful. This couldn’t be farther from the truth,” wrote Djokovic, in a six-page social media post.

Unsurprisingly, any complaints have been given short thrift by locals unprepared to concede any ground on their hard-earned freedoms, especially after Spaniard Paula Badosa tested positive on her seventh day in isolation. It is unlikely the public mood will ever soften towards the players, 256 of whom are guaranteed at least \$100,000 (£50,779) even if they lose in round one of the singles.

Discontent escalated on Wednesday when a man working at a hotel housing hundreds of players and officials tested positive, sending a tremor through the community. This “nightmare scenario”, according to broadcaster Rennae Stubbs, led to calls for the tournament to be scrapped. But while there are many dissenting voices, unifying them into a movement is tricky because the major criticism aimed at Victoria’s approach to the pandemic has been that it is too risk-averse. That appears to be changing.

“The strategy is not zero cases forever,” the Victorian premier, Daniel Andrews, said on Thursday. “The strategy is to try and find that Covid normal, to try and have economic activity, to try and begin rebuilding and recovery, and to manage this risk”.

This all helps explain that despite the striking contrast between a largely unaffected Australian summer and the hibernal catastrophes unfolding elsewhere, there is little hubris. The absence of grandstanding might surprise outsiders but this is a state where Australian rules football dominates, and public servants take a day off for a horse race. The tennis, not unlike the Formula 1 Grand Prix, does not possess limitless goodwill. It can be viewed as an outward-facing enterprise, valued as much for its economic impact.

Tennis Australia does not shy away from the dollars and cents, celebrating the generation of \$387.7m (£216m) for the local economy last year. Much of this flows to the tourism and hospitality sectors, areas badly hit by the pandemic. It’s little wonder administrators have done everything they can to get the show on the road, despite the risks to public health.

If this scenario all feels familiar, that’s because it is. In the run up to last year’s Australian Grand Prix the pandemic’s tendrils were extending around the world and Melbourne just happened to be a hub of international sporting activity. The race was eventually cancelled, but not before a stack of damaging PR, including Lewis Hamilton responding despairingly that “cash is king” when asked why the race was still going ahead.

Ankita Raina becomes third Indian woman to feature in Grand Slam main draw

MELBOURNE, FEB 7 (PTI): Ankita Raina on Sunday became only the third Indian woman tennis player to secure a place in the main draw of a Grand Slam as she made the cut for the women’s doubles event of the Australian Open.

The year’s first Grand Slam starts here on Monday.

After missing out on the women’s singles main draw, she still had a chance to qualify as a ‘lucky loser’ till the completion of the first round, but the 28-year-old realised a long-time dream when she signed up with Romania’s Mihaela Buzarnescu and earned a direct entry.

Only Sania Mirza and Nirupama Vaidyanathan have competed in the Grand Slam main draws for India before.

Ankita is only the second Indian after Sania, a six-time Grand Slam champion, to compete in the women’s doubles of a tennis major. Nirupama was the first to crack a Grand Slam main draw, back in 1998 at Australian Open.

The braveheart, who played a key role in Indian Fed Cup team’s tremendous progress, said although singles hold a different significance, making the doubles too is special.

“It’s first main draw of a Grand Slam, so singles or doubles, I will take it. It’s special. Years of hard work, toil and now I am there. Not only my hard work but blessings and support of countless people have brought me here, I can’t forget that,” Ankita told PTI moments after getting confirming



her entry.

“I know it’s doubles but India’s name will be there. These are the moments that spark something among people. Maybe a few will start dreaming that it’s possible,” she added.

“People start believing. We touch many small milestones but this one is at a pinnacle. Anyone who starts playing professional tennis, dreams of playing

in a Grand Slam.”

“Regardless of the fact that it is doubles, I will take it. I kept at it. I stayed in the process. Maybe next time, I will play singles too. After years of hard work, it is starting with doubles but singles will happen. It’s first, so special,” she added.

Ankita said initially she did not find her name in the draw and was

disappointed.

“I can’t believe it, I missed my name in the sheet. After practice I asked for the draw and frantically looked for my name. I did not find it. Then my coach called me to say I have made it,” she said.

Ankita had signed up with Romanian southpaw Mihaela, who was a top-50 singles player before injury pegged her back, on Friday.

They will open their campaign against Australian wild card pair of Olivia Gadecki and Belinda Woolcock.

“A friend told me that Mihaela is looking for a partner. I spoke to her and she agreed. I have not played with her before but I have played with a lefty on the tour. It make a

good combination. I am looking forward to it.”

Now India will have four Indians competing in the season’s first Grand Slam.

Sumit Nagal will compete in the men’s singles while Rohan Bopanna and Divij Sharan will present their challenge in the men’s doubles with their respective partners.

Nagal has drawn Lithania’s Ricardas Berankis as his first round opponent.

Bopanna and his Japanese partner Ben McLachlan will take on Korean wild card entrants Ji Sung Nam and Min-Kyu Song.

Sharan and his Slovakian partner Igor Zelenay will take on German combo of Yannick Hanfmann and Kevin Krawietz.

Jürgen Klopp seeks ‘special’ win against Manchester City to reignite title push

SACHIN NAKRANI LONDON, 07 FEB [THEGUARDIAN]: Jürgen Klopp has admitted Liverpool will have to deliver a “special” performance to beat Manchester City on Sunday and believes a victory could provide the spark that would reignite their title defence.

The champions have been in stuttering form since Christmas, playing poorly and winning just

three out of 10 games in all competitions, a run that has also seen them lose twice in a row at home, most recently against Brighton on Wednesday. Across the same period City have been imperious, winning every fixture, going top and opening up a seven-point gap on Liverpool in fourth.

This makes it make-or-break for Liverpool for their return to Anfield, especially given

City also have a game in hand, and while the odds may be against Klopp’s side, recent history is not – City were seven points behind Liverpool when the teams met at the Etihad Stadium in January 2019; City went on to win 2-1 and retained the title.

“The situation [now compared with January 2019] is completely different but, yes, of course, things can change

really quickly,” said Klopp. “There are a lot of things to consider for a game like this, a lot of things to think about, but in the end we have to play football on a high level because you don’t get easy chances against City. You have to make special things happen, and that is what we will try.”

Alisson, Fabinho and Sadio Mané are set to return for the hosts, having missed the game against Brighton through

illness and injury. The new signing Ozan Kabak could also start having received international clearance, although it is likely the 20-year-old will be on the bench, alongside his fellow recent recruit Ben Davies.

Regardless of who features on Sunday, Liverpool’s display will certainly need to be much better than those delivered in midweek and against Burnley

16 days ago. One thing Klopp is especially keen to see from his players is greater urgency in their passing, using a phrase that translates from German somewhat curiously to make his point. “It is about the tempo of the ball,” he said. “Everything was open [against Brighton] but they could close the gap because the ball was not [passed] hard enough.

Earthquake of magnitude 6.3 strikes Southern Philippines

MANILA, 07 FEB [REUTERS]: A strong earthquake with 6.3 magnitude struck the southern province of Davao del Sur in the Philippines on Sunday, with damage and aftershocks expected, the country's seismology agency said.

The earthquake was initially recorded at magnitude 6 at a depth of 10 km (6.2



miles), the GFZ German Geosciences earlier said.

The Philippines Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Philvolcs) said it recorded the depth at 15 km, adding that the earthquake was tectonic.

The Southeast Asian country is on the geologically active Pacific Ring of Fire and experiences frequent earthquakes, particularly in the south.

Egypt frees al Jazeera journalist after 4 years in prison

CAIRO, 07 FEB [REUTERS]: Mahmoud Hussein, a journalist for Qatar's Al Jazeera, arrived at his home in greater Cairo Saturday after four years in an Egyptian jail, an AFP journalist reported, amid thawing relations between the countries.

The 54-year-old Egyptian national was released on Thursday from a Cairo prison, a security source and his daughter Azzahra Hussein confirmed to AFP, but bail conditions at a police station in southern Cairo were still being finalised.

"His father died before witnessing this moment, he was waiting for it for a long time," Hussein's mother told AFP before her son's arrival.

Clutching a necklace with a photo of Hussein on it, she was surrounded

by throngs of relatives and supporters who had set up colourful lights to celebrate his return.

Neighbours handed out drinks while children lit fireworks as women clapped and ululated. Others rushed to hug him in the small village on the outskirts of Cairo.

Qatar's Al Jazeera -- which had run a daily campaign calling for his liberation -- had repeatedly said he was being held "without formal charges nor trial".

According to Egyptian law, detainees can be held in pre-trial detention for up to two years, but authorities regularly prolong the periods.

"Even though there are bail conditions... Dad is out of the police station, thank God. Freedom to all those oppressed," his other daughter based in

Paris, Aya Hussein, said on Twitter.

Hussein's release comes just over two weeks after Egypt and Qatar restored diplomatic ties, following a three-year Saudi-led freeze on relations with Doha, with a particular focus on Al Jazeera's coverage.

Cairo has been critical of the pan-Arab network's stance, considering it a mouthpiece for the Muslim Brotherhood.

The group was outlawed after general-turned-president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi led the military overthrow of Islamist Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

"Al Jazeera Media Network welcomes the news of Mahmoud's freedom, and believes that no journalist should ever be subjected to what Mahmoud has suffered for the past four

years for merely carrying out his profession," the Doha-based network said in a statement Saturday.

"While he was incarcerated, Mahmoud had become a symbol of press freedom across the globe," Al Jazeera added.

Three Al Jazeera journalists were previously arrested in 2013, including Australian Peter Grete, drawing international condemnation. They were freed in 2015.

"This has been a colossal and shameful travesty of justice by Egypt purely for political ends," tweeted Grete, hours before Hussein's arrival home.

Egypt is the world's worst jailer of journalists behind China and Turkey, according to press freedom group the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Tens of thousands protest Myanmar coup, internet blackout eased

Yangon, 07 Feb [AFP]: Tens of thousands of people rallied again in Myanmar's biggest city Yangon on Sunday denouncing a military coup and demanding the release of elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Protesters marching in Yangon for a second consecutive day on Sunday carried red balloons -- the colour of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) -- and chanted, "We don't want military dictatorship! We want democracy!"

They walked in the bright sunshine down the middle of the road, waving NLD flags and making the three-figure salute that has become a symbol of protest against the February 1 coup. Drivers honked their horns and passengers held up photos of Aung San Suu Kyi.

"We will move forward and keep demanding until we get democracy. Down with the military dictatorship," protester Myo Win, 37, told AFP news agency.

The scenes, broadcast on Facebook, were some of the few that have come out of the country since Myanmar's military authorities shut down the internet and restricted phone lines on Saturday.

Netblocks, a UK-based service that tracks internet disruptions, reported that partial internet access had been restored on Sunday afternoon.

"Partial restoration of internet connectivity confirmed in #Myanmar from 2 PM local time on multiple providers following information blackout," the internet monitoring service said on Twitter, adding that social media platforms remained blocked.

But mobile phone customers using services with MPT, Ooredoo, Telcel and Mytel are

now able to access mobile internet data and Wi-Fi.

Netblocks had earlier reported "a near-total internet shutdown" was in effect in Myanmar by Saturday afternoon, with connectivity falling to just 16 percent of normal levels.

The broad outage followed a military order on Friday to block Twitter and Instagram after authorities said some people were trying to use the platforms to spread "fake news". Facebook had already been blocked earlier in the week -- though not fully.

The communication blackout lent greater urgency to efforts to resist the coup. Saturday saw the largest protests to date, with tens of thousands coming out in cities across the country to condemn the coup that brought a 10-year experiment with democracy to a crashing halt.

In Yangon, thousands of people -- factory workers and students prominent among them -- marched down a main street on Saturday, chanting, "Military dictator, fail, fail; Democracy, win, win".

Similar-sized demonstrations took place in at least two other parts of the city. At Yangon's City Hall, protesters presented flowers to police, some of whom carried assault rifles.

Thousands more also took to the streets in Myanmar's second city Mandalay and its military-built capital Naypyidaw, home to the nation's government bureaucrats, where demonstrators chanted anti-coup slogans and called for Aung San Suu Kyi's release.

"#Myanmar's military and police must ensure the right to peaceful assembly

is fully respected and demonstrators are not subjected to reprisals," the UN Human Rights office tweeted after Saturday's protests.

The demonstrations have largely been peaceful, but shots were heard in the southeastern city of in the southeastern town of Myawaddy as uniformed police with guns charged a group of a couple of hundred protesters, live video showed.

It is unclear what kind of munitions were used or whether there are any casualties.

"WE MUST ALL STAND WITH THE PEOPLE OF MYANMAR"

With the internet cut off and official information scarce, rumours swirled about the fate of Suu Kyi and her cabinet. A story that she had been released, which drew huge crowds onto the streets to celebrate overnight on Saturday, was quickly quashed by her lawyer.

More than 160 people have been arrested since the military seized power in the early hours of Monday, said Thomas Andrews, the UN special rapporteur on Myanmar.

"The generals are now attempting to paralyse the citizen movement of resistance -- and keep the outside world in the dark -- by cutting virtually all internet access," Andrews said in a statement on Sunday.

"We must all stand with the people of Myanmar in their hour of danger and need. They deserve nothing less."

The civil disobedience movement has been building in Myanmar all week, with doctors and teachers among those refusing to work. Every night, people bang pots and pans in a show of anger.

Debbie Stothard, founder of the campaign

group, the alternative ASEAN network on Burma, told Al Jazeera the protesters were "taking a huge risk" as the military had cracked down on protests in the past with lethal force, killing thousands of people.

But people in Myanmar are "very angry", said Stothard. "They know this is more than about the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi. This is about their future. This military has messed with the wrong generation."

She added, "The military dictatorship is gambling on the fact that there will be a lot of statements, but no real action. It's time to target military companies, because economic power is one of the motivating forces for the military to grab power like this."

As the civil disobedience movement gathered steam over the weekend, the military ordered telecoms networks to freeze access to social media platforms, which have been critical sources of independent news as well as organising tools for protests.

In a statement, Twitter said it was "deeply concerned" about the blockage order and vowed to "advocate to end destructive government-led shutdowns". Its spokesman said the blockages "undermines the public conversation and the rights of people to make their voices heard".

Facebook also urged the military to reverse its decision.

"At this critical time, the people of Myanmar need access to important information and to be able to communicate with their loved ones," Facebook's head of public policy for Asia-Pacific emerging countries, Rafael Frankel, said in a statement.

Fury at Gove as exports to EU slashed by 68% since Brexit

TOBY HELM LONDON, 07 FEB [THEGUARDIAN]: The volume of exports going through British ports to the EU fell by a staggering 68% last month compared with January last year, mostly as a result of problems caused by Brexit, the Observer can reveal.

The dramatic drop in the volume of traffic carried on ferries and through the Channel tunnel has been reported to Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove by the Road Haulage Association after a survey of its international members. In a letter to Gove dated 1 February, the RHA's chief executive, Richard Burnett, also told the minister he and his officials had repeatedly warned over several months of problems and called for measures to lessen difficulties -- but had been largely ignored.

In particular he had made clear throughout last year there was an urgent need to increase the number of customs agents to help firms with mountains of extra paperwork. The number now, around 10,000, is still about a fifth of what the RHA says is required to handle the massive increase in paperwork facing exporters.

Burnett told the Observer that in addition to the 68% fall-off in exports, about 65%-75% of vehicles that had come over from the EU were going back empty because there were no

goods for them to return with, due to hold-ups on the UK side, and because some UK companies had either temporarily or permanently halted exports to the EU. "I find it deeply frustrating and annoying that ministers have chosen not to listen to the industry and experts," he said.

Contact with Gove had been limited and had achieved little over recent months. "Michael Gove is the master of extracting information from you and giving nothing back," he said. "He responds on WhatsApp and says he got the letter but no written response comes. Pretty much every time we have written over the last six months he has not responded in writing. He tends to get officials to start working on things. But the responses are a complete waste of time because they don't listen to what the issues were that we raised in the first place."

According to the House of Commons library, UK exports to the EU were £294bn in 2019 (43% of all UK exports) while UK imports from the EU were £374bn (52% of the total). The overwhelming majority of exports to the EU from the UK go through ports rather than by air.

Richard Ballantyne, chief executive of the British Ports Association, said the 68% figure sounded "broadly in line" with his impressions of the drop-off in traffic. He said some but not all of

the problems with extra paperwork that caused delays could be overcome in time, although he warned some businesses on both sides would look for new markets rather than try to deal with the added friction. Ballantyne also predicted a new set of difficulties in months to come as the infrastructure needed at the point when the UK introduces full import checks on goods from the EU on 1 July would not, in his view, be ready in time. This raised the prospect of a whole new set of issues affecting imports.

As part of the Brexit arrangements, the government decided to offer a six-month grace period, meaning the full range of physical checks would not be needed on imports until July.

Trade experts said part of the reason for the sharp fall in exports was the coincidence of Brexit and the pandemic. But several heads of trade bodies fear worse is to come. Shane Brennan, chief executive of the Cold Chain Federation, the body for companies that move and store frozen and chilled foods, said: "As we look to April through to July what really worries me is we face a perfect storm."

"We will have an economy looking to come out of lockdown at the same time as the UK is imposing a range of import controls on EU business that may be

no more prepared than UK businesses have been -- and possibly less so -- and a supply chain that is incredibly reluctant to service the UK. The full Brexit crisis that we were predicting could well come into effect at that point."

In recent weeks hundreds of UK companies have decided either to halt exports to the EU or to set up warehouses or subsidiaries within the EU so they can distribute goods more easily. Ministers say most of the Brexit-relating issues facing businesses are "teething problems", although Michael Gove has accepted that those affecting Northern Ireland are more serious.

A government spokesperson said: "We have had intensive engagement with the road haulage industry for many months and are still facilitating a daily call with representative groups."

"We do not recognise the figure provided on exports. Thanks to the hard work of hauliers and traders to prepare for change, disruption at the border has so far been minimal and freight movements are now close to normal levels, despite the Covid-19 pandemic."

"We will continue to work constructively with the RHA as we adjust to our new relationship with the EU and seize the opportunities of Brexit."

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MATERNITY SUPERMODEL! The pregnant star, Emily Ratajowski, looks incredible as she enjoys a walk in New York City.

Natalie Portman, Christina Anstead and More Stars Who've Clapped Back at Body Shamers

Celebrities really want people to stop talking about their bodies.

Earlier this week, Natalie Portman discovered her figure was a topic of conversation after photographers snapped photos of her on the set of Thor: Love and Thunder in Sydney.

But instead of focusing on her role for the superhero film, rumors spread that she was pregnant and expecting her third child with husband Benjamin Millipied. Shortly after, the Black Swan actress slammed the media reports in a rare Instagram Story statement.

"Hey, so I'm totally not pregnant..." the 39-year-old Oscar winner shared on Friday, Feb. 5, "...but apparently it's still OK in 2021 for anyone to speculate and comment on a woman's body shape whenever they want? Do better @nypost."

Sadly, Natalie wasn't the only star to deal with body-shaming this week. HGTV star Christina Anstead hit back at internet trolls who have continued to judge her appearance.

"People are commenting that I look really skinny or that I need to eat," the reality TV



personality said on an Instagram Story video on Friday. "This is actually the weight I've always weighed... You guys have just watched me have babies and then go back to my original weight. So don't worry, everything's fine."

Stars like Lizzo, Demi Lovato and more have spoken out against body shamers. See their bada-s clap backs in our gallery below!

Susan Sarandon reiterates support to farmers: Must let India's leaders know world is watching

Hollywood veteran actor Susan Sarandon has amplified her support to the ongoing farmers agitation and said despite attempts to silence the "most vulnerable" Indian leaders should remember the world is watching them. The "Thelma & Louise" star became the latest international celebrity to back the protest, after a tweet by pop star Rihanna triggered a wave of support for the protesting farmers by a number of global personalities, activists and politicians.

Sarandon took to Twitter late Saturday evening and shared a news report by Al Jazeera, headlined, "Free speech under threat as India clamps down on farmer protests."

"Corporate greed and exploitation knows no bounds, not only in the US but worldwide. While they work w/ corp. media and politicians to silence the most vulnerable, we must let India's leaders know the world is watching and we #StandWithFarmers! #FarmersProtests," she captioned the post.

Earlier on Saturday, the 74-year-old actor had shared a news report by The New York Times, explaining why farmers are protesting in the country.



"Standing in solidarity with the #FarmersProtest in India. Read about who they are and why they're protesting below," Sarandon wrote.

Swedish teen climate activist Greta Thunberg, Meena Harris, an American lawyer and niece of US Vice President Kamala Harris, actor Amanda Cerni, singers Jay Sean, Dr Zeus and former adult star Mia Khalifa have also

supported the protesting farmers.

The government had criticised the tweets by Rihanna and other celebrities, saying facts must be ascertained before people rushing to comment on the issue, calling it "neither accurate nor responsible".

Tens of thousands of farmers have been protesting at three border points on the outskirts of Delhi demanding a complete repeal of the three farm laws

Stephen King's 'Rita Hayworth' out as standalone book

Acclaimed author Stephen King's "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption", a tale of unjust imprisonment and offbeat escape which was the basis for Oscar-nominated "The Shawshank Redemption", is now available for the first time as a standalone book.

"Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption" is regarded one of King's most iconic stories, and it helped make Castle Rock a place readers would return to over and over again.

Suspenseful, mysterious, and heart-wrenching, this novella, populated by a cast of unforgettable characters, is about a fiercely compelling convict named Andy Dufresne who is seeking his ultimate revenge.

Originally published in 1982 in the collection "Different Seasons" (alongside "The Body", "Apt Pupil," and "The Breathing Method"), it was adapted on the big screen in 1994.Starring Morgan Freeman and Tim Robbins, it was nominated for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

This new book is published by Hodder & Stoughton, an imprint of Hachette.

King has authored more than 60 books, including "If It Bleeds", "The Institute", "Elevation", the short story collection "The Bazaar of Bad Dreams" and the Bill Hodges trilogy "End of Watch", "Finders Keepers", and "Mr. Mercedes".

Many of his books have been turned into films, television series and streamed events.



Tom Holland would love to play James Bond

Spider-Man star Tom Holland says he would love to suit up and play British spy James Bond in future.

The 24-year-old actor, who is best known for essaying the role of Peter Parker/ superhero Spider-Man in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, quipped at 5' feet 6 inches, he will be a "really short" Agent 007.

"Ultimately as a young British lad who loves cinema, I'd love to be James Bond. So y'know, I'm just putting that out there. I mean I look pretty good in a suit! I'd be like a really short James Bond," Holland said on Variety Award Circuit podcast.

The actor was last seen in psychological thriller "The Devil All

the Time", which released on Netflix in September.

Before starring in the third chapter of "Spider-Man", Holland will again change gears with crime drama "Cherry", in which he will reunite with Russo Brothers after "Avengers: Endgame", and "Chaos Walking", a sci-fi action adventure thriller.

'Wynonna Earp' to end with season 4

Supernatural drama 'Wynonna Earp' will end with its fourth season. Cabel channel Syfy has announced that the final six episodes of the show will begin airing on March 5, with the series finale arriving April 9.

The first six episodes of the fourth season of the show premiered on NBCUniversal-owned Syfy in July last year.

"I'd like to thank our wonderful cast and crew, all of whom were instrumental in bringing Wynonna Earp to our loyal and passionate audience. We couldn't be prouder

of these last six episodes on SYFY, and are thrilled to share them with our beloved fans, who have changed our lives forever," showrunner/executive producer Emily Andras said in a statement to The Hollywood Reporter.

"I have been honored to tell Wynonna and her family's story, and along with Seven24, Cineflix and CTV Sci-Fi, are hopeful we can continue to share their inspiring tales in the future," she added.

Starring Melanie Scrofano as the titular heroine, the show followed Wynonna as she returned to her hometown in Purgatory and continued the Earp legacy of killing demons and other creatures that go bump in the night.

ARIES:

Spoiler alert, Aries: if they wanted to be in your life, they would be. If they wanted to make things work, they would have done that too. You're being called to put an end to this hot-and-cold behaviour immediately. Remember, the only way you can take a stance for yourself is by being in a space of clarity.

TAURUS:

Selfless service is coming up as a big theme for you right now, and it requires you to move beyond the confines of the ego self. That does not mean you have to give up on what you're doing in the world, or change the course of your life. It simply means that it's time to expand the scope of work in a way that benefits Society. Remember, no contribution is too little. So let your creative side lead the way, Taurus.

GEMINI:

In the immortal words of Georges Braque, "Art is meant to disturb, science reassures." What is this quote awakening within you, dear Gemini? How are you being called to use your work as a vehicle of social change? Remember, now is not the time to play it small or safe. So put your revolutionary ideas into motion. We are in the midst of Aquarius season, after all!

CANCER:

You've been killing it at work lately, giving your boss more than

one reason to brag about you. But is this dedication bringing you the inner peace and happiness you desire? Probably not. The cards are urging you to balance the material side with the spiritual. To make time for the practices that ground you and bring you back to this moment. Don't believe a word we say, though. Pull out your yoga mat and put on your favourite playlist. You won't be disappointed, we promise!

LEO:

If we chose to step back every time somebody belittled our dream, we wouldn't get anywhere, Leo. Today, you're being asked to use the criticism as fuel. The fuel that helps you move further along your path and makes the impossible seem possible. Remember, the mysterious forces are working with and through you, which is helping you manifest that one thing you thought was a distant dream.

VIRGO:

You've spent way too much time following the rules and trying to please the people around you. But has that brought you any peace, Virgo? Today, you're being asked to listen to your inner voice, to take a chance and to break a rule. No, we're not asking you to be rebellious for the sake of rebellion. We're simply reminding you that it is the black sheep who have all the fun!

LIBRA:

Kismet has big plans in store for you, so get ready for some action. This could manifest as a huge opening for some of you

or the opportunity to sync forces with somebody you admire. Others may find themselves in the room with somebody they've been eyeing for a while now. The one thing you want to keep in mind for the rest of the day is that we don't always get second chances. So, make the most of what you're being offered today. Playing your cards right could change the course of your life permanently!

SCORPIO:

You may be feeling a sense of stagnation on the work or money front. Here's the thing, though: nobody's going to give you what you deserve until you ask for it. So, if you want to handle more responsibility, ask your boss. If you wish to be compensated in proportion to your efforts, have a word with the HR (or your client). You may or may not be able to make a drastic shift immediately. But, hey, every small step counts!

SAGITTARIUS:

Maybe it's not that hard, Sagittarius. Maybe it's we who complicate our lives by going against the flow. So, just for today, work with the rhythm of the Universe. Pay attention to what the signs and symbols are revealing to you as you realign with your true path. You'll find that this is the secret to allowing into your existence what is truly yours.

CAPRICORN:

Dreams, visions, signs, numbers, and symbols. Welcome to the new normal, Capricorn! No, you're not

going crazy. You are simply upgrading to a whole new frequency, one that's making you aware of the mysteries that lie beyond the veil. Word for the wise: pay attention to what these signs are revealing to you. This could help add a whole new dimension to your work and take your creative projects to the next level. Remember, you are not obliged to play by the rules that were handed down to you by Society.

AQUARIUS:

Just because it hasn't been done before doesn't mean it can't be done. Nobody understands this better than you! You're embracing your yang side in a way you never have before. You're all about the action and the initiative, which is making you a magnet for all kinds of miracles. So, stay focused on your path as you keep moving forward and onwards. Imagine where you will be six months from now if you continue at this pace!

PISCES:

It's not that you do not enjoy company. It's just that you cherish your own company a lot more. This is why the cards are urging you to be still. To observe silence and practice meditation. This will help you look at the trajectory of your life *and* the emotions that are resurfacing at the moment from a detached perspective. Remember, it's okay to feel sorrow. It's okay to feel sadness, melancholy and grief too. Remembering the mantra 'this too shall pass' will help you get through it all.